A curatorial crisis of confidence?

by Mark Iddon

A pre-Raphaelite painting, Hylas and the Nymphs 1896 by JW Waterhouse, was taken down from Manchester Art Gallery on January 26th. The act was filmed for a piece in the forthcoming exhibition by the artist Sonia Boyce. The picture is of a Greek mythological scene in which Hylas, the Argonaut and armour bearer for Hercules, in search of water happens upon a pool of naked water nymphs or Naiads. According to legend, they were so taken with his handsome, youthful appearance that they lured him to the water and he was never seen again. The room in which it was hung was named ‘In pursuit of beauty’.

A note was placed on the wall suggesting that there should be a conversation about how we display and interpret art. There were also some questions about how the female body is represented, how art can address issues of race, gender, sexuality and class, and what other stories could these artworks and their characters tell. Visitors were also invited to leave

messages on post-it notes on the gallery wall.

The public was very much in favour of the artwork being re-instated and indeed it was 8 days later. In the meantime the gallery gained a great deal of publicity both locally and nationally as news headlines expressed shock over the censorship of artworks at a prestigious gallery.

Having an open debate about what galleries are for and of the value and purpose of art is all well and good if it is for the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. However, the curator, Clare Gannaway, said that she felt uncomfortable with the way the work is presented and that she felt it necessary to test public opinion, is of great concern. No doubt the Sonia Boyce exhibition has been in preparation for some time, but it seems to be quite a co-incidence that this stunt has been played in the weeks following the walk-on girls in darts competitions, and the Formula One grid girls being no longer required.

Although, posed as questions for debate, the wording and phrasing of the particular questions is leading towards the divisive and separatist outlook of identity politics rather than a universalist human outlook. The stunt may have done its job in creating publicity for the Sonia Boyce exhibition but also reveals a crisis of confidence in the role of galleries and museums and also questions the ability of visitors to make their own judgment, and further their own understanding of the world around them.

Surely, galleries and museums are places where our views and perceptions could be

challenged and where we may feel uncomfortable, but that is part of learning and the pursuit of knowledge.

The discussion is just about to get interesting as we defend the integrity of art from those who advocate galleries as safe spaces where nobody is ever offended.

A full and open debate is required regarding the role and purpose of artworks, galleries and museums, and whether that role should be one based on the pursuit of knowledge and progress or the proposal to agree a particular narrative that is offensive to none.