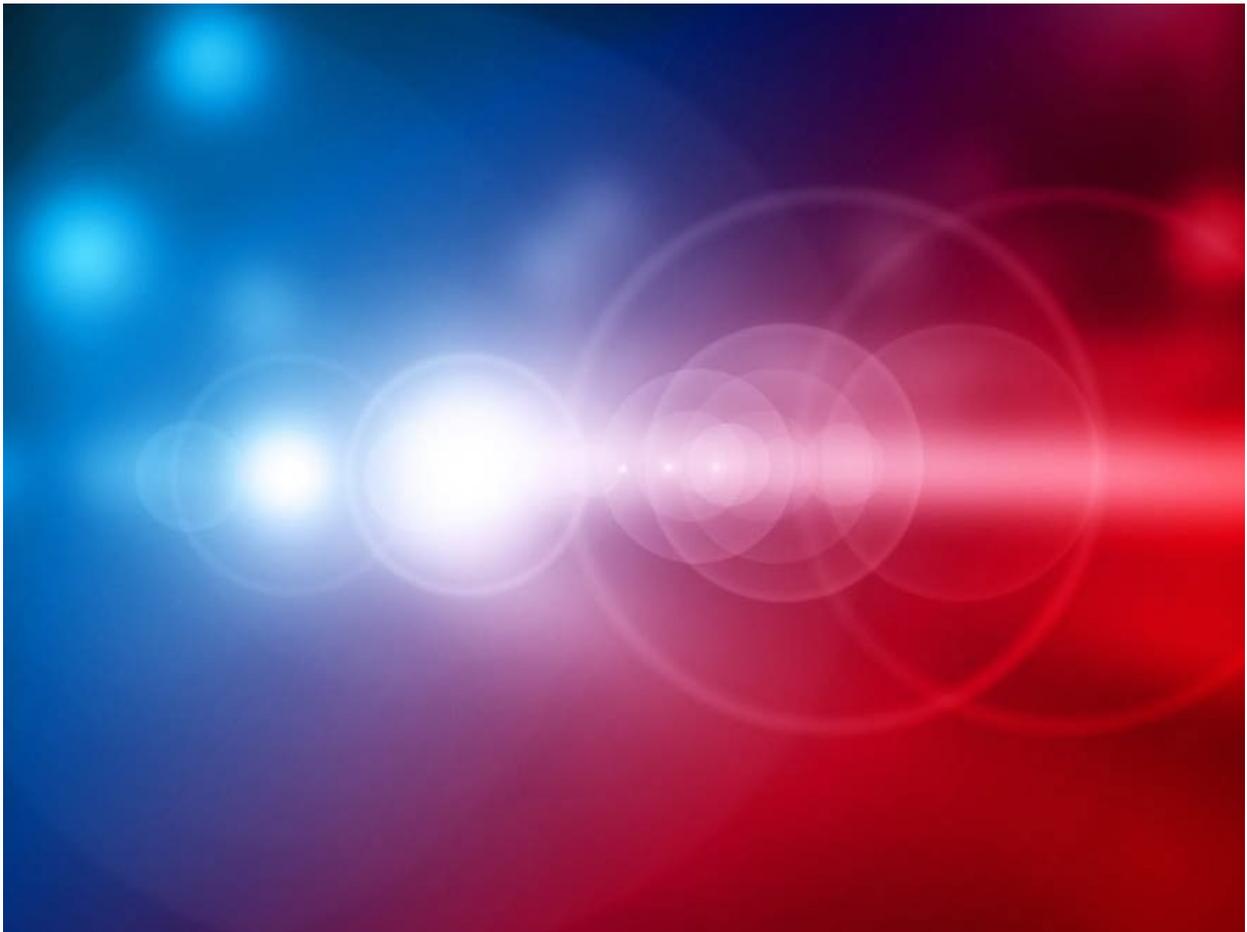


Embracing Our Differences Art Exhibit Vandalized: Sarasota Police

Public art inspired by author Toni Morrison's book "The Bluest Eye" was vandalized and destroyed at downtown Sarasota's Bayfront Park.



Tiffany Razzano, Patch Staff



Public art inspired by author Toni Morrison's book "The Bluest Eye" was vandalized and destroyed at downtown Sarasota's Bayfront Park. The work was part of the annual Embracing Our Differences exhibit. (Shutterstock)

SARASOTA, FL — Artwork displayed in downtown Sarasota’s annual Embracing Our Differences art exhibit in Bayfront Park was vandalized Tuesday night, according to a Sarasota Police Department report.

Each year, the Embracing Our Differences exhibition features 50-billboard- sized works of art accompanied by an inspirational quote. Thousands of artists and writers from nearly every state and dozens of countries submit their work each year.

[Photos of the vandalized work](#) shared by the nonprofit organization on social media show that the destroyed work was a canvas print of “Women of the Bluest Eye” by Tampa artist Donna M. Richardson. Her work was accompanied by a quote from Ojasvi “Oju” Ramani, a 6th- grade student from Virginia, according to the Embracing Our Differences website.

" An ideal world would be one where you accept others, but a perfect world is one where you accept yourself," the quote read.

In a statement shared with the Sarasota Herald- Tribune, the organization said, “[Diversity is a reality](#), not a slogan. Human beings come in all shapes, sizes, colors, ethnic backgrounds, abilities, and sexual orientations. That’s a fact...But the forces of reaction, hate, bigotry and prejudice haven’t gone away."

The artist wrote on her Facebook page, “The [truth strikes at the heart of hate](#)!!! This is what happens when the governor decides to ban important literature that speaks to our trauma. You cannot erase the truth! You will not silence our voices! This is the inspiration that drives my art. You can try, but I will not be stopped!”

The vandalized piece was inspired by the book “The Bluest Eye” by author Toni Morrison.

The story of the protagonist, Pecola, “resonated with me and millions of other little Black girls who [struggled to fit the typical standard of beauty](#) thus wishing for ‘blue eyes,’ including Oprah Winfrey and Viola Davis,” Richardson wrote in her artist statement. “To me 'Embracing Our Differences' must also include embracing and

celebrating what makes every individual beautiful, unique and worthy of love. You never know, they may grow up to be an Academy Award-winning actress or the first Black woman billionaire.”

“The Bluest Eye” is a frequently challenged book at schools and libraries — including in Sarasota County, where parents called for its removal from public schools last year [after reading rape scenes from the book](#), out of context, at a school board meeting. After this meeting, the book was temporarily removed from school media centers throughout the district.

The title also landed at No. 8 on the American Library Association’s “Top 10 Most Challenged Books for 2021.”

It’s often “banned and challenged because it [depicts child sexual abuse](#) and was considered sexually explicit,” the organization said. One witness told officers who responded to reports of property damage near Marina Jack that she saw a man “intentionally damage” the display, according to the police report.

The suspect pulled down the art and cut the canvas before leaving the park, she added.

An officer found the canvas on the southern portion of Bayfront Park, along the beach, and moved it next to where it was displayed.

Damages amounted to about \$3,000, according to reports. Embracing Our Differences plans to reprint the canvas.

Witnesses described the suspect as a 40- to 50- year- old white man with “a scruffy beard” and a red duffle bag, the report said.

Police found a Wesley Chapel man matching the suspect’s description near Ringling Boulevard and Orange Avenue. They questioned him, but he denied being at the art exhibit and said that he was coming from a nearby Publix.

While the police report named the suspect, he wasn’t charged with any crimes.

Whether the suspect is charged or not will be up to the Embracing Our Differences organization, police said.

Patch has reached out to Richardson and Embracing Our Differences for comment. This story will be updated when they respond.