

Is narcissism the source of outcry over 'offensive' art?

It seems that being a true-blue American today requires that you occasionally go out and get yourself offended.

Once you have been offended, you can join in the popular national pastime of marching in protest, filing lawsuits and, most importantly, appearing on the "Geraldo" television show.

When I was a child, and America was a more innocent place, preachers used to go out and buy *Playboy* magazine so they could become offended by the centerfold. This practice helped inspire many a hellfire and brimstone sermon on the evils of pornography. If applause had been allowed in church, some of those sermons would have drawn a standing ovation.

Of course, fashion and tastes change over the years. *Playboy* now seems refined compared to the magazines filling liquor store racks. They might provide a busman's holiday for a gynecologist.

But there is never a shortage of things to become offended about. If you are burning with desire to become offended, you can go to the corner of 15th Street and Wilshire Boulevard in Santa Monica and see Ed Massey's



Rich
Seeley

"controversial" art work.

It's the store window display featuring "... three-dimensional likenesses of two ghostly male figures hanging by their genitals while a female rape victim writhes in shock and pain below ..."

A group of "mothers, ministers and others offended" by the artist's work held a little protest Thursday evening. As best I could estimate, the protest was made up of one-third offended persons with signs, one-third photographers, reporters and television news producers and one-third curiosity seekers and voyeurs like me.

One young man held up a sign that said: "Pass Obscenity Laws," which made me wonder if our schools have discontinued teaching anything about the First Amendment and the U.S.

Supreme Court.

The protesters claimed to be horrified by Massey's sculpture, but I had a hard time figuring out what all the fuss was about. The figures are symbolic and hardly realistic. Anyone who finds them pornographic needs new glasses. The anti-rape theme is decidedly feminist and hardly the sort of fantasy sex imagery that characterizes adult books and videos.

As public displays of sexually explicit material goes, there are billboards on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, advertising movies and blue jeans, with images that are much more pornographic.

But this controversy proves that some Americans still cling to our Puritan heritage as if it were a security blanket.

Massey's scene is nowhere near as horrifying as the works of Hieronymus Bosch, the 16th century Flemish artist, whose bizarre and ghoulish "Garden of Earthly Delights" can be found in any library by any school child.

And Michelangelo's anatomically correct David, which every impressionable school child in Florence, Italy, has seen since 1504, is not considered a threat to public decency in that

city.

Plazas, parks and public spaces in Europe often feature sculptures of nude men and women, including warriors triumphantly holding up the severed heads of their enemies. An American looking to be offended by art works in public places could have a field day in Italy and France.

But in Santa Monica, U.S.A., we have a higher standard of morality, which permits us to be offended at the drop of a fig leaf. We will not allow ourselves to be subjected to images we do not want to see or ideas we do not want to think about. Our sense of moral uprightness is so great that we are willing to go anywhere to see the images that offend us and be exposed to the ideas that vex us. We suffer it all so we can bear witness to how offended and vexed we really are. With a little luck we will see ourselves on the 11 o'clock news.

Watching the offended protesters mug for the minicams at 15th and Wilshire, one might wonder which is the more powerful force in the modern American psyche: Puritanism or narcissism?