

Australia: Growing opposition to Zionist censorship of Venice Biennale artist and curator

Gabriela Zabala, Richard Phillips**3 March 2025**

Opposition to Creative Australia's ejection of artist Khaled Sabsabi and curator Michael Dagostino from the 2026 Venice Biennale continues to mount with hundreds of creative workers publicly denouncing the Labor government and its arts funding agency. Over 4,350 artists and other creative workers have now signed a petition demanding reinstatement of the artist and curator.

On February 7, Sabsabi and Dagostino were selected to represent Australia at Venice from a list of 50 applicants and a final short list of six.

Creative Australia's decision is part of escalating bi-partisan government and corporate media attacks on all public opponents of Israel's Gaza genocide. Artist, writers, actors, academic and health workers have been frontline targets in this widening antidemocratic assault.

Last Friday, around 30 artists, several of them holding placards stating, "Stop silencing pro-Palestine voices," demonstrated outside Creative Australia's headquarters in Sydney. The protest is just a small indication of the deep-going hostility of thousands of artists and creative workers nationally over the sacking of Sabsabi and Dagostino.

Addressing the demonstration, Omar Sakr, a well-known poet, denounced Creative Australia's attack on freedom of artistic expression. "When art must serve the government's political agenda, it's no longer art, it's propaganda," he said.

Sakr is one of three writers whose teen-writing workshops were shut down in early 2024 by the Victorian State Library after they publicly denounced the Gaza genocide. Library management bogusly claimed that the writers' classes posed "child and cultural safety concerns."

Last week Sabsabi and Dagostino declared that they were determined to present their work to the 2026 Venice Biennale. "The overwhelming support from the arts community, colleagues, and the public has reinforced the fundamental role of artists in shaping discourse and pushing boundaries," they said.

"This project is about art, unity, and dialogue—a vision that challenges, inspires, and reflects the complexities of our world. We are determined to see it realised and need your support to make it happen."

The artist and curator were dropped by Creative Australia on February 13, less than a week since their appointment and just six hours after the Liberal Party's shadow minister for the arts Claire

Chandler used the Senate to question their appointment.

Chandler falsely claimed that two of Sabsabi's video installations—*You* in 2007 and *Thank You Very Much* in 2006—supported terrorism. Her bogus allegations followed a gossip column article the previous day by Yoni Bashan in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper.

Half an hour after Chandler's question, Arts Minister Tony Burke called Creative Australia chief Adrian Collette, who told him that a board meeting would be held that night. While Burke disingenuously claims he had no role in the removal of Sabsabi and Dagostino, the board meeting was all over in 90 minutes with a media statement issued soon after.

The artist and curator were given no right of appeal or the opportunity to address the board, nor were any members of the panel that recommended them for the Venice Biennale invited to address the meeting.

Denunciations of this flagrant political censorship erupted the next day with the protest resignation of board member and artist Lindy Lee and two other leading figures from Creative Australia's visual arts department.

Five of the artists shortlisted to represent Australia at Venice declared that they would not accept any invitation to replace Sabsabi and Dagostino, which means there will be no Australian artist represented at Venice in 2026. Last year Australia won Venice's Golden Lion award for Archie Moore's exhibit.

This powerful statement of solidarity was followed by an open letter from leading figures in Australian contemporary art—Mike Parr, Imants Tillers, Patricia Piccinini, Ricky Swallow, Shaun Gladwell, Callum Morton and Tracey Moffatt—and curators who previously represented Australia at Venice.

Suzanne Cotter and Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, current and past directors respectively of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Arts, which holds several of Sabsabi's works, also condemned Creative Australia.

On February 26, Creative Australia CEO Collette and the board's chairman Roy Morgan were questioned at a Senate Estimates hearing about their sudden removal of Sabsabi and Agostino. Collette, who has held two all-staff meetings over the issue in the past fortnight, told the hearing that the board "didn't have the time" to get legal advice about tearing up its contract with Sabsabi and Agostino.

The immediate deselection of Lebanese-born Sabsabi and Dagostino was necessary, Collette insisted, to prevent a “divisive debate” which threatened “social cohesion” and “the future of the organisation.”

