

Rhode Island School of Design shuts down pro-Palestinian art exhibition

David Walsh
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In the latest blatant attack on free speech, the administration of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) shut down an exhibition expressing support for the Palestinian people and opposition to Israel's mass murder in Gaza. The work was moved, without the student artists' permission, to a building that is not open to the public.

RISD, founded in 1877 in Providence and now affiliated with Brown University, is one of the most prominent art and design schools in the US.

The exhibition in question, *To Every Orange Tree*, was organized by the RISD Students for Justice in Palestine (RSJP) and Carr Haus, a student-run cafe accessible to the public.

The exhibition, which features the work of 20 artists, opened March 17. Three days later, the far-right StopAntisemitism posted a comment on X asserting that RISD "is facing outrage over an 'art' show promoting violence against Jews and calling for the removal of Israel—yet administrators of @risd are doing NOTHING!"

The "outrage," of course, was in the minds of those smearing the exhibition. The artwork included no antisemitic propaganda whatsoever. One piece included the message, "There is no peace as long as the Zionist entity exists," a reality confirmed on a daily basis in the blood and misery of the Gazan and West Bank populations. Many of the pieces, in fact, were created by Jewish students at RISD.

The exhibition, according to organizers, was shortly afterward shut down. Six days later, RISD President Crystal Williams addressed a letter to the "RISD Community," in which she wrote:

An art exhibition co-organized by two student

groups, RISD Students for Justice in Palestine and Carr Haus, which opened on March 17 in Carr House, has been the focus of negative public attention, including calls for its removal. RISD continues to condemn antisemitism and all forms of hate, and we seek to foster an environment where artistic expression, freedom of speech, and cultures of care co-exist.

The statement reeks with hypocrisy and bad faith. Again, the exhibition was a "focus" for an extreme right-wing outfit, which fully supports the Netanyahu regime and its campaign of genocide. RISD condemns "antisemitism," which is dragged in out of nowhere, but expresses no concern for the tens of thousands of Palestinian men, women and children slaughtered since October 2023.

RISD's shameful conduct was entirely predictable. The art school has fallen in line with other "elite institutions of higher learning" in the US, such as Harvard and Columbia, in carrying into practice the policies and demands of the Trump administration.

The WWSWS noted Monday that these institutions are "money-making machines" whose "administrations ... are generally dominated by the Democratic Party and closely integrated with the corporate and financial elite."

Williams cannot have been pleased to see her name as part of the exhibition. One of the pieces is a simple placard that reads, "Crystal Williams & Board of trustees make \$100-300/HR / Custodians make \$15-17/HR." Indeed, Williams received \$412,115 in compensation in 2023.

The RISD Board of Trustees is loaded with the usual assortment of well-connected business people,

financiers and lawyers, with a few affluent artists thrown in. Hillary Blumberg, one of the five officers of the board, was able to donate \$4 million to the school earlier this year, along with her husband, hedge fund manager Alex Ginsburg. One of the members of the board of trustees is Sheikha Al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the sister of Qatar's ruling Emir. And so forth.

In January 2025, unsurprisingly, the board of trustees voted against a proposal to divest from Israel, a proposal made by the Students for Justice in Palestine chapter. A few months earlier, five representatives of the RSJP met with Williams and "proposed the institution sever its financial ties to companies linked to Israel's war on Gaza and other anti-Palestinian violence and discrimination," according to *Hyperallergic*.

The RSJP's divestment proposal pointed out that 800 of the school's over 2,000 students signed in favor of their demands, including disclosure and divestment, in a petition in fall 2023.

Hyperallergic notes that an occupation of RISD's Providence Washington building occurred in May 2024. The RSJP renamed the building

"Fathi Ghaben Place" in honor of the Gazan artist who died after Israeli authorities blocked his travel for medical treatment, students held art-making sessions and teach-ins. The action was disbanded following expulsion warnings.

The RJSP explains on Instagram that:

Since RISD shut down our exhibit due to our support for Palestinian liberation, we installed a new exhibit in Carr Haus. Following the original dimensions of the artwork, we curated a collection of posters highlighting RISD's hypocrisy and complicity in the genocide and Israeli military occupation of Palestine.

Posters have replaced the artwork announcing the act of censorship.

Sadie, a Jewish ~~Hyperallergic~~ student, told only safety concern she was aware of was related to allegations of antisemitism. She said:

It made me really angry, because it's a really common thing to conflate antisemitism with anti-Zionism, which are totally different things. ... And it's very frustrating that the school doesn't recognize the distinction between those two.

The university said the show will reopen on April 7, after spring break, in its new location.



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