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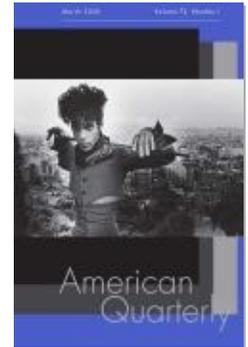
Midterm Evaluations, Swing State Aesthetics

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Midterm Evaluations, Swing State Aesthetics

Harrod Suarez

***Ohio Artists for Freedoms*, curated by Emily Hanako Momohara, Art Academy of Cincinnati, August 31, 2018, to September 21, 2018.**

Ohio Artists for Freedoms opened on the final day of August, a Friday. On my four-hour drive down I-71 from Cleveland that day, with the hot sun kept at bay thanks to a thin layer of gray clouds, I kept alternating between the radio broadcasts of funerals for two national (and international) figures: Aretha Franklin and John McCain. I drove past flags at half-staff and billboards advertising adult entertainment and religious salvation, Amish cheese and the union of man and woman; others startled me, giving me pause from my listening (and serving as my unofficial entry into the exhibit, though I didn't realize it yet). Had I driven just a mile or so beyond the Art Academy of Cincinnati, I would have reached one of five bridges that cross over the Ohio River—the waterway that touches six states and, at one point, marked the boundary between free and slave states—into Kentucky. But rush-hour traffic gave me time to switch from the radio to Google Maps and make it to the opening just in time.

The exhibit closed on September 21, another Friday, but the more crucial date for *Ohio Artists for Freedoms*—and for people in this state, and country—arrived forty-six days later, on Tuesday, November 6, the date of the midterm elections. The exhibit was part of the 50 State Initiative, a program designed to stimulate political dialogue and investment in arts communities across the country—hence the disquieting billboards (fig. 1)—leading up to the midterm elections that many saw as critical for the nation after President Donald Trump's crisis-ridden first two years.¹ *Ohio Artists for Freedoms* thus strived to play a role in an election for a state that has been historically important in charting national trends.



Figure 1. Emily Hanako Momohara, *Child Imprisonment: Never Again Is Now*, 2018. Billboard for Freedoms installed in Cincinnati, OH. Photograph by Emily Hanako Momohara. Courtesy of the artist.

The 50 State Initiative was organized by For Freedoms (forfreedoms.org), which the artists Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman launched initially as a Super PAC in 2016; transforming it into a nonprofit (and nonpartisan) organization in 2018, they sought to raise \$1.5 million through dozens of Kickstarter fundraisers.² The name of the organization is derived from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's State of the Union address in January 1941, which has come to be better known as the "Four Freedoms" speech, in which he specified freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear as guiding principles not just for Americans but, to quote the refrain repeating after every freedom, for people "everywhere in the world."³ The speech served to justify the entry of the US into World War II, and it arrived at the beginning of a year that would end with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Two years later, Norman Rockwell's series of four oil paintings, one for each freedom, was featured in the *Saturday Evening Post* and reportedly raised \$133 million for the war effort.

The legacy that For Freedoms draws from is at once vital and vexed, in productive and instructive ways. Perhaps foreshadowing the Cold War, Roosevelt's speech aimed to promote American values in shaping the contours of a world mired in violence; Thomas and Gottesman's organization and the 50

State Initiative aim to stimulate civic participation through the arts, and in the context of a very specific moment in the 2018 midterm elections. As expected, those elections were historic in terms of voter turnout, ending a decades-long run of declining participation. The results potentially reflect an increasingly polarized population: dozens of House seats changed to give Democrats control, while Republicans strengthened their majority in the Senate. In Ohio, the state continued its recent trend of moving toward the right; despite claims that Ohio's demographics can no longer serve as a barometer for the nation because of its older, whiter population, the state continued at least in this election to demonstrate its relevance for tracking trends, a national visibility that led both Trump and former president Barack Obama to campaign here during the midterm races.

