

Dear Readers,

**O**n a chilly day in November I walked the three blocks from D.C. Superior Court, where I was serving on a grand jury, to see a new exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. Word was that **Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture** broke new ground in examining the ways in which 20th century artists both communicated and obscured gay and lesbian themes in their work. I went back to the show on two subsequent lunch hours, but I did not linger at the video installations and thus missed what became the cause célèbre.

Within a week or so the Catholic League objected to a video that depicted a crucifix with ants crawling over it, an artist's testament to a lover who had died of AIDS. The Smithsonian quickly removed the offending video but held firm in not shuttering the exhibition before its scheduled February 2011 closing date. This despite intense pressure, including threats of budget cuts, from the new Congress. Most of the ensuing controversy focused on questions of art censorship and the quick compliance by the Smithsonian with the Catholic League's demands regarding the video.

But from my point of view (and the reason that I am discussing this in an issue devoted to the nature of museums) the more important point is that this exhibition exemplifies what museums should be about: designed spaces that provide opportunities for insight, enjoyment, and new ways to experience the world. In a period when gay and lesbian concerns are highly sensitive, a mainstream American museum, in a very tough political environment, chose to explore through design and display an important aspect of American portraiture that had been left mostly unexamined in the museum world. I was familiar with a number of the paintings and photographs in the exhibition, but their juxtaposition and interpretation here provided a new set of lenses through which to view them.

Those who have seen the show will know what I mean when I say that I will never look at another vintage Arrow shirt ad in the same way! This is, I think, what motivated me to spend three precious breaks from the jury room—I was seeing familiar work anew, I was gaining a wider perspective—this kind of expansive learning is extremely engaging. **Hide/Seek** was a very traditional exhibition in terms of its format, despite one or two somewhat interactive installations. But within its genre it was extremely well done: its scholarship took visitors to uncharted territory; the works selected were impressive in their quality and variety; the design and measured pacing of the galleries within the whole led the visitor forward; and the content provided insight into an important contemporary issue. It was an example of best practice that any museum would (or should) be proud to display. Isn't this what all museums strive to do? Through interpretation, intentional design, and exhibitry (whether artifacts in cases or hands-on components) museums provide time and space to explore both known and unknown worlds. This is the achievement of NPG's **Hide/Seek**, and why I think it provides an object lesson on the nature and role of museums in the 21st century.

Sincerely,

*Gretchen Jennings*

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Editor

from the editor



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