

Rudy & 'Yo Mama' duke it out over pic

Mayor wants museum 'decency' panel

Commission could face many legal obstacles

By LISA COLANGELO and MICHAEL R. BLOOD
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITERS

In proposing a decency commission to review art in city museums, Mayor Giuliani appeared to be treading in vague legal territory, experts said yesterday.

The U.S. Supreme Court in 1998 upheld a decency test for awarding federal arts grants. The decision required the National Endowment for the Arts to take into account "general standards of decency and respect for . . . diverse beliefs and values."

But a majority of justices said the law contained only "advisory language" that did not ban federal aid for what some would call indecent art.

Despite the ambiguity of the decision, Giuliani cited the ruling as a guideline for the proposed commission. "I'm going to put together in the next couple of days a group of people, call it a task force or a commission, that can set decency standards for those institutions that are using your money — the taxpayers' money," the mayor said.

"Should they be very, very general standards? Should they be more particular standards? There are people who have different views of this, but I do not believe that it is right for public money to be used to desecrate religion, to attack people's ethnicity," he added.

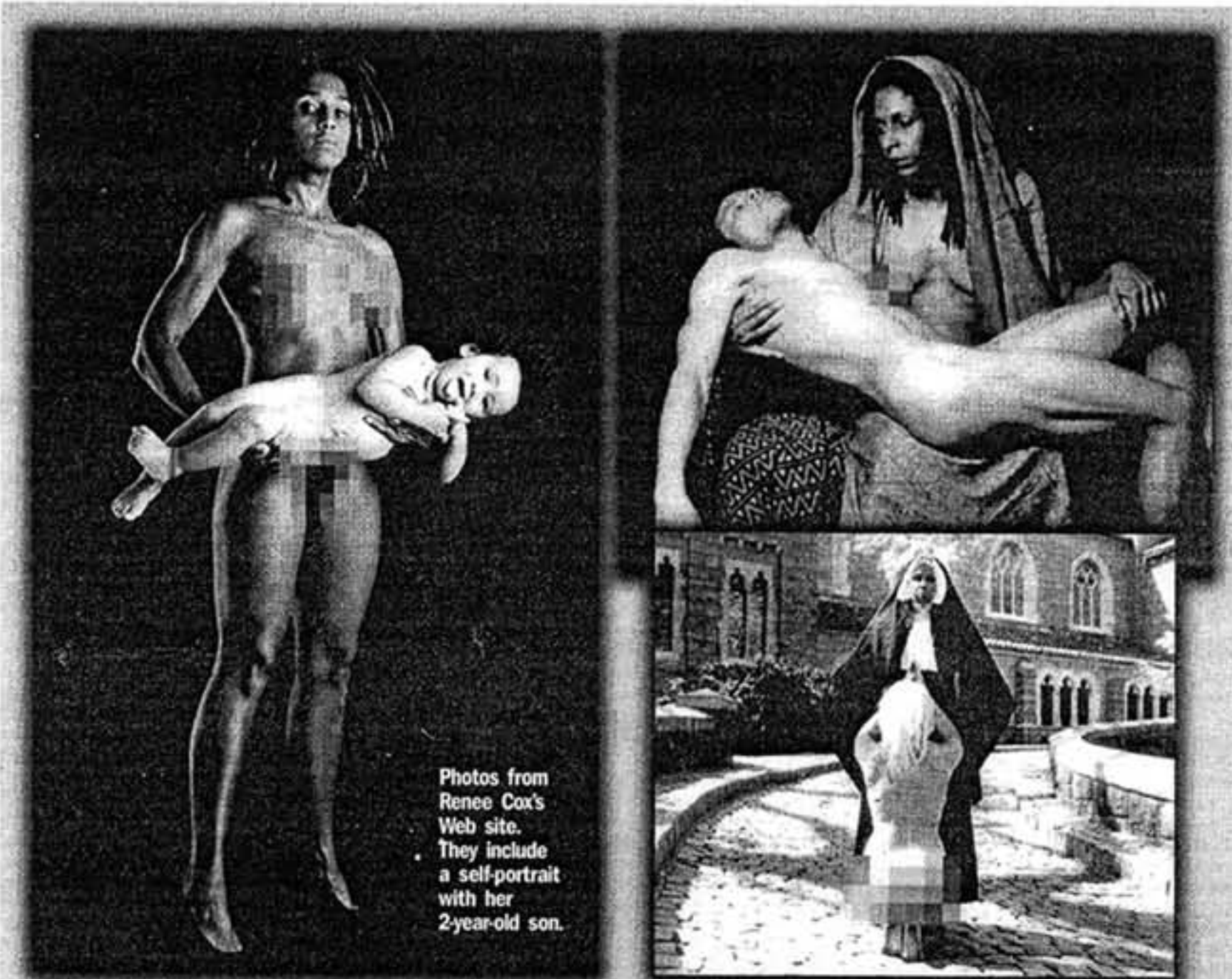
City lawyers moved quickly to put the mayor's idea into writing. It wasn't immediately clear whether a law would be needed to set decency rules or whether the mayor could act on his own.

"We are following the lead of the Supreme Court," said Daniel Connolly, a special attorney with the city corporation counsel's office. "It's a work in progress."

But some questioned the mayor's thinking.

City Council Speaker Peter Vallone said the idea was "legally dubious."

Larry Ottinger, senior attorney at the People for the American Way Foundation in Washington, said Giuliani misunderstood the 1998 ruling. "That decision does not support the creation of a ratings board, a censorship board," Ottinger said. "He's shown over his tenure he has very little appreciation for the Bill of Rights and the fundamental freedoms we enjoy as citizens of this great country."