To suggest that the very existence of Creative Australia—the country’s principal arts funding body—was threatened by a debate about two almost 20-year-old videos that do not in any shape or form support terrorism is bogus and ludicrous. It is a clear message, however, from the agency that it will slavishly accede to each and every demand from Australia’s Zionist lobby and the Albanese Labor government.

Prior to the Senate hearing, Creative Australia suddenly announced that it was postponing its 2025 Asia Pacific Arts Awards ceremony scheduled to be held last night at the Arts Centre in Melbourne. The cancellation was necessary, the agency declared, “to support the wellbeing of all involved.”

This unprecedented decision, with no future date announced, was a desperate attempt to circumvent further public criticism of its political censorship, not just by protesters outside but from those attending and receiving prizes. Many of those shortlisted for Arts Pacific Arts prizes have signed petitions opposing the Gaza genocide and Creative Australia’s political censorship.

Amid this rising opposition, the *Guardian* newspaper revealed last week that National Gallery of Australia censored two items related to Palestine on a large tapestry included in the SaV?ge K’lub group exhibition by Pacific Island artists in June last year.

The tapestry had artistic interpretations of flags from various Pacific Island nations and a t-shirt made in the Palestinian flag colours of red, green, black and white, a badge and fist pin.

SaV?ge K’lub’s curator told the *Guardian* that she and the artists had pushed back against this censorship but had little choice to accept the management’s demands that the Palestinian items on the tapestry be covered with pieces of white cloth.

It is no accident that the reactionary campaign against Sabsabi and Dagostino was initiated by the pro-Gaza genocide Murdoch media.

Yoni Bashan, a rabid Zionist, who penned the initial gossip column piece, began his career at *Australian Jewish News* before working for several of Murdoch’s outlets, including the *Daily Telegraph*, *New York Post* and *Wall Street Journal*. The first Australian journalist embedded with the Israeli military when it invaded Gaza in October 2023, Bashan was later joined by pro-Zionist Murdoch hack Liam Mendes.

Impressed by his work, Lachlan Murdoch awarded Bashan the News Corp’s “Journalist of the Year” prize in 2024. Presenting him with the award in Sydney, Murdoch declared, “As the horrific October 7 attacks happened, Yoni was on the phone to the *Australian*’s Editor-In-Chief Michelle Gunn wanting to go to Israel. By October 10, he was on the ground, the first Australian journalist to visit Gaza after the attacks.”

Bashan has followed his initial hit piece against Sabsabi and Agostino with witch-hunting claims that a group of Muslim artists known as the Eleven Collective, which was established by Sabsabi, had unfairly secured extensive arts grants from Creative Australia in recent years.

On Friday the *Australian* published a lengthy piece by arts critic

Christopher Allen, who claimed that Creative Australia had been “corrupted” and was “increasingly dysfunctional.”

The board’s job, Allen wrote, should be to “rein in rogue staff and corrupt peer panels to ensure that arts funding in Australia rewards excellence and the humane values of civility, tolerance and freedom, not work that overtly or covertly promotes poisonous and divisive ideologies.” In short, it must promote Zionism, militarism and imperialist war.

These reactionary calls echo those sent by letter last week from Zionist Federation of Australia president Jeremy Leibler to Arts Minister Tony Burke. Leibler demanded Burke investigate the arts funding agency’s “grant allocation processes, selection criteria, and accountability mechanisms to prevent the misuse of taxpayer funds.”

The Labor government, he said, must “cease funding for extremist-aligned projects” to prevent public funds from “supporting individuals or works that promote hate, anti-Semitism, or extremist ideologies.”

In other words, this means banning arts grants and other government funding to individuals and organisations opposing Israel’s genocide of the Palestinians and other imperialist-back war crimes. No one must be allowed to denounce the US-backed Israeli war crimes and the Albanese government’s active involvement and support.

While thousands have raised their voices against the dumping of Sabsabi and Dagostino and other witch-hunting assaults, artists and creative workers cannot confine their opposition to appeals to Creative Australia or the pro-imperialist Labor government.

This means uniting with academics, teachers, students, medical practitioners now under attack and a turn to the working class in a political and industrial struggle against the capitalist profit system, the source of imperialist war and genocide.



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