

## Artists Withdraw Work from Barbican Exhibition as Censorship Scandal Grows | Artnet News

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Diedrick Brackens and Mounira al Solh have joined artists Yto Barrada and Cian Dayrit and three other lenders in requesting their work be removed from an exhibition at the Barbican in London in protest of an alleged censorship scandal. Last month, the arts center canceled a lecture by Indian writer Pankaj Mishra after it realized that he would be addressing Israel's war on Gaza.

Two married collectors, Lorenzo Legarda Leviste and Fahad Mayet, [initiated the protest](#) at the end of February by requesting that two quilts by Gee's Bend artist Loretta Pettway be removed from the exhibition "Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art," which opened on February 13. The quilts had been lent to Barbican by Leviste and Mayet for the exhibition. Now a total of six artists and nine artworks have been withdrawn.

Lebanese artist Mounira Al Solh is the latest artist to request their work be withdrawn today. This afternoon, the foundation Art Jameel also requested the removal of a work it lent by Filipino artist Pacita Abad. Last week, Filipino artist Cian Dayrit, American artist Diedrick Brackens, and French-Moroccan artist Yto Barrada also requested that their works be removed from the show.

"We cannot take seriously a public institution that does not hold a space for free thinking and debate," said Barrada, "however challenging it might feel to some staff, board members, or anxious politicians."

Diedrick Brackens, whose woven tapestries speak to the Black queer experience, also requested on Friday that his work *fire makes some dragons* (2020) be removed from the show. He said the censorship of Mishra had sullied the show's "well-intentioned vision" and called for "Unravel" to be closed "in solidarity with those calling for immediate ceasefire."



Diedrick Brackens, *fire makes some dragons* (2020) at “Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art” at the Barbican Art Gallery. Photo: Jemima Yong, © Barbican Art Gallery.

“I am dismayed by the museum’s acts of censorship and refusal to hold itself accountable,” he said in a statement to the Barbican’s administration and trustees. “It is disheartening that this exhibition has to be dismantled work by work in order to expose the complicity of the institution in silencing those of us who are speaking out against the historical and ongoing violence being committed in Gaza.”

“The work in ‘Unravel’ has garnered the Barbican considerable attention and acclaim, and positions the institution in alignment with the often unsung work of women and people of color,” he added. “However, the institution, through its actions, has betrayed its lack of commitment to any such radical politics or the people who espouse them.”

The arts center decided not to host Mishra’s lecture, which was organized by the London Review of Books (LRB), after it learnt that the talk’s title was “[The Shoah after Gaza](#).” Shortly after the [news broke](#), the arts center released a [statement](#) claiming that it had been prematurely advertised as the venue for the lecture before this had been officially agreed with the LRB. This meant that the Barbican did not have time to give the topic “dedicated and thoughtful care.” The LRB denies this version of events, stating that the lecture had been canceled “at a late stage.”

“As lenders to the exhibition, which explicitly aligns itself with values of ‘resistance,’ ‘protest,’ ‘solidarity,’ and ‘liberation,’ we were disturbed and alarmed by the Barbican’s late-stage cancellation of the lecture,” Leviste and Mayet said in their [online statement](#), when they chose to pull Pettway’s quilts. They also published their [email correspondence](#) with the show’s curators following the removal of

the quilts.



Loretta Pettway’s quilts were removed from the “Unravel” exhibition at the Barbican in London in February 2024. Photo: Courtesy of Censorship at the Barbican.

The Barbican’s chief executive Claire Spencer released a [new statement](#) last week that the institution recognized why the cancelation of Mishra’s lecture “created significant concern about artistic freedom, and which voices are given a platform to speak during this moment of deep humanitarian crisis.”

In a further statement shared by email, she added that the gallery has “processes in place to make sure such [a] situation doesn’t happen again.” It also confirmed that it has no plans to close the show early.

“We respect the lenders’ decision,” the show’s curators wrote on a sign placed by the empty platform that once displayed Pettway’s textiles lent by Leviste and Mayet.

Last year the Barbican advised the Palestinian radio host Elias Anastas, who was participating remotely in an event organized by the arts center, to “avoid talking about [free Palestine](#) at length... just to further safeguard the audience.” His interviewer Nihal El Aasar was also advised to “steer clear of thorny issues,” according to the [Guardian](#).

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