Philadelphia’s Freedom Artist Spotlight
Interview with Natalie Hope McDonald

How did you hear about the opportunity to participate in the Philadelphia’s Freedom exhibition at NLM?

I saw the open-call post that was shared on social media. I’ve also participated in other exhibitions at the museum.

What made you want to submit artwork to the exhibition?

After seeing the call for art, I happened to be reading a book series about the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The series reignited a lot of feelings I have that intersect issues of race and politics that still resonate today. It made sense to me to reflect on this tumultuous history to better understand not only what freedom means in America, but also the hypocrisy that so many marginalized voices were and continue to be left out of the conversation.

How do you personally define freedom?

Freedom, to me, is two-fold. Personally, it's about accepting one's self and living life accordingly. On a larger scale, it's about how the government is structured, and whether all people have the ability to exist peacefully and fairly. In most cases, these two definitions don't always coincide - and certainly one can influence the other.

In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, for example, being discriminated against in terms of being served in a restaurant, voting and even simply existing in public spaces prompted black leaders to speak out, march and ultimately encourage allies to stand up against these limitations based on race. The fight also inspired other marginalized people, like women and LGBT people, to also take a stand for their own freedom in subsequent movements that changed American society.

How would you describe your process in making art?

I start by doing research and collecting information and images related to the subject. In this case, I spent time reading a series of books and searched online to find materials that I could incorporate into the triptych. I then start working on paper before adding to each part of the series using plastic overlays that are also painted. I often layer words and images to create a sense of movement that's heavily inspired by graffiti.
What mediums do you primarily work with?

I work on paper with plastic overlays that are framed. I also use oil-based paint markers and ink pens which produce different effects depending on what type of surface they are applied to. The tape can be used to cover up and draw attention to different details.

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

Having the ability to create a work of art that can be seen by people is a big part of what freedom means to me as an artist. Being free to reflect on history that is complicated and, at times, painful is also a freedom I value. The reality is that if we cannot talk about this country's flaws and mistakes and ongoing problems, then we cannot ever really grow as a people.

I think the fact that we are living in another chaotic time in history inspired me as an American and as an artist to look back to history for answers about how we got here and what we can ultimately do to move forward. I wish I could say we have come farther than we have when it comes to frank discussions of race in this country.

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

Absolutely. I'm not working as much as a writer (my other job), so I have more time to focus on art. But because it's much more difficult to access art supplies (I waited a few weeks for a few basics), I find myself being a bit more creative with items I have. I ended up creating these thinner, longer pieces in a triptych because I happened to have the materials that I was inspired to make into panoramas. Because I have been reading a lot more, I've become more reflective overall. As such, I'm experimenting more than I might usually.

How has the pandemic changed the way you perceive freedom?

A world health crisis like this one really drives home how fragile life can be, both in terms of our own bodies and also how we function in society. Suddenly having luxuries means a lot less when you are cut off from friends and family. It challenges our priorities.

It also becomes even more apparent just how important leadership (or lack thereof can be). The people most at risk naturally suffer the most when a leader fails to act. The fact that so many people in the United States of America still don't have access to basic healthcare has become a paramount issue, especially with unemployment on the rise and uncertainty on the horizon.

What inspirations tied to the ideals of freedom led you to the creation of “FREEDOM RIDES”?

People who were denied freedom in our nation's very recent history put their lives on the line to be treated fairly. And the government was slow to stand up for them when they needed political leadership most. It's a story that echoes in each generation that follows.
For me, I'm interested in revisiting the past to better understand where we are today, and why it's so important to stand up for marginalized people who still face discrimination because of the color of their skin, their gender, their sexuality, and the list goes on.

I think anyone who truly learns about and understands what inspired these activists then would be a lot less apt to take their right to vote for granted today.

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

I hope the audience is inspired to take a deeper look at American history, both the successes and failures, and act accordingly.