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Monday, October 20, 2008

Row over removal of art works at the Maze

BRYAN COLL

ARTISTS AT an exhibition being held in the former Maze prison have accused the Stormont government of "total State censorship" after several art works were removed following objections by staff of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

Deconstructing the Maze/Long Kesh, which opened on Friday, is the first visual arts exhibition to be held inside the former prison, whose redevelopment is a source of ongoing political controversy in the North.

Artist Dara McGrath said that OFMDFM staff had threatened to shut down the exhibition only hours before a preview show unless architectural drawings, models and books were handed over. The items were then placed in a storage room in an area which was supervised by security staff.

McGrath told The Irish Times that the exhibits and books were of a non-political nature, but were removed by OFMDFM staff because they had not been submitted to the Ministers' offices for approval, unlike the other art works at the show.

"I was astounded by the amount of censorship at this exhibition", said McGrath, whose photographs and video installations were displayed at the Maze last night. "Artistic freedom is out the door because the Executive is so over-sensitive. They know the Maze is a powder keg and they don't want it to blow up in their faces." The OFMDFM is overseeing the controversial redevelopment of the 360-acre Maze site.

DUP Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister Gregory Campbell gave an indication this week that plans to build a multi-sports stadium at the Maze had been scrapped. Mr Campbell told the Assembly on Monday that representatives from soccer, rugby and Gaelic games had been asked to identify a preferred alternative location for the stadium.

The future of a proposed international conflict transformation centre to be based in the remaining prison buildings remains unclear. The centre is supported by Sinn Féin, but strongly opposed by the DUP who fear it would become a shrine to IRA and INLA hunger strikers.

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The drawings removed from the art exhibition included sketches of suggested designs for the conflict transformation centre.

John Reid, an architect and co-organiser of the exhibition, criticised the "unnecessary" use of security guards at the art show.

"I thought I lived in a country where you had freedom of expression but I don't believe that anymore."

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