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Art Or The New Anti-Semitism?

Israeli artists say Stockholm incident could have chilling effect on expression.
Julia Goldman - Staff Writer

The Israeli ambassador to Sweden who vandalized an installation he felt glorified suicide bombers earned praise this week from the Israeli government. But many in Israel's arts community see the incident as a blow to freedom of expression.

The clash of art and politics — especially explosive at a time when Israel's image is under attack in much of the world — occurred Friday at Stockholm's Museum of Antiquities, where an installation portrays the smiling portrait of a suicide bomber who killed 21 Israelis and herself in an Oct. 4 attack in Haifa.

Ambassador Zvi Mazel literally pulled the plug on the installation because he believed it was an insult to the victims and their families.

Israeli artists and curators contacted by The Jewish Week said instead that Mazel's actions amount to government censorship and could have a chilling effect on artistic expression at home.

"I'm afraid for our democracy," the artist David Wakstein said by telephone from Tel Aviv. "I'm worried about being free to speak, free to think."

The Stockholm installation, titled "Snow White and the Madness of Truth," consists of a small boat floating in a rectangular basin filled with red liquid. The boat bears the portrait of Hanadi Jaradat, a 29-year-old lawyer from Jenin.

The work was created by an Israeli-born Swede, Dror Feiler, and his wife, Gunilla Skold Feiler, for an exhibition connected to an upcoming conference on genocide.

Angered by what he reportedly called "an obscene misrepresentation of reality," Mazel unplugged four lights illuminating the installation and threw one of them into the pool.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has congratulated Mazel for taking a stand against "a growing wave of anti-Semitism."

Outrage over works of art is nothing new, in Israel or elsewhere.

The conductor Daniel Barenboim drew fire from Israel's Education minister last summer when he led the visiting Berlin Staatskapelle Orchestra in a performance of music by Wagner, a favorite of Hitler whose music is subject to unofficial ban in Israel. New York's Jewish Museum weathered impassioned protests against "Mirroring Evil," an exhibition of contemporary art that used images of Nazis and the Holocaust. Former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, angered over a work at the Brooklyn Museum that portrayed the Virgin Mary with elephant dung, sought to cut the museum's funding.

What seems to be changing, in Israel at least, is that a climate now exists in which political concerns seem to outweigh artistic sensibilities, observers say.

Last summer, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art responded to complaints about Wakstein's use of anti-Semitic imagery — including a swastika merged with a Jewish star — by removing nine works from his one-man exhibition there.

"It was like fighting for democracy," he said of the controversy.

The Sweden incident, Wakstein said, indicates a growing sense that those in power can "change the rules."

"It means you are not protected, and someday the rules can become very, very ugly," he said.

Israeli officials say it rules were broken, Sweden broke them. According to the Foreign Ministry, the Swedish government had pledged not to link the Stockholm Forum on Preventing Genocide to the Middle East conflict.

An exhibition that glorifies the actions of a suicide bomber "is a violation of the understanding, and if it is not removed, Israel will reconsider its participation in the conference," the ministry said in a statement Saturday. The conference is set to begin Jan. 26.

In recent days, Israel and Sweden have made attempts at reconciliation, but neither side has budged. Mazel refused to apologize. Sweden reportedly has replaced posters for the exhibition, "Making Differences," that featured Jaradat's portrait, but has no plans to remove the Feilers' installation.

The highly charged meeting of art and politics comes as Israel is increasingly isolated, especially in Europe. Some see Mazel's action as a violent act that will only heighten perceptions of Israel as the aggressor. Others suggest that Israel must display strength in an increasingly hostile world.

Israel's Public Security minister, Tzachi Hanegbi, for example, was quoted in the Israeli press as saying, "If there's a situation in which an ambassador should act in an undiplomatic manner, this is it."

Ephraim Zuroff, the director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Israel Office, told The Jewish Week, "This is a classic example of the new anti-Semitism. Under the mantle of Holocaust education, in a conference devoted to preventing genocide, an exhibition that glorifies suicide bombers is held.

"And it is done by someone born in Israel, which gives it a hechsher, so to speak," Zuroff continued, referring to the kosher seal of approval.

Feiler, 52, left Israel in 1973 after serving as a parachutist in the Israeli army. A musician and composer, he said he gave up Israeli citizenship in order to facilitate his career as a jazz saxophonist.

Feiler is also a political activist who until recently was president of Jews for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, a Swedish group opposed to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. His musical compositions include works titled "Shrapnel," "Intifada" and "Let the Millionaires Go Naked."

While acknowledging his political activism, Feiler told The Jewish Week that "Snow White" was not meant as propaganda.

"This work is not a pamphlet and it is not a manifesto," he said from his home in Stockholm. "It is a work of art. It is aimed for people to think."

Feiler said "Snow White" tries to provoke contemplation of "this strange, wrecked world that sometimes can deform a person from a rational person — a lawyer, like [Jaradat] was — to a lonely, desperate person with no hope."

But Zuroff said the work "makes martyrs [of the terrorists] and ignores the plight of Jewish victims, and it takes away whatever sympathy there is for Jewish victims by concentrating on the bomber and explaining her angst."

Responding to such criticism, Feiler insisted he was not "accepting, justifying or glorifying suicide bombers." He added that text accompanying the installation, which inserts Jaradat's story into the fairy tale, refers also to the suffering of the victims' families.

"If I have the same boat, but I put in it a picture of Ariel Sharon and the text with the names of Palestinian children who have been killed, would anybody think I'm glorifying him?" Feiler asked.

Feiler said Mazel's act was meant to "stop talk about Israel's policies that are indefensible."

Asked if any limits exist concerning what can be expressed through art, Feiler noted that there are laws in Sweden against racist statements and artwork.

"If Mazel thinks our art is of this kind, he can go to the court, and the court will close the exhibition," he said.

Laws aside, there may be an unwritten line across which art provokes vehement reaction.

The intifada itself is not off limits, even in Israeli art, the Tel Aviv-based curator Tami Katz-Freiman said. She just curated an exhibition at the University of Haifa that includes work depicting the aftermath of a bus bombing. Working from a press photograph, the artist Merav Sudaey embroidered and sequined the scene of religious rescue workers searching for bodily remains.

The contrast between the wrenching content and the decorative technique "makes it chilling," Katz-Freiman said. But public response has been tame compared to the uproar over the works of Feiler or Wakstein.

"Nobody asked me to take it out of the show," Katz-Freiman said.

Years ago, Katz-Freiman studied responses to representations of the Holocaust in Israeli art and concluded that "the barometer of responses went very high" whenever the focus shifted from Jewish victims to perpetrators. That seems to be the case in Stockholm.

Mazel, who admitted to having planned his action in advance of seeing the installation, was further incensed when he saw the terrorist "wearing perfect make-up and sailing placidly along the rivers" of Israeli blood.

"The picture of this woman is floating on a sea of blood, but it doesn't matter," Katz-Freiman said. "It's using her image and trying to understand her motives."

"That's what's making the people here crazy," she said. "Really, the barometer is boiling."

For Wakstein, the forecast is grim indeed.

"Intellectual, human, virtuoso ways of speaking are not necessary now," said Wakstein, who leads art workshops for Jewish and Arab children. "Everything must be more aggressive to be heard — that's happening all over the world."

In Israel, he said, "it's so sensitive now that nobody can speak anymore."

"Everybody hears [only] what he is afraid to hear, and immediately it becomes a struggle." n