

# The Student Body: Just A Work Of Art Or A Campus-Wide Attitude of Insensitivity?

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Contributor

Now that the initial furor caused by Julia Balk's sculpture *The Student Body* has died down, it is time to take a step back and examine what is wrong here and why. For those of you who have been asleep for the last week, Balk was commissioned by the Class of 1985 to create a sculpture for the outside of Davis library. Her creation, *The Student Body*, was just installed last week and immediately drew criticism for containing figures which many considered stereotypical and offensive. A petition was circulated which called for the artwork to be removed, and collected about 600 signatures.

Balk, who graduated from UNC in 1985, said that the sculpture was meant to positively portray a diverse group of students united by a common quest for knowledge. The figures, she argues, are all carrying books, and any stereotypes found in the figures are the result of reading too much into the figures of her microcosm. The administration, as of this writing, has hesitated to take a stand so far, although there has been loose talk that the statue could be moved to another location, such as the Haynes Art Center or the Ackland Art Museum.

Probably the most frustrating aspect of the controversy has been that the two "sides" have been arguing on completely different levels and never seem to connect. One group argues eloquently why the statues are offensive, but never addresses the creative issues involved. The other offers stirring arguments for free speech, but fails to adequately address why anyone would take such strong offense to the artwork. There is even disagreement about what is at the center of the debate — just a work of art or a campus-wide attitude of insensitivity?

It's no wonder this argument is getting nowhere. The only way any progress can be made is if both sides acknowledge there are (at least) two valid ways to approach the issue. This article will not attempt to resolve the issue, but will present it in more focus than the "art-lovers-vs.-oversensitive-minorities" rhetoric that has so far been displayed.

There is good reason to be skeptical of the appropriateness of Balk's microcosm. By attempting to represent the 23,000 member student body in only seven figures, the artist is almost asking

for trouble. The viewer is invited to scrutinize each figure for its latent meaning, and one can never be sure what meaning was intended, nor how it relates to the whole work. With these ambiguous conditions, it is justified to be skeptical at first when the two African-American figures are a basketball player and a woman evoking an image of African culture.

I myself have spent the last two years trying to depict the many aspects of the student body through my campus political cartoons for the *Daily Tar Heel*. I've often confronted the problem of drawing a "representative" group of seven people, and have never been totally satisfied with my solutions. An artist tackling this problem usually ends up counting on his or her fingers the number of non-whites, the number of females, the number of athletes (Republicans, etc.), which will be included. The result is a forced diversity, like that found in the Benetton ads or the "Cosby Show" on a bad night. There is no perfect solution, but some solutions are better than others.

One option which is particularly undesirable is the use of stereotypical images. Stereotypes are so emotionally charged that they kill the effectiveness of a character which is already straining to represent something else. And as stated earlier, the intended meaning of the character is often ambiguous, and its interpretation can only be complicated by stereotypical images.

The artist maintains that none of the sculptures were meant to be stereotypical, and that they actually portray positive images. This is true, but the sculptures *also* portray images which could easily be interpreted as stereotypes, as evidenced by the more than 600 people who identified stereotypes in the sculpture. The intentions of the artist should be respected, but the fact remains that whether intentional or not, emotionally-charged images were employed in the design of the sculpture.

The artwork could have been just as effective without the use of loaded images. It could have been possible to depict grace and beauty and the balancing of academics *without* also recalling stereotypes of Africans. It could have been possible to depict a romantic couple sharing knowledge *without* also recalling images of a seductive female. These images are accidental, but could have easily been avoided.

Anyone sensitive to "isms" will naturally be skeptical at first when confronted with a stereotypical image. After the initial discomfort of seeing such an image, the viewer searches for a context which would justify the use of the image. In other words, when an African-American female is depicted carrying *anything* on her head, the viewer immediately recognizes it as a stereotype he or she has seen before, then searches for something else in the artwork which would restore his or her confidence in the artist. The fact that the figures are all carrying books may be comforting to the viewer, but this may not be enough. The viewer's discomfort is especially compounded when the next noticeable figure is an African-American man with a basketball or a female seductively offering an apple.

It was probably the artist's feeling that the stereotypical images couldn't be avoided when choosing the seven figures. She probably felt that the images were a necessary sacrifice in order to portray the other positive aspects of the artwork (and there are many). It is up to each individual to decide whether this

sacrifice was worth it, and it is apparent that a large portion of this campus feels it was not.

Personally, I don't care for the sculpture. I am among those who would rather not be subjected to seeing it every time I go to Davis library. However, I am extremely hesitant to call for its removal for the following reasons.

The statues, as inappropriate as we may judge them to be, were honestly meant as a tribute to this university's students. The sculpture should not be listed as another example of the wave of "hate crimes" receiving front-page coverage in the *DTH*. It is perhaps more accurate to characterize the sculpture as an unfortunate misrepresentation of a noble idea (appreciation of this campus' diversity).

For art to retain any of its power, it must be kept intact with regards to the artist's vision. Any changes made to a final work of art without the artist's consent is an abridgement of speech. There is no use trying to find a cozier term for it. To compromise the artist's

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