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Aldrich rescues controversial exhibit

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The Whitney's loss is the Aldrich's gain — that's the position taken by Harry Philbrick, director of Ridgefield's Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, regarding its decision to exhibit an installation of live nudes after it was dropped by the Whitney Museum of American Art.

The exhibit, which will be open to visitor participation, will feature artist Karen Finley and others as nude models in a drawing class setting. It is scheduled to run June 13 to Sept. 12, 1999.

Censorship issue

When it canceled "The Great American Nude" exhibition last month, the Whitney claimed it was a cost-cutting move designed to benefit its upcoming "Project of America" series on the history of 20th century American art. However, the timing of the announcement raised the specter of censorship, coming just days after Finley and three other performance artists lost a case before the U.S. Supreme Court in which the Justices voted 8 to 1 to uphold a decency test for federal arts grants. The Whitney has denied that its decision was influenced by the court case and indicated that

the show might eventually be rescheduled.

"We will never know exactly why that show was canceled," Philbrick commented from his office earlier this week. "We are in the fortunate position of being able to judge an exhibition on its merits and whether or not we think we should do it." He explained that the National Endowment for the Arts only gives grants for specific exhibitions, and the Aldrich does not plan to apply to the NEA for its planned show. The museum relies on the funding from the federal government and the State of Connecticut for general operating support, specific education-

al programs and exhibitions, Philbrick reported.

Separate show

The director stressed that the Aldrich is not taking the Whitney's show, but rather expanding on an idea to do a show of the contemporary nude. He added that he had for some time contemplated such a show and the decision to go ahead was made in light of another exhibition planned for the year 2000 that will deal with the impact of religion on contemporary art. "We thought that by looking at these two subjects we really are touching on the two pillars of the history of art in the West. And that's a

very appropriate thing to do at the millennium," Aldrich said. Philbrick also pointed out that the Aldrich has worked with Finley before (her sculpture entitled "Black Sheep" is on display in the museum's garden), further facilitating this new collaboration.

Next year's show is expected to occupy all 5,000 square feet of the museum and will feature a number of other artists working in a variety of media — videos, sculpture, paintings, and photography. Philbrick estimates it will cost approximately \$60,000 to mount. The Whitney exhibit would have reportedly cost \$300,000 to \$400,000.

"Innocent decision"

Commenting on "the rather innocent decision I thought we were making," Philbrick remarked that the nude is one of the oldest subjects in art history. "It's been around forever," he said incredulously. "Obviously the whole treatment of the nude throughout Western art history has reflected changes in philosophical and religious points of view, ideals of beauty — all sorts of things have been worked out through the depiction of the human form."

Philbrick reported that he has gotten positive support from colleagues in the art world and museum who approve of

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the decision, and several new members have joined the museum as a result of the publicity. He added that he has not received "a single negative word" since the story broke.

The irony of the situation, he concluded, is that some of

the artists who have contacted the Aldrich about being in the show are what could be called "classical artists." "They're doing things which are really very conservative, very elegant — and that's what a large part of the nude in art is," he said. "It's not necessarily going to be salacious and controversial."