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## Smithsonian Christmas Exhibit Features Ant-Covered Jesus and Naked Brothers Kissing

By *Penny Starr*

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By [Penny Starr](#) | November 29, 2010 | 17:47

The federally funded National Portrait Gallery, one of the museums of the Smithsonian Institution, is currently showing an exhibition that features images of an ant-covered Jesus, male genitals, naked brothers kissing, men in chains, Ellen DeGeneres grabbing her breasts, and a painting the Smithsonian itself describes in the show's catalog as "homoerotic."

The exhibit, "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," opened on Oct. 30 and will run throughout the Christmas Season, closing on Feb. 13.

"This is an exhibition that displays masterpieces of American portraiture and we wanted to illustrate how questions of biography and identity went into the making of images that are canonical," David C. Ward, a National Portrait Gallery (NGP) historian who is also co-curator of the exhibit, told CNSNews.com.



A plaque fixed to the wall at the entrance to the exhibit says that the National Portrait Gallery is "committed to showing how a major theme in American history has been the struggle for justice so that people and groups can claim their full inheritance in America's promise of equality, inclusion, and social dignity. As America's museum of national biography, the NPG is also vitally interested in the art of portrayal and how portraiture reflects our ideas about ourselves and others.



An ant-covered Jesus/crucifix in "A Fire in My Belly" video, part of the 'Hide/Seek' exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

"These themes, historic and artistic, come together in 'Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture,' the first major exhibition to examine the influence of gay and lesbian artists in creating modern American portraiture," says the plaque. "'Hide/Seek' chronicles how, as outsiders, gay and lesbian artists occupied a position that turned to their advantage, making essential contributions to both the art of portraiture and to the creation of modern American culture."

The Smithsonian Institution has an annual budget of \$761 million, 65 percent of which comes from the federal government, according to Linda St. Thomas, the Smithsonian's chief spokesperson. The National Portrait Gallery itself received \$5.8 million in federal funding in fiscal year 2010, according to St. Thomas. It also received \$5.8 million in federal funding in fiscal 2009, according to the museum's annual report. The gallery's overall funding in that year was \$8 million.

St. Thomas told CNSNews.com that federal funds are not used to pay for Smithsonian exhibits themselves, including the "Hide/Seek" exhibit. The federal funds received by the Smithsonian, she said, pay for the buildings, the care of collections exhibited at Smithsonian venues, and museum staff, including the salaries for curators of exhibits. The exhibits presented at Smithsonian museums, including "Hide/Seek," are funded by donations from individuals or institutions. Among the donors who provided support for the "Hide/Seek" exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery are The Calamus Foundation, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The John Burton Harter Charitable Foundation, and The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute and a former senior economist on the congressional Joint Economic Committee, told CNSNews.com, "If the Smithsonian didn't have the taxpayer-funded building, they would have no space to present the exhibit, right? In my own view, if someone takes taxpayer money, then I think the taxpayers have every right to question the institutions where the money's going."

"Think about the Washington Post," he said. "They don't have to publish every op-ed that they get, right? They own the platform. In this case [the Smithsonian Institution], the taxpayers own the platform and so the taxpayers should decide what is presented on that platform."

Gary Scott, an economist who is a senior research fellow at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, had a similar view.

"Leaving aside the merit or lack of it in the exhibit itself, the notion that taxpayers don't fund it is unpersuasive," said Scott. "First, most of the overall budget derives from tax monies for the facility, and maintenance and staff. Second, the exhibit appears inside and is monitored by staff. Finally, if it was funded only by outside funding the exhibit would be outside in a

snowdrift.”

A spokesperson for the gallery’s external affairs office said the cost to mount the “Hide/Seek” exhibit is \$750,000, the most expensive exhibition to date at the National Portrait Gallery.

Located just seven blocks from the White House, the National Portrait Gallery is a Washington, D.C., tourist attraction because of its permanent collection of portraits of distinguished American figures. These include iconic pieces such as a version of Charles Willson Peale's painting of George Washington after the Battle of Princeton and John Trumbull's portrait of John Adams when he was vice president.



