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# ‘In the art world the name Palestine is radioactive right now,’ says director of Palestine Museum US



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Faisal Saleh, founder of Palestinian Museum, speaks during the inauguration of the facility in Woodbridge, Connecticut, April 22, 2018. [HECTOR RETAMAL/AFP via Getty Images]



by Naima Morelli  naimamorelli



A few months ago, the director of the Palestine Museum US, Faisal Saleh, was in a room in Venice with members of the commission for the 2024 Venice Art Biennale. They tried to explain to him why his proposal for a collateral exhibition of Palestinian artists was rejected.

Saleh is not only Palestinian, but also very American in his ethos. So, he told me, when the Biennale spokesperson tried to convince him that art and politics have to be kept separate, he didn't hesitate to tell them, "Well, I may not be as much of an expert on art as you are, but I do know that politics and art are intertwined. You can't really separate one from the other."

Speaking to me on Zoom, Saleh pointed out that the Venice Biennale didn't hesitate to support Ukraine at the dawn of the war after Russia's invasion. However, when it comes to Israel and Palestine, the attitudes are very different. "Today you're giving Israel their pavilion, while Palestinians are not even eligible for a collateral exhibition," he said.

He explained that Palestinians and their political shows started to be ostracised in 2023, with a rejection of the proposal for a collateral exhibition of Palestinian artists at the 2023 Architecture Biennale in Venice, which alternates with the Art Biennale.

The proposed theme then was the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the 1948 Palestinian **Nakba**. "We played nice, we didn't complain," said Saleh. "But we proceeded with our exhibit and we put it on anyway at Palazzo Mora, without the official 'collateral event' logo."

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For the upcoming Venice Art Biennale, taking place from 20 April to 24 November this year, Saleh decided to give political Palestinian art another try.

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He found the theme of the Biennale — "Foreigners Everywhere" — particularly fitting. "Our theme in response was 'Foreigners in their Homeland'.

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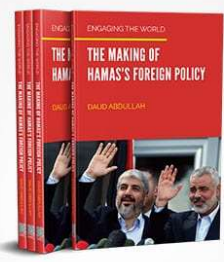
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And it was really an exhibit focused on the Israeli occupation, and **apartheid** rule and all the things that Israel was doing in the occupied areas.”

The proposed exhibit featured 23 artists, with one of them from Gaza. “We thought the theme and the presentation were really strong, so we were kind of surprised when in late October we got notified that our application was rejected again.”

After the second rejection in a row, after the Architecture Biennale, the Palestine Museum US decided to put an **online petition** as the first step towards contesting the rejection. “Right now, we have more than 21,000 signatures from over 120 countries, including over 2,000 signatures from Italy, which we think is significant.”

The Venice Biennale has rarely featured a notable representation of Palestine. Aside from the Palestine Museum US exhibition in 2022, the only other dedicated showcase for Palestinian artists was the 2009 event titled “Palestine c/o Venice” featuring talents like Emily Jacir and Khalil Rabah. This exhibition, like its successor, was organised as a collateral event.

In 2002, curator Francesco Bonami endeavoured to establish a Palestinian Pavilion, but his efforts faced accusations of anti-Semitism in the Italian media.

Venice Biennale didn’t respond to my requests for comment. “My interpretation is that, being the Biennale tied to governmental policies, they did not want to have anything that embarrasses Israel,” suggested Saleh, before he mentioned another project at the Biennale tied to Palestine, which was approved. “This other show was exactly the kind they needed. The theme was about olive trees and settlers, but it was mostly soft. A soft subject.”

The project in question is “Anchor in the Landscape”, a collateral exhibition by the Hebron-based Palestinian activist Issa Amro and the Berlin-based South African photographer Adam Broomberg, who together founded Artists + Allies x Hebron. “Our exhibition was never intended to represent the whole of Palestine,” noted Broomberg. He said that the exhibition features the work of many Palestinians and all the work was made and facilitated by two collectives operating in the south of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

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According to Broomberg, Artists + Allies x Hebron aims to draw the attention of the international community to the situation in Hebron H2, where the Israeli army exercises control to monitor every aspect of Palestinian life throughout the West Bank.

“The olive trees shown in this exhibition acquire a sense of urgency in the context of occupied Palestine,” Broomberg

told me. “Since 1967 settlers and the Israeli authorities have destroyed over 800,000 olive trees. The olive tree is of totemic, cultural, economic and political importance to the Palestinian community. Sadly, the trees themselves have now become a target. We know of four trees, each more than 1,000 years old, and represented in our photographs, which have since been burned to the ground. It begs the question: What kind of person claims a biblical right and a love of the land, yet would destroy its oldest indigenous inhabitant?”

Beside Adam Broomberg, the artists featured in the show are Samer Barbari, Duncan Campbell, Rafael González, Isabella Hammad, Shayma Hammad, Chris Harding, Baha Hilo, Emily Jacir, Sebastián Jatz Rawicz, Benjamin Lind, Jumana Manna, Michael Rakowitz, Mohammad Saleh, Vivien Sansour, Andrea de Siena and Dima Srouji. There will be several participants from the Researching Palestine Zine Group coordinated by Chris Harding, such as Ramzi Nimr, Laura Tibi, Raghad Hilal, Hanna Salmon, Marta Wodz and Suzannah Henty.

Broomberg said that the reason for featuring non-Palestinians is because the exhibition is global in its scope, and is reflecting the work produced within Palestine. “After all, in keeping with the theme of the 60th Venice Biennale proposed by artistic director Adriano Pedrosa, we can all be seen as Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere.”

Ever since the latest war in Gaza started, a number of exhibitions and awards for Palestinian artists have been cancelled, to avoid any backlash, as the issue is very delicate and polarising in the art world. For this very reason, the Palestinian Museum US has introduced a programme in the US, and beyond, and will allow some of their artworks to be borrowed and shown.

“We are responding to the fact that a lot of the museums are under pressure by people to do something about Gaza, and some of them don’t want to express political views,” said Saleh. “But so far we haven’t had any institution wanting to borrow our works. The name ‘Palestine’ is radioactive right now.”

Broomberg agrees that it is particularly hard to exhibit works related to Palestine at the moment. “There has been a concerted and continuous effort to silence Palestinian voices or cancel artists who show solidarity with Palestine in cultural institutions. It is crucial for Palestinian art and voices to be represented, especially within Europe’s current climate of fear and polarisation.”

When asked what the role of art is during these probing times, Saleh responded: “I think art is a very powerful medium, particularly at times of crisis. Art talks to the heart, to your emotions. You might fall in love with a piece of art

without knowing who's behind it. And for us Palestinians at the moment, this is necessary."

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