I want to cut to the chase before chasing the cuts, flashes, brushstrokes, and blood found in the exhibit: there is no way to *measure* the success of the 50 State Initiative, a sentiment whose resistance is aimed not at art's impact but at the notion of measurement. In terms of the initiative, the rise in voter participation tells us nothing, and neither do the outcomes. And though the initiative's stated goal is "to produce nationwide public art installations, exhibitions and local community dialogues in order to inject nuanced, artistic thinking into public discourse," even tallying the number of patrons who visit these exhibits across the country can only show how many people entered the building, and timing their stay can only demonstrate duration; whether any exhibit or artwork can "inject nuanced, artistic thinking into public discourse" is, strictly speaking, a moot point.⁴

In this sense, engaging with art—thinking about it, letting it sit and simmer while one makes decisions mundane (soup or salad?) or major (this gubernatorial candidate or that one?)—resists the very logic of elections, which necessarily structures decisions according to the measure of how many votes each candidate or issue received. Political measures are mandatory and crucial for civic life, but so, at least to my mind, is artistic immeasurability, and the two are fundamentally incommensurable, even despite the long history of patronage and commodification of the arts (blockchains in the art world being only the most recent development)⁵ and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work on representation as both *darstellung* and *vertretung*. Recognizing this cleavage between the aesthetic and the political enables us to engage, aesthetically *and* politically, with *Ohio Artists for Freedoms* without mistranslating its premise or promise.

A sense of historicity permeated the exhibit. For instance, in a different—but not unrelated—context, Roosevelt's proclamation that the US could define freedoms not just for itself but for people "everywhere in the world" may be

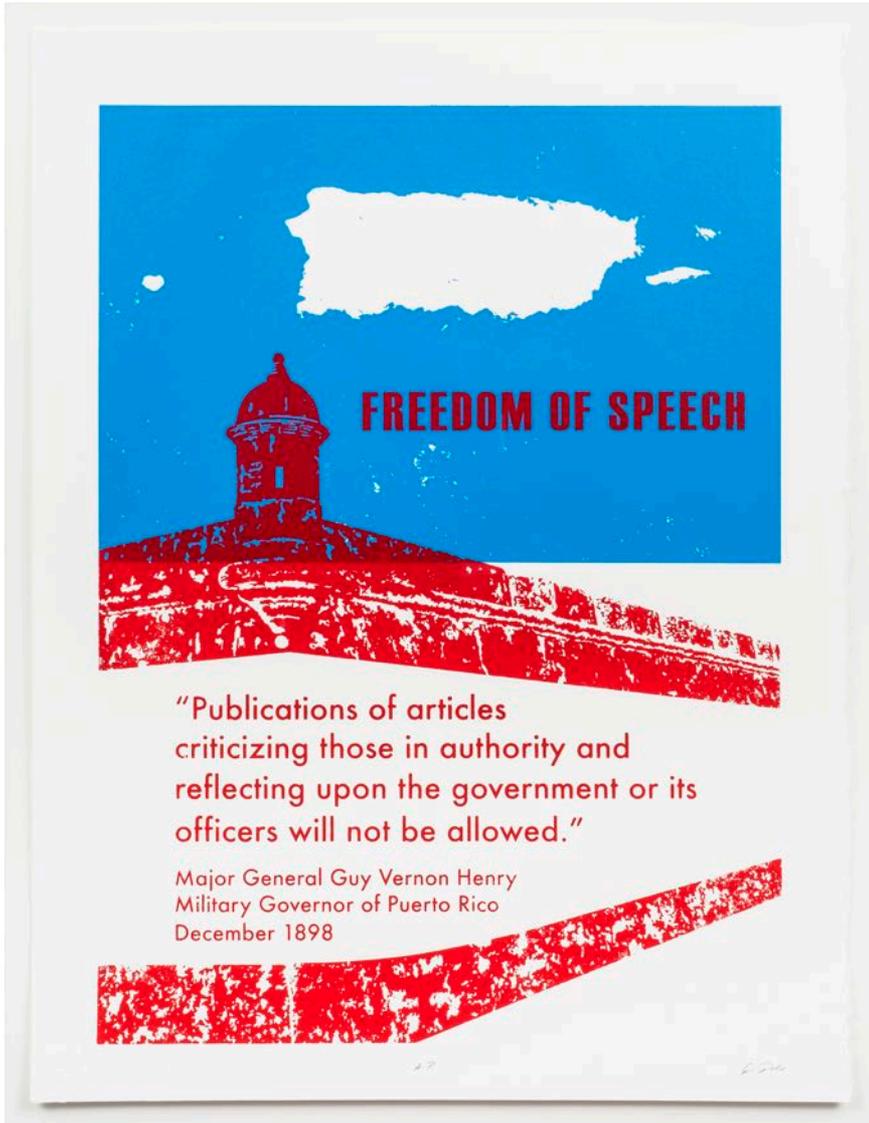
regarded as the problem rather than the solution; at least that seems to be at the heart of Darice Polo's *Seeds of Colonialism* (2016), a series of posters featuring quotes derived from the advent of US and, before that, Spanish Empire in Puerto Rico (fig. 2). In the first poster, part of a proclamation delivered by General Nelson Miles on July 28, 1898, is printed in red, sans serif type on a white background on the lower third of the poster:

