

Australian artists demand immediate reinstatement of Khaled Sabsabi and Michael Dagostino to Venice Biennale

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In a blatant act of political interference and censorship, Creative Australia, the Labor government's advisory and arts funding body, has suddenly rescinded its previous appointment of artist Khaled Sabsabi and curator Michael Dagostino to represent Australia at next year's Venice Biennale. It follows bogus claims in the Murdoch media that Sabsabi supports Islamic terrorism.

The decision has been angrily denounced by artists, critics and visual arts peak bodies across the country. More than 3,500 artists and other creative workers have signed a petition calling for the immediate reinstatement of the artist and his curator.

Sabsabi, who migrated to Australia from Lebanon in 1978 following the outbreak of civil war, began his career as a hip-hop artist before becoming a visual artist during the 1990s.

His work has been exhibited throughout Australia and internationally in over 90 exhibitions, including at Italy's Casoria International Contemporary Art Museum and at the Shanghai, Marrakech, Adelaide and Sydney Biennales.

Dagostino is currently CEO of the University of Sydney's Chau Chak Wing Museum. He has decades of experience in the contemporary arts sector, including as the director of Campbelltown Arts Centre in Sydney's west.

The decision to remove the two came less than a week after Creative Australia had announced the appointment. The artistic work of Sabsabi and Dagostino, Creative Australia's CEO Adrian Collette proclaimed on February 7, "reflects the diversity and plurality of Australia's rich culture and will spark meaningful conversations with audiences around the world."

A few days later, Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper published an article referencing a 20-year-old video installation created by Sabsabi that had images of Hassan Nasrallah, former Hezbollah leader. The newspaper falsely claimed the work had "lauded" Nasrallah.

These bogus allegations were taken up the next day in a Question Time exchange in the Senate between Liberal

shadow arts minister Claire Chandler and Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong.

"Why is the Albanese government allowing a person who highlights a terrorist leader in his artwork to represent Australia on the international stage in the Biennale?" Chandler asked. Wong claimed to know nothing about the issue but said she would get more information.

Arts Minister Tony Burke immediately phoned the Creative Australia CEO and by 10 p.m. that night the Board had removed Sabsabi and Dagostino and announced an inquiry into the selection process.

The Board's late-night statement said Sabsabi and Dagostino were being dumped because "a prolonged and divisive debate about the 2026 selection outcome poses an unacceptable risk to public support for Australia's artistic community."

In other words, Creative Australia has removed Sabsabi and Dagostino because the Albanese government will not allow any public figure to speak out—even in the mildest terms—against Israeli's US-funded genocidal assault on the Palestinians in Gaza.

Last week, after being selected for the Venice Biennale, Sabsabi said, "How can you not be affected when you have family, when you have friends there? As a human being, as a Lebanese, as an Arab, as a Muslim, as an Australian, what's been happening is inhumane and unacceptable.

"This violence, destruction cannot be sustained. We need a way forward for all of us to co-exist and to respect the rights of Palestinian people and their right of return to their lands and culture." Labor and Australia's political elite cannot and will not tolerate this sort of comment.

Sabsabi, who is also on the board of the Sydney Biennale, was bitterly attacked last year by the Zionist lobby for selecting Emirati royal Hoor Al Qasimi to direct its 2026 event. In 2022, he participated in the mass boycott by artists and performers of the Sydney Festival over its sponsorship deal with the Israeli embassy.

Working in tandem with the corporate media and the Liberal-National opposition, the Albanese government and its state counterparts have spearheaded efforts to intimidate and silence popular opposition to the Gaza genocide.

Artists, actors, musicians, academics and journalists, along with students and health workers, have been falsely accused of antisemitism and persecuted for speaking out against Israel's mass murders of tens of thousands of Palestinians.

In one particularly instructive example, former Victorian Labor Premier Dan Andrews declared last year at an event organised by the Zionist lobby: "If people won't speak out against antisemitism, defund them. If people are happy to take your money while being antisemites, defund them... We are beyond tropes. Silence and much worse are only possible if there are no consequences."

Some of the victims of this brutal witch-hunting include journalists Mary Kostakidis and Antoinette Lattouf, sacked sports commentator Peter Lalor, Jewish Council of Australia member and human rights lawyer Sarah Schwartz, and Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, a pro-Palestinian academic at Sydney's Macquarie University.

Abdel-Fattah has been under sustained political attack by the corporate media and university authorities, and was recently targeted by Jason Clare, the federal education minister. Clare is attempting to revoke her \$870,000 research grant, based on phony allegations that she breached its rules.

Sabsabi and Dagostino are just the latest targets of the escalating demonisation and anti-democratic assaults on opponents of the genocide. Their removal from the Venice Biennale, however, has been met with a vocal backlash from leading figures in the arts community, including senior figures inside Creative Australia itself.

Artist Lindy Lee, a member of Creative Australia's board, as well as Mikala Tai, head of its visual arts department, and Tahmina Maskinyar, a Creative Australia program manager, have all resigned in protest.

Likewise, Simon Mordant, a major donor, resigned as a Creative Australia ambassador and withdrew his financial support, describing the Board's decision as "a very dark day for Australia and the Arts."

Importantly, the five other shortlisted artists and curators in the running to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale also issued an open letter calling for the reinstatement of Sabsabi and Dagostino and making clear that they would not accept any invitation to be their replacements. Effectively, this means that Australia, which won a Golden Lion at last year's event, will not be represented.

The National Association for the Visual Arts denounced Creative Australia, rightly declaring, "This is not just about one artist or one exhibition; it is about whether Australia

upholds the right of artists to critically engage with history, politics, and the urgent issues of our time."

While these statements are important indications of the depth of opposition to the Albanese government and Creative Australia's political censorship, their appeals will be ignored.

Emboldened by its short campaign to remove Sabsabi and Dagostino, the *Australian* has been publishing hit lists of artists, writers and other creative workers who have won grants and received government funding but have also spoken out against the Israeli military's mass murder of Palestinians.

The Murdoch media is demanding that the Albanese government and its state counterparts demonise these artists and writers and remove their grants.

It is almost impossible not to draw a connection between these methods and the victimisations and purging of Jews, socialists and communist academics, artists, writers and other opponents, in the lead-up to and early years of Hitler's Nazi regime.

To defeat this intimidation and win the immediate reinstatement of Sabsabi and Dagostino to the Biennale, artists and other creative workers need to link up with all others facing the same attacks.

Artists cannot defeat this alone. The defence of freedom of artistic expression and other basic democratic rights is inseparably linked to the fight against the capitalist profit system itself, the source of these reactionary assaults, the Gaza genocide and other imperialist war crimes.

To discuss this struggle, we urge creative workers to attend tomorrow's Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee meeting in defence of Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah. This meeting—to be held at 1 p.m. AEDT in Room 110, 11 Wally's Walk—will review the political issues contained in this fight and how to take it forward. The meeting can also be joined online via Zoom. Click here to register.



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