



In the month of June this year the Australian media gave a lot of prominence to two stories that dealt with photographic artists exhibiting photographs of nude children in their work. The debate that still ensues raises very important issues that are worth taking up in this column.

It all began when internationally reputed Australian photographic artist, Bill Henson, photographed a naked 13-year-old girl using her breasts-bared picture on invitations to his latest exhibition in Sydney. A heated controversy followed that underlined serious public concern over the matter. Kevin Rudd openly condemned the incident while he and his fellow critics got a lashing in turn by the art elite.

In what appeared as an expression of protest, the taxpayer-funded magazine, *Arts Monthly*, carried in cover yet another photograph- this time of a nude six-year-old girl, Olympia, taken by her own mother, Polixeni Papapetro, also a professional photographer. Olympia is now eleven years old. In the photograph, Olympia sits naked with her arms round a bent leg. Two more photographs of Olympia inside were even more sexually explicit. One shows Olympia lying with her legs coyly crossed and hands behind her head and the other shows her from her waist up, hands on hips. In both these pictures Olympia is naked wearing only jewellery and make up.

Critics have argued that these pictures show remarkable parallels to some pics in the Playboy magazine and also to some of the pics kept by a convicted paedophile.

Now, Olympia is Robert Nelson's daughter and Robert Nelson is the art critic of *The Age* newspaper. In an ABC radio discussion, Nelson showed anger about the criticisms of the photograph and he attacked the public figures that "sensationalised" the issue "committing vituperative opinions to the

We know how Oscar Wilde was charged in court for his writings that suggested a defence of homosexuality. The prosecuting officer who read his poems in court followed up by querying from Wilde: "Do you call this poetry?" Oscar Wilde rejoined: "not when you read it".

public". Many arts circle stalwarts defend both Henson and Nelson.

In one sense, this is an echo an old and unresolved debate between art and pornography or art and obscenity. This controversy is perhaps unresolvable because it is hard to decide where art ends before obscenity. A serious confusion of terms in debate is natural. We know how Oscar Wilde was charged in court for his writings that suggested a defence of homosexuality. The prosecuting officer who read his poems in court followed up by querying from Wilde: "Do you call this poetry?" Oscar Wilde rejoined: "not when you read it". Before Wilde, many paintings and other works of art one time condemned as obscene are now regarded as great works of art. Homosexuality is not being criminalised in the Western world anymore and in other parts of the world it is regarded as more of an embarrassment to be kept concealed. In this limited sense, the criticism of artistic expression has reflected the values of the time and the maturity of art critics.

On the other hand, I do not think that the Henson and Nelson events can find easy justification. It may well be that Henson was genuinely trying to give vent to some mystical artistic expression. The artist, by nature, attempts to cross the border and attempts to push boundaries. In this way the creations of artists have led to great societal change. The French and Russian revolutions partly arose out of an

intellectual and artistic background. Literary men, dramatists, and now cinema artists have been behind a lot of necessary social change in the world. The Cinema in particular has the potential to be a powerful medium for beneficial change.

However, the issue here is not so much about art Vs porno. Whether it is a genuine freedom of expression or not would partly depend on the artist's intent. Whatever an artist's intent may be, he or she has to think of context, too. In other words, no artist can ignore general social concerns. An artist does not live in a vacuum and works of art have little value if divorced from social concerns. Issues of adult nudity have different implications when compared with issues of child nudity. Kids in any society form one of the most vulnerable of groups needing our protection. Human societies all over the world realize the need to protect children and assist in their healthy development to adulthood. Kids' self-exposure to nudity can spawn a sexualisation that would damage them. This means, firstly, that kids would develop a premature

CHILD NUDITY IS NOT FOR



ARTISTS

consciousness of sexuality that can replace normal innocent childhood behaviour patterns with a form of sexual behaviour that carries limitless risk to the latter. Secondly, childhood sexualisation would offer ladders to child pornography and paedophile activity thereby exposing children everywhere to sexual abuse and related dangers. Advertisers and marketers, lured by profit, may well get hold of a new pasture to feed on. The prospects are mindboggling. It was reported in *The Age* of 10th June that an explosion of a practice known as sex texting ('sexting' for short) is alarming teachers, police and youth counsellors in Victoria. With the use of new mobile phone technology that can send large pictures via internet school kids are being bullied into sending sexually explicit images of themselves. A survey by a teenage girls' magazine found 40% of respondents had been asked to send sexual images of themselves. Once a kid's nude picture enters cyberspace via mobiles etc it cannot be recalled. Poor countries like Sri Lanka in particular are the playground of such paedophiles who gain entry to such countries in the guise of tourists.

The art elite appear to treat valid criticisms of artists' employment of child nudity with a sense of disdain



Whether it is a genuine freedom of expression or not would partly depend on the artist's intent. Whatever an artist's intent may be, he or she has to think of context, too. In other words, no artist can ignore general social concerns. An artist does not live in a vacuum and works of art have little value if divorced from social concerns. Issues of adult nudity have different implications when compared with issues of child nudity. Kids in any society form one of the most vulnerable of groups needing our protection.



Shyamon Jayasinghe

and arrogance arguing for a freedom of expression that ignores social context. They are prone to condemn their critics as wowers and philistine or as ignorant people. "This is something that we understand", they would be tempted to assert, "You guys do not know and cannot know". This kind of response shows up a callous disregard toward valid social concerns and social fears.



SPICE CORNER

ශ්‍රී ලාංකීය චිතේ සිසල අවසාන සඳහා

Monday - Thursday 10.30am to 8.00pm
 Friday - 10.30am to 9.00pm
 Saturday - 10.30am to 9.00pm
 Sunday - 10.30am to 8.00pm

සින කළ ආහාර
 රසකැවිලි
 කාල
 කුනු පහ වර්ග
 විධිමත් සිවිසි සිසි
 සිනිනි සිංහල විකුලට
 ඉන්ද්‍රියානු ශ්‍රී ලංකා සාරි සහ බලවුද
 මැණික් හා සවර්ණාභරණ
 ගෝනේ කාඩ්ප්
 වෙසක් සුබපැතුම් පත්

දිනපතා උණු උණු ආහාර
 සුරිසානි
 බත්
 පාන් රෝස්
 වට්ටි

weekly video hire
75c
 විවිධ මාසික
 අධික කාලයක
 පොලී 1

16 Bellerive Avenue Mount Waverley
Tel : 9544 7189 Mob 0418 531 620 Fax : 9562 5503