We have not come to make war upon the people of a country that for centuries has been oppressed, but, on the contrary, to bring you protection, not only to yourselves but to your property, to promote your prosperity, and to bestow upon you the immunities and blessings of the liberal institutions of our Government. It is not our purpose to interfere with any existing law and customs that are wholesome and beneficial to your people as long as they conform to the rules of military administration of order and justice.

The basic tenets of benevolent imperialism are stated plainly, with minimal dress aside from moral certitude and, tacitly, military might. Other posters present different quotes: an 1899 congressional speech by Ohio senator Joseph Foraker clarifying the prospects for statehood for Puerto Rico; Representative Jacob Bromwell's 1900 address establishing Puerto Rico as a legal precedent for US Empire in the Philippines; and a quote by the president of the Board of Education in Puerto Rico, Victor Clark, in 1899, about the role of education as Americanization.

The upper half of each poster contains a blue square on which is printed, also in red, the title of the piece, all capitalized and several sizes bigger than the quoted material. Occupying the middle of each poster, straddling both the blue and white backgrounds, is a red panoramic print of what looks like a lighthouse at the edge of a cliff. Polo notes that these are actually the sentry boxes found at Castillo San Felipe del Morro, a fort constructed in 1539 in San Juan for Spain to defend Puerto Rico from other colonial invaders. There is a crucial interplay, then, between the sentry boxes and the text; together they traverse the long history of colonialism in Puerto Rico—Polo writes that it “is considered the oldest colony in the world.”⁶ Following the landscape views of the sentry box, the white object that hovers above each fort and title appears to be a cloud. But it is more precisely a bird's-eye silhouette of Puerto Rico, which means that the poster works with at least two perspectives, less a shift in perspective than a continuity across two distinct viewpoints. “The blue water can also be viewed as sky,” Polo says.⁷

Figure 2.
Darice Polo, *Seeds of Colonialism: Freedom of Speech*, 2016. Serigraphy. Courtesy of the artist.



FREEDOM OF SPEECH

"Publications of articles
criticizing those in authority and
reflecting upon the government or its
officers will not be allowed."

Major General Guy Vernon Henry
Military Governor of Puerto Rico
December 1898

Interrupting the series of posters is a small television monitor accompanied by a pair of headphones; on the screen, a January 2018 interview Polo conducted with the artist Pedro Vélez plays on a loop, which is part of a film project, *Open Letter to a Libelist*, Polo is working on about her grandfather. Vélez discusses, among numerous topics, the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, especially in terms of the art community in Puerto Rico. The video's placement is not arbitrary; instead, the juxtaposition of posters drawing on and aestheticizing the imperial archive and Vélez's contemporary commentary tasks the viewer with thinking through the relationship between the past and the present. The posters draw on connections between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries; the video brings them to the twenty-first. Polo's piece may thus be read as critically entangled with the general platform of For Freedoms, drawing on the past less for inspiration than for identifying certain foundations of America's geopolitical presence "everywhere in the world."

