

Lindsey Meyers' art is intended to be controversial, in your face and thought provoking. What Meyers didn't expect was that affecting people would affect her art.

Meyers' collection, *Drift or Die Trying*, is her personal statement on segregation, class, and prejudice in American culture, and was slated to be on display at Il Covo Ristorante during this year's Around The Coyote Arts Festival in Wicker Park, Chicago. Inspired by the surveys that require checking a "box" in an attempt to identify one's racial, gender, economic and social status, the collection aims to blow the doors of prejudice and cultural preconceptions wide open.

"The work consists of 16 black and white images- 8 subjects with two photos each. All are 12x18 prints encased in 12x24 plexi glass sheets, and are hung simply with clips and wire. Each subject was asked to paint the box he/she fills out on a piece of canvas, if a box is checked at all. I shot the backside of the subject with the canvas clipped on, and then asked him/her to paint a list of his/her ethnicities on another canvas, and tacked that to the front side and shot the photo."

The time came and the work went up at Il Covo Ristorante. The installation hung for a full week before Carol Johnson, managing partner at the restaurant, informed Meyers that her photos had raised eyebrows and that regular customers of the establishment found the portraits "offensive".

The portrait that Johnson was referring to was a shot of a young man, Kyle-Jason Schwartz, who has the word "Jewish" displayed on his front. According to Johnson, customers found the depiction to be "concentration campish", and requested that Meyers replace the piece with something less offensive. Johnson went on to parallel Meyers' use of the word "Jewish" with the use of "the 'N' word" as a means of derogatory speech. Per Johnson's words, "I don't have a problem with something being thought provoking and just as you find the "jewish" thing okay and you are Jewish, doesn't mean I'd let an African American install something with the "n" word."

Also deemed controversial and offensive was another subject's portrait in which he is holding up his canvas sign which reads "Hinjew" as well as "Ashkenazie".

"I really just don't see how Jewish can be seen as obscene or a slur, which is what it was equated to by their management." Schwartz said.

Meyers and Schwartz were equally outraged, and Meyers refused to replace the picture. As a consolation, Meyers offered to provide a written explanation to be posted with the art during the viewing detailing the meaning behind the work. Meyers even offered to come into the main dining room during the festival to engage in an open discussion with anyone who may have had questions regarding the pictures. Johnson refused, stating in her email that she was not interested in a compromise. "I do not want to engage my customers in any kind of explanation, nor do I feel the need to 'enlighten' them".

Meyers was enraged, but stuck firmly to her guns. She explained to Johnson that the word "Jewish" was just as valid a description as "Caucasian" or "African American", and was *not* intended as a derogatory term. She also explained that the subjects chose how to classify themselves - she had no part in it. Not only was her work not intended to offend anyone, but Meyers herself is Jewish, so the accusations were nothing short of ridiculous.

Even after Meyers explained herself to Johnson, she still wouldn't budge. Johnson said, in her email response, that she would "place the 'non Hispanic' in its place and place the two Jewish references upstairs". The upstairs that Johnson was referring to is a private banquet room that was not open to diners during regular business hours. Johnson went on to state in her email that "I understand your reasoning and I certainly respect your artistic voice etc....but it has been brought to my attention more than once and it is not open for debate."

Meyers believed that her artistic integrity was at stake, and as a result, was left with no other option than to pull her entire *Drift Or Die Trying* collection from Il Covo.

"She's acting like this is a surprise. We discussed the work - there was no hidden agenda."

The collection, which was intended to shed light on social injustice and prejudice, was removed from Il Covo for those very reasons. In her initial email, Johnson assured Lindsey that she did not want to "play censor", but the fact is, she had. The only photographs that Johnson mentioned as posing a problem were the two pictures that depicted Jewish subjects. The non-Hispanic images were deemed inoffensive, and were allowed to remain on display.

Johnson continued to send emails to Meyers and to her husband which threatened the safety and well-being of Meyers' "art" and involved verbiage that included personal attacks on both Meyers' character and work ethic. Lindsey realized that this situation had evolved into something bigger and more ferocious than she had originally thought.

"I will not and do not accept any liability for your work left at my property...it is considered to be at your own risk. Sorry! I just want to be done with you." Johnson said in her email.

Meyers' is taking her fight public, contacting local news publications, radio stations, magazines, human-rights organizations and anyone else who will listen. What began as a statement on social prejudices has snowballed into a war of ethics and artistic fortitude.

Carol Johnson was approached, but refused to give an interview on behalf of Il Covo. In her email response she stated that "There was no controversy. The work that was hung was not the work that had been submitted for approval by myself, the previous owner or Around The Coyote. End of story." Representatives from Around The Coyote were also approached for an interview, but did not respond.

Meyers says that she will not back down to Johnson, and is only motivated by the events that have unfolded. "Nobody patronizes me...I'm not affected by her."

Lindsey Meyers' work is on display at John Fluevog shoes in Wicker Park, Chicago through the end of October. For more information, or to contact Meyers, visit her website at www.lindseymeyers.com.

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