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NOTES ON THE CULTURE

Where Is All the Art About War?

At a time of global conflict, institutions are shying away from the topic — and artists are struggling to show their work.



An image from the artist Richard Serra's protest campaign "Stop Bush," installed in Manhattan in the fall of 2004. © 2026 Estate of Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo (detail): Robert Polidori

By Julia Halperin
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IN MARCH 2022, the artist Deborah Kass decided to transform her cheerful yellow sculpture in front of the Brooklyn Museum, “OY/YO” (2015) — which reads “OY” from one direction and “YO” from the other — to show solidarity with Ukraine following Russia’s invasion. The canary-colored “O” was wrapped in blue fabric so that the piece would match the colors of the Ukrainian flag.

But less than three years later, the museum’s posture toward political protest had shifted. In late 2024, 22 participants in “The Brooklyn Artists Exhibition” asked to hang kaffiyehs next to their pieces for what they called a “collective artistic intervention” in support of Palestine. The museum declined the request, with its deputy director for art writing in an email to the artists that doing so could open “the door to other requests for changes” that might “fundamentally change the nature of the show.”

The message referred to Kass’s “OY/YO” intervention, noting that leadership “took lessons from the feedback we received … about selectively engaging with geopolitical events.” Moving forward, the email continued, “we are being more considered in our own actions as an institution.”

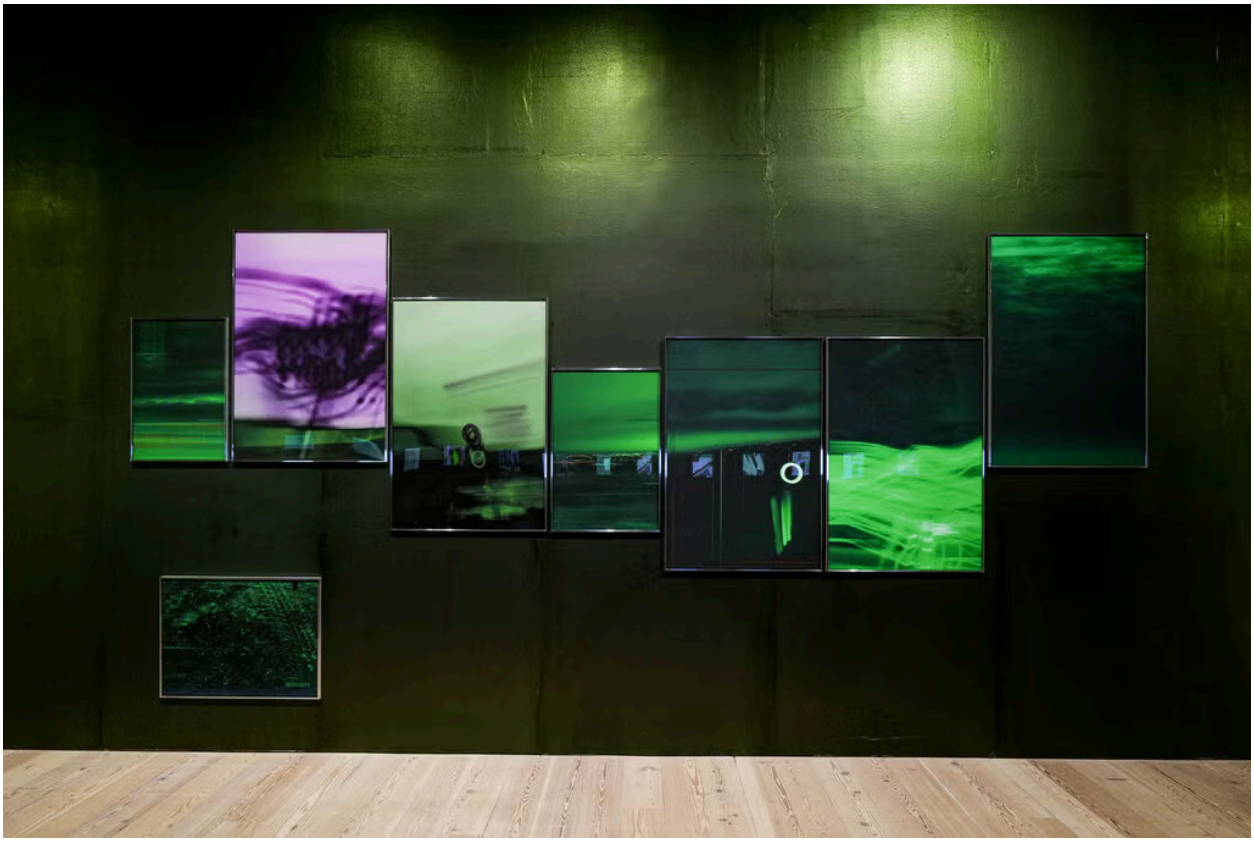


Deborah Kass’s “OY/YO,” installed in front of the Brooklyn Museum in March 2022, and partially wrapped in blue fabric to match the colors of the Ukrainian flag. © 2006 Deborah Kass / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Danny Perez

