

Allora McCullough: “We are just two young artists in the Midwest of America, what can we do?”

The anatomy of an act of censorship: St. Louis arts center shuts down pro-Palestinian exhibition

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As part of a global process, the Craft Alliance, an arts center in St. Louis, Missouri, has censored two pro-Palestinian artists who dared to make a statement against the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza.

On June 24, officials of the Craft Alliance shut down an exhibition by local artists Dani Collette and Allora McCullough, accusing the pair of using “antisemitic slogan[s] and imagery” that called for “violence and the destruction of the Jewish state of Israel.”

This smear is based on what?

Collette and McCullough were selected last year to be artists-in-residence at the Craft Alliance. The 11-month program involves choosing two artists “to share a private studio, receive a stipend and tuition waivers for workshops, and compose a group exhibition that’s presented for a month at the end of the program.” (St. Louis Public Radio)

McCullough received her MFA in Ceramics from the State University of New York at New Paltz in 2015 and her BBA in Economics and Finance from McKendree University in 2010. Collette is a glass artist, who graduated with a BFA in Sculpture and Glass from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale in 2013.

Their exhibition at the Craft Alliance, with its pro-Palestinian themes, was entitled *Planting Seeds, Sprouting Hope*.

The Craft Alliance’s censors removed two of Collette’s pieces before the exhibition’s opening June 21. The artists were not aware of the removal until they arrived at the event. One of the works taken out of the show, according to St. Louis Public Radio, “was a bowl with a keffiyeh print, titled ‘Symbol of Solidarity,’ and the other was several watermelon seed-shaped pieces with the phrase ‘Land Back’ carved into them.”

A few title cards for Collette’s pieces were also removed, including for the artworks “Indigenous to Palestine” and “From the River to the Sea.” Not only was the exhibition entirely closed down several days later by the Craft Alliance, but McCullough was also fired from her job giving classes at the arts center. “I think that the reaction of removing my livelihood and removing Dani’s work, specifically her Indigenous work, are violent actions,” she told St. Louis Public Radio.

The show, fortunately, has been moved to the Fifteen Windows Gallery, which will hold an opening reception for *Planting Seeds, Sprouting Hope: Redux* on July 13. Numerous artists have been added to the exhibition.

The WSWs spoke to McCullough Wednesday afternoon, and she provided this account of the events. We consider it worthwhile to include the full details:

“In July 2023, Dani Collette and I were selected to be artists-in-

residence at the Craft Alliance. In August we met for the first time, at a Craft Alliance orientation. In September, we moved into our studios. Then, of course, in October the most recent escalation of the conflict in Gaza occurred. It was prominent in the news.

“As artists sharing a studio space, we would talk every day about what was going on in the world. The events around Palestine just continued to get worse and worse. We both felt a growing sense of responsibility to do something, but we didn’t know what it was. We continued to make our art works in line with what we had been doing as artists. I’m an animal sculptor predominantly, and Dani makes kinetic glass works that play with light and refraction.

“At the end of April, early May, we were experiencing two things. On the one hand, we were witnessing the student protests across campuses. I’m a former educator—the previous three years, I had been a full-time professor in the arts, and before that, for seven years I had taught in an adjunct capacity.

“When I saw the student protests, I felt compelled to participate, but I didn’t feel it was appropriate for me to join at a local campus in a community of which I wasn’t a part.

“I said to Dani, ‘I really want to do something because I know if I were back at school, I’d be with my students in those tents.’

“Simultaneously, our program director at the Craft Alliance had missed three or four meetings with us. It was not a good time, and the communication was not good. We were both frustrated.

“It was the first week of May, these meetings had been missed, the protests were continuing, and I said to her, ‘I really feel a moral obligation to do something, to help, and also to be on the right side of history. We are just two young artists in the Midwest of America, what can we do?’

“We realized we had an exhibition coming up. We had a chance to present our thoughts and feelings. We started to look for opportunities where we could contribute. We found an organization called Operation Olive Branch, a grassroots organization that has been working with people in Palestine to verify families requesting funds either to fulfill their evacuation needs, to pay for border crossing fees or to have funds to potentially rebuild their homes.

