Philadelphia’s Freedom Artist Spotlight
Interview with Jean Broden

How did you hear about the opportunity to participate in the Philadelphia’s Freedom exhibition at NLM? What made you want to submit artwork to the exhibition?

I saw the call for artists on Facebook, shared by a friend of mine. The exhibit immediately appealed to me for a few reasons. I was certainly excited by the idea of exhibiting in an important city museum, a first for me. I loved that this exhibit was all about Philadelphia. We have our own way of seeing the world here and I was anxious to express that. As a life-long resident of Philadelphia, I feel my artwork exemplifies that spirit. To have the opportunity to show my perspective of freedom to a wider world was very appealing.

How do you personally define freedom?

I think that freedom is all about living in a world that feels comfortable and at peace with itself. I move through the place I live with an ease and a sense of belonging to a community that strives to be better together. Knowing that I can express myself in my way while my neighbors can express themselves in their way, and it’s all okay; that’s freedom. Diversity merged into one voice, one goal, with no fear of reprisals.

How would you describe your art?

I consider my work to fall into the category of contemporary realism (if it needs a category), in the tradition of early and mid-twentieth century American art trends of Realism and Regionalism. In my pieces, I try to create a sense of place and time in the ordinary surroundings that make up a person’s life.

How would you describe your process in making art?

Mostly, I am an observer. As I travel through my life. I watch people interact, I study buildings and bridges and structures of all kinds, I carefully consider the objects that I find in my own home or the corners of others. I wonder about the lives of these people, places and things. I think about how objects were designed and used, how people
interacted with them. All of this is fascinating speculation for me. It speaks to my naturally introverted disposition. I’m much more comfortable studying my surroundings at an event or gathering than actually participating in the festivities.

When I come across these scenes and objects, I photograph them, over and over. I go back and photograph them again, different times of day, different times of year, until I catch the exact image that sparks my imagination; the image that answers the question I didn’t know I had. Suddenly it’s right and I can begin a painting.

**What mediums do you primarily work with?**

I work directly on the canvas, sketching out my composition in thin oil paint. From there I do a grisaille underpainting to find my values. Colors are applied in layers, slowly building up details toward the finished piece.

**How does the concept of freedom in this exhibition influence how and what you create as an artist?**

The most treasured part of creating art for me is the freedom to express who I am. To feel unrestricted in what I choose to create and how I choose to go about that process. The choices are mine and led only by the particular way that I feel at a particular moment. I don’t feel the need to be tied to anyone else’s agenda, the work is for me.

**Has the pandemic had an effect on your processes? If so, please elaborate how.**

The current situation of quarantine has indeed affected my life and my work. The initial thoughts were that it would be a positive thing, a great excuse to spend extra time in the studio. The truth is, however; that being separated from my family, and then suffering the loss of two family members has proven to be anything but positive. It is with great effort that I find the enthusiasm for working that I had before. Painting is an uplifting experience for me, filled with love and happiness. I find that I am forcing myself to work through my isolation and grief, hoping for the rainbow on the other side of this storm.

**How has the pandemic changed the way you perceive freedom?**

Because my concept of freedom has never been of the “all about me, the hell with you” variety, the restrictions of the pandemic haven’t upset my beliefs. If anything, they have strengthened my feeling that freedom only works when it includes everyone. If this strange situation has a silver lining, I hope it’s that we see each other as one community. Having to wear a mask, or wait to enter a store doesn’t restrict my freedom, it allows more of us to enjoy those freedoms down the road.
What inspirations tied to the ideals of freedom led you to the creation of the artwork you submitted?

The works I chose for this exhibit are pieces that, I believe, exemplify that positivity that I strive for in all of my paintings. These are meant to embody my two enduring concepts about Philadelphia and the freedoms it affords its citizens. One painting is very large, the other very small. This is our city: big enough for everyone to find a place, small enough for us all to feel connected.

The Ben Franklin Parkway Flags have always been an inspiration to me. They wave at us overhead for blocks, swaying in bright colors like there’s a parade or celebration, meant to welcome visitors and residents alike. “You are part of us!” they call. This view of the flags leading directly to City Hall and the statue of William Penn seals the deal about what we have to offer, what we are about. The architecture of City Hall is big and beautiful, from an age where every tiny detail mattered in the design. Our founder looks down over our city, reminding us of his Quaker ideas of freedom and inclusion that are still alive today. We are a city of brotherly and sisterly love.

The tiny painting, Poppop’s Posse, takes the opposite approach. It zooms in on one small place, one brief moment in time, showing just a few, very young children. The children are self-absorbed, living in their own happy existence. No one is fighting. These little ones are unaffected by any strife or controversies of the grownup world. They trust that their needs are being met within their little worlds. They represent that small, neighborly feel that our city has. We are full of small communities that exist side by side, finding strength and security within them and in the other communities surrounding them.

What do you hope your audience will take away from this artwork?

My hope is that when viewers look at my work, they feel the love and compassion that I try to convey about the world. I am an observer. This is the world that I inhabit. I invite my viewers to, at least temporarily, inhabit it as well.