Philadelphia’s Freedom Artist Spotlight
Interview with Gary Grissom

How did you hear about the opportunity to participate in the Philadelphia’s Freedom exhibition at NLM?
An artist exhibition call posted on social media by the National Liberty Museum.

What made you want to submit artwork to the exhibition?
I’ve struggled with finding a process of image-making that would depict social and/or political concepts that are not overly illustrative. When I saw the exhibition call I started to mentally scan the art I made to see if I had work that would represent the concept of freedom and be recognized as environmentally existing in Philadelphia. I choose two photographic images.

How do you personally define freedom?
Having the opportunity and responsibility to participate in a society that respects rights, has a social contract for the health & welfare for all citizens and the non-regulated rights for individual expression

Tell us about your work:
During the 1970s I painted large paintings of grid structures of subtle color variations. My art has evolved to depicting representational images. I have continued to maintain a maximalist obsession with patterning, surface detail and color variation. Currently my painting, drawing and photography are a response to what I see.

How would you describe your process in making art?
I work slowly.

What mediums do you primarily work with?
Painting, photography and drawing

How does the concept of freedom in this exhibition influence how and what you create as an artist?
I seek to depict or record images that express my interests and beliefs.
Has the pandemic had an effect on your processes? If so, please elaborate how.
I miss visiting museums, galleries and art centers that I find necessary as a learning resource.

How has the pandemic changed the way you perceive freedom?
Because of my age, 74, with family encouragement I’ve willingly sheltered-in-place at home.

What inspirations tied to the ideals of freedom led you to the creation of the artwork you submitted?
I decided that my photographic image that recorded a multi-cultural street march of Philadelphians expressing their rejection of the hate shown at the Charlottesville, Virginia white supremacists 2017 rally represented a free civic response and call for inclusions for all Americans. The other photographic image I choose is of Philadelphian’s passing on the sidewalk below Jacques Lipchitz’s sculpture Government of the People on the Municipal Services Building Plaza. The totem-like sculpture is an iconic representation of a societal struggle for freedom that births democracy.

What do you hope your audience will take away from this artwork?
A rewarding interesting visual experience.

What are the requirements you believe need to exist for a country or individual to be indeed free?
Opportunity, fairness, equality, civic engagement, belief in the future, continual learning and the willingness to accept change.

Have you ever had your freedom tested either personally or creatively? Please explain.
Only when I failed to contest a repressive situation.

What’s the single greatest threat to freedom today?
Tribalism that divides us and denies the biological reality that we are all the same species that prospers or fails collectively.

How would you like to see this concept of freedom evolve in the future?
An expansion of opportunity, a leveling of the economic playing field, the increase of civic societal participation and the tolerance of difference.

Finally, when you think of someone who embodies the fight for freedom, who comes to mind and why?
Ruth Asawa who as a child during World War II was interned at the Santa Anita racetrack and Rohwer War Relocation Center in Arkansas despite being an American citizen. She became a successful artist with work collected by major museums. and through public service championed arts education especially for children. She wrote, “I hold no hostilities for what happened; I blame no one. Sometimes good comes through adversity. I would not be who I am today had it not been for the internment, and I like who I am.”