“We were really excited about the idea of helping, but we wanted to make a larger impact. With Operation Olive Branch, they have this organization called the Perinatal Project. That was specifically for doctors, nurses, therapists, midwives, lactation consultants and people providing

formula and diapers to pregnant and nursing mothers, and children under the age of two.

“We thought, we want to say something about what’s going on, nobody in their right mind could be against helping innocent mothers and children. We had a meeting in the middle of May with the Development & Communications Director at Craft Alliance, and she was very much on board. She and the Marketing & Communications Manager were both very excited about the opportunity to bring in healthcare workers to support the notion of helping mothers and children. They were helping us figure out how we could fund-raise through our exhibition, while still protecting the 501(c)3 non-profit status of the Craft Alliance.

“They asked, ‘Has your proposal for this exhibition been approved yet?’ We said, ‘No, because our past three or four meetings have been cancelled by the program director.’ So they said, ‘We’re going to keep working on this, but we can’t really move forward until it’s approved.’

“We had a meeting with the program director May 17 and told him of our intentions. He said, ‘Wow, this is a big shift from the work you have been making, I want to see some examples.’ Dani showed him some plans for a large stained-glass window. I had already been making some watermelons, so I showed him physical examples of the work. We explained we wanted it to be a very peaceful environment, very supportive of protecting children, a beautiful garden space to nurture this discourse.

“He said he would take it to the executive director and that we would hear back later that afternoon. We received a text message—at 1:40 p.m. that day—that it had been approved and that we could move forward with it, but that we could not use the Craft Alliance platform for the fund-raising component, we would strictly have to use our personal platforms. We agreed.

“Full steam ahead from that time all the way through June 20. We were working until midnight every night, with some all-nighters. We had to produce all the art work, it was just the two of us filling the gallery space. Also, for weeks we were posting videos and clips of the process, and talking about the fund-raising aspect on both Instagram and Facebook. We were very public about it.

“June 21, the day of opening, was when everything blew up. We worked all the way through the 19th and the 20th, and we turned in our titles, which later became controversial, on that Thursday [the 20th]. Craft Alliance officials received the titles, printed everything out, mounted them.

“Like many artists, we often don’t title our works until they’re finished. It’s just part of the process. That Thursday night I texted the program director, ‘Hey, these titles don’t look right in the gallery space. There are too many of them, they’re too large, they’re distracting from the art work. We’d appreciate revisiting them.’ They replied curtly that they weren’t going to make any changes. I pointed out there were some typos. I showed up to the gallery space, and he said, ‘OK, I should reorganize this so it looks better in the gallery space.’ They reprinted the titles and mounted them that same day. For them to say they didn’t have all the information ahead of time is blatantly false.

“This is the day of the opening. After the titles were sorted out, Dani and I left to have lunch, to relax a little bit before the opening. When we returned to the gallery at 5:00 p.m., we walked in and some of her artwork had been removed, and the program director was actively in the process of removing the title cards and replacing them with cards that simply had her name, the materials and the date.

“Dani was obviously very shocked, and upset. They had our phone numbers, they could have called, or texted. They had all afternoon, no one said anything to us. We walked in to find this going on behind our backs, without any effort at communication.

“The executive director, Bryan Knicely, accused Dani of knowingly making a violent statement with the phrase ‘From the river to the sea.’ He said that it was absolutely unacceptable because this was not a political

space. He said, ‘Art is not political. You’re not allowed to be political here.’ He argued with Dani about the meaning of ‘Land Back,’ because she is of Indigenous descent and she was making a connection between her family’s experience of genocide as a Native American and the plight of the Palestinians. They pulled anything that had the words ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Land Back’ from the gallery.

“On that Friday night, nothing was said to me about any of my work being problematic. So, after Dani’s talk with the executive director, that seemed to be the end of it.

“The next day, we got an email from Knicely saying ‘I’d like to have a meeting with you Monday morning.’ I said, ‘I’d like to know what the meeting’s about.’ I thought I was available, but Dani was not. No response whatsoever. Dani also insisted that she be able to record any meeting and that she wanted a statement in writing as to what the meeting was about.