Other pieces in the exhibit address the current administration through a variety of mediums. Ryan Dewey's *Deportes* (2017), for example, consists of a plain white soccer ball, deflated, and on which is written in black marker a false quote from Trump, "MY FAVORITE PASTIME IS DEPORTES, ESPECIALLY WITH THE BAD HOMBRES," followed by his signature. The piece hinges on the word *deportes*, which translates into *sports* in Spanish but also sounds similar enough to deportation to remind viewers of the border issues that have become Trump's crutch. Adjacent to the ball is *Mar-a-Lago-Becomes-a-Swamp* (2017), a lenticular print also commissioned by the SPACES Gallery in Cleveland, which shifts based on your perspective between an image of a swamp and the Mar-a-Lago estate and resort that Trump owns. Depending on your perspective, one of two quotes appears in white letters over the images: "¿Sabias?: Este lugar en florida se llama 'mar-a-lago'" ("Did you know? This place in Florida is called 'Mar-a-Lago'") or ". . . pero debe ser llamado mar-a-lago-pantano" (" . . . but it should be called 'Mar-a-Lago-swamp'"), touching on Trump's campaign refrain to "drain the swamp." *The Gun Flute* (2018) showcases one of seventeen flutes that the Wave Pool Welcome Project converted into guns based on designs by the artist Pedro Reyes, which were then played by participants in the Cincinnati March for Our Lives demonstration on March 24, 2018, in response to the school shooting in Parkland, Florida; a video of the performance played on an adjacent screen. On an adjoining wall, two provocative images of Scott Hagen's patriotic barn paintings are on display, one featuring the likeness of Annie Oakley hoisting her rifle and the other showing the American flag and bald eagle as a tribute to war veterans (fig. 3).



Figure 3.
Scott Hagen (“The Barn Artist”), *Annie Oakley Barn*, 2015. House paint on barn.
Courtesy of the artist.

Terence Hammonds draws on other national symbols in order to frame contemporary political activism and its predecessors. His contributions range from more discrete renderings—*Student Nonviolent Coordina-*

tion Committee (2018) is a simple and direct pencil drawing of a SNCC button featuring the well-known civil rights slogan, derived from a religious hymn, “We Shall Overcome,” enlarged—to a set of fifteen mugs, *And the Beat Goes On (Riot Cups)* (2018), on which appear gray scale images documenting the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. The mugs of varying sizes sit in a line on a shelf, on display but also as one might imagine them resting in a cupboard. Where people sometimes use vanity mugs to commemorate family life, the jarring images of protest and strife bring the mugs out of the quotidian. Interestingly, the insides of the mugs are colored various shades of either blue, indigo, or yellow, adding a subtle touch of color that seems to add to the force of the images without becoming distracting.

In addition to this aesthetic engagement with national politics, other works in the Pearlman Gallery consider local and regional issues that remain relevant across the country. A set of images by the photojournalist Melvin Grier documents the 2001 Cincinnati riots, which began after a police officer shot and killed Timothy Thomas, an African American teenager, an event that resonates with contemporary racial politics as more attention has been brought to issues of police brutality and institutionalized antiblack violence within legal and cultural systems in the US. Grier's images—of an American flag outside a Cincinnati police station turned upside down by protestors; of Angela Leisure, Thomas's mother, addressing the city council; and of other scenes from the riots—are intriguingly organized around a corner of the gallery leading from one area to another, such that one may not realize that two of the seven listed images are on the other side until one turns that corner. Such a positioning invites readings, to say the least, of how upon viewing a series of images that document a politicized scene, we might remember that not everything is visible, especially all at once, or of the ongoing nature of racist violence and antiracist protest that the country continues to traverse, the sudden irruption of the temporal within the static image set as a reminder of the ether of our racial legacies.

