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Art Or The New Anti-Semitism?

Israel artists say Stockholm incident could have chilling effect on expression. **Amotz Ben-Ner**

The latest ambassador to Sweden who renounced an installation he had planned would probably have prevented the work from the Israeli government. But many in Israel's arts community see the incident as a blow to freedom of expression.

The death of an art project — especially expensive at a time when Israel's image is under attack in much of the world — occurred Friday at Stockholm's Museum of Art, where an installation honoring the smiling portrait of a suicide bomber who killed 21 Israelis and himself in an Oct. 4 attack in Haifa.

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

Israel artists and curators contacted by The Jewish Week said instead that Meir's action amounts to government censorship and constitutes a chilling effect on artistic expression of home.

"You stand for our democracy," the artist David Watstein 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 Trust," consists of a small boat floating in a rectangular basin filled with red liquid. The boat bears the portrait of Yehoshua Kuper, a 29-year-old lawyer from Haifa.

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

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

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

Outrage over works of art is nothing new, in Israeli 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 prohibition in Israel. New York's Jewish Museum weathered impassioned protests against "Showering 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 De Brooklyn Museum that portrayed the Virgin Mary with elephants dung, sought to end 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 Wadstein's use of anti-Semitic imagery — including a swastika merged with a Jewish star — by removing nine works from its on-man exhibition there.

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

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

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

Swedish artists say it costs more money, because of the same, increasing to the Foreign Ministry, the Swedish government had pledged not to give the Stockholm Foundation financing because of 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. 28.

In Israel, Spain, Israel and Sweden have made attempts at reconciliation, but neither side has budged. Meir refused to apologize. Sweden reportedly had prepared posters for the exhibition, "Meeting Differences," that featured Israel's portrait, but has in plans to remove the Feller's installation.

The highly charged meeting of art and politics comes as Israel is increasingly isolated, especially in Europe. Some see Meir's action as a violent act that will only heighten perceptions of Israel as the aggressor. Critics argued that Meir 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 unprofessional manner, that 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, is a conference devoted to preventing genocide, an exhibition that glorifies suicide bomber's a hero."

"And it is done by someone born in Israel, which gives it a heftiness, so to speak," Zuroff continued, referring to the leader's use of approval.

Feller, 52, left Israel in 1979 after serving as a paratrooper in the Israeli army. A musician and composer, he said he gave up Israeli citizenship in order to further his career as a jazz saxophonist.

Feller is also a political activist who until recently was president of Jews for Israel-Palestinian Peace, a Swedish group opposed to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. His musical compositions include works titled "Shoveled," "Inchala" and "Let the Millionaire Go Home."

While acknowledging his political activism, Feller 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."

Feller said "Snow White" tries to provide contemplation of "this strange, absurd world that sometimes can define a person from a rational person — a lover, his [sic] friend, his — to a lonely, desperate person with no hope."

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

Responding to such critics, Feller insisted he was not "accepting, justifying or glorifying suicide bombers." He added that text accompanying the installation, which names Israel's army as the only side, refers also to the suffering of the victim's families.

"I have the same boat, but I put in it a picture of Imre Spector and the text with the names of Palestinian children who have been killed, would anybody then not glorify him?" Feller asked.

Feller said Meir's act was meant to "stop talk about Israel's policies that are intolerable."

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

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

Lars Arvid, Meir's lawyer, said he is unwilling to discuss which art provoked Wadstein's 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 Sudæy 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 Feller 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 Israel and concluded that "the language of responses were very high" whenever the focus shifted from Jewish victims to perpetrators. That seems to be the case in Stockholm.

Meir, who admitted to having planned his action in advance of seeing the installation, was further incensed when he saw the bomber wearing perfect make-up and talking gleefully about the "river" 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 indoctrinate her mother."

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

For Wadstein, the message is just intended.