

Nearly 800 artists protest Royal Academy's anti-Palestinian censorship

David Walsh
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Hundreds of arts professionals have signed an open letter condemning the decision by the Royal Academy of Arts (RA) in London to remove anti-Gaza genocide works from its Young Artists' Summer Show. The letter was published July 29 by Artists for Palestine UK.

As we commented in July, the Royal Academy, giving in to pressure from pro-Israel organizations, took down artworks that condemned the current mass murder of Palestinians.

One of the “controversial” works is merely a photograph of someone holding up a sign reading, “Jews say stop genocide on Palestinians: Not in our name.” The other, by a 16-year-old, is a charcoal drawing, in the center of which are three screaming women in headscarves, with a swastika above them. The youthful artist explained that he was “inspired by the recent conflict in Gaza.”

On July 15, Andrew Gilbert, Vice President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, addressed a letter to Axel Rüger, the Royal Academy's Chief Executive, which expressed “significant concern” about “three recent works which the RA is exhibiting.”

In addition to the two works already referred to, Gilbert complained about a work in the RA's Summer Exhibition 2024, Michael Sandle's charcoal drawing, “THE MASS SLAUGHTER OF DEFENCELESS WOMEN & CHILDREN IS NOT HOW YOU DERADICALISE GAZA.”

The drawing features a pilot in an aircraft, emblazoned with the Star of David, and in the background, a mass of bodies in burial shrouds. Sandle (born 1936) is a member of the Royal Academy and a well-regarded sculptor and artist, known for his anti-war and anti-establishment pieces. He has been exhibited internationally and his works are held by

museums and galleries in the US, Brazil, Germany, France, Japan, Australia and other countries, as well as the UK.

Gilbert, in his July 15 letter, observed there was a “long and admirable tradition of anti-war art,” but claimed that “some imagery and content relating works mentioned above comprise antisemitic tropes and messaging as defined by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism.” But there is no hint of antisemitism in these works. Instead, there are strong and legitimate indictments of Israel's genocidal policies.

The IHRA definition, however, as we pointed out previously, includes this as one of its “contemporary examples of antisemitism”: “Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.” But the problem here does not lie with the artworks or the artists but with Israeli government policies—aimed according to a UN commission's findings last month at the “extermination” of the Gazan population—as well as the faulty IHRA definition.

The Royal Academy officialdom, like its counterparts around the world, capitulated immediately upon receiving Gilbert's letter, and removed the two youthful works. Sandle's remains on display.

In an unprincipled statement, the RA argued that

We recognise that an exhibition for young people and artwork by young people is not an appropriate environment for volatile public discourse.

As we commented three weeks ago,

Heaven forbid that young people should protest against daily atrocities and even “extermination”—the deaths of as many as 186,000 people, according to *The Lancet*, including tens of thousands of women and *children*.

The recent open letter protesting the RA decision was signed by Royal Academicians Jock McFadyen, Rana Begum, Vanessa Jackson, Tim Shaw, David Nash, Helen Sear, David Mach and Goshka Macuga. The signatories also included more than 100 Jewish creatives and several Jewish organisations.

Visual artists Nan Goldin, Rosalind Nashashibi, Adam Broomberg, curators David Company and Michael Pattison, and writers Natasha Walter, Kamila Shamsie, Sabrina Mahfouz, Fatima Bhutto and Gillian Slovo also signed the public protest.

Other signers include comedian Alexei Sayle, playwright Caryl Churchill, filmmakers Ken Loach and Aki Kaurismäki, writer Laura Mulvey, along with fashion designer Bella Freud (daughter of painter Lucian Freud), directors Mike Leigh, Peter Kosminsky, Asif Kapadia and Farah Nabulsi, musicians Brian Eno, Ana Tijoux and Robert Wyatt, photographer Shahidul Alam and actors Juliet Stevenson, Harriet Walter, Maxine Peake, Alia Shawkat and Adam Bakri.

The July 29 open letter begins,

We artists and human rights defenders, many of us Jewish, condemn the shameful decision of the Royal Academy of Arts to censor artworks by young artists that respond to Israel’s genocide against Palestinians in Gaza.

It goes on,

Far from protecting Jews, the RA is lending support to a racist, anti-Palestinian campaign that aims to silence expressions of support for Palestinian people.

British arts institutions have the ethical, historical and legal duty to uphold freedom of

expression and anti-discrimination. Those that fail to meet these obligations have, rightly, faced peaceful grassroots measures including artist-led boycotts in order to defend the democratic functioning of our cultural spaces. ...

The International Court of Justice has recognised the plausible risk of genocide in Gaza and condemned Israel’s underlying system of apartheid and occupation. We call on the Royal Academy and all arts institutions to end all complicity in Israel’s genocide and apartheid, including by ending their silencing of artists who speak out against it.



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