

# Beyond the Controversy: The George Washington High School murals and the Removal of Public Art

ILWU Local 34 Hall, July 9, 2019

Opening Remarks on the Living New Deal: Susan Ives; Moderator: Harvey Smith;

Panelists: Robert Cherny, Dewey Crumpler, Tamaka Bailey, Lope Yap Jr.

Susan Ives is a writer, editor, and communications consultant to nonprofit organizations, including the Living New Deal. She was conference coordinator for the 2018 conference “Women and the Spirit of the New Deal.” Her previous work includes vice president for Trust for Public Land and leading the creation of the Massachusetts Environmental Trust. She received a master’s in Public Administration from Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government.

Harvey Smith is Project Advisor to the Living New Deal and President of the National New Deal Preservation Association. Wrote a book titled *Berkeley and the New Deal*. Co-curator of the 2010 exhibit “The American Scene: New Deal Art, 1935-1943” at the Bedford Gallery in Walnut Creek, CA, and curator of the exhibit “Building Bridges, Not Walls” at the Canessa Gallery and the San Francisco Public Library in 2017 and at the Berkeley Historical Society 2018-2019. Former member of two teacher unions and the carpenters union.

## Introduction by Harvey Smith

I want to state from the outset that this is not a debate. We have deliberately not included those who wish to destroy the Arnautoff mural in this panel. This is a forum to sum up where we go from the point of the school board’s decision to destroy the 13 panel mural. If you are interested in the other side’s position, go to the SFUSD board website to view the over two hours of debate, pro and con, on two evenings last month.

I am not without sympathy for those who say the images in the mural are hurtful. I am likewise sympathetic to those who are deeply upset by nudity in art or by the provocative images by an artist like Robert Mapplethorpe. However, these feelings do not justify censorship. Certainly some images are not appropriate for “children or kids,” as almost all the mural detractors describe the high school students. More appropriately they should be referred to as adolescents, young people or young adults. I have been a high school teacher; I know high school students to be critical thinkers able to parse different realities. The urban youth I’ve taught see on the streets of their neighborhoods daily scenes that are both hurtful and violent.

I’d like to provide some context for this controversy, something I found to be completely missing from the school board hearings. These murals were created through the Works Progress Administration, one of several New Deal programs that employed artists and brought art to the public. When replying to people who ask “What is the Deal?” - I often flippantly describe it by saying, “Just think of now and then think of the opposite, that was the New Deal.” The New Deal was characterized by taking care of the 99%, not the 1%. Franklin D. Roosevelt articulated the New Deal’s policy directions in several key addresses. In January 1941, he spoke about the Four Freedoms – freedom of speech and worship, freedom from want and fear. In January 1945, he outlined his economic bill of rights stating everyone has a right to employment, education, housing and health care. These were not platitudes; the programs of his administration strove to make them real for all Americans. Furthermore, he envisioned a United Nations that would do likewise throughout the world. After his death in 1945, the UN founding conference was held here in San Francisco. Eleanor Roosevelt carried his ideals forward in 1948 by developing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Looking specifically at George Washington High School built by the New Deal’s Public Works Administration, we see a public school designed by one of the City’s most prominent architects and standing on a site that in this age would be gobbled up quickly by a greedy private developer and City Hall enablers. A team of artists embellished the building, included an African American, Sargent Johnson, who supervised a team of 40 assistants to create his massive relief on the football field. One of the murals was painted by a French immigrant artist, Lucien

Labaudt, who would become a wartime artist and war hero when he died on a mission in South Asia.

I say all this to show there was an ideological basis for the New Deal and what it produced. What is the ideological basis for those who wish to destroy a New Deal artwork, particularly one that they have grossly mischaracterized? If we were truly combatting white supremacy, we would be continuing the critique initiated by Arnautoff and instituting a defined program to get there.

We have been in the same place fifty years ago. During that time, The Black Panther Party articulated a Ten Point Program that included employment, housing and education. The Panthers advocated for education that would teach “true history.” They established their own health program. Likewise, in the 1969 Letter from Alcatraz, a Cultural Center, college, religious and spiritual center, museum, ecology center and training school were proposed to advance the traditional Indian way of life. We’re still waiting on all this.

The school board wants to spend roughly three-quarters of a million dollars on destroying artwork while we’re still lacking textbooks that tell true history. This money would also go a long way in interpreting the murals or establishing a cultural center.

Those who advocate the destruction of the mural do not seem to have a constructive program in mind, merely a symbolic gesture that has even been referred to as “reparations.” This is identity politics gone off the rails. What is behind trying to pit seemingly progressive allies against each other? I think most activists believe a substantial and effective strategy is needed. This is not about gestures but about dealing with structural and institutional change. This is not about a depiction of a dead Indian on a wall, but about dead Black, Red and Brown youth being killed on our streets. We are living in a new Gilded Age ruled by the titans of tech. Progressive people have to be collaborating together on essential issues, working together toward economic democracy.

I know the line of people speaking up for the mural last month collectively included people with hundreds of years of multicultural work on social and economic justice issues. Tonight our

panel similarly represents a diverse representation of activism in many spheres of work. Let me introduce the panel.

Robert Cherny is professor *emeritus* at San Francisco State University. He received his PhD from Columbia University. In his teaching and writing, he has specialized in US history since the Civil War and the history of California and the West. He is author or co-author of forty published essays and eight books, most recently in 2017 *Victor Arnautoff and the Politics of Art*. He has been a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, Distinguished Fulbright Lecturer at Moscow State University, Visiting Research Scholar at the University of Melbourne, and Senior Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Heidelberg. He served on the city's Landmarks Preservation Advisory Committee and is currently serving on the city's Historic Preservation Fund Committee.

Dewey Crumpler is Associate Professor of Painting at the San Francisco Art Institute. His current work examines issues of globalization and cultural co-modification through the integration of digital imagery, video and traditional painting techniques. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, and is featured in the permanent collections of the Oakland Museum of California; the Triton Museum of Art; and the California African American Museum, Los Angeles. He has received a Flintridge Foundation award, National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship Grant, and the Fleishhacker Foundation, Eureka Fellowship.

Tamaka Bailey is a member of the Oklahoma Choctaw Nation and a certified Community Teacher of Choctaw Language. He is a native born San Franciscan. He is a Storyteller/Magician/Performing artist, and a member of SAG/AFTRA (Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists). He is Co-Founder of the nonprofit organization Linking Rings Performing Arts Group and a Jefferson Award winner.

Lope Yap Jr. is a San Francisco-based film producer, director, production manager, assistant director and special effects producer. He is a native of San Francisco, attended George Washington High School, was inducted into its Hall of Merit in 2006, and is Vice President of the Alumni Association. His credits as assistant director and visual effects producer include many TV and Hollywood productions such as *The Hunt for Red October*, *Titanic*, *Farewell To Manzanar*,

Party of Five, Beverly Hills 90210, Just Like Heaven, Nash Bridges and many more. He is a member of and has been honored by the Directors Guild of America. He has been guest speaker and lecturer at many universities, colleges and schools.