In another room, the region remains in focus. On one wall, a series of yard signs created by Anissa Lewis plays with the built landscape of Cincinnati's Eastside community to reimagine what messages circulate and the consequences of the circulating. One sign, which in an accompanying image shown above was posted in what looks like a grassy field, is a standard "PRIVATE PROPERTY: NO TRESPASSING" sign in red lettering against a black background; but in the white box under that language another line reads "DON'T APOLOGIZE FOR THE SKIN YOU ARE IN." Another sign posted in a lot beneath an overpass reads "WARNING: ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE. YOU'RE BLACK, GIFTED AND YOUNG," drawing on the work of Lorraine Hansberry and Nina Simone, while another sign that appears in a driveway quotes a popular Kendrick Lamar lyric: "NEIGHBORHOOD CRIME WATCH. DO YOU HEAR ME, DO YOU FEEL ME? WE GON' BE ALRIGHT." On the opposite wall, two pieces show work that Lewis, Mary Clare Rietz, and others did to address the Eastside neighborhood across the Ohio River in Covington, Kentucky, where Lewis grew up. An "Eastside Manifesto" scroll claims, "We, the Eastside, proudly declare: Our neighborhood is NOT TO SCALE," playing with different meanings of "scale" as climbing ("Tonight we scale the flood wall to share in stories . . .") and justice ("Tonight we collectively call for a balancing of the scale") to demand visibility beyond the flood walls visible from Cincinnati but which may obstruct other narratives. It lists seven priorities—"Affordable

Healthy Food,” “Quality Affordable Housing,” “Accessible Quality Health Care,” “Living Wage Jobs,” “Accessible Public Transportation,” “Accessible Quality Education,” and “Engaging Community Center”—which are followed by ninety-seven signatures from community members. Accompanying the scroll is a small speaker posted high in the corner, amplifying a fifteen-minute live performance featuring music, speeches, and recitations of the manifesto.

There are three pieces that warrant more scrutiny and discussion for their arresting, elegant designs. Taking up one wall in the main room of the Pearlman Gallery, Terence Hammonds’s *Untitled Wallpaper Version 3.2* (2018) features a dark-blue floral motif against a white background, borrowed from thirteenth-century Arabic silk patterns; on the white space inside the main plant-like figures—gourds or bulbs, perhaps—appear red images of African American life, some figures holding up protest signs or raising fists, others including his mother in more casual, dignified poses (fig. 4). In doing so, it evokes everything from William Morris to Angela Davis. Similar to Hammonds’s *And the Beat Goes On (Riot Cups)* (2018), a series of mugs featuring images from King’s assassination, the mundane and domestic fabric of living spaces is torn asunder by images of racialized unrest, undoing the binary separation of private and public and arguing for racial discourse as part of daily life, something that is not just out there but also, conversely, in here.



Figure 4.

Terence Hammonds, *Untitled Wallpaper Version 3.2*, 2018. Screenprint on photo-tec. Installation image courtesy of the Art Academy of Cincinnati.

Nearby, in roughly the center of the room, on a table lies Ryan Dewey's *My Lack of Redness Is Transparent* (2017). It consists of a series of vials containing his blood arranged in a case (fig. 5); each vial is diluted with water equivalent to generational dilution—specifically, the seventeen generations that Dewey traces from himself back to Wahunsonacock and Amopotiske, the parents of Matoaka, better known in American history as Pocahontas. With each generation, the liquid in the vial becomes less red until it is completely transparent, filled only or primarily with water. Here is how he explains it on his website:

I explored and exposed moves toward settler innocence by tracing 17 generations in my ancestry to identify the last fully indigenous man and woman to produce a child. A physician drew two vials of my blood in the gallery which I then diluted with water by factors of four for each generation (since four gene pools converge in every child: maternal grandmother, maternal grandfather, paternal grandmother, paternal grandfather). . . . Looking through the vials of blood moving from 100% blood to blood so diluted that it is crystal clear, it became visually evident that my lack of redness is transparent. My ratio of indigenous blood to settler blood is for every 1 drop of indigenous blood, there are 32,698 drops of settler blood running through my veins.⁸



Figure 5.

Ryan Dewey, *My Lack of Redness Is Transparent*, 2017. Aluminum, cedar, acrylic, blood, vials, lineage, paper. Image courtesy of the artist and the Muted Horn.

The redness of each vial shows the ratio of blood to water, but it signifies indigeneity. In doing so, *My Lack of Redness Is Transparent* seems to engage with the question of blood quantum, a legal protocol used to determine one's indigenous status. For Dewey, though, the piece helps challenge genealogies that, as he puts it, "gets used as a move toward settler innocence in contemporary white American culture."⁹ Where Dewey's two other works in the exhibit, *Deportes* (2017) and *Mar-a-Lago-Becomes-a-Swamp* (2017), pivot especially on the play of language as cultural and political belonging, here the biological value of blood, heritage, and material belonging manifest.

