



Artist Pops Peterson on Freedom

By Carleen Brice

July 21, 2020

Carleen Brice is content manager in the marketing department at the Denver Art Museum. Carleen has been at the DAM since 2013. Every day at the museum she is reminded of this quote by Maya Angelou: "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have."

As part of [Norman Rockwell: Imagining Freedom](#) we're asking people to share their thoughts about freedom and change using #FourFreedomToday. In the following Q&A, artist [Pops Peterson](#) weighs in on the subject. See Rockwell's work and Peterson's *Freedom From What? (I Can't Breathe)* in the exhibition through September 7.

How do you imagine freedom?

As a child, “freedom” was a bad word to me. Because you couldn’t imagine freedom without also imagining slavery, which was the shame of the “Negro” (a word we embraced as our own in those days). Because of slavery, and all its incarnations and ramifications through the decades, I was afraid to go to the luncheonette with my classmates, who were mostly white. It wasn’t only that 35 cents would put a strain on my allowance, but because I feared I might not be served. That I’d be turned away from the lunch counter, humiliated, made to go home alone while my friends would get to stay and have their milkshakes.

It was then, in grade school, that I first imagined freedom: Freedom was a world where we all could get a milkshake, sit with whomever we wanted at the lunch counter, and have fun. All these years later, I feel the same. Freedom is when we can just do what we want, with whomever we want, with nobody making you feel any bit of a slave.

And I knew intrinsically that we would have to do things to make this way of life a reality. So when Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law integrating all public spaces, I went with my brother and a friend, Alton, intending to integrate the movie theater in Wilson, NC, where we were spending the summer. We were 12 years old, and it was our own idea to make this historic move, becoming the first Black people ever to sit downstairs where the white people sat. We walked to the theater unescorted by parents, saw the entire five-hour and 20-minute blockbuster that was *Cleopatra*, and walked back home without incident. The most surprising aspect of the adventure was finding out that the white people’s seats had cushions!

What does freedom look like for you—as an artist and as a Black, gay man?

As an artist I feel completely free at last, after spending most of my artistic life feeling restricted and constrained. As a journalist in the ‘70s, I was expected to write about Black movies and celebrities. And as a playwright, I was expected to write about the

African American experience. As a musician, I was limited to soul, jazz, or hip hop—country, pop, even Broadway music was for white artists, and remains so even now to a large extent. And my sexuality was so shameful I felt I had to hide it any cost. This was the artistic ghetto I had to navigate through, most of my life although I did fight successfully to participate in the mainstream. You can only imagine how relieved and grateful I am to live in this present era, where I can proudly love and marry the person I choose, write and paint subjects at my own discretion, and speak with one consistent and authentic voice.

If you were to add a Fifth Freedom (to **Rockell's Four Freedoms**), what would it be?

In fact, I do have a fifth freedom, and I've done a painting for it: *Freedom from Shame (Breaking Barriers)*. I firmly believe democracy and peace must be built on a foundation of diversity and inclusivity. No one should feel ashamed when they walk into a room because of where they came from or how they got there. You shouldn't feel ashamed if you walk with a limp, or need a wheelchair. You shouldn't be ashamed that your skin is a different color or that your ancestors were slaves. All humans face challenges, only for some of us we cannot keep our challenges hidden from public view. If anything, we must take great pride in our differences and our struggles, celebrate them, because our struggles are the tools of our personal growth.

Image at top: Gallery view of the gallery of contemporary artworks included in *Norman Rockwell: Imagining Freedom*. Peterson's artwork is on loan to the museum for the exhibition. The other works are part of the DAM's collection.

Watch Pops Peterson's video about Freedom from Shame

Pops Peterson at the Breaking Barriers Exhibition 11-14-17

