

Torn over art

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Last week my wife and I flew from Santa Barbara to Phoenix in the first lap of our trip to Ireland to attend a conference on Chicano literature in Cork.

We never got there.

At the Phoenix airport, we boarded our flight to Philadelphia where we would transfer to another plane to Dublin.

After we boarded and everyone was seated, the captain announced that there was a cooling problem and the air conditioner had to be turned off. Mind you, this was in 100 plus degree weather outside and it felt as hot inside. We suffered for about an hour and my wife and I felt heatstroke.

Finally, the captain informed us that the cooling problem had been fixed and restarted the air conditioning. Relief!

We then started taxiing to the runway. However, the captain came back on the intercom and this time announced that the runway was being closed and we had to move to another one. But, because our plane was too heavy for the new runway, we had to return to the terminal and discard either passengers or baggage. We had had enough.

Still feeling not well by our heat ordeal and by now recognizing that we would for sure miss our Dublin connection (meaning we would have to spend the night in Philadelphia due to the fact that the next flight to Dublin from that airline would not be until the following evening), we decided that our trip was not meant to be.

We arranged to fly back to Santa Barbara relieved that we didn't need to suffer additional ordeals. I had heard about other such incidents where passengers have been kept on planes for even longer periods with no air conditioning, but I never thought this would happen to me. Well, it did.

In the meantime, while we didn't get to Ireland, our bags did and it took a week to get them back.

In a way, it was somewhat fortuitous that we didn't make the conference due to a messy situation there. As part of the conference, an art exhibit by Chicana artist Alma López was opened the night before the conference proceedings.

Alma, a former student of mine, is an accomplished digital artist and is best known for her controversial and revisionist depiction of Our Lady of Guadalupe, showing her in different sexualized poses including wearing a bikini. When first shown in Santa Fe a few years ago, thousands of Catholics, including the Archbishop of Santa Fe, protested. That exhibit was not closed but its duration was scaled back.

In Cork, similar protests occurred although the exhibit continued during the conference. It was not a very auspicious beginning for the significant conference to further introduce the importance of Chicano literature to Ireland.

I say that it was somewhat fortuitous that my wife and I weren't there to witness the protests because I, personally, feel torn by the reactions to Alma's images. I without reservations support her right as an artist to her interpretation of Our Lady of Guadalupe based on her assertion that it is her way of trying to make other Chicanas not feel ashamed of their bodies, a shame that she probably believes comes from their Catholic upbringings.

On the other hand, I believe that an artist, especially one such as Alma who is revising the most venerated image in the

Catholic world -- that of the Virgin Mary--, has a responsibility to ponder the impact on her audiences.

I believe that the artist has a responsibility to think about how her art may be offensive to, in this case, many Catholics. What is the relationship of artistic freedom and societal responsibility?

This is the dilemma that I feel with respect to what happened at Cork and because of this, it was probably just as well that I was not there. Perhaps this is a cop-out, but that's the way I feel.

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