



# CUBAN AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION

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Dr. Vincent Price  
President of Duke University  
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Email: dukepresident@duke.edu

*Re: Portrait of Che Guevara at the Nasher Museum's Pop America, 1965-1975 exhibition.*

Dear Dr. Price,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Cuban American Bar Association (CABA), a voluntary bar association comprised of over 1,000 lawyers in the South Florida community, we write you regarding the Duke Nasher Museum of Art's decision to feature "Day of the Heroic Guerrilla," a portrait that purports to pay homage to Che Guevara, in its Pop America, 1965-1975 exhibition.

As you know, since February 2019 the Nasher Museum has been featuring an art exhibition called Pop America, 1965-75, by Duke professor Esther Gabara. The exhibition purports to be the first "to consider Pop art throughout the Americas as an intentional strategy for communicating sensitive, politically challenging content." Of note, the exhibition includes a portrait of Che Guevara called "Day of Heroic Guerrilla." If you are familiar with it, there can be no mistake that this portrait of Guevara presents him as a romantic figure—a progressive icon and supposed liberator. We find that depiction of Guevara incredibly troubling because that is actually far from the truth, as known by numerous Duke alumni and CABA members whose family and friends were imprisoned or executed at the hands of Guevara and the Castro regime. As history reflects, Che Guevara was a murderous barbarian who killed anyone who failed to swear fealty to his communist, tyrannical political insurrections. His worldview—which he sought to impose through guerrilla tactics—was fundamentally at odds the basic tenets of liberal democracy: it was anti-democratic, coercive, intolerant, anti-pluralistic, and violent. You either swore allegiance, or you died.

Guevara was a mass murderer whose "revolution" in Cuba alongside Fidel Castro led to the murder and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of Cubans who were political dissidents or who participated in the country's prior regime. Guevara personally ordered and oversaw the execution of dozens of men (political opponents, journalists, businessmen, etc.) when he presided as the so-called "chief judge" of military tribunals at the La Cabaña prison in Cuba, which has been described as an "execution mill." See Maria C. Werlau, *Che Guevara's Forgotten Victims* (May 5, 2011); see also John Fund, *Re-Branding Guevara: Che the Butcher*, *The National Review*, Sept. 17, 2012. In ordering the executions, Guevara is reported to have said, "The investigating officer is always right; he always has the truth." *Id.* And also, he said, "Do not delay the proceedings. This is a revolution. Do not use bourgeois legal methods; evidence is secondary. We must proceed to convict." *Id.* Relatedly, Guevara was also instrumental in establishing forced labor camps in Cuba, which were used to detain not only political dissidents, but homosexuals,

devout Catholics, and others who were considered “undesirables” or “vagrants” by the intolerant Cuban dictatorship. See, e.g., Paul Berman, *The Cult of Che*, *Slate*, Sept. 24, 2004.

Notably, Guevara wanted to destroy the American people. He sought our annihilation. It is reported that Guevara advocated for the use of nuclear weapons against the United States during the Cuban Missile Crisis and was upset the confrontation ended without mass bloodshed. See, e.g., Sean O’Hagan, *Just a Pretty Face?*, *The Guardian*, July 10, 2004. In fact, Guevara admitted his sordid, murderous objectives, stating: “If the missiles had remained (in Cuba), we would have used them against the very heart of the U.S., including New York City. The victory of socialism is well worth millions of atomic victims.” Humberto Fontova, *FBI Foiled Castro Holocaust*, *The Miami Herald*, Sept. 27, 2014. Guevara’s desire to kill masses of Americans didn’t end there. It was also reported that in 1962 the FBI uncovered a terrorist plot by Guevara and Castro to place bombs and other explosives in numerous places throughout New York where they would inflict mass casualties—Macy’s, Gimbels, Bloomingdale’s, and Grand Central Station—the day after Thanksgiving. *Id.*

This is a just a short list of Guevara’s record as a human rights violator. We could spend dozens of pages documenting his utter disregard for the rule of law, and his militant and violent imposition of communist ideology.

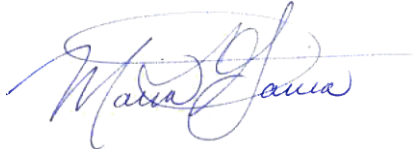
We understand that you have already received correspondence about this exhibit from CABA members Victor Diaz, Duke ’82, a CABA past president, and Nelson Bellido, Duke ’89, a former CABA Board of Directors member. Notwithstanding, it appears that their thoughtful letters and e-mails did not persuade Duke to take any action regarding this exhibit, including, at a minimum, to provide exhibitgoers with another perspective or comprehensive information regarding Guevara’s track record with respect to human rights. Given Duke’s various institutional initiatives, like that of the Duke Human Rights Center at the Franklin Humanities Institute, which promotes respect for human rights as a core value, we find Duke’s lack of responsiveness in this situation to be very unfortunate.

As an organization with a large Cuban American exile membership, we stand behind Msrs. Diaz and Bellido in their repeated calls for Duke to provide a balanced and informed presentation of the historical record with respect to the “romanticized” pop portrait of Guevara. Doing so would further one of Duke’s core tenets: provoking thoughtful discussion and consideration of diverse perspectives regarding Guevara’s place in history, and of the pain that this display causes for Cuban American Duke students, alumni and others who were victims of the Castro regime’s atrocities. We sincerely urge the Nasher Museum to re-consider its approach to romanticizing a historical figure like Guevara, who imposed a worldview antithetical to the values of a liberal arts school like Duke and who, through cold-blooded means, participated in the murder and detention of members of our families and friends. Though, on the surface, we do not ascribe political motivation to Nasher’s inaction to-date, we wonder whether Duke would be this insensitive—and unmoved by requests like those of Msrs. Diaz and Bellido—if the complaints pertained to an art exhibit glorifying a right-wing dictator.

Thus, our position on this is simple: American universities, responsible for educating and molding young minds, should not glamorize mass murderers—whether communist or fascist, left or right leaning. These institutions should condemn those historical figures who sought to stifle democracy, freedom, and free speech, and who murdered political dissidents in fanatical pursuit of political aims. Certainly, at a minimum, institutions like Duke should inform their students of the real facts surrounding someone like Che Guevara when portraying them on campus as cultural icons. Duke and the Nasher Museum have failed in this essential academic mission. As an organization whose members are products of educational institutions across the country, Duke’s actions and inaction are beyond disappointing, and even troubling. Skewing history based on political leanings is the kind of thing that happens in a dictatorship like Cuba, but it should never happen at a premier institution of higher education in the United States of America.

In sum, we request that Duke, at a minimum, provide viewers of this portrait with a balanced factual, historical perspective rather a one-sided romanticized perspective of this controversial historical figure. As we have set forth, there is nothing “heroic” about Che Guevara, who jailed, tortured, and murdered his political opponents in complete disregard for their basic human rights and without due process of law. We hope that Duke looks at this matter more closely and offers its alumni and this organization a real opportunity to discuss this important issue. By keeping that art piece up, the school offends many of its alumni—such as Msrs. Diaz and Bellido, as well as other Cuban Americans—who lost so much at the hands of Castro, Guevara, and their henchmen. Equally egregious, Duke’s continued support of this exhibit offends and undermines the fundamental values underpinning its reputation and academic environment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Maria D. Garcia". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Maria D. Garcia  
President

CC:

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