

Jewish artists protest Gaza genocide at San Francisco museum

David Walsh
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According to organizers, some 200 people gathered outside San Francisco’s Contemporary Jewish Museum (CJM) on June 6 to protest the genocide being carried out by the Israeli government and military in Gaza.

The protest was organized by California Jewish Artists for Palestine (CJAFP), along with Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP).

The group of 10 self-described “anti-Zionist” artists—Micah Bazant, Jules Cowan, Rebekah Erev, Rebecca Maria Goldschmidt, Steph Kudisch, Kate Laster, Ava Sayaka Rosen, Sophia Sobko, Arielle Tonkin and Irina Zadov—initially submitted works, with pro-Palestinian messages, to the proposed *California Jewish Open* exhibition at the CJM.

The museum framed the exhibition, set to run until October 20, as an opportunity for “Jewish-identifying artists in California to submit artworks in response to a central question: How are artists looking to the many aspects of Jewish culture, identity, and community to foster, reimagine, hold, or discover connection?” The resulting exhibition, asserted the CJM, would bring “together the work of forty-seven artists reflecting on their connection to Judaism, the world, and their own history.”

Five of the 10 anti-Zionist artists’ works were accepted, but the museum refused to respond to the artists’ demands, including “transparency around funding and a commitment to BDS [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions],” which led to the withdrawal from the show. A museum spokesperson acknowledged to the media that the Israeli consulate had provided funding in the past for exhibitions and talks.

On Instagram, protest organizers explained that the artists and their supporters gathered at the museum in downtown San Francisco to demand the CJM “call for

an immediate and permanent ceasefire and support the Palestinian Campaign for Cultural Boycott of Israel. The theme of the exhibition is ‘Connection’—but how can we connect to our Jewish values and our humanity without doing everything we can to stop a genocide?”

Exhibiting artist Vanessa Thill told *Hyperallergic* that at first, she “had felt encouraged by curator Heidi Rabin’s assurances that pro-Palestine views would be accepted. But as the opening neared, Thill felt less and less supported in her anti-Zionist views. There was little dialogue among artists even after she reached out to the group to discuss Israel’s ongoing attacks on Gaza—and that dialogue didn’t seem to be encouraged.”

As part of the protest June 6, reported *Hyperallergic*, Thill stood next to her sculpture “Cleave-To (His Cheeks Were Beds of Spices)” (2023), consisting “of two large crescent shapes cast in various spices, graphite, and fake blood,” and “read the traditional Kaddish prayer followed by the names of Palestinians killed by Israeli forces. She then read the names of Israeli hostages who were recently confirmed dead. And in a final act violating her museum’s artist contract, Thill broke off a piece of her sculpture and held the fragment to the crowd.”

The CJAFP insisted in a statement that as “anti-zionist Jewish artists with long-term commitments to both Palestinian Liberation and Jewish community, we call on the Contemporary Jewish Museum and ALL Arts & Cultural institutions to end complicity with Israeli war crimes and racist, white supremacist zionist political ideology NOW!”

The artists have pointed to one of the museum’s funders, the Helen Diller Family Foundation, which has been criticized in the past “for its grants to Canary Mission, a group accused of doxxing anti-Zionist students, and to the American Freedom Defense

Initiative, which was labeled an anti-Muslim extremist group by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2022.”
(*Hyperallergic*)

In an interview with KQED, artist Sophia Sobko argued it would be hypocritical for the CJM to feature art criticizing Israel’s bombardment of Gaza “while receiving funding that directly ... facilitates the material oppression that we’re trying to raise awareness to stop.” She added, “I wish for some ethical clarity and backbone and courage.”

In its May 10 statement, members of the CJAFP expressed their refusal “to participate in Art World ‘business as usual’ as the genocide of Palestinians continues.” As Israel “continues assaults on Rafah,” the group went on, “millions of Palestinians, mostly children, are forced to ‘evacuate’ with no safe destination. Now, more than ever, is the time to declare with unambiguous and unequivocal clarity that Palestinians have the right to live in freedom, and that US-funded genocide is abhorrent and needs to end immediately.”

The CJAFP continued:

Many of us have been indoctrinated into zionism and have been unlearning it for many years. Our Jewish tradition teaches us that we are made in the divine image with the unique capacity to create. As artists, we choose to CREATE, not destroy!

The artists added:

Palestinians are being murdered as we are asked to endlessly discuss definitions of terms like “anti-zionist” to be used in exhibition wall texts. There is no time to waste over semantic arguments like whether or not we can say that israel does not have a “right to exist” or whether or not to ban “From the River to the Sea”. Rather than fall for these strategic distractions, we are focusing on ending this genocide and fighting for Palestinian liberation.



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