

Artist Khaled Sabsabi and curator reinstated to represent Australia at Venice Biennale

Richard Phillips
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In an extraordinary backflip, Creative Australia, the country's principal arts funding body suddenly announced on Wednesday that it was reinstating artist Khaled Sabsabi and his curator Michael Dagostino as Australia's representatives at the 2026 Venice Biennale. It followed a so-called governance review by consultants Blackhall & Pearl into Creative Australia's previous selection in February, and the sudden dumping within days, of the two artists.

Acting Creative Australia board chair Wesley Enoch publicly apologised to Sabsabi for the "hurt and pain" and cited the consultants' review, which he claimed would repair the damage done to Creative Australia's reputation.

"The board has considered and reflected deeply on all relevant issues to find a path forward," Enoch said.

The removal of Sabsabi and Dagostino, the review cynically declared, was not the fault of any single individual but the outcome of a series of mistakes, which the board would have to address.

The decision constitutes a significant blow against the efforts of the pro-Zionist lobby, aided and abetted by Australian Labor governments, state and federal, and the Liberal-National Coalition, to intimidate and silence all public opposition to Israel's mass murder of tens of thousands of Palestinians.

Like their counterparts internationally artists, writers, actors, musicians, academics, health workers, students and journalists are frontline targets, falsely accused of antisemitism and persecuted for speaking out against the Gaza genocide.

On February 7, Sabsabi, a multidisciplinary artist who migrated to Australia from Lebanon in 1978 and Dagostino, an experienced curator, were selected from a pool of 50 applicants to represent Australia at next year's Venice Biennale. Less than a week later, on February 13, their appointment was abruptly rescinded following a 90-minute meeting of Creative Australia's board.

The dumping of Sabsabi and Dagostino followed a hysterical campaign in Murdoch-owned news outlets which falsely claimed that *You*, a video installation made in 2007 by Sabsabi, had "lauded" Hassan Nasrallah, the late leader of Hezbollah, and that another in 2006 supported terrorism. The art works, which had been exhibited in leading galleries, did none of this

and had never been accused of such in the years since they were created.

Australian journalist Yoni Bashan, who has been embedded with the Israel Defence Forces twice since October 2023, played a leading role in the hysterical campaign.

What followed was a bipartisan political assault. Liberal Party shadow minister for the arts, Claire Chandler, then used the Murdoch media allegations in the Senate to question the appointment of Sabsabi and Dagostino at the Venice art show.

Labor's Arts Minister Tony Burke immediately contacted Creative Australia's CEO Adrian Collette who convened an emergency board meeting and issued a media statement announcing the rescission. The artist and curator were given no right of appeal or opportunity to address the board.

It was urgently necessary to dump Sabsabi and Dagostino, Collette said, to prevent a "divisive debate" on the appointment which, he claimed, threatened "social cohesion" and "the future of the organisation."

The censorious attack triggered an immediate and vocal backlash across the country with over 4,400 artists and other creative workers signing a petition to demand reinstatement of the artist and curator and a virtual rebellion by key members of Creative Australia.

Board member Lindy Lee, Visual Arts department head Mikala Tai and program manager Tahmina Maskinyar resigned. Simon Mordant, a major donor, quit as a Creative Australia ambassador and withdrew financial support, calling it "a very dark day for Australia and the Arts."

As the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) correctly stated, "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."

Crucially, the five other artists shortlisted to represent Australia at Venice declared they would not accept any invitation to replace Sabsabi and Dagostino. This meant that there would be no Australian representation at Venice, despite Archie Moore having won the prestigious Golden Lion award, the main prize, the first time for an Australian artist, in Venice in 2024.

Such was the support for Sabsabi that he was able, with

official backing from NAVA, to raise \$82,000 from over 860 single donors within two days to fund the staging of his own art exhibit in Venice in 2026, during the prestigious art show.

The generalised and deep-seated hostility of artists across the country over Creative Australia's anti-democratic attack, along with the fact that Australia would not be represented at Venice because of political censorship, ultimately pressured the arts funding body to reverse its decision.

