

Palestinian artists under attack

David Walsh
1 November 2023

In the midst of the genocidal Israeli attack on Gaza, Palestinian artists and those artists who defend the Palestinians continue to face censorship and suppression internationally. The financial aristocracy that believes it owns the art world—and, for that matter, the artists themselves—is attempting to suppress all signs of criticism and opposition to Israeli and US government policy.

Three Palestinian-American artists were recently able to prevail in Toronto against efforts by Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) officials at “censorship and alteration” of their work. The women sat in for 18 hours at the museum in protest against the museum’s actions from early Saturday evening until Sunday afternoon.

The women were brought in for a meeting with ROM management two days before the exhibition, *Death: Life’s Greatest Mystery*, which looks at the cultural and natural responses to death, was scheduled to open. According to the *Toronto Star*, one of the artists, Jenin Yaseen, “said the museum asked them to replace the word ‘Palestine’ with ‘West Bank’ and ‘exile’ with something ‘less harsh.’ At the end of the meeting, the group rejected the museum’s requests to make changes to their work.”

However, on the day of the members-only preview of the ROM exhibition, the artists were “shocked” to see their work had been modified without their consent.

“They showed me the panel that they had intended to replace with mine. They had completely cropped off my painting into a very, very small picture. I was so shocked to hear they completely cut off my painting,” Yaseen told the *Star*.

In the original work, the artist had included motifs as part of the representation of a Palestinian being pulled out of a grave by two soldiers, among them one symbolizing the Palestinian flag. The museum altered the piece “to remove the motif altogether from the full picture.”

One of the demonstrators posted a photo of herself next to her art work on X with the message: “I’m a Palestinian artist currently doing a sit in at @ROMtoronto for outrageously censoring my art display. The ROM is complicit in ethnic cleansing by censoring Palestinian culture, stories, history, mourning practices, and art.”

The artist went on: “The @ROMtoronto is so bothered by my art because it includes a small section depicting how Palestinian dead bodies are often withheld by the Zionist entity, how can you expect me to paint about death if Palestinian dead bodies are held hostage by our colonizers?”

And further: “A Jewish comrade was kind enough to buy me a roll of canvas and paint so I could recreate the section and display it myself at the @ROMtoronto during my sit in :).”

The same artist later posted: “The @ROMtoronto concedes and will now showcase our display with NO modifications as of 10/31. However this does not minimize the harm and abuse I had experienced at the ROM.”

The museum committed itself to restoring the original art work and text panels by 10 a.m. Tuesday 10 so that the public could see the uncensored exhibition. The ROM also apologized to the Palestinian-American artists. In a written statement, the museum expressed regret “for the disrespect you felt. We acknowledge our failure to understand your perspectives, which caused you pain and frustration at a time of great difficulty.”

Another Palestinian artist, Berlin-based Jumana Manna, continues to face attacks from pro-Zionist forces after comments she made in the wake of the October 7 Hamas attack. As she explains in an opinion piece on *Hyperallergic*, “My Instagram content was taken out of context and misframed by the German newspaper *Die Welt*, notorious for its bad-faith journalism. A smear campaign ensued, magnified by

vindictive trolling that exaggerated and distorted my comments. International institutions that have worked with me in the past or present are being harassed and pressured. This has resulted in the cancellation of public engagements and exhibitions in Germany, where I live, and elsewhere.”

Manna’s exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, connected to Ohio State University, has become a particular focus.

The center on its website describes the show, *Break, Take, Erase, Tally*, as Manna’s “first major museum exhibition in the US.” It “charts the artist’s multidisciplinary practice, exploring the paradoxical effects of preservation in agriculture, science, and law.” The work seeks to “visualize the slow violence of industrial agriculture, neoliberal economic policy, and policing.”

According to *Matter News*, “Manna argues that Israel sees the Palestinian landscape as ‘wild’ and ‘barbaric,’ requiring ‘control, refinement, or simply elimination.’ This, she said in a talk at the Center for Palestine Studies, is ‘persistent throughout the histories of colonialism and slavery.’”

While the Wexner Center has so far resisted efforts to close down the show, it half-capitulated in a thoroughly cowardly manner by initially removing Manna from a panel at a November 14 event. Then the Center ended up canceling the entire panel, explaining, “Due to current world events, we do not feel this is the right time to have conversations about a region at war. We will look for opportunities to reconvene the panel at a future date.” The absurdity of canceling a “Dialogue on Art and Social Change” at a time of global upheaval and widespread artistic outrage hardly needs to be pointed out. It simply demonstrates the unseriousness and unprincipled character of the entire “Dialogue.”

Manna has explained that it has become common for her to be excluded from events due to her speaking out against Israel. “Censorship often happens not directly, but through exclusion,” she told the journal *Protocols*. “I believe that is the most prominent form: a non-engagement with these issues by avoiding inviting Palestinians or Arabs, and more recently left-wing Jews.”

Billionaire businessman Les Wexner is a major funder of the Wexner Center for the Arts at the Ohio State University, named in honor of his father. The

Wexner Foundation recently cut its ties with Harvard University after complaining about the university’s response to the October 7 events and anti-Israeli protests by certain student groups. The foundation would have liked to have seen censorship and suppression of anti-Zionist critics.

Les Wexner, as the *Harvard Crimson* pointed out, “has faced scrutiny over a pattern of inappropriate conduct and misogyny under his watch as CEO of Victoria’s Secret, as well as for his ties to sex trafficker Jeffrey E. Epstein, who served as his financial manager for decades.”

Pro-Zionist outfit StopAntisemitism posted on social media a denunciation of Manna and added, “Demand @WexArts immediately remove her exhibition...those like Jumana Manna that glorify the murder of others must be shunned from EVERY facet of our society.”

Ohio State University’s Students for Justice in Palestine organized a protest Wednesday against the cancellation of the November 14 panel event.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact