

Anti-Zionist artists withdraw work from San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum exhibition

David Walsh
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A number of works have been withdrawn from the upcoming *California Jewish Open* exhibition at the Contemporary Jewish Museum (CJM) in San Francisco by artists opposing Israeli oppression of the Palestinians.

The anti-Zionist artists call themselves the California Jewish Artists for Palestine. As a group, the artists originally submitted works to the open call for the exhibition, intending “to make a statement ... in a coordinated effort to bring visibility to anti-Zionist Jewish artists in California, with anticipation that their works would be rejected by museum curators.”

The ten artists, Micah Bazant, Jules Cowan, Rebekah Erev, Rebecca Maria Goldschmidt, Steph Kudisch, Kate Laster, Ava Sayaka Rosen, Sophia Sobko, Arielle Tonkin and Irina Zadov, submitted works “with pro-Palestinian messages,” according to KQED.

Guest curator Elissa Strauss, in fact, chose five of the group's works for the show. However, the museum failed to respond to the artists' demands, “including transparency around funding and a commitment to BDS [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions].” This failure “reaffirmed for artists the importance of adhering to and demanding PACBI (The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel) in the Arts.” This led to the withdrawal of the works.

The museum framed the exhibition, set to run from June 6 to October 20, as an opportunity for “Jewish-identifying artists in California to submit artworks in response to a central question: How are artists looking to the many aspects of Jewish culture, identity, and community to foster, reimagine, hold, or discover connection?” The resulting exhibition, asserted the CJM, would bring “together the work of forty-seven

artists reflecting on their connection to Judaism, the world, and their own history.”

The protesting artists, in their statement, called on all cultural workers worldwide to join the BDS movement and to “abstain from collaborating with institutions that continue to normalize genocide and Israeli Apartheid.”

An eleventh artist, Liat Berdugo, separately withdrew from *California Jewish Open*, “concerned,” reports KQED, “that the exhibit wouldn't sufficiently address what she describes as the Israeli government weaponizing Jewish grief after the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks to justify the killings and displacement of Palestinians. She said the language in CJM's contract made her uneasy about whether the message of her work would be lost.”

Hyperallergic notes that the group of artists also expressed concern about a stipulation blocking them from altering or removing their artwork, “a condition they think may be linked to a recent incident in which artists altered their work with messages of Palestinian solidarity in the *Bay Area Now 9* triennial at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.”

“The group demanded the ability to modify or remove their works and control over curatorial framing of their pieces, as well as transparency in funding and ‘a full divestment from Israeli governmental and pro-Zionist foundation funding.’”

The artists pointed to one of the museum's funders, the Helen Diller Family Foundation, which has been criticized in the past “for its grants to Canary Mission, a group accused of doxxing anti-Zionist students, and to the American Freedom Defense Initiative, which was labeled an anti-Muslim extremist group by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2022.”

In an interview with KQED, artist Sophia Sobko insisted it would be hypocritical for the CJM to feature art criticizing Israel's bombardment of Gaza "while receiving funding that directly ... facilitates the material oppression that we're trying to raise awareness to stop." She added, "I wish for some ethical clarity and backbone and courage."

In regard to divestment from Israeli government financing, the CJM told the artists that "this condition cannot be met." A spokesperson told *Hyperallergic* that "the Consulate General of Israel to the Pacific Northwest has provided small amounts of funding for exhibitions and talks."

In a statement, one of the artists, Kate Laster, explained that

It is our connection to Jewishness: activism, diaspora, and the spirit of adaptation that brings us here. As Jews, we refuse to allow any justification, any weaponization of our generational trauma, or to give our consent to normalize apartheid. There is power in refusal—it's a form of honoring rebellion and imagining what cultural arts ecosystems could be like beyond zionism.



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