

Whitney Triple Chaser Exhibit

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I accept that I am hyper sensitive to criticisms of Israel. And I accept that a free world requires freedom of speech. But in the present climate of increasing and ever-present hatred of Israel coming from so many sectors of American and European intellectual and political life, if we honestly believe in free speech we ought to insist on the right of reply. We cannot sit back and ignore bias or dishonest reporting without reacting.

Things are getting worse. Antisemitism is now kosher because attacking it might offend others. If you disagree with a policy on illegal immigration in the USA, you can call people Nazis and accuse them of building Death Camps. If you are a Muslim Head of State speaking before Oxford University's prestigious debating chamber, you can accuse Jews of being violent, cruel moneylenders and oppressors and have the audience applaud. And you can politicize the Eurovision Song Contest and be called a hero.

Once again, a New York Gallery has chosen to pillory Israel without any nuance and with no fair right of reply. As if Israel was the only state to use tear gas to control demonstrations from getting out of hand. You may argue that protest is legitimate – and I do. But where there is no nuance – no right of reply – it is simply dishonest.

Amongst all items in the 2019 Biennial exhibition of American Art at the Whitney Gallery in New York is an item behind a curtain in a screening area. There is no warning that it is a piece of propaganda. An organization called *Forensic Architecture* contributed an artistic documentary about the Triple Chaser tear gas cannisters which are used around the world for crowd control. Used ones were collected and assigned colors according to locations of use. And then turned into computer graphic collages which might be regarded, in the context

of Modern Art, as... Art.

But there was an ulterior motive. The Triple Chaser is manufactured by a company called the Safariland Group which is headed by Warren B. Kanders who also happens to be a vice-chair of the Whitney Museum of Modern Art. So you might say that this was a laudable exercise in free speech. Goody for the Whitney having the courage to bite the hand that feeds it. But dig a little deeper and you discover that there is a much deeper hidden agenda.

This exhibit is not just an attack on Kanders. It selects Israel for very special and specific condemnation and obloquy. About a third of the presentation of what an innocent art goer might think is a work of art is devoted to specifically excoriating Israel for defending itself. Not against peaceful demonstrators, as the film implies. But against those trying to pull down its defenses and invade its territory – both with malice aforethought and malice expressed.

The Principal of Forensic Architecture is Eyal Weizman who provides a fig leaf of respectability because of his Israeli name. He is a man with an agenda to research human rights abuses. I would applaud this if he were remotely objective. He is supported by the B'Tselem NGO and the Omega Research Foundation who are both outwardly committed to human rights but equally myopic in their concentration of hatred towards Israel. So the purported aim of embarrassing Kanders was, in reality, only one small part of it all.

Apart from the graphics, the film contains clips of US agents firing tear-gas grenades at civilians along the San Diego-Tijuna border in November 2018. The grenades were made by the Safariland Group. So were the tear gas grenades used in the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey. As were items used by any number of other countries around the world that trample on human rights and suppress non-violent protests with guns and bullets. Or as the blurb of the exhibition puts it, "to suppress dissent." That alone is a lie because dissent has never been the issue in the Israel-Palestinian affair where Arab members of the Knesset have always expressed their criticism and opposition to Israel openly and freely.

The film then moves on to Sierra Bullets – also made by Safariland and used in crowd control. The clips show the effects that the bullets can have – and focused almost entirely on Israel's use of them in containing the Gaza clashes over its security border. To make matters worse, several of the clips have been proven to be fake through staged and doctored injuries – a tactic used all the time in support of the Palestinian cause.

Most of what the audience takes away from this is that Israel is the arch villain in the piece and the prime user of these cannisters and bullets. Quoting the European court of Human Rights to condemn Israel, it equally misrepresents them by making no reference to a condemnation of Palestinian tactics which includes using children as human shields or firing over the security border with incendiary devices, explosives and rockets into civilian areas on the other side.

The arms manufacturing and dealing business is not a very attractive one. But if countries want to defend themselves against arms, or violence, they need to buy arms of various sorts and degrees of sophistication and someone needs to manufacture them. It is the sickness of the left that Israel is singled out for condemnation for using arms to defend itself. And it is to the shame of the Whitney, following in the long line of fellow travelling opponents of Israel's right to defend itself (and in most cases to just exist) that have fallen for such biased art to curry favor with anti-Israel propagandists. After having had their hatred bottled up for so long, what a relief it is to be able to come out into the open and spew their prejudices all over the place.

I have no objection to criticizing the use of gases, guns and every other form of violence except in self-defense. If anyone has a fairer, safer, more effective alternative, I'd love to hear it. I have no doubt Israel would love to use it.

It hurts me when I see Israelis at the forefront of trying to undermine Israel's right to self-defense. If the Whitney were honest, it would put on an exhibition of art that expresses a counter argument – or least include some artists who do. It hurts me that an organization who claim to be committed to art allows itself to be used for biased political ends. But, in the meantime, you can write and complain. And if you are in town, give them a

miss.