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‘Deferral’: Performance piece at Corcoran takes on blood donation, gay rights

By Rebecca Ritzel, Published: August 2, 2013



Junnie Shah/Corcoran Gallery of Art - Artist Mary Coble.

You know those stickers that say “I saved a life today” or “Be nice to me, I gave blood”? Those stickers have never made artist Mary Coble feel particularly altruistic. Not because she’s averse to donating blood herself, but because she’s opposed to the federal government dictating who cannot.

Since 1983, the [Food and Drug Administration](#) has required that the Red Cross and other agencies turn down any male blood donor who acknowledges that he’s had sex with a man since 1977. At the beginning of the AIDS crisis, that made sense, Coble agrees. But given the improved state of donation screening, she and other advocates say it is time to lift the ban.

“This is an example of institutionally supported homophobia, in my mind,” Coble said. “It’s on my radar as an issue that’s important to discuss, and as an artist, I’ve found a way of visually discussing it.”

Coble's "visual discussion" will take place at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, beginning at 10 a.m. Wednesday, when a registered nurse will draw one pint of the artist's blood. Coble will then enter an operating theater set up in the Corcoran's atrium and begin painting the curtains with dots of her blood. She calls the project "Deferral" because she'll be joined behind the curtains by 11 gay men who would be "deferred" if they attempted to donate blood.

Instead of writing in bodily fluid, the men will be stitching with various shades of red thread. By Saturday, the operating theater will be decorated with various blood-donation slogans. Some of Coble's favorites include "Don't be such a wuss" and "Holding out for a hero."

"What does that mean if you're not allowed to give blood?" Coble said. "Does a gay man ever get to be a hero?"

She plans to incorporate some superhero imagery into the installation, and there are some indications that a heroic day at the Bloodmobile may be coming, although perhaps only for gay men who are celibate. In 2008, the American Medical Association came out in support of allowing men who have not had sex with another man in five years to donate, a standard Canada has since adopted. Last year, Rep. Mike Quigley (D-Ill.) and then-Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) urged the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to investigate revising the federal guidelines and got 60 members of Congress to sign the letter.

In March 2012, the department began studying the possibility of adopting "alternative donor deferral criteria," but no decision on whether to proceed with a pilot has been announced, said Curtis Allen, a spokesman for the FDA. He defended the agency's stance, saying the "FDA's deferral policy is based on the documented increased risk of certain transfusion transmissible infections, such as HIV, associated with male-to-male sex and is not based on any judgment concerning the donor's sexual orientation."

Many activists don't buy that rhetoric or have the patience for more government studies. On July 12, gay rights groups across the country staged the [National Gay Blood Drive](#). Protest efforts included picketing Red Cross offices in Utah and attempting to donate blood in Bakersfield, Calif.

As the daughter of two North Carolina nurses, Coble said she was raised understanding the importance of blood transfusions and has donated herself. She approaches her Corcoran project as a lesbian out to draw attention to a public health quandary that's a major issue within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community.

Sarah Newman, curator of contemporary art at the Corcoran, said she wasn't looking for a political piece when the museum asked Coble to participate in its "NOW at the Corcoran" contemporary art series; she simply asked her to respond to the space. Yet, given her past projects, Newman knew there could be controversy.

Coble moved to Washington in 2001. As an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, she studied photography but began exploring performative art while pursuing a master's degree at George Washington University. Locally, she's probably best known for a 2005 exhibition in which a tattoo artist punched the names of hate crime victims all over Coble's body. There was no ink in the tattoo gun, so her skin was covered in bloody sans-serif text. She's still represented by [CONNERSMITH](#), a gallery on Florida Avenue NE, even though she now works primarily in Scandinavia and teaches at a small academy in Denmark.

"Deferral" will be Coble's first installation at the Corcoran. The [museum](#) is in a much-publicized period of uncertainty in terms of its finances and governance, but Newman said the Corcoran is committed to showcasing performance art.

“We all batted around different names, and [Coble] was someone who people across the institution were interested in,” Newman said. “There is so much enthusiasm for her work here. The brief that I gave her was to respond to our space and respond to D.C. as an idea.”

Coble knew the Corcoran was near the American Red Cross’s headquarters, and she knew that the museum’s atrium space had a balcony walkway, which would allow visitors to look down on the installation, like medical students viewing a procedure.

“Her performance is so ideal, just what we were hoping for,” Newman said. “It directly engages a political issue, it explores a contemporary social topic, and it makes really good use of our space. This will turn our public space into something very private, and I think it’s going to be very powerful.

Ritzel is a freelance writer.

Deferral

by Mary Coble. 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Aug. 7; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Aug. 8-10. Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 17th St. NW. 202-639-1800. corcoran.org.