

The Whitney Again

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

A month ago, I wrote a blog about the Whitney Biennial 2019 Exhibition that included a piece which, among other things, contained a distorted smear job against Israel over its use of tear gas to break up the Gaza protests. The exhibit was called "*The Triple Chaser*" after tear gas canisters of that name. The Triple Chaser is manufactured by a company called the Safariland Group which is headed by Warren B. Kanders who also happened to be a vice-chair of the Whitney Museum of Modern Art.

Although the piece starts off with a clip of the USA using tear gas to stop illegal entry on the Mexican border, it soon turns into an attack on Israel that goes on to include use of Sierra bullets

There was no nuance. No suggestion whether the Gaza riots were peaceful or not. Or whether any violence was directed at Israeli civilian targets. Or whether there were attempts to break through security fences. Or a declared commitment to enter Israel and commit violence. Or discussion about whether tear gas may or may not be a preferable way of dealing with unrest than other more violent methods. Or any historical nuance. A subsequent investigation by the manufacturer found out that the only evidence for the use of Sierra bullets was a single Sierra bullet discovered in rubble in Gaza with no indication that it came from Israel.

From a legal perspective, none of Kanders' business dealings directly contradicted the Whitney's mission and, therefore, he could not be forced to resign. The onus was on protesters to prove their allegations were founded in real evidence and not simply politically motivated.

In my blog I argued that it was dishonest propaganda which used lies and deception to tarnish Israel's reputation. And I recommended to my readers that they boycott the Whitney.

What eventually became clear was that this was a planned hatchet job on Warren Kanders in addition to a showcase of anti-Israel propaganda. And it worked. On July 25th, 2019 Kanders announced his resignation from the Whitney Board of Trustees. His letter to the Board was included in a New York Times article that broke the news of his resignation.

Since my blog, I have discovered that he is just a small part of a very serious and disturbing phenomenon which illustrates the challenges that curators face in exhibiting art and artists. It has been infecting many major temples of culture in New York. It is a culture war that is now being fought across the USA.

There is no question that art has always been used for personal and political ends. Art was used to spread Christianity. Two Spanish giants, Goya and Picasso, used art to condemn atrocities. But their art stood on its own

merits. Not simply as hatchet jobs.

The Whitney campaign started before the Biennial. An online magazine called Hyperallergic made the link between Safariland and the tear gas used on the Mexican border. Soon after, 100 staff members, including the co-curator of the Biennial exhibition, signed a letter asking the Whitney to demand that Kanders resign.

One week later, in early December, a group called *Decolonize This Place* (DTP), led by the notorious Amin Hussain, announced that it would hold a protest at the Whitney in solidarity with Museum staff. Hussain is a well-known agitator and advocate of violence and terrorism in support of Palestine and the BDS. He is listed on Canary Mission, a site dedicated to documenting hatred toward the U.S., Israel and Jews on North American college campuses.

As promised, DTP held its December protest at the Whitney. During the fifth week of activism (ahead of Whitney Biennial 2019), DTP's anti-Safariland museum protest focused on Palestine. Dancers from the Palestinian youth group, *Within Our Lifetime*, chanted, "Warren Kanders you can't hide, we charge you with genocide/ From Brooklyn to Palestine, occupation is a crime/ From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free." Which is as clear as you can get to calling for the elimination of Israel without actually using those words.

In February, Biennial curators Hockley and Panetta announced the list of artists invited to participate in Whitney Biennial 2019. While the Museum's mission is to exhibit American art, and the Biennial's mission is to survey the most recent developments in American art, London-based research collaborative, Forensic Architecture, was invited. So why did Hockley have to go to London for American art unless she had an agenda? Especially as Forensic Architecture made it clear that it would use its Whitney invitation to produce a political statement designed to help take down a Whitney board trustee.

In response to the demonstrations Whitney Museum Director Adam Weinberg gave a speech defending the Museum and made a "plea for conversation." But then Weinberg took no further action and allowed DTP to conduct numerous unimpeded disruptive protests inside the Whitney Museum.

Decolonize this Place has acknowledged "We know this goes beyond Kanders. He is a stand-in for an entire system. Toxic philanthropy can no longer be normalized. The landscape is changing, as we can see with the repudiation of the Sacklers by the Met, Guggenheim, and Tate... The removal of Kanders is a gesture of good faith by the museum, a signal that you grasp the historical moment and that you recognize business cannot go on as usual."

In other words, the mere association with a company or a history in which these new culture police determine there was something offensive, is grounds for booting off more than half the donors to American cultural institutions unless they kow-tow to these latter day, holier-than-thou fanatics.

The Biennial curators and artists belong to a club of coastal elites who are

largely influenced by cultural and geographic biases along with prescribed institutional affiliations. But in fact these new arbiters have skewed the representation based on ethnicity, not art.

This is a culture war. If it were just to press for more representation of minority artists, then I would agree (provided the art exhibited was based on talent). But where the battle is part of a culture war, it is no different than all the second-rate Soviet State sponsored artists who supported or helped underpin its inhuman dogmas. And we all know what happened to the Marxist regime and its art.

On July 26, 2019 Brian Allen, Director of the Museum and Vice President of the New York Historical Society and former Director of the Addison Gallery, wrote an article saying that the Warren Kandors exit is a big story. "It should make institutional trustees and New York philanthropists uneasy. Unlike the protestors, I don't see a connection between the enforcement of the Mexican border and the governance of a New York art museum. Yet open letters—signed by marginal academics and cranks—demanded Kandors's expulsion, and now they've gotten it.

The artists who wanted to pull their work from the Biennial to protest against Kandors are the most modest talents in a show that has many high points and, alas, many tedious ones. Kandors's resignation will end nothing – for the protestors will prove insatiable. They won't be satisfied by a single scalp and will seek out more targets at every museum with a trustee whose career, beliefs, family, or philanthropy conflict with left-wing ideology."

Since museums and galleries depend on charitable donations rather than governments in the USA, this could radically degrade the every institutions dedicated to protecting art and culture. This is a battle we need to be aware of.

The more facts the greater the chance of surviving this tsunami of distortion and political agenda. I do not expect anything I say can change the minds of those too prejudiced to pay attention. But in the culture wars and the epic international struggle for Israel's right to exist, fake and dishonest news can only be counteracted by shedding light on both sides of the argument. I accept there are two sides and I accept that there are two cases. But telling lies helps neither. We should not remain silent.

Correction:Last week I mentioned a UK ban on Limmud by former Chief Rabbi Sacks. I have been corrected. There was no ban as such. But the Head of the Court of the Chief Rabbi did warn rabbis under its authority that they would seriously damage their careers if they were to attend Limmud.