

Italian city defies China, opens exhibit by dissident artist Badiucao

By Charlene Pele
The Associated Press

BRESCIA, Italy — A provocative exhibit by dissident Chinese artist Badiucao opened in November in the industrial northern Italian city of Brescia despite pressure from the Chinese embassy in Rome to cancel it.

A letter from the embassy included veiled economic threats, noting Italy's trade with China, in a bid to prevent the first solo exhibit by Badiucao — the pseudonym used by the artist whose work takes aim at China's policies and human-rights record.

Brescia mayor Emilio Del Bono "responded with delicacy and firmness," said Elettra Stamboulis, curator of the exhibit at the city's Museum of Santa Giulia.

"Of course we are always a little worried, not so much for the artist's safety, but because we know there are more creepy ways to silence dissident artists," she said.

After a previous attempt to stage a solo show in Hong Kong in 2018 was cancelled under pressure, Badiucao said he is "proud and happy" that the Brescia exhibit finally opened to the public.

"Because my art is always focusing on human-rights issues in China ... it makes me almost the type of No. 1 enemy," Badiucao said. "They hunt me down. They harass me, harass my families, threatening the people working with me constantly. So that is why, for me, it is really hard to actually having [sic] an exhibition in an established gallery, a museum like this."

The exhibition, which runs until February 13, traces Badiucao's artistic career from its start to most recent works created in response to the health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. A former



BADIUCAO IN BRESCIA. Visitors walk past a torture chair during the opening of dissident Chinese artist Badiucao's exhibition at the Santa Giulia Museum in Brescia, in this November 13, 2021 file photo. A provocative exhibit by the artist opened in the industrial northern Italian city of Brescia despite pressure from the Chinese embassy in Rome to cancel it. A letter from the embassy included veiled economic threats, noting Italy's trade with China, in a bid to prevent Badiucao's first solo exhibit. (AP Photo/Felice Calabro, File)

assistant to the Berlin-based Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, Badiucao currently works in exile from Australia.

The works range from oil paintings to installations and performance art. They include one that evokes a scandal involving tainted baby formula exported by China in 2018, another that recalls the Tiananmen Square massacre, and yet another that represents the Umbrella Movement as part of the Hong Kong pro-democracy demonstrations quelled by China.

During the exhibit's opening days, Badiucao sat in a torture chair and read from a diary shared with him by a resident of Wuhan, the Chinese city where the coronavirus was first detected.

"Anyone who tried to tell the truth or some story different from China's government's narrative would be punished, so I made a public call on

Twitter to the residents of Wuhan and said I'd like to share the burden and risk with you, if you trust me you can send your information," Badiucao said.

The diary, read in Mandarin, contains 100 days of records.

The artist kept his identity secret for many years, wearing masks during public appearances to protect his family members. The long-held secrecy drew comparisons to British graffiti artist Banksy, whose true identity remains shrouded in mystery.

But Badiucao said any comparison misses key points.

"If Banksy's identity gets revealed, he is not or she is not going to be hunted by the U.K.'s national security police, which in my case is totally different," he said. "But also, I am really mad at Banksy, because he never does any artwork that criticizes the Chinese government."

Japan OKs record \$317 billion extra budget for COVID, economy

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan's parliament has approved a record extra budget of nearly 36 trillion yen (\$317 billion) for the fiscal year through March to help out pandemic-hit households and businesses.

The budget largely is to fund COVID-19 measures, including booster shot vaccines and oral medicines. It also includes cash payouts for families with children and a promotion campaign for the hard-hit tourism industry, which critics said are pork barrel giveaways.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the supplementary budget is meant to revive an economy not yet fully recovered from the pandemic and to achieve stronger growth and a more equitable distribution of wealth under his "new capitalism" policy.

Under Kishida, the government has tightened border restrictions to help keep at bay cases of the fast-spreading omicron variant of the coronavirus, after managing to bring infection levels down sharply in the past few months.

The budget includes 100,000 yen (\$880) payouts to households with children 18 or younger and a 2.5 million yen (\$22,000) subsidy for businesses that suffered substantial losses of sales due to the pandemic. It also will pay to increase salaries of nurses and other caregivers.

It allocates 617 billion yen (\$5.4 billion) for promoting semiconductor manufacturing inside Japan as the country moves to improve its economic security and counter shortages of the computer chips that are vital for a wide range of products. The budget will also fund the promotion of tourism, sustainability, and digitalization.

In response to growing concern about rising Chinese power and other strategic challenges, it includes about 773 billion (\$6.8) dedicated to speeding up deployment of missile defense systems and other military preparedness.

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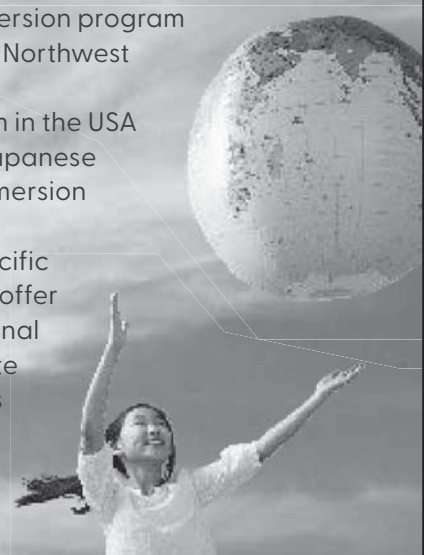


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