The reinstatement of Sabsabi and Dagostino came just a week after journalist Antoinette Lattouf won federal court action against the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for sacking her in December 2023. Lattouf was illegally sacked for sharing a Human Rights Watch post condemning Israel's use of starvation in Gaza.

The court ruled that Lattouf had been terminated by ABC management to "appease the pro-Israel lobbyists" who had campaigned to have her dismissed because "she held political opinions opposing the Israeli military campaign in Gaza." She was awarded \$70,000 in compensation.

The sheer volume and breadth of this opposition to the Gaza genocide among creative workers is, of course, a global phenomenon, welcomed and reaffirmed by mass audiences, young and old. Increasing numbers of artists refusing to be intimidated.

The barrage of pro-Zionist, corporate media and government slanders conflating opposition to a genocide with antisemitism has failed to silence masses of people and especially millions of young people.

This was powerfully demonstrated at the Glastonbury music festival last week in the UK, which saw artists like Irish rap trio Kneecap, Bob Vylan, Amyl and the Sniffers, CMAT, Inhaler and Rizzle Kicks voice strong pro-Palestinian sentiments to massive crowd support, defying attempts at censorship.

The reinstatement of Sabsabi and Dagostino is undoubtedly a significant victory for democratic rights and freedom of artistic expression, and a blow against those who weaponise bogus accusations of antisemitism to censor any criticism of Israeli actions and Australian government complicity in these war crimes.

Former federal arts minister, now the minister for home affairs, Tony Burke hypocritically declared on Wednesday that he fully supported the reinstatement of Sabsabi and his curator. As the record shows, Burke and the Labor government were fully involved in the witch-hunt of Sabsabi.

Labor, moreover, has not changed course one iota, backing the Israeli genocide, as well as the illegal US attack on Iran last month, and cracking down on fundamental civil liberties.

In February, a few days after it stopped Sabsabi from appearing at the Venice Biennale, the Albanese Labor government rammed through sweeping anti-democratic "hate speech laws."

These deliberately vague but all-encompassing laws, which include mandatory minimum sentences of up to six years' jail

time, can be used to imprison opponents of the Israeli genocide of Palestinians.

The laws were introduced following a so-called wave of antisemitic graffiti and a police tipoff about a caravan of explosives in an outer-western Sydney suburb with a list of targets, including the Sydney synagogue. It was later revealed that these incidents were not carried out for political or ideological reasons but by small-time criminals for money or to bargain with police.

Artists and creative workers should be warned, the Blackhall & Pearl review is a crude coverup and is not advocating for freedom of artistic expression. Its purpose is to hide the pro-Zionist motivations behind the dismissal saga and prevent the awarding of future grants to artists deemed to be unacceptable to Australia's political elite and its international allies. The report uses the words Lebanon, Gaza and Israel just once. The words Zionism, Zionist, Palestine, war or political pressure are not referenced anywhere in the 64-page review.

The report warbles on about "oversights, misunderstandings, missteps and assumptions, exacerbated by a lack of clarity around roles and accountabilities" with no one named or held to account. Its central call, however, is for the establishment of mechanisms that further threaten artistic freedom.

These include the development of a "clearly documented risk identification policy and procedure" for the Venice Biennale selection process. "Risk identification" is corporate speak for censoring potentially controversial artists. Genuinely creative art is all about "taking risks," "challenging audiences," and, in one form or another, a deeply felt protest against the cultural and political status quo.

Those responsible for the poisonous political climate that led to the dumping of Sabsabi and Dagostino, and the ongoing persecution and witch hunting of those opposing Israel's war crimes in the Middle East and the Australian Labor governments' active complicity, remain in power. These forces will respond by stepping up their antidemocratic attacks.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* insists, the defence of artistic freedom and other basic democratic rights is "inseparably linked to the fight against the capitalist profit system itself, the source of these reactionary assaults on democratic rights, the Gaza genocide and other imperialist war crimes."

This is the struggle that creative workers need to join.



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