There was a key difference between Kass's gesture and "The Brooklyn Artists Exhibition": Gaza. David Velasco, a former editor in chief of Artforum who was fired by the magazine's publishers in 2023 after authorizing the publication of an open letter supporting "Palestinian liberation," has since written about how Gaza "broke the art world." There's been fallout on all sides. El Museo del Barrio in East Harlem declined to display a commissioned artwork after the artists included a Palestinian flag. The interim chief executive of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco resigned because, she said, her refusal to boycott Israeli artists and institutions sparked a "vitriolic and antisemitic backlash." A collections committee at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto voted against acquiring a slide show by Nan Goldin after some members raised concerns over her vocal criticism of Israel. Indiana University Bloomington's Eskenazi Museum of Art canceled a solo exhibition by the Palestinian artist Samia Halaby after she posted support for Palestinian causes on social media. Protesters interrupted a conversation at New York's Jewish Museum between the institution's director, James S. Snyder, and the Israeli and Ukrainian artist Zoya Cherkassky, whose raw depictions of Hamas's Oct. 7 attacks were on view there, saying that Cherkassky's 2023 work was "manufacturing consent for genocide." Three people were charged with hate crimes for vandalizing the homes of four Brooklyn Museum leaders and stenciling the words "Blood on your hands" in red paint, after a clash between pro-Palestinian protesters and police outside the museum.

"People are afraid. I don't think artists are unaware of and uninterested in the issues of war," said Tom Finkelpearl, 70, the former commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. "Galleries don't feel they can show stuff. Museums are worried about funding. I've never seen anything like this in terms of the level of fear."

THERE'S A LONG tradition of American antiwar art, and even artists whose work isn't considered explicitly political have been moved to action. In 1968, the Japanese-born artist Yayoi Kusama, known for her polka-dot patterns, staged a nude dance performance in front of the New York Stock Exchange to protest the military-industrial complex during the Vietnam War. In 2004, during the Iraq war, the American sculptor Richard Serra plastered a drawing based on the notorious photograph of an Iraqi prisoner of war being tortured by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib across a billboard in West Chelsea, Manhattan's blue-chip-gallery district; accompanying the drawing was a slogan, referring to the U.S. president at the time: "Stop Bush."



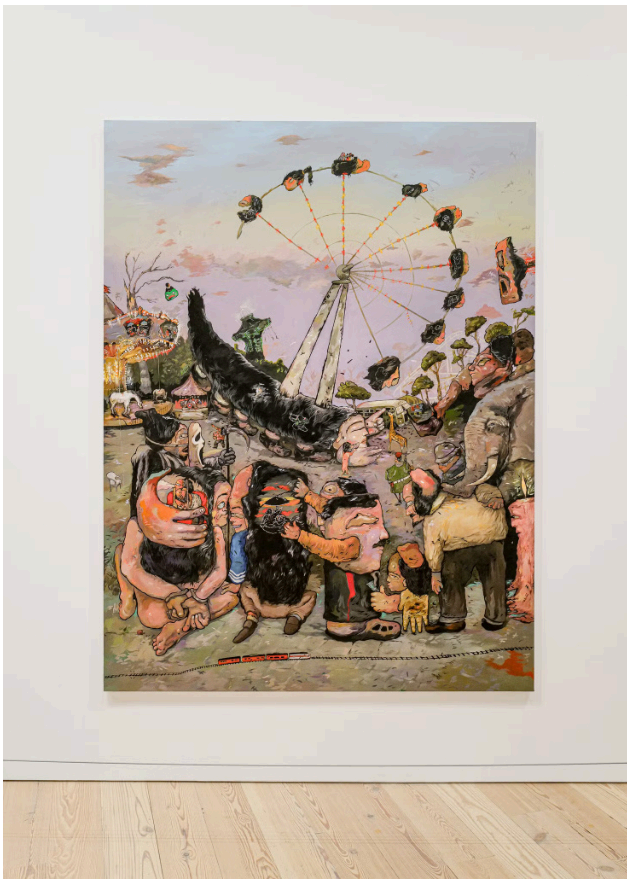
Aziz Hazara's "Moon Sightings" (2024), exhibited at this year's Whitney Biennial.Credit...Jason Lowrie/ BFA.com © BFA 2026

Today, America is again at war in the Middle East — not to mention its involvement, to varying degrees, in conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. But the rare art addressing war in major galleries and institutions looks considerably different than it did 20, or even five, years ago. Explicit imagery and confrontational language have in many cases been replaced by something much less direct. Agitprop has given way to the uncontroversial. If a work carries an antiwar message, it must now "be quiet enough that it blends in and the patron can't see the critique," says one museum director, who declined to be named because of the sensitivity of the issue. "It's more akin to art produced in an authoritarian regime."

