

CI 452 S O'Carroll

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Last name: O'Carroll

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I don't believe so. While in purely theoretical terms this seems like a reasonable proposal, there are three practical reasons why it should not be enacted. The first is that it will be an obstacle and burden to artists, resulting in a less vibrant and free artistic community. The second is that recent history shows it to be completely unnecessary. The third is that classifying art changes the context in which it is viewed, interfering with the relationship between viewer and artist. The same image viewed with an R stamp is experienced very differently to that same image viewed with a G stamp.

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It needs to be recognized that requiring classification will create a burden on artists. Most artist work by themselves for themselves. Most fund their own activities. As such, requiring artists to comply with a new classification scheme will mean less time creating art, and will in fact discourage artists from producing certain material.

Given that a classification scheme for artworks will place a burden on artists, and possibly discourage the creation of artworks - and in particular, challenging artworks - we need to have a good justification for introducing such a scheme. And this is where the proposal falls down.

There have been very few (any?) instances of artworks doing anyone any harm (perceived or real) in Australia in the last 20+ years. In this discussion, the work that is continually referenced is that of Bill Henson and his 2008 exhibition. However, this work, once classified, received a PG rating. In effect this means that had we had compulsory classification, Henson's work would not have been restricted. It seems that in recent years there have been NO cases of art being displayed that should have been classified, or art for which classification would have prevented anyone coming to any harm.

As such, what we would have if classification is introduced, is thousands upon thousands of works and exhibitions being classified, inhibiting artists, costing money, wasting time, effort, and paper, for no perceivable - or evidence-based - gain.

I suspect that in the minds of those calling for the classification of art there exists the fantasy that such a classification will somehow limit or censor work such as Henson's 2008 image. The PG rating suggests that it won't, though future classification boards may judge differently. It will simply create more obstacles for the artist, and mean that Australia has a less vibrant, less daring, and less enlightening arts culture.

Part of the role that art plays in society is to challenge the status quo, to challenge laws, challenge community standards and values. This is achieved within the law. And when laws are broken (such as child pornography laws) artists can be prosecuted like anyone else.

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My own artistic work involves working with and depicting children. I believe it is essential that children continue to be depicted in art. I believe that children inhabit a unique and essential place in art. Symbolic of promise, potential, innocence, new-life, authenticity, and vulnerability, they act as a precious mirror in which society regards itself; both ideal and actual. This classification scheme will make my work more difficult, and could render some of my future work 'refused classification' and thus banned.

We also need to remember that in the art world, meaning lies partly in the eye of the beholder. As such, if an image in my show (see attached) is accompanied by a G rating it is experienced and interpreted differently than if it is given an R rating. No classification board has the wisdom or authority to say how such a work should be interpreted. (As a case in point, when my work was shown in a channel Ten news bulletin, I was disgusted to see that they had blurred out parts of the image. Rather than "protecting viewers" this instead casts the work in a very particular (and misleading) light.

Depicting children in thoughtful works of art provides a counterbalance to the flood of commercialized and thoughtless depictions of children we see in the mass-media - selling toys, clothes, breakfast cereal etc. Corporations will continue to be able to "use" children in their advertising because they have access to resources: money, lawyers, secretaries, lobbyists etc. Artists like myself already struggle under the various legal requirements that exist around working with children.

We already have laws to protect children. We ought to encourage artists who work with children, and protect these artists from the crushing weight of paperwork, classification, guidelines etc that serve only to erase children from gallery walls... When children partake in the creation of my work, they have the profound and enlightening experience of being a part of something done not-for-profit, but for love, for meaning, for its own sake. When other children see children depicted in art they see representations of themselves that are not commercialized. They see themselves as something being portrayed for its own sake, and for its own inherent worth.

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Other comments:

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