

# Aurora, Ontario arts center censors anti-genocide artists and closes down exhibition as “the best possible business decision”

David Walsh  
29 October 2024

Globally, artist-critics of Israel’s Gaza genocide continue to face censorship, repression and blacklisting.

When a “controversial” art work or exhibition goes on display, i.e., one that protests in some fashion against or simply registers the murder of tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians, a by now trite and even stereotyped process is set in motion.

Generally, although not always, an anonymous individual (sometimes it’s an organization) complains about the piece’s or the exhibition’s “antisemitism,” arguing the artwork in question will cause offense—or already has. Museum and other institutional officials respond, as though tasered, to such grievances. Inevitably, they raise concerns about “security issues” and possible “divisiveness.” For the greater good, in the interests of the community and the museum/institution’s long-term well-being, the piece or exhibition has to be removed or shut down. The result: voices are silenced, criticism is quashed, the genocide goes unquestioned.

One of the latest such lamentable episodes has unfolded at the Aurora Cultural Centre (in the Greater Toronto Area) in September and October. One day after the exhibition “Expressions of Critical Thought” (no less!) opened at the venue on September 21, Iraqi-Canadian artist Hala Alsalman was informed that the show, which included her work along with that of five other artists, was “temporarily closed.”

Alsalman’s piece, *They Stole Our Eyes (but We Still See)*, 2023, made with photo collage, ceramics, video animation and found objects, consists of inlay eyes and an interactive table and chairs. (*Hyperallergic*).

The artist explains

In 2003, Iraq’s National Museum and archeological sites were strategically looted upon the Anglo-American invasion. Enabled by a nefarious web of thieves, private collectors, auction houses and

even museums, the Mesopotamian antiquities market has been thriving ever since.

In this interactive installation work, viewers were invited to put on gloves and investigate at a desk that could belong to a museum archivist or perhaps an antique forger. An array of eye inlays “owned” by Western museums and traded at auction houses like Christies and Ebay bring attention to the persistent theft of Iraq’s ancient artifacts since the early days of European colonization. ?

The piece also features a map with a label that reads “(Israel) Palestine.” This aroused the hostility of pro-Zionists.

The other “objectionable” piece, by one of the show’s co-curators, Chantal Hassard, is a pillar, according to the local press, “featuring various graffiti-style paintings,” which “includes the word ‘intifada,’ an Arabic word for uprising or rebellion, commonly used to refer to multiple uprisings of Palestinians against Israel. The pillar also features a Palestinian flag and the words ‘Free Palestine.’” It carries slogans “commonly associated with Indigenous causes in Canada, like ‘Land Back.’” (*Aurora Today*)

One Jewish resident complained to the center that “Everything since Oct. 7 right now is triggering for us ... I’m just using my voice to protect myself, to protect others and my family.” Another asserted that she was “heartbroken over this disgusting display.” She added that it was “hard to feel safe in my own community, let alone see art work calling for my death.” How anything in either of the artworks remotely called for her death went unexplained.

The first reaction of the Aurora Cultural Centre, as noted, was stalling and doubletalk:

We have received concerns from the community

and we are taking the time to engage in a process involving our board, community members, the artists, and subject matter experts in order to move forward with care and intention. These galleries will remain closed while we do this important work.

The outcome of such a “process” was entirely predictable, with an eye, above all, to currying favor with the Canadian establishment. The progress of the officials’ cowardly retreat can be traced through three subsequent statements, from October 4, 18 and 26, accessible on the center’s website.

The first announces that

we have made the difficult decision to permanently close the Expressions of Critical Thought exhibit.

These are clearly people without a developed sense of irony. They go on:

This decision was reached after careful deliberation and extensive consultation with subject matter experts, community members, community partners, and the Centre’s Board. The outcome reflects our commitment to balancing the importance of artistic expression with our responsibility to safeguard the well-being of our community.

Unraveled, this means that the potential financial and other types of losses and the blasts the center would receive from the right-wing and pro-Israeli media, which is quite vicious and prominent in Toronto, far outweighed any concern for democratic rights and the fate of artistic freedom.

The second and third statements go through a ritual of apologizing and beating of the breast, while always insisting, above all, that the show must *not* go on.

Finally, center officials tell us

In thinking of the organization as a whole and the future sustainability, the decision was made to pause and reflect and accept that we just do not currently have the capacity within our small administration to do the necessary work to make this exhibit happen the way it should for the artists and the community. We walked through rigorous process, considered all

partners, and made the best possible business decision for the sustainability of the organization.

None of the tortured, unconvincing arguments make any reference to the fact that tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians continue to be starved, bombed and murdered, that Israel, in fact, is stepping up its war of extermination. After all, “best possible business decisions” must prevail.

Alsaman, a multidisciplinary artist with a background in journalism and documentary filmmaking (and, according to one source, “a penchant for dark comedy”), told *Hyperallergic*: “I feel what they did contributes to the consistent dehumanization of Arabs in general ... I’m the only Arab who was showing, but obviously it’s not just me, it’s all of us.”

Hassard, who says she is the grandchild of a Holocaust survivor, told *Hyperallergic* that she did not think any of the works in the gallery expressed antisemitic sentiment and called those allegations a “dangerous mischaracterization of the term.”

Alsaman commented that she was asked in a meeting with the center’s director about

the meaning of her small handwritten label that read “(Israel) Palestine.”

“As an Iraqi, all my life, my country’s been bombed,” Alsaman told *Hyperallergic*. “So seeing images in Gaza now ... they are us and we are them.” Alsaman described her Palestine reference as a “tiny thing of solidarity” that was part of a larger, more complex work.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**