

Artists jump to Henson's defence

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ARTISTS and curators associated with photographer Bill Henson have expressed dismay at the "witchhunt" of one of the country's most prominent artists.

Kevin Rudd's description of Henson's work as "revolting" also caused a shiver among some in the cultural sector.

Australian Chamber Orchestra director and violinist Richard Tognetti said: "I think it's most unfortunate that the Prime Minister's first overt comments about culture have been to say it's revolting."

Tognetti collaborated with Henson on a concert tour that included the photographer's work, but not of the explicit nature of those in his current exhibition. "Nobody expressed negative reactions," he said.

Film director Fred Schepisi stood next to Henson and actor Geoffrey Rush at the National Gallery of Victoria on Wednesday, all there to promote the NGV's \$150 million endowment campaign.

Schepisi, director of *The Devil's Playground*, said censorship of artists was inappropriate, unless they broke the law. "There always seems to be an overreaction from public officials when anything out of the norm or slightly contentious raises its head," he said. "And that's a very dangerous thing. It's like a throwback to another time."

Henson's work is known internationally: he was Australia's representative at the 1995 Venice Biennale and his work shows at Robert Miller Gallery in New York, where he is due to have an exhibition later this year.

Elton John is said to be a collector of his work.

Jan Minchin, the director of Henson's Melbourne gallery, Tolarno Galleries, said the photographer was "revered around the world". "Never could I have imagined such an uninformed and extreme response to his work," she said.

Henson's photographs were seen by 115,000 people in 2005, when a 30-year retrospective was held at the Art Gallery of NSW, and then at the NGV in Melbourne.

Chris Deutscher, of auction house Deutscher and Hackett, said the controversy was unlikely to affect prices at auction.

"It will make people more aware of him but I can't see it having effect," Mr Deutscher said. "If it does, it might be a positive because more people are now aware of the edge to his art."