

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



OUR 151ST YEAR

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RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS

**Security guard Brennan Kinney speaks with a Sullivan Goss art gallery associate on Thursday. An exhibition featuring antiwar works by John Nava has prompted loud criticism and even a few death threats.**

## Less-than-peaceful response to antiwar art

### Gallery owner hires armed guard after threats are made

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John Nava's fascinating "Neo-Icons" exhibition is a cleverly devised expression of his rage over Bush-era politics and war-making.

REVIEW IN  
SCENE  
MAGAZINE

By **VLADIMIR KOGAN**  
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

When downtown art gallery owner Frank Goss began planning an exhibition featuring antiwar works by artist John Nava, he knew it would be controversial.

But he didn't expect that the show would start a small war of its own.

After receiving what amounted to death threats, Mr. Goss beefed up

security, met with Santa Barbara Police Chief Cam Sanchez — who suggested that he keep his eyes open for suspicious individuals with packages — and hired an armed security guard to protect Mr. Nava at last Saturday's opening.

"I gave up counting at about 100 phone calls," Mr. Goss said of complaints from disaffected benefactors, who were outraged after he sent word of the show to the 5,000 people

on his mailing list. "We anticipated losing clients. We anticipated anger. I don't think I anticipated threats."

Though most of the calls have been civil, Mr. Goss said a few were particularly disturbing. Some said the exhibition of tapestries and paintings by the Ojai artist was treasonous. One caller suggested that Mr. Goss check to "make sure your insurance

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**Frank Goss,**

gallery owner, on the reaction to an exhibition of antiwar artwork, left, by John Nava

## Art controversies not unusual in S.B.

### ■ THREATS

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is paid up.” Another said he wanted to burn the gallery to the ground. And one woman, whose son is fighting in Iraq, told Mr. Goss he was taking advantage of his gifts of peace and freedom.

“We had a guy call and sort of read the riot act to me, and I listened for a while,” Mr. Goss recalled. “Then he said, ‘You better be careful tonight,’ in a deep, creepy voice. It was almost like Freddy (Krueger).”

In Santa Barbara, controversy about art is nothing new. Just a few weeks ago, a sculpture created by Colin Gray as part of a public art display drew outrage from a prominent local family, who appealed to the City Council, which had provided some of the funding for the project, to have it removed. Mr. Gray’s work “W” incorporated precariously positioned Golden Arches, though he said McDonald’s was not meant to be the target of the work.

Mr. Goss says that both Mr. Nava and Mr. Gray have done an enormous service to the community: They have made people think.

“I think Colin Gray’s piece is a spectacular piece of art that causes

dialogue, that causes us to think about the issues that are important to us all,” he said. “It has sort of ignited the town in controversy about things artistic and things political. I think that’s one of the great functions of great art.”

However, Ralph Waterhouse, owner of the Waterhouse Gallery, argues that the two issues are best considered separately. Mr. Colin’s work was paid for partly by taxpayers, and placed in the public right-of-way. Mr. Nava’s is displayed in a private gallery.

“Knowing Frank, I don’t think he was necessarily making a political statement,” Mr. Waterhouse said of Mr. Goss. “The artist was making a political statement, and Frank gave him a space to do it. I think that’s a perfectly legitimate thing for a gallery to do.”

Mr. Waterhouse warned that the response the Nava pieces generated could affect future decisions of other area galleries.

“I would think that anybody who is getting death threats, that would certainly have a chilling effect,” Mr. Waterhouse said, adding that he is confident most galleries will continue to book thoughtful and provocative shows.

For Leon Olson, a member of the city’s Arts Advisory Committee who said he hasn’t yet seen the Nava exhibition, the reaction is best compared not to Mr. Gray’s work but the violent protests that broke out in Europe after a Danish paper published editorial cartoons depicting Islamic prophet Muhammad last year.

“I’m reminded of the controversial cartoons, and what happened there seems to have snuffed out criticism there, and that doesn’t seem good,” Mr. Olson said. “I think the issue with Colin’s work was not so much his work, as it was the venue ... I think the problem was that it was a public venue, and that it was funded in part by a lot of people who haven’t made a contract to show work like that.”

Despite protests from people Mr. Goss described as the city’s most prominent citizens, he has vowed that the exhibition will remain on display through Nov. 22, as originally planned, and hopes a rich donor will fund taking show on the road across the entire country.

“I didn’t think twice of doing it the first time, and I would surely do it again,” he said.

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