“He wrote back that it was imperative we have a meeting and that he appreciated our making the time. Even though Dani had said she wasn’t available and she could meet Wednesday.

“The exhibition was open for a few hours Saturday morning, and then they closed it early, at 11:00 a.m., and they put a note on the door saying the gallery was closed due to short staffing.

“We walked in on Sunday morning to do some work with a videographer. The woman who works on Sundays opened the gallery as usual. She later wrote us that she had gotten into trouble with the director. He arrived and shouted at her for opening up.

“I had forgotten that I had agreed to house-sit on Monday, so I wasn’t available for a meeting then either. I explained I was available on Wednesday as well.

“Monday morning, without talking to us, the Craft Alliance released its statement accusing us of ‘antisemitism’ and ‘violence.’ We found out through the Internet that we were being terminated from our positions as resident artists. Then we received an email from the executive director about the public statements and their decisions. This was horrific and shocking to both of us. All we ever wanted to do was help a family in Gaza.

“You see, the fundraiser for the Perinatal Project turned out to be entirely funded, so they suggested we choose a family from the Operation Olive Branch spreadsheet. We chose a family. By the time of the opening, we were very connected to this family, we had already spoken to them through Instagram. The mother needs a C-section, she has two children, they’re living in a tent in Gaza without running water. We want to raise the money and hope she can get to a hospital in Egypt as soon as possible.

“After the Craft Alliance’s Monday press release, I had a phone conversation with the executive director and the chair of the board of directors. I was still trying to come to a peaceful agreement, a compromise, perhaps involving changing some labels, but keeping the work up. They doubled down and released another statement to the students and Craft Alliance community members that again accused us of ‘antisemitism’ and ‘violence.’

“We then realized there was no peaceful discourse possible. They were continuing to slander us and make claims that simply weren’t true. That’s when we started talking to the news media and looking for legal representation.

“I never thought I would find myself in this situation.

“What do I think actually happened? In all of the public statements of the executive director, he keeps referring to a ‘volunteer’ who objected to the art work. That’s a little misleading. Because the ‘volunteer’ is the chair of the board of directors, she is a ‘volunteer’ board member. She is the one who registered the complaint about our work. In order to protect the Craft Alliance’s donors, they moved forward this way. It comes down to money and, yes, cowardice in the face of money.

“We have heard from artists and many supporters. Lots of people have

reached out to help us. We are installing our show at a different gallery in St. Louis. We've expanded the exhibition, we've got some 15 to 20 artists who will be contributing work to help fund-raise as well, which is fantastic.

"We spoke to several previous artists-in-residence who said all their exhibitions had been political. For the past seven years the shows have been on contemporary political issues, gun rights, trans rights, immigration, cultural identity, you name it. The notion that somehow ours was out of line is again just blatantly false.

"We've spoken to artists who have had shows shut down before they opened, on the Palestinian issue. We've seen and heard a lot, so we know we're not alone in this. We stand by our actions, and we stand by our commitment to create a peaceful space to have discourse around difficult issues and focus on how we could help, literally, save the lives of a family. That's all we wanted to do.

"The idea that we could be inciting violence is antithetical to our purpose. The accusation of antisemitism has been personally painful because my grandfather is Jewish, and my fiancé is Jewish. The way that Craft Alliance officials are conflating being pro-Palestinian with being anti-Jewish, and conflating the Jewish people with the state of Israel is quite dangerous. We're facing a lot of that.

"We felt blindsided because in the weeks leading up to the opening we had several meetings with the arts center's leadership team—they approved it, they supported it, they wanted to host a night dedicated to healthcare workers to get more fund-raising support for us. To go from that to what they eventually did, kicking us out and making us leave immediately, was like whiplash. Also, they terminated my teaching position, so I'm unemployed. In the upcoming fall semester, I was scheduled to be teaching four to five classes a week. They haven't explained the termination, I haven't received anything in writing, any explanation. They simply decided to kick me out.

"The administration of Craft Alliance does not represent the community. I have had many faculty members, students and others express support. The faculty makes up the base, the core of the center. The administration is something else entirely separate."



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