

Tate Modern director warns of threat over freedom of expression

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The Tate Modern must be a place where “difficult and different positions” can be explored at a time when freedom of expression is under threat, its director Frances Morris has said.

Referencing the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, the Tate’s first female director said creative spaces must be championed as political leaders consider building walls.

Morris told the Press Association: “As the horizon diminishes, and the barriers go up across the world and Trump makes outrageous statements about gender, I think it’s incredibly important that we are able to see the creativity and innovation that comes from moving up horizons, and taking down barriers and celebrate gender.”

She added: “We need public spaces where people can set out their positions.”



Tate Modern (Charlotte Ball/PA)

Asked if the art gallery provides such spaces, Morris, who was promoted to her role last year, referenced the newly-opened Switch House’s Tate Exchange which aims to provide a place for diverse voices to generate fresh ideas that contribute to society.

She said evidence of the Tate as a space for opposing views was highlighted in 2016 when around 150 protesters took issue with the gallery after it featured the work of artist Carl Andre who, in 1988, was acquitted of the murder of his wife and fellow artist Ana Mendieta.

“We had a demonstration at the Tate ... where we were joined by 3000 school kids and we baited and we protested and called for the protection of, and enhancement of arts education in schools,” Morris said.

“Within 24 hours a group of highly committed, articulate women came in and did almost exactly the same in support of the legacy of Ana Mendieta. I think it’s really important that Tate is a place where people can come and make their voices felt.”



Frances Morris (Dominic Lipinski/PA)

She added: “It’s a space for those difficult and different positions to be confronted. I don’t think at the Tate we are in a position to intervene in those people’s rights to do that as long as they are in the law.”

Morris was speaking as she opened an all-female exhibition at the Turner Contemporary in Margate, Kent.

Entangled: Threads and Making features installations from the early 20th century to the present day, including work from Ursula von Rydingsvard who was born in Nazi Germany and grew up in a refugee camp.



Work from Entangled: Threads and Making at the Turner Contemporary (Stephen White)

Morris linked Rydingsvard's background to the current political climate, telling the Press Association: "I think what is particularly terrifying is the sort of ... almost stealth-like removal, of the kind of freedoms that we have taken for granted for decades in the western world, particularly, freedom of expression.

"So recent pronouncements about press, and alternative truth are very, very scary and we will do well to remember that much of this work was originated in a similar context."



Work from Entangled: Threads and Making at the Turner Contemporary (Stephen White)

She added: "Maybe it's kind of a trite thing to say but Brexit and Trump are a result, in some ways, of our leaders not listening. Or you could say our leaders not caring.

"Maybe it's late in the day but we all need to listen and care. And even the ivory tower of the art world needs to become a place where listening and caring and sharing happens."



Work from Entangled: Threads and Making at the Turner Contemporary (Stephen White)

Entangled: Threads and Making is open to the public until May 7 at the Turner Contemporary in Margate.