Melbourne artist forced to remove anti-war mural after reactionary social media campaign

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In a blatant suppression of artistic expression, Melbourne artist Peter Seaton has been forced to remove his three-storey mural depicting a Russian and Ukrainian soldier hugging after a reactionary backlash on social media branding it as "Kremlin propaganda."

Seaton's piece, titled "Peace Before Pieces," was unveiled last week in central Melbourne. He had spent $2,000–3,000 of his own money on the mural. In an Instagram post on the artwork, Seaton wrote: "I hope we can find peace and end this needless bloodshed."

This humane appeal was rapidly distorted and obscured. Seaton was barraged with online comments accusing him of being a patsy of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and championing the war in Ukraine, which has been fueled by the US and NATO. The comments toed the official line that this imperialist operation is a fight for "national self-determination."

Not a single media outlet or prominent figure has opposed the barrage to which the artist has been subjected. This has served to isolate Seaton, even though those issuing the hostile comments represent a miniscule fraction of the population, at odds with broad-based anti-war sentiment that exists among workers and young people.

Seaton painted over the artwork within days of its unveiling.

In a radio interview with Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) journalist Patricia Karvelas, Seaton said his intention was to put forward a "sincere message of peace beyond the labels, the identities that comes around countries and nationality."

He said that he spent eight months preparing the artwork, running the idea by others, including Ukrainians. One Ukrainian, who has since joined the online frenzy against Seaton, told the artist in an email that he agreed with the piece, saying it looked good. Seaton said he knew the piece would be confronting, but did not expect such a backlash.

Karvelas asked if Seaton was "trying to be sympathetic" to the Russian government, "because that's how it was perceived by some people." He replied: "No, not at all," adding, "I know the devastation that Russia has caused. It's obvious and it's horrific."

Seaton said that soldiers of ostensibly "opposing sides" might share a hatred of the war.

Importantly, Seaton gave an historical example, referring to the Christmas truce of 1914 in World War I when British and German troops laid down their weapons and played soccer together. He said, "they were literally forced at gunpoint … to go and kill each other because they'd just had this human connection."

The Christmas truce was the subject of a powerful 2005 film, *Joyeux Noël (Merry Christmas, Frohe Weihnachten)*, written and directed by Christian Carion.

Carion's film tackles the deadly trap of nationalism, the commonality of ordinary people, the indifference and hostility of the ruling elite towards "their" own soldiers, and the importance of art and culture in human society.

Explaining his decision to paint over the artwork, Seaton said he feels he may have "buckled to the pressure" of those saying the mural should be removed, "and self-censored."

In a tweet on Saturday, Ukrainian ambassador to Australia, Vasyl Myroshnychenko, said the mural was "utterly offensive to all Ukrainians" and claimed that it

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“creates a sense of a false equivalency between the victim and the aggressor. It must be promptly removed.”

In the most backward remarks, online commenters said painting a Ukrainian and Russian soldier embracing is tantamount to showing a Nazi hugging a Jew. The attempt to draw an equivalence between the reactionary Russian invasion and the Nazi genocide of six million European Jews relativizes the Holocaust, the greatest crime in human history. It is particularly sinister, given that fascist and neo-Nazi forces are prominent in the Ukrainian government's own militias.

The attacks on Seaton are part of a broader attempt to cultivate an hysterical and militarist atmosphere, in which any questioning of the official narrative is tantamount to treason.

Australia’s flagship, state-owned media organisation, the ABC, has been at the forefront.

Earlier this year, ABC journalist Stan Grant ordered the ejection of a young Russian-Australian student from the network’s weekly “Q+A” television show for criticising media coverage of the war in Ukraine.

Before being removed, Sasha Gillies-Lekakis, a 22-year-old post-graduate student from the University of Melbourne, told the program he was “outraged” by media reportage that simplistically depicted “Ukraine as the ‘good guy’ and Russia as the ‘bad guy.”

When Gillies-Lekakis sought to explain the death toll from attacks by Ukrainian government forces on Russian populations, Grant ordered the student’s ejection, falsely claiming that Gillies-Lekakis was “sanctioning, supporting violence and killing of people.”

Thereafter, Grant gave free rein to panelists to discuss the need for NATO and its allies to escalate the conflict. A Ukrainian academic, who was given the final word on the program, called for the imposition of a NATO no-fly zone over Ukraine, which would likely result in a World War III.

The sharpest expression of the anti-democratic assault on anti-war voices is the decade-long attack on heroic journalist and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange who exposed US war crimes in the Middle East.

Seaton’s piece expresses the deep hostility among broad sections of workers, youth, intellectuals and artistic layers to the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

The official attempts to cultivate a broader pro-war atmosphere have largely fallen flat. The militarist sentiments are primarily concentrated within the political and media establishment, affluent layers of the upper middle-class and the most disoriented and backward layers.

Increasingly, there is skepticism towards the official story of a war for “democracy” in Ukraine. In reality, the conflict was provoked and escalated by the US and its allies, as part of longstanding plans for war with Russia and China, aimed at ensuring American imperialist hegemony.

The endless wars of the past 30 years have had a deep impact on popular consciousness. Workers, moreover, are increasingly entering into struggle against the governments responsible for the war, including in the US, Britain and Australia. They are being forced to pay for the militarist policies, in the form of austerity budget cuts and massive price hikes, amid the continuing suppression of wages.

In its own way, censorship of Seaton’s mural underscores the need for the progressive sentiments among working people to be developed into a conscious political movement that defends democratic rights, including artistic expression, and wages war on war.

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