Finally, in the Academy's main gallery, what first welcomes visitors due to its size and striking use of figures recognizable, familiar, yet defamiliarized is Jenny Ustick's acrylic mural, *Reconstruction* (2018). The piece extends across the length of the wall (fig. 6). To the far left, the dome of the US Capitol looms over the perspective in an ominously dark setting; to make matters more ominous, the very top of the dome, including the Statue of Freedom, is pictured in midair, flying off the dome as if blown off the building. The Statue of Freedom, erected in 1863 and showing a woman representing something akin to Columbia, acquires the likeness of a ghost in Ustick's rendering. A rectangular flash of pink, leaning to the right, appears from behind the Capitol, and overlaid on it are the legs of a figure in a gown—perhaps the same female figure as embodied in the Statue of Freedom, come to life, and also falling forward to the right. From there, a series of parallel bars of roughly the same dimension, all falling at the same angle, suggest movement and momentum, the force of whatever critical gale that dismantled the Capitol dome creating a dizzying series of diagonals: a story unfolds. The bars alternate between two—or three, depending on your reading—different graphics: the first is an image of Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president, but with his eyes covered with pink circles with several lines of pink dripping down his cheeks; in the second bar of the image, large pink stitch patterns disrupt the gray scale portrait, and then again both the background and stitch patterns are in shades of pink, at which point one can decide to read this as a different graphic altogether. The second (or third) graphic that alternates with Davis's doctored image is of what appears to be a blurry and nondescript landscape, if the sky blue top part and grayish brown bottom—a nod, Ustick notes, to Winslow Homer's Reconstruction-era painting, *The Brush Harrow* (1865)—can even be called that; it resembles, perhaps, the calm after whatever storm began the mural to the far left.¹⁰ And finally, on a layer above the final five bars to the right is the figure of a woman's head and shoulders, wearing a red bonnet, who seems to almost be looking at the viewer standing in front of her. Almost. There is a slight but evident grimace on her face.

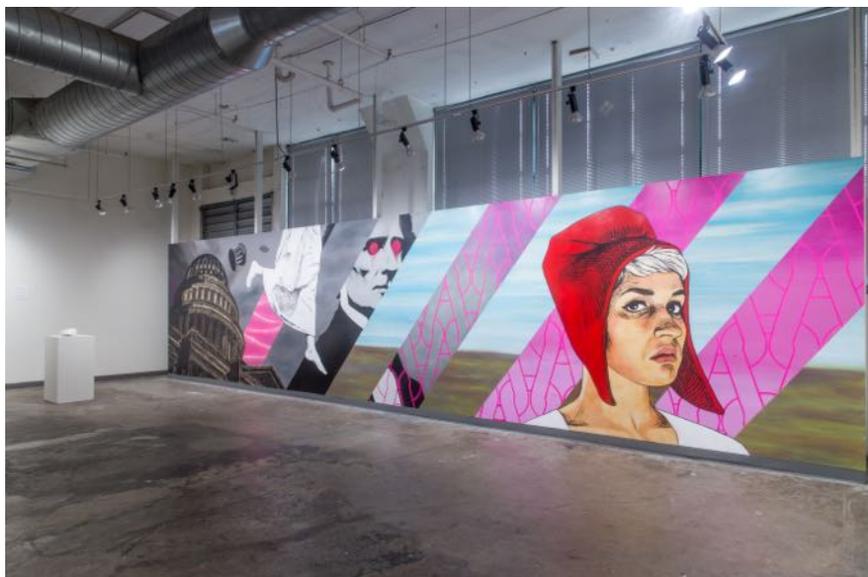


Figure 6. Jenny Ustick, *Reconstruction*, 2018. Acrylic on removable panel. Installation image courtesy of the Art Academy of Cincinnati.

