

## STATEMENT

I am angered and disappointed by this decision. What I find most distressing is the fact that non-traditional ideas can be so intimidating. One of the functions of art is to challenge and possibly disturb what we might otherwise take for granted. It should be the role of the NEA to support work, no matter how controversial, which has been determined by the peer review process to meet the criterion of excellence. The cultural production of artists is equivalent to basic research in the sciences and must be funded so that knowledge, consciousness, and perception can continue to expand.

There is nothing that should be legislated out of public consciousness, because there are many things that need to be exposed to critical inquiry. The debate that can occur in regard to this kind of scrutiny is healthy. Art is an active arena. Art has the ability to remind us that there are no answers and no hard and fast rules; that 'reality' and 'morality' are not timeless givens but historically specific human constructions. Art is a place where the struggle of language and image can be acted out. It is a place where questions are asked.

It is the person who asks questions who is the greatest threat to the status quo because questions create doubt. A question is like a knife that slices through the screen and gives us a look at what lies behind it. In the last five years of NEA funding controversies, the work that has been so controversial has done just that - it has asked questions. It has cut through the veil of the sentimental clichés of patriotism, religion, traditional family values, and compulsory heterosexual sexuality, to reveal rich and diverse counter narratives - those which give a voice to life styles and beliefs usually on the fringes of sanctioned cultural production.

From the beginning, the controversy has centered on photography and performance - the two media with the greatest potential for veracity. Artists using these forms have presented challenges to a system of inflexible values created in a heterosexist and eurocentric tradition. Anything that provokes so fundamentally and so aggressively the foundations of such a powerful system will of course be open to self righteous and unscrupulous attack. In comparison to what we see on TV, in film, and in advertising, the work that is so controversial is extremely mild. Opponents have targeted work that is POLITICALLY sensitive not sexually obscene. Religious and

governmental agencies despise this kind of work because its critical nature disputes their authority. This battle is not about obscenity - none of our images are what can remotely be considered obscene. This battle is about fear - the fear of the realness of human experience. It's also about representation and meaning and who will control access to knowledge.

I am 47 years old. I live in a culture that does its best to deny women a sense of their sexuality and agency, particularly as they get older. Nine years ago, at the age of 62, my mother committed suicide. She perceived herself as being powerless and increasingly invisible. She did not have access to certain kinds of knowledge - she was working class, uneducated, and unaware of her options. I am not. My refusal in this body of work to be the good girl my mother struggled all her life to be is my refusal to die as she did. I believe the culture which now surrounds us is incapable of expressing the complexities of women's lives, of their sexualities, their gender orientations, their desires and pleasures. I believe images and words can change people and as an artist I use both in an attempt to alter cultural perceptions.

I want to locate a woman as the subject and sexual agent within my images in order to interrupt conventional perceptions of female sexuality. There is pleasure for this middle-aged woman in activity - in watching/looking, being in control, in receiving pleasure and in aggressively giving pleasure. Action is pre-orgasmic and takes place in the mind as well as in the body. A mature female sexual knowledge is suggested - a forceful, dominating, penetrating, carnal/intellectual knowledge of the body and intellect. This is a woman who knows the male body through experience and self knowledge. Her body is a site of intense physical and intellectual pleasures. Her use of sexually suggestive language personally negates notions of an "essential" feminine identity, particularly one of exclusive tenderness and passivity.