Image of a naked man in “The Pink Narcissus” video as exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery. (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

The "Hide/Seek" exhibit includes a television screen that shows edited versions of two videos, “A Fire in My Belly” and “The Pink Narcissus.”

“The Pink Narcissus” is a video released in 1971 by James Bidgood (b. 1933). The National Portrait Gallery’s description for the video says, “The film is a surreal portrait of the youth’s emergence into gay life, his coming out symbolized by the metaphor of a caterpillar’s metamorphosis into a butterfly.” The video was originally 71 minutes long, and has been edited down to 7 minutes for display in the museum, according to the description.

“A Fire in My Belly” was created by David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992). The full-length version of this 1987 video, according to the description at the exhibit, is 30 minutes long. The version viewable in the National Portrait Gallery has been edited down to 4 minutes. The description says, “A Fire in My Belly, a compilation of footage largely shot in Mexico, weaves together numerous images of loss, pain, and death into a metaphor for the AIDS epidemic; it concludes in a picture of the world aflame.”

The description speaks of the video artist's "poetic, yet furious, condemnation of the way greed, religion, and selfishness conspire to label certain people as outside the scope of our caring." It also quotes Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS, as saying, “When I was told I’d contracted the virus, it didn’t take long for me to realize that I’d contracted a diseased society as well.”



Image of crucifix overrun with ants in "A Fire in My Belly" video, at kiosk in the "Hide/Seek" exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

The four-minute version of the video shown in the exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery shows, among other images, ants crawling over the image of Jesus on a crucifix, two halves of a loaf of bread being sewn together, the bloody mouth of a man being sewn shut, a hand dropping coins, a man undressing, a man's genitals, a bowl of blood, and mummified humans.

A differently edited four-minute version of Wojnarowicz's "A Fire in My Belly" [video posted on YouTube](#) shows images of ants crawling over the image of Jesus (as does the version exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery), but also shows a man masturbating (an image which is not included in the edited version exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery, which only shows a man's genitals.). The YouTube version also carries a soundtrack that is different from the version exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery.

Wojnarowicz's collected papers and work are held by the [Fales Library and Special Collections](#) in New York City. CNSNews.com contacted the library to verify the authenticity of the edited version of the "A Fire in My Belly" video posted on [YouTube](#). Marvin J. Taylor, the director at the library, told CNSNews.com that the edited YouTube version of the video "is accurate in that it is part of Fire in My Belly. David [Wojnarowicz] had a cutting script for the film that includes these scenes, plus others. The score by Diamanda [on the YouTube version of the video] is not original."

Brent Phillips, the media specialist and processing archivist at the Fales Library and Special Collections, said the library supplied the "moving image material" for the video to the National Portrait Gallery, but added that he has "not seen the 'edit' that is currently part of the exhibit." The soundtrack for the video in the exhibit "came from an audiocassette in the David Wojnarowicz Papers here at Fales" and "is of an ACT-UP demonstration from June 1989," said Phillips in an e-mail to CNSNews.com. "The sound was added for the exhibit, but as stated, we have not seen the combined edit."

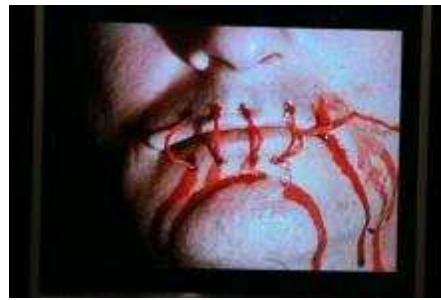


Frontal nude image of man in "A Fire in My Belly" video, part of "Hide/Seek" exhibit at Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

National Portrait Gallery historian and exhibit co-curator David C. Ward told CNSNews.com in an e-mail that "A Fire in My Belly" reflects the "violent, disturbing and hallucinatory" aspects of the AIDS epidemic.

"Fire in My Belly is an example of political engagement in artistic form with the AIDS epidemic by an artist deeply concerned with the exploration of our response to that medical and societal calamity," Ward said. "That it is violent, disturbing, and hallucinatory precisely replicates the impact of the disease itself on people and a society that could barely comprehend its magnitude."