If it is Columbia reimaged—reconstructed?—after the storm, she remains skeptical, or perhaps resigned. The title suggests that reconstruction is not limited to the era following the Civil War. After all, Jefferson Davis is juxtaposed here not with the Confederate capitol building (now the Virginia State Capitol), but with the US Capitol, which, like so many Confederate monuments and statues in the last year, is here shown being dismantled, just as his face is being defaced. Ustick offers some insight on the juxtaposition: “The sculptor of the Statue of Freedom, Thomas Crawford, originally designed her to be wearing a Liberty Cap, as Columbia would have. Jefferson Davis [who oversaw construction of the Capitol dome], disapproving of the imagery representing an emancipated slave, ordered Crawford to change his design to show the statue wearing a military helmet instead.”¹¹ The mural thus shows Columbia “freeing herself” from Davis’s dome and assigned attire, and the red Phrygian cap she instead wears, in addition to the pink stitch patterns that overtake Davis’s figure, alludes to the January 2017 Women’s March on Washington and the pussy hats that have become a lasting symbol of the event and preceded the #MeToo movement.

Though history falls forward, left to right, on the wall, the figures and momentum seem to suggest it can continue to fall; in Ustick’s words, the mural

serves as “a subtle warning that if things are not handled in a careful manner, there may be danger ahead.”¹² Hence Columbia’s ambiguous glance, which Ustick says also points to the racialized narrative that has repeatedly used the “virtue and sanctity of white women” as a “justification for violence and murder.”¹³ The mural and in particular Columbia’s eyes, which dwarf the other works near it, are among the first things welcoming visitors to the exhibit; to leave, one must pass by her glance again. This is the price of admission, and the admission of implication, a cautionary greeting and then farewell that may affect the viewer at both the beginning and the end; after all, the shift from discrete and concrete quantity (“four freedoms”) to ambiguous pledge (“for freedoms”) opens up to a wider range that is as daunting as it is promising.

Apart from Ustick’s mural, one has to do a little bit of interpretive work in order to obtain some insights on questions of gender in this exhibit—a necessary task given that the exhibit strives to be part of contemporary political discourse, of which the #MeToo movement is among the most prominent, and especially in the aftermath of the contentious fight over Trump’s nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Arguably, the exhibit succeeds in demanding visitors mine pieces for gender themes rather than making overt statements. But there is Annie Oakley aiming a rifle on one of Hagen’s barn paintings; there are Grier’s images of Angela Leisure appealing to police and the courts after the death of her son at the hands of a Cincinnati police officer; there is Columbia reimaged in Ustick’s mural. It isn’t as if gender isn’t problematized in the exhibit, but it manifests in varied aesthetic and political contexts, delivering crucial complexity as opposed to a reified and generalized identity politics. What freedoms matter most in this particular historical juncture? And what do Columbia’s eyes, gazing or glaring at us as we leave, headed home or to the polling station—or to the border, to address the caravan (and in what manner?)—signal? In a city that can trace the origins of its name to a Roman dictator heralded for twice relinquishing power after restoring order, the questions posed by the exhibit in the contexts of both Cincinnati’s origins and local history and contemporary national and global politics position us to approach the ballot box with a more expansive sense of the stakes of civic participation.

Notes

1. Sabrina Tavernese, "Planning to Vote in the November Election? Why Most Americans Probably Won't," *New York Times*, October 3, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/10/03/us/non-voters-midterm-elections.html/.
2. "Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman Open for Freedoms Headquarters in New York," *Artforum*, June 29, 2018, www.artforum.com/news/hank-willis-thomas-and-eric-gottesman-open-for-freedoms-headquarters-in-new-york-75904.
3. For the fourth freedom, he changed "everywhere" to "anywhere." See Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1941 State of the Union Address, voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/fdr-the-four-freedoms-speech-text/ (accessed October 3, 2018).
4. "Take Part in the 50 State Initiative," accessed October 4, 2018, www.forfreedoms.org/participate/.
5. Jason Bailey, "The Blockchain Art Market Is Here," *Artname*, December 27, 2017, www.artname.com/news/2017/12/22/the-blockchain-art-market-is-here.
6. Darice Polo, email correspondence with the author, October 1, 2018.
7. Polo.
8. "SEEN/UNSEEN/NOT SEEN," accessed October 3, 2018, www.ryandewey.org/seen-unseen-not-seen-sculpture/.
9. Ryan Dewey, email correspondence with the author, September 19, 2018.
10. Jenny Ustick, email correspondence with the author, October 1, 2018.
11. Ustick.
12. Ustick.
13. Ustick.