

# Michigan State University cancels event over pro-Palestinian art

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In the latest instance of a university violating democratic rights in defense of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the administration of Michigan State University (MSU) in East Lansing recently canceled a campus event over a piece of art with a pro-Palestinian image.

MSU's Broad Art Museum had scheduled its Fall Opening Party for the evening of Friday, September 13. The party's organizers had received over 500 RSVPs for the public event, which was to celebrate the simultaneous opening of three exhibitions: *Diasporic Collage: Puerto Rico and the Survival of a People*; Esmaa Mohamoud's *COMPLEX DREAMS, Seeing in 360 Degrees: The Zaha Hadid Design Collection*; and Samia Halaby: *Eye Witness*.

On the morning of the opening, artists and curators received an email from museum leadership informing them that their event had been canceled due to "staffing and continued capacity challenges." When confronted over this sudden cancellation, museum and university administrators insisted that content of the artwork in the exhibits had played no part in their decision. This was a lie.

Rather than the scheduled party, the museum administration suggested an opening that would admit only the artists, curators and their close friends. For some reason, the museum stipulated that these attendees would be required to use the service entrance. Meanwhile, donors and museum board members attending the opening were welcome to use the front doors.

On September 18, the co-curators of *Diasporic Collage*, Yomaira Figueroa-Vasquez and Dalina Perdomo Álvarez, were invited to a meeting with museum administrators where it was explained to them that, because of a complaint, their exhibition would have to be changed. Within a half hour of the end of the meeting, Figueroa-Vasquez and Alvarez found that their exhibition had been changed *for* them.

The focus of the complaint, whose source MSU will not reveal, had been a single piece of art in the exhibition, a large, woven version of a photograph from 1973. The artwork, *Piquete en el capitolio*, by Kuwaiti-Puerto Rican artist Alia Farid, presents a group of Arab refugees in Puerto Rico protesting US military aid to Israel. Signs held by the protesters include the messages "Down with Zionist Occupation," "Justice for the Palestinians" and "Palestine Yes, Racist Israel

No." The had been acquired by the Broad Museum on October 3, 2023, four days before the Hamas incursion into Israel provided the pretext for the subsequent Israeli mass murder.

When Figueroa-Vasquez and Álvarez returned to the exhibition after their meeting with administrators, *Piquete en el Capitolio* had been moved to a less visible spot. In addition, a warning sign had been placed near the front of the exhibition. The sign reads in part,

Some content in this exhibition draws connections to Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the depiction of protest signs that include controversial content.

Whom is the museum protecting? The state of Israel has murdered at least 40,000 Palestinians. Or, if you trust the medical journal *The Lancet*, close to 200,000 Palestinians. That is, nearly 10 percent of the Palestinian population of Gaza one year ago. Whose interests are served by obscuring the artwork and providing a trigger warning?

After language distancing the museum and MSU from the art, the sign closes with an invitation to "learn more about the University's commitment to Academic Freedom."

Palestinian artist Samia Halaby is no stranger to censorship. In January 2024, Indiana University canceled a retrospective exhibition of Halaby's work scheduled to open February 10. The exhibition would have been the first retrospective of the artist's work in the US.

As the WSWS reported

In late December, Halaby received a call from David Brenneman, the director of Indiana University's Eskenazi Museum of Art, where the retrospective was to be held. Brenneman told the artist that employees had raised concern about Halaby's Instagram posts expressing outrage at the devastation of Gaza and terming Israel's acts genocidal. After this phone call, Halaby received a two-sentence note from Brenneman formally canceling the retrospective without providing

an explanation. Many of Halaby's paintings were already at the university, including works lent by museums around the country.

As far as MSU goes, like all major universities, its administration's strings are pulled by a governing board packed with wealthy and/or prominent figures. Figures associated with one or both of the big business parties often play wield significant power. In the case of the MSU Board of Trustees, it is largely the Democratic Party and its orbit, which fully backs the genocide in Gaza, in charge. A glance at the board's membership makes clear the faction of the ruling class that directs policy at MSU:

**Dianne Byrum** is a career Democratic Party politician, who served two terms as the state's House Democratic leader.

**Dennis Denno** is owner of Denno Research LLC, a polling company, and formerly chief of staff to former Democratic state senators Virgil Smith and Buzz Thomas. Along with fellow board member Rema Vassar, Denno is the subject of a March 2024 ethics investigation.

**Dan Kelly** (Chair) is the sole Republican member of the Board and an attorney whose Kelly Firm, PLC, serves "municipalities, school districts, and various corporate clients."

**Renee Knake Jefferson** was originally appointed to the Board by Michigan's Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2021 to fill a vacant seat and was nominated in 2022 by the Democratic Party. She is a law professor at the University of Houston Law Center.

**Sandy Pierce** is executive vice president of Huntington Bank, appointed to the Board in 2022 by Governor Whitmer. She has made individual donations to Whitmer and PAC donations in support of Republican candidates.

**Brianna T. Scott** is a Democrat and owns a law firm in western Michigan.

**Kelly Charron Tebay** is a Democrat and is the senior director of corporate relations for United Way. She holds a master's degree in Law Enforcement Intelligence and Analysis, with a certificate in Homeland Security.

**Rema Vassar**, a Democrat, is a professor in the department of Administrative and Organizational Studies at Wayne State University's College of Education. She resigned as board chair in March 2024 amid accusations of impropriety and ethics violations.

With such a cast of characters in charge, it is clear that the interests of US imperialism, not notions of academic freedom and freedom of speech, hold the upper hand at MSU. And, as has been made eminently clear to workers and youth in the past year, the situation is the same at universities throughout the country, from Columbia and Harvard to Cornell, the University of Michigan, the University of California system and dozens if not hundreds of others, where any opposition to Israel's genocide in Gaza is immediately met with administrative

punishment and police brutality.

To her credit, Figueroa-Vasquez responded to the canceling of the opening party and the alterations to her curation of *Diasporic Collage* with an outraged and eloquent post on her personal blog. In this post, she lists demands she has for MSU, including accountability for the lie that the cancellation was due to concerns about capacity and staffing. She demands an apology "for the blatantly racist and unwelcoming atmosphere that our artists, community, curators, and contributors endured on Friday 9/13/24." And she demands transparency, particularly regarding the source of the complaint the museum claims was behind its decision to alter the exhibit, in order to "have the necessary open dialogue that this situation requires."

She writes:

To be clear, we object to this mandate and the fact that the exhibit was changed without our consent within 30-minutes of us being informed. Furthermore, the sign placed at the entrance of the gallery is irresponsible and reductive in its framing of the exhibit and the piece based on a 51-year old image. We did not create or approve of this text and we reject this overreach. Curatorial work is part and parcel of the protected speech and the design of this exhibit is an expression of academic freedom. Forcing the rearrangement of the exhibit is an act of censorship of the professional work of the curator.

For the working class, students and youth across the country and around the world, the ties of the universities to imperialist policy, genocide and global war are becoming more apparent by the day. Student protests, mass protests and worker actions—despite efforts by outfits like the Democratic Socialists of America and the union bureaucracies to strangle them—are proliferating and increasing in vigor. Democratic rights and the defeat of all forms of censorship are of central importance to the working class.



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