“The museum was careful to edit the video for a museum audience,” Ward said. “It is a 4-minute sample of a much longer work and the curators and the museum were aware of our responsibility in introducing a difficult piece of work about an important subject in a way that respects the individual sensibilities of our public.”



Video image from "A Fire in My Belly" at the National Portrait Gallery. (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

A portrait of the video's creator David Wojnarowicz, buried up to his face, is also in the exhibit. The catalog description says of the image: “Here, on the brink of a premature death, Wojnarowicz is at once disappearing peacefully into the American landscape and being violently suffocated by it.”

The Smithsonian-published catalog also notes (p. 54) that “Wojnarowicz earned a reputation for public, and for many, an utterly cathartic, portrait of rage.” It then quotes a passage from Wojnarowicz's 1991 book, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, in which the artist writes of daydreaming about shooting darts dipped in HIV-positive blood into the necks of politicians and expresses his enmity for “walking swastikas that wear religious garments.”

“... and I'm waking up more and more from daydreams of tipping Amazonian blowdarts in 'infected blood' and spitting them at the exposed necklines of certain politicians or government healthcare officials or those thinly disguised walking swastikas that wear religious garments over their murderous intentions,” the Smithsonian catalog (p. 54) quotes Wojnarowicz as writing.



Image of a mummified human in video "A Fire in My Belly" at the National Portrait Gallery. (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

The “Hide/Seek” exhibit also contains a piece entitled “Charles Devouring Himself,” which uses the cremated ashes of an AIDS sufferer (who committed suicide) mixed with nail polish and painted onto a platter.

The catalog description (p. 256) for “Charles Devouring Himself” says the artist Jerome Caja “mixed his friend Charles's ashes with nail polish to create this image of Charles ingesting his own body. (Charles committed suicide once his life with AIDS became unbearable and recovery

was beyond hope.) One can hardly imagine a more gruesome inversion of Goya's famous painting of Saturn devouring his son. This searing condemnation of America's willingness to devour its sons during the AIDS crisis is immediately undercut by Jerome's campy frivolity and cartoonish vulgarity."

Elsewhere (p. 54) the Smithsonian-published catalog says: "Broadly modeled on Goya's dystopian Saturn Devouring His Children, Caja's painting depicts his friend and muse Charles Sexton engaged in an act of self-cannibalism. Literally painted on Sexton's ashes after his death from AIDS, Charles Devouring Himself, like Caja's Bozo F---s Death, an image of a heavysset clown engaged in anal intercourse with a grinning skeleton, hit that sweet spot, so often historically associated with drag queens, between pathos and aggression."

### Brothers Kissing

Another piece in the exhibit is a 1994 photograph (from a triptych) entitled "Brotherhood, Crossroads, Etcetera" by Lyle Ashton Harris. The "Hide/Seek" catalog says that Harris created the piece in collaboration with his brother, Thomas Allen Harris.



Brothers kissing as one holds gun to other's chest in photograph at the National Portrait Gallery. (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

"In this provocative center image, the brothers exchange a passionate kiss as Thomas presses a gun into Lyle's chest--conjuring the original biblical story of Cain's treachery toward his brother, Abel," states the catalog description (p. 265) of the piece.

"The image transgresses many dualisms we use to structure society: male versus female, black versus white, 'brotherly love' versus homosexual desire," reads the description. "And it raises provocative questions surrounding themes of domestic abuse between lovers, perceived violence among black men, and the dangers that come from engaging in an 'illicit' love--whether it be from disease, homophobia, or a lethal combination of the two."



Robert Mapplethorpe's "Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter" in the catalog for the NPG exhibit 'Hide/Seek.' (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

Another piece in the exhibit is Robert Mapplethorpe's 1979 photograph "Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter."

"In this playful inversion of the classic family photograph, leather-clad Brian Ridley sits in an ornate wingback chair, chained and shackled to his dominant, horsewhip-wielding partner, Lyle Heeter," says the National Portrait Gallery's description of this Mapplethorpe photo.