One exception is "War," by the Canadian-born, New York-based performance artist Miles Greenberg, who began developing the project — a six-hour epic featuring opposing armies — after the Israel-Gaza war broke out in 2023. He said he struggled to find institutional support ("I've received an ocean of no") until Performa, the multidisciplinary nonprofit arts organization, agreed to sign on as co-presenter. Still, the work debuted this week for a one-night-only run not at a gallery or museum but instead at a former movie theater on East 86th Street in Manhattan.

Some artists and curators have also sneaked antiwar messages into exhibitions through obfuscation. This past spring, the Museum of Modern Art in New York hung "The Auction" (2025), a painting by Nicole Eisenman that depicts a black-robed figure presiding over an art auction. Eisenman made the work at least partly in response to collectors threatening to sell her art because they disagreed with her pro-Palestinian views; in the painting, the art market is cast as the judge and jury of her actions. At MoMA, curators presented it, like most new acquisitions, without explanatory wall text, rendering the context invisible to most visitors. And this year's Whitney Biennial in New York included "Moon Sightings" (2024), abstract photographs by the Afghan-born, Berlin-based artist Aziz Hazara that looked as if they were taken underwater but were in fact derived from retinal scans and biometric data extracted from military night-vision goggles. The artist also has a solo show at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens, through Dec. 28, comprising piles of trash that American soldiers left behind at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan; he spent five years navigating supply chains, sanctions and subcontractors to ship it back to the United States.

Perhaps the most explicit protest art on view at a major institution this year took a more humanistic approach. In "Greater New York 2026," MoMA PS1's survey of New York City-area artists, the photographer Dean Majd showed his "Mahmoud Khalil, Noor Abdalla and Baby Deen" (2025), an image of Khalil, who led pro-Palestinian protests at Columbia University in 2024, with his wife and son, who was born while Khalil was in federal custody. The trio are luminous against a dark background, as in an old master painting. Such tender work may pull in an audience that's numb to, or turned off by, more explicitly political visual language — language that is harder to deploy these days, in any event: Images of war have never been more available but, thanks to A.I., social media and a general distrust of the press, they've also never been more contested. Drone strikes bring new terrors to soldiers and civilians, yet their violence — witnessed from afar — can also feel less visceral than imagery of boots on the ground. In 2004, the leaked Abu Ghraib images were credited with eventually turning public opinion against the Iraq war. Could one set of photographs have the same effect now?



Ali Eyal's "Look Where I Took You" (2026) at the Whitney Biennial.Credit...Jason Lowrie/BFA.com © BFA 2026

Serra, who died in 2024, said that his goal in creating the Abu Ghraib drawing "was completely political" and "not aesthetic at all." Today this qualification often goes in the opposite direction: Artists attend demonstrations and post about politics, but they want to keep the art they make separate. "Protests have a clear message," says the Iraqi artist Ali Eyal, 32. "My work doesn't need to function that way." Based in Los Angeles, Eyal paints unsettling works inspired by his experiences growing up in Iraq during the Iraq war. They possess a kind of unhinged dream logic that might make sense to a child living in proximity to senseless acts of violence. He says his father was kidnapped by Jaysh al-Mahdi, a Shiite militia, never to be seen again; several other family members disappeared and are presumed dead. A young Eyal frequently awoke to the sound of bombs.

His 2026 painting "Look Where I Took You," one of the few obviously war-related works in this year's Whitney Biennial, was inspired by a Ferris wheel ride he went on

with his mother at an amusement park in Baghdad days before the American invasion in 2003. Eyal recalls his mother saying of the city as they reached the top, “Have a look. … You’ll never see it like now. It will change forever.” At the center of the canvas, there are disembodied heads where the gondolas should be.

Today, Eyal is navigating an ascendant career and thinking about how to express public positions on war and violence. He finds creative ways to protest, including a 2024 performance in response to the decision of the Noguchi Museum in Queens to fire three employees for wearing kaffiyehs at work: Eyal and the artist David Horvitz draped a kaffiyeh that had belonged to Eyal’s father over three Isamu Noguchi public sculptures across Los Angeles.

Eyal also doesn’t want galleries to sell his work to an individual or organization that helped fund the war in Iraq or supports a genocidal state. But he isn’t comfortable getting any more specific. Earlier in our conversation, he said: “My life has been shaped by political decisions. But I’m not trying to make a political statement.”

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