

## ***Freedom: Art as the Messenger***

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“It’s hard to be an individual.” These words, printed across the staircase at the Cato Institute, encompass some of the themes of the organization’s upcoming art exhibit, *Freedom: Art as the Messenger*. Through a blind jury process, curators Harriet Lesser and June Linowitz narrowed a selection of over 2,000 submissions of art down to just 90 pieces from 76 artists.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank that values limited government and individual liberty, at first seems an unlikely space for an exhibit. Recalling her first experience visiting the Institute, artist and curator Harriet Lesser “was surprised to see that there was virtually no art on any of the art-inviting walls or spaces.” This is the first time in its history that the organization has ever held an art exhibition.

“Individual freedom is at the basis of what Cato believes. I am not a libertarian but there are areas where I agree with them completely—freedom of the individual, freedom from individual oppression, women’s rights,” says Lesser. “I mean that was a big deal that they would do this. It has never been done before, never. Sort of starting off with a bang here.”

Each artist submitting a piece was tasked with answering the same question: what does freedom mean to you? Lesser was struck “by the incredible variation in the media chosen”—a diversity in texture, size, and in the interpretation of the word itself. Despite the call for submissions from across the country, Lesser noted that “it turns out most of the artists are from the District, Maryland, and Virginia,” with many pieces created in the past few years.

As soon as you walk into the building, you are immediately drawn to Melinda K. P. Stees’ work, *HOW MUCH HIGHER*. The piece is over six feet tall and from across the room, seems to be digitally printed. Up close, you see that it is intricately knitted yarn, black and white threads that form an image of a figure holding a child and looking up at a seemingly endless wall. “The farther back you stand...it’s every wall that was ever built,” Lesser paused. “And every person that was behind every wall that was ever built. The message is so strong and the material is so soft.”

Some of the works’ messages are easier to interpret than others. Jim Mckeon’s *Isolation Theory* speaks for itself: a large acrylic painting of an older man riding the subway alone, the red of his “Make America Great” hat a stark contrast from the blacked-out windows of the subway car. Shanden Simmons’ *The Profile* illuminates a moment of police brutality. Using charcoal and white conte charcoal with photorealistic precision, Simmons shines light on two police officers beating a black man to the ground while another officer stands in the background, gun at the ready.

Other standout pieces benefit from some context, like Clayton Evans’ and Christopher Barclay’s *Black Boys in Green House: Green House Effects*, an grouping of eight black plywood frames shaped like houses. In each door frame there is an image of a young black man. Each stands in different states of rest and unrest—different poses, different stages of life. Emanating from these young men are webs made of thin pieces of string. One of the photos is of Clayton Evans’ son. Lesser explains, “what [Clayton’s] doing is he’s trying to prepare him to survive and have a good life. He’s got stories from lots of people, and all those strings are lots of possibilities.”

While many artists explored darker themes on freedom, humor is present throughout. Robin Harris' small painting of five cheerfully-colored Lifesaver candies in their wrappers is rendered so well that you can nearly taste them. Stopping in front of the piece, Lesser laughs and says "people always say to me, what do lifesavers have to do with freedom? Well, the title is *Let Me Be Your Lifesaver*. So why isn't freedom your lifesaver?"

Each work of art was chosen because it told a unique and compelling story. It begs the question, why the Cato Institute, and why now? "Freedom and art have been intertwined throughout history," says Peter Goettler, CEO of the Cato Institute. "Cato hosting this exhibition is a natural fit. Freedom of speech and expression are among our most cherished values, and...art advances by pushing limits that test whether we're living up to these values."

June Linowitz, co-curator for this exhibit and president of Arts on the Block, initially was hesitant about collaborating with "an organization that advocates political and social views notably different from my own." However, she and Lesser agree that the strong belief in individual freedom is their common ground, "a central concept that we can agree on."

Ultimately, Lesser hopes that the art on display will offer viewers "an alternative way of communicating, an alternative way to have a conversation which is not just taking one side or another." Her decision to embark upon this project has to do with this idea of conversation: "It had to do with yelling...we pick sides, but we don't have a conversation. We don't think in words. Most of the time we think in images." If two people are standing and talking about a piece of art together, then the *Freedom* exhibit strives to promote a level of openness and civility in their discourse.

The selected artwork is on display on the main floor as well as the lower level. The section downstairs feels more like a traditional gallery, secluded and separate from the organization. On the main floor, the art is interrupted with the comings and goings of people unaffiliated with the artwork, with elevator doors chiming and people leaving conference rooms. This blending of the fine arts and political institutions calls back to one of the video pieces in the exhibit, Ryan Lewis' *Everted Sanctuaries IV*, a display of two time-lapse videos occurring simultaneously. When asked why she wanted to stop at this piece, Lesser explained, "because in one video, it's a complete transformation. It's organized, it's chaotic, it's liquid, it's solid. It takes you on a journey."