"Far from submissive, Ridley's wide-legged stance, upright posture, and direct address to the camera indicate that he willingly acts out his chosen sadomasochistic role," says the description. "The machismo of the couple's leather gear is undercut by the flamboyance of their living room--replete with an Oriental rug, pewter vases, sculpted lamp and clock, and grasscloth wall covering. That this homosexual S&M ritual takes place in the context of the couple's 'normal' life (which also includes antique collecting) powerfully challenges what it means to be a 'normal' or 'domestic' couple."

"O'Hara Nude with Boots" painting at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.



"O'Hara Nude with Boots" painting at the National Portrait Gallery's 'Hide/Seek' exhibit. (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

One of the paintings in the exhibit is "O'Hara Nude with Boots," from 1954, by Larry Rivers. O'Hara was an American poet (1926-1966). The painting depicts O'Hara standing nude and the exhibit description says Rivers was O'Hara's "sometime lover."

"O'Hara mirrors the seductive pose of the modern pinup and a classical goddess, bridging myth and art history," says the description. "While referencing grand-manner painting in the grandeur of the pose, by showing O'Hara posed outdoors, Rivers alludes to O'Hara's poetical and personal celebration of cruising for sex in the city. The double meanings shown in Rivers's painting echo O'Hara's enjoyment of masks and masquerade. This overtly homoerotic work was an act of personal courage in the cultural climate of the 1950s, a climate in which the repression of gays was as severe as that of political dissidents."



Annie Leibovitz photo of Ellen DeGeneres in the "Hide/Seek" exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery. (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

A 1998 photograph by Annie Leibovitz shows television talk show host Ellen DeGeneres with her face caked in white makeup and holding her breasts. The label accompanying the photograph says the "photograph presents a carnival of visual signs that highlight the ambiguities with which



DeGeneres presented herself in public and on her television shows. Amid the madcap mugging in the photograph, notice the aggressive presentation of the breasts versus the exposed boxer shorts. DeGeneres's mimelike mask both reveals and hides, and the cigarette gives her a tough-guy look."

### **Exhibit Fits NPG's Mission**

Co-curator David Ward told CNSNews.com the "Hide/Seek" exhibit is in keeping with the National Portrait Gallery's mission.

"The NPG is a museum where history and biography intersect with art, specifically the art of portrayal," Ward said in an e-mail. "In our permanent collection, we give primacy to the images of people who have made a significant impact on American history and culture.

"In our special, themed exhibitions, we have the opportunity to explore additional questions about American identity, history and culture.

"Hide/Seek evolved from the Portrait Gallery's ongoing commitment to represent the diversity of our people in recognizing the contribution that gay and lesbian Americans made to American art and culture during the last century," Ward said.

"Moreover, exploring the relationship between identity and art allowed us to ask wider questions about the complexities of human nature and its representation in portraiture," he said. "Thus the exhibition is subtitled, 'Difference and Desire in American Portraiture,' precisely because we wanted to show how concepts of gender, sexuality, and identity are fluid and changing, evolving over time and under different circumstances."

"We wanted to explore the idea of identity historically, going back to the late nineteenth century and then tracing how the art evolved in response to the development of modern society as well as how individuals coped with the pressures of modern life," Ward said.

"Also, to end on a wider note, this exhibition has never been done before."

"Although scholarship has provided us with many new insights into the lives of American artists and insights into their work," he said, "this scholarship had never been integrated into a museum exhibition of masterworks of American art that adds a new depth of understanding to how that art was made."

When asked by CNSNews.com if "Hide/Seek" had a central message, Ward said it does not.

"Hide/Seek has no single main message," the co-curator said. "What it asks us to do is to expand our understanding of what we think we know, whether that be art or American history. In particular, it asks us to consider how being marginalized or excluded by the mainstream, normative culture led gay and lesbian artists to create portraiture that was particularly insightful and responsive to the modern condition."

"Their attempt to grapple with a situation in which they lived a double life--in, but not fully 'of' the wider culture--created a situation in which they were able to deliver acute insights into the nature of and the depiction of the world and people around them," he said.