Photos from Renee Cox's Web site. They include a self-portrait with her 2-year-old son.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RENEE COX

Maverick with a middle-class start

By ROBERT INGRASSIA
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Her work has rattled Mayor Giuliani and many Catholics, but photographer Renee Cox sprouted from a decidedly mainstream background.

Cox, born in Jamaica, came to New York with her parents as an infant and grew up in privileged Scarsdale and other areas of Westchester.

"What can I say? It was middle-class," said Cox, 43.

Cox, the only child of a social worker mom and an insurance executive dad, attended the private Catholic Blessed Sacrament school in Queens until fourth grade. The experience still contributes to her art, she said.

"It's a lot of propaganda and a very one-sided education," she said. "But it was positive for my handwriting."

Cox picked up an interest in photography as a teenager. She'd fool around with her mother's movie camera but soon came to love the still image.

"I wanted to make films, but I didn't want to be an independent filmmaker," Cox said. "Plus, with photography, I liked that you could take a picture in the morning and

have something to look at that afternoon. Call it the baby boomer instant gratification syndrome, I guess."

Cox showed an eagerness to tackle barriers as a teenager, when she played hoops for a boys' basketball team. After graduating from Scarsdale High School, Cox studied photography at Syracuse University.

After a stint as a fashion photographer, she earned a masters in 1992 from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan.

Later, she honed her skills in a program at the Whitney Museum of American Art and



Renee Cox (in '95 photo) has gained attention of mayor and Catholic leaders.

studied in Italy. Her first big break as an artist came in 1993, when she landed a piece in the acclaimed "Bad Girls" show at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo. Her subject — a 7-foot-tall nude portrait of herself holding her 2-year-old son — foreshadowed much of her later work.

Cox has earned spots in a number of exhibitions, including the Whitney's "Black Male" and "The Nude in Contemporary Art" at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Conn.

The work that touched off the latest Brooklyn Museum storm was part of an exhibit two years ago at the Venice Biennale, an arts festival in the Italian city. The work was displayed at the Oratorio di San Ludovico, a 17th century Catholic church.

"That piece was on display at that church for five months, and nobody had any problems with it," said Kathleen Goncharov, the curator. "But Europeans tend to be more open-minded."

Cox, who is married and has two sons, lives in SoHo. She keeps a studio in the DUMBO area of Brooklyn.

The artist's work reflects her personality, said Manhattan writer Brian Keith Jackson, a close friend. "She doesn't shrink from anyone," he said. "There aren't too many barriers for Renee Cox." With Bill Egbert

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD
DAILY NEWS CITY HALL BUREAU CHIEF

Mayor Giuliani said yesterday he wants to slap "decency standards" on artwork at city-funded museums after a photo depicting Jesus as a nude woman was unveiled at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

Stepping into another First Amendment minefield, Giuliani denounced the five-panel color photo, "Yo Mama's Last Supper" by SoHo photographer Renee Cox, as fiercely anti-Catholic and unworthy of a taxpayer-funded institution.

Cox, who posed as the nude Jesus, wasted no time in firing back at the mayor.

"It's all very hypocritical," said Cox, charging that the mayor has no standing to moralize about art, given his widely publicized relationship with "very good friend" Judith Nathan — which Giuliani acknowledged shortly before announcing he would separate from his wife.

"Now that he's been busted with the other woman, I wouldn't be talking about moral issues," Cox said.

Giuliani was undaunted. "I think that what they did is

disgusting, it's outrageous," he said yesterday of the artwork reported in the Daily News' exclusive stories.

"We are going to try to set up decency standards, and then . . . I'm going to look at what penalties are available for this," he said. "If we had decency standards, I'd submit that this photograph would never be exhibited in a building funded by the taxpayers."

Details of the plan were sketchy. Giuliani said he was unsure which museums or cultural institutions would be included, or whether his decency "commission" would set broad policy or approve specific artworks.

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Standards applied by the panel would include "showing decency and respect for religion, for ethnicity, for race," the mayor suggested. When asked who would serve on the commission, he said, "Decent people."

Critics immediately attacked the plan, saying it trampled on artistic freedom and threatened free speech.

"The bottom line is this is unconstitutional," said Larry Ottinger, a senior attorney at the

People for the American Way Foundation in Washington.

While offended by the photo, City Council Speaker Peter Vallone said the mayor was attempting to empanel a "censorship committee."

"It is not the role of government to play culture cop," said Vallone, one of several Democrats running for mayor.

The controversy over "Yo Mama's Last Supper" echoed the furor over the Brooklyn Museum's 1999 "Sensation" exhibit, which included dissected animals, graphic images of sexuality and a painting of the Virgin Mary dappled with elephant dung.

At the time, Giuliani tried to shut the museum and cut off its funding, but a federal court ordered the city to back off.

Cox's 1996 work is part of a 188-photo show, "Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers," which the museum calls one of the largest exhibitions ever assembled of current black photographers.

It offers a window on the black experience, with works as varied as schoolgirls clutching dolls, jazz musicians and placard-waving strikers. It also includes a photo by Willie Middlebrook that depicts a topless woman on a crucifix.

"Why is the Brooklyn Museum of Art showing no regard for the religious sensibilities of the community?" asked Bishop Thomas Daily of Brooklyn. "Why another vulgar display of anti-Christian sentiment? Is publicity more important than respect for religious belief?"

But most museum visitors yesterday said they didn't understand the fuss.

"To me it's the artist's prerogative. It's a piece of art like any other," said Arlene Rouse, a retired social worker. As for the mayor's decency commission, she asked, "Whose standards?"

With Elizabeth Hays



YO RENEE Renee Cox stands by her controversial "Yo Mama's Last Supper" yesterday at Brooklyn Museum of Art

LINDA ROSIER DAILY NEWS

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Mayor Giuliani

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Renee Cox