



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc

Headquarters & Secretariat

Georgetown University
Center for Contemporary Arab
Studies

3700 O St. NW, ICC STE 241
Washington DC 20057

Phone 520-333-2577
Fax 520-207-3166
secretariat@mesana.org
mesana.org



8 October 2024

Kevin M. Guskiewicz
President
Michigan State University
president@msu.edu

Thomas Jeitschko
Interim Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs
Michigan State University
provost@msu.edu

Dear President Guskiewicz and Interim Provost Jeitschko:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our grave concern over the decision of the Michigan State University (MSU) administration to cancel the public opening event of the art exhibition “Diasporic Collage: Puerto Rico and the Survival of a People,” scheduled for 13 September 2024 at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum located on the MSU campus, and then to impose a significant change to the exhibit itself. These actions were taken because the exhibit included a 1973 image depicting pro-Palestine protestors. This egregious interference with curatorial work and research, and the public’s access to a broad range of perspectives, is a clear violation of academic freedom and free speech.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the prestigious *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2,800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and outside of North America.

The photography exhibition “Diasporic Collage” explores Puerto Rican identities through the global experiences of its diaspora communities. One exhibit, “Piquete en el capitolio,” created by Kuwaiti-Puerto Rican artist Alia Farid, is a weave of a 1973 photograph of Puerto Ricans protesting for Palestinian rights and against Israeli state policies at the time; the demonstrators are holding signs with statements such as “Justice for the Palestinians” and “Down with the Zionist Occupation.” Although the curators had spent more than a year researching and preparing for this exhibit, university officials canceled the public opening, citing “staffing and ongoing



Re: Diasporic Collage Exhibition

8 October 2024

Page 2

capacity issues,” but assured the curators that the decision was not based on the content of the exhibit. Instead of a public event, officials allowed only artists and select guests to attend, and they were required to enter the Broad Museum through a service entrance. Five days later on 18 September 2024, university officials contradicted their earlier statements, claiming that security concerns about the piece “Piquete en el capitolio” required further changes to the exhibit. Without consulting the curators, officials moved the photograph to another area of the exhibition space and added a warning about “controversial content” and additional language distancing the Broad Museum and MSU from the curators and artists. We note that MSU officials have not offered any evidence for their alleged safety concerns.

Curatorial work is protected speech, and the design of this exhibit is an expression of academic freedom. By misleading the curators in order to cancel the public event, and then unilaterally altering their scholarly work, university officials directly undermined MSU’s own avowed [values](#) regarding free speech: “The basic purposes of the University are the advancement, dissemination, and application of knowledge. The most basic condition for the achievement of these purposes is freedom of expression and communication. Without this freedom, effective sifting and testing of ideas cease, and research, teaching, and learning are stifled.”

In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to defend open debate and academic freedom when it comes to important issues of public concern, including Palestinian rights and Israeli state policies. We call your attention to the [statement](#) issued by MESA’s board of directors and its Committee on Academic Freedom on 6 May 2024 which denounced actions by university leaders to delegitimize and repress campus advocacy opposing Israel’s war in Gaza. We also remind you of the [statement](#) on “Academic Freedom in Times of War” issued by the American Association of University Professors on 24 October 2023, which is directly relevant to the perniciousness of your censorship:

It is in tumultuous times that colleges’ and universities’ stated commitments to protect academic freedom are most put to the test. As the Israel-Hamas war rages and campus protests proliferate, institutional authorities must refrain from sanctioning faculty members for expressing politically controversial views and should instead defend their right, under principles of academic freedom, to do so.



Re: Diasporic Collage Exhibition

8 October 2024

Page 3

We call on you to immediately restore the exhibit to the format set by its curators and to issue a public apology to all of the artists, curators, and staff who worked to craft “Diasporic Collage.” We also call on the MSU administration to forcefully reiterate its commitment to protect the academic freedom and the free speech rights of all members of the MSU community.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Asli U. Bali'.

Aslı Ü. Bâli

MESA President

Professor, Yale Law School

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand'.

Laurie Brand

Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Emerita, University of Southern California