

the **aldrich**
museum of
contemporary
art

By MEL GUSSOW

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, a small museum in Ridgefield, Conn., plans to present a variation of an exhibition on the nude in 20th-century art that was canceled last month by the Whitney Museum of American Art. The show, opening next June, will include an installation by Karen Finley, a drawing class in which she and others will take part as nude models.

In canceling the exhibition, "The Great American Nude," the Whitney said it was trying to cut costs so it could devote more resources to its forthcoming Project of America, a series of shows about the history of American art in the 20th century.

The decision was announced days after Ms. Finley and three other performance artists lost a case before the United States Supreme Court, with justices voting 8 to 1 to uphold a decency test for Federal arts grants.

The Whitney said the cancellation had nothing to do with the court case and that the show might eventually even be rescheduled. But Ms. Finley and other artists criticized the Whitney's move as a form of censorship and predicted that it would make it more difficult for them to receive backing from the National Endowment for the Arts and other agencies.

Harry Philbrick, the director of the Aldrich, said the museum's exhibition was partly a response to the Whitney withdrawal. "When I heard about the cancellation, that jolted me in different ways," he said. "I had wanted to do a show on the nude for some time, and it dovetailed with our discussions about the issue of censorship."

"Most people think there is freedom of expression, but there is a more insidious form of censorship, in terms of funding," he said. Although nudity in art has "been a staple for thousands of years," Mr. Philbrick added, he expects the exhibition to be controversial. The show is scheduled to run from June 13 to Sept. 12, 1999.

Several weeks after the cancellation, Willard Holmes, the acting director of the Whitney, acknowledged that there had been "a reaction from the art community and from people interested in preserving First Amendment rights."

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Bumped From the Whitney, Nudity Finds a Showcase

His response was that there was "absolutely no chill at the Whitney" and that the museum was not acting as a censor.

"The importance of First Amendment rights and free speech has been a continuing theme of this museum since it was founded by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney," Mr. Holmes said. "If there is a tradition in this museum, it is supporting the new voice, the iconoclast, the person who goes against the grain."

Recently the Whitney named Maxwell L. Anderson as its new director, replacing David A. Ross, who resigned last spring to become director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The Whitney exhibition would have included art from the museum's collection as well as Ms. Finley's drawing class. Because the Aldrich does not have a permanent collection, the artworks in its show will be drawn from other sources. Mr. Philbrick said it would include sculpture, paintings, photography and probably video, mostly by American artists. The exhibition will occupy the entire museum, some 5,000 square feet encompassing nine galleries, and an illustrated catalogue is to be published. Visitors will be invited to participate in the drawing class.

The show at the Whitney would have cost \$300,000 to \$400,000. Mounting the smaller Aldrich exhibition will cost around \$60,000, Mr. Philbrick said.

The drawing class installation, titled "Go Figure," was first presented last year at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Ms. Finley has shown other work at the Aldrich. A copy of her 1990 sculpture "Black Sheep" is in the museum's sculpture garden.

Speaking by telephone from Los Angeles, where she will soon be directing her first film, "Creating Kali," Ms. Finley said that she was pleased that the Aldrich was mounting the exhibition but that she was



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Karen Finley, whose work will be shown at the Aldrich Museum.

focusing her energies on other aspects of her career, beginning with the film (written by Ms. Finley and Kamala Lopez and starring Rosanna Arquette and Ms. Lopez).

Still discouraged by the Whitney episode, she said, "I have to transform myself and leave the museum world for a while."