

California and the West



AURELIO JOSE BARRERA / Los Angeles Times

Letitia Houston wraps herself in cloth that will be used to cover her painting, which she did not want photographed.

'I finally had gotten around to the point to voice my opinions as an artist and to feel strong enough to do it and now they're telling me no.'

—Letitia Houston, Orange County High School for the Arts student

Gay Art to Be Covered Up for Show

By ZAN DUBIN
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LOS ALAMITOS—A Los Alamitos high school student has been forbidden to exhibit her painting, an abstract work that depicts two nude women embracing, in a senior class art show.

Letitia Houston, a senior at Orange County High School for the Arts, says the work addresses her homosexuality. But a school official said that she must entirely drape the painting with a cloth.

Other students with works in the exhibit, on view this evening at Rancho Santiago College Art Gallery, plan to shroud some of their art to draw attention to what they perceive as censorship.

Houston, 18, painted the 5-foot by 6-foot acrylic as one of four works she planned to contribute to the nine-person senior class exhibit. The abstract painting depicts two bare-breasted women, one clutching the other around the shoulders.

But, Houston said, Nancy Melbourne

director of the school's visual art department, told her on Wednesday that she must cover part of the work and change a statement she wrote to go with it.

In her original statement, in which she explores her experiences as a Catholic and explains the theme of her work, Houston wrote, "I don't want to live with the fear of going to hell because of loving another woman." In the reworded statement, "another woman" is to be changed to "another person," Houston said.

"I'm a little disappointed" in the high school, Houston said. "It's an art school, a place for you to grow and expand. I finally had gotten around to the point to voice my opinions as an artist and to feel strong enough to do it and now they're telling me no."

Melbourne, who said she is responsible for choosing works for the senior exhibit every year, said she was not censoring the art. She said she objected to the painting and to the part of Houston's statement that refers to her homosexuality because nei-

ther fits the theme of Houston's other submitted work—her struggle with Catholicism. Melbourne also said the painting was submitted late.

"I felt [the painting] was not dealing with her theme of her struggle with religion and all of a sudden, four days before the show, she's throwing in another whole issue," that of homosexuality, Melbourne said.

Melbourne said she initially wanted to remove the painting from the show but agreed instead that it would be draped, after Houston and other students threatened to withdraw from the show.

"One student's idea was to drape the canvas so [its presence] could show part of [Houston's creative] process," she said.

Melbourne said Thursday that the exhibit would be on view only from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. today. Several people associated with the show said they had thought it would be open for several days at least.

Art teacher Adi Yekutieli, whose class is

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presenting the exhibit, said Melbourne asked him whether Houston was gay and said the work might be found offensive by high school board members and harm the school's relationship with Rancho Santiago College.

Melbourne denied that she objected to the painting because it might be found offensive, but did object that it was submitted unfinished.

Yekutieli said that at least three other students submitted unfinished paintings for Melbourne's review, all intending to complete

them before the exhibit opened.

Ralph Opacic, the high school's executive director, said he backed Melbourne. "My job is to support the decision [Melbourne] makes," he said.

Houston's mother, Charlette Cook, has long been aware that her daughter is a lesbian and said she is proud of Houston's outspokenness.

"I have always felt that our American society is built on denial, and it has denied all kinds of people, all kinds of behavior and opinions," Cook said. "The world is too small now for all of us to remain secluded and unaware of each other."