Children participate in hands-on arts activities inspired by the "Hide/Seek" exhibit at the NPG. (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

On Nov. 21, a "Hide/Seek Family and Friends Day" was held at the gallery in conjunction with the exhibit. The event was publicized on the Web site for the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution and other venues.

The promotion read, in part: "Gallery Talks & Tours, Kids & Families. EVENT LOCATION Throughout the museum COST Free RELATED EXHIBITION Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture ... NOTE This friends and family day includes music and hands-on arts activities inspired by the exhibition Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture. Guided tours of the Hide/Seek exhibition also available at special times."



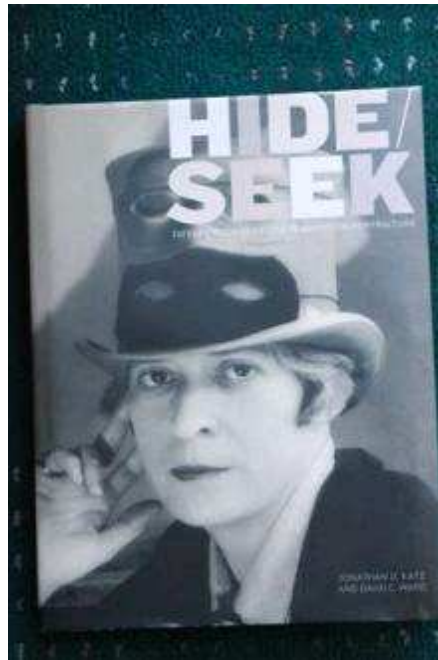
A child's drawing from "Hide/Seek Family and Friends Day" at the National Portrait Gallery. (CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

The "hands-on arts activities" for children inspired by the "Hide/Seek" exhibit were held in the atrium of the gallery.

CNSNews.com asked Ward if he thought the exhibit might be offensive to people who disagree with the homosexual lifestyle. He said, "I believe that the American public is mature and tolerant in its opinion of alternative points of view. This is an art and cultural exhibition that displays important and key works of artistic creation and attempts to interpret them against the background of American history."

"This exhibition identifies specific artists who were gay and discusses how that identity affected their art," Ward said. "It also shows how straight artists were also influenced in their art by questions about the fluidity of gender and identity. Insofar as Hide/Seek has an over-arching message it is that democratic culture consists of many strands and influences."

"It would be wrong for us as a museum to close off the discussion of any question because of a personal or political point of view," Ward said. "The National Portrait Gallery is a living institution, responsive to the social and cultural changes that we have experienced in America since our founding (and before!)."



Smithsonian catalog for "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture."  
(CNSNews.com/Penny Starr)

Ward continued: "In our permanent collection, we show the extension of the rights to all Americans laid out in the Declaration of Independence; that process is laid out in our Struggle for Justice room, adjacent to Hide/Seek. In addition to the various civil rights movements that have helped drive American history, we also document the cultural presence of people, as we do in Hide/Seek. Hide/Seek simply asks us to recognize the complexities of human identity, and the crucial role that gay and lesbian artists played in creating modern portraiture.

"The proof is in the art," Ward said.

Through the NPG's external affairs office, Ward and co-curator Jonathan D. Katz issued a statement to CNSNews.com about the video "A Fire in My Belly." It reads as follows:

"David Wojnarowicz went to Mexico and in Mexican life he found colorful metaphors for AIDS in America. Seeking to convey his anger at the American government for its inattention to AIDS he took images of suffering, marginality and extremity in an attempt to create an art that would awaken a sleeping populous.

"Katz feels that there is no more potent image of AIDS in America than the image of the construction workers [in the video] standing on the concrete that they are trying to remove from the wire suspended in the air.

"The crucifix, covered with ants, represents the lack of attention to Christian teachings in that Christian morality has been cast to the ground and the teachings of Jesus abrogated by speaking in his name. In the film this represents that the most vulnerable and the most in need are the most aggressively attacked."

The catalog for the exhibit, Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture [18], is published by Smithsonian Books and is being distributed by Random House. The catalog sells for \$45 and proceeds from the book go to the Smithsonian and the National Portrait Gallery, according to a spokesperson for the gallery.