

The distinctions between art and porn can be very fine

THE decision by photographer Bill Henson and the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney's Paddington to permanently withdraw certain images from Henson's exhibition strikes me as a sad backdown to puritans such as the Prime Minister and the NSW Premier ("Show closed as police investigate nude child photos", 23/5).

Courts and police cannot be expected to make fine distinctions between art and pornography. It isn't possible to draw consistent, easily articulated and legally meaningful judgments as to the relative merits of (to name an esteemed few whose works have been banned) the painters Egon Schiele and Balthus or the photographers Sally Mann, Jock Sturges, Robert Mapplethorpe and their less accomplished rivals.

It's a stupid and unworkable law that makes acceptable the production and dissemination of masterworks, but would prosecute the apprentice works of what we arbitrarily call "major artists" and the works of serious amateurs.

Henson's images of underage girls and boys are potentially arousing to pedophiles, which makes their production and dissemination illegal in many jurisdictions. But we have to ask ourselves, is it appropriate to close exhibitions, throw out or permanently store away from view Henson's pictures, as well as Degas's paintings of nubile ballet dancers, Mapplethorpe's photographs of four-year-old children and Sally Mann's pictures of her own children? Do we really have to ban all images of children between birth and age 18 simply because some people's interest in them is not purely aesthetic?

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