



How Artist Pops Peterson Reinvents Norman Rockwell's Artwork

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."

[Pops Peterson](#) is one of the contemporary artists whose work expands upon some of the themes explored in [Norman Rockwell: Imagining Freedom](#). In this wide-ranging Q&A with us, he discusses his creative process, his connections to Rockwell, and much more. Read on and then

see Rockwell's work and Peterson's *Freedom From What? (I Can't Breathe)* in the exhibition through September 7.

There seem to be so many parallels between your life and Rockwell's. Can you elaborate?

It's a cavalcade of coincidence: Norman Rockwell and I were born in uptown New York, less than a mile apart. In our teen years, we passed our days in Harlem, only a half mile apart on a street called St. Nicholas. Rockwell's last home was in Stockbridge, MA, at 8 South Street, and I bought 7 South Street for my business, SEVEN salon.spa, located only 25 yards across the street. When I look outside the window of my office, I can see his property. When I discovered this, by researching Google Maps and seeing the imprint of his original studio still there, right across the street from my building, I nearly fell off my couch. The spooky part is that the day he died, they brought his body from number 8 South Street across the street to number 7 South Street, my building, which was, at the time, Finnerty's Funeral Home. Norman Rockwell was embalmed in our staff room!

We joked about this for years in the salon. Whenever there was a strange noise or something weird would happen, we would blame it on Norman's ghost. Then one day, completely to my surprise, one of my cartoon images came out looking like a Rockwell painting. It was complete happenstance, but that was how I got the notion to try and remake the Rockwell images on purpose. Within nine months, I was giving a speech and pop-up exhibition in the Main Hall of the Norman Rockwell Museum! The rest, as they say, is history.

A lot of your artwork is in direct relation to or in conversation with Rockwell's—you've done new takes on his Four Freedoms illustrations. You've talked in the past about "updating" his work. Why do you think it's important to update it?

When I began my series, *Reinventing Rockwell*, I simply thought it would be fun to remake the [iconic Rockwell paintings](#) as if Norman Rockwell were alive and telling the same stories today. I was primarily interested in showing new styles of dress, new technology, and new attitudes, nothing at all relating to Civil Rights or freedom. Being

in the same community as Rockwell, living amongst the same people who knew and posed for him, and the very same landscape would give my new versions a special historic authenticity. So naturally, it was a delight to walk around town in his footsteps, or should I say his shadow.

My first attempt, *Sailor's Best Friend*, based on *Sailor on Leave*, was a modest attempt to show the passage of decades, primarily by substituting a pack of cigarettes in the sailor's shoe for an iPhone. This iPhone 6s photo was my first attempt at using models and props. But the stars were in alignment and the results took my breath away. Next, I remade *The Runaway*, in which the little boy running away was portrayed by a brown-skinned boy from Nepal, Benjamin Gross, who comes to the salon with his mother Betsy. Instead of a male State Trooper, I wanted to show a female in blue, and that was how the series started just gently becoming more political. When the police department wouldn't lend me a uniform, the Fire Department made sure I had one. That's why it's called *Stockbridge Fire Department to the Rescue*. I wasn't just reproducing the Rockwell at this point. I was taking liberties, infusing more of my own beliefs and personality.

At just that time came the Ferguson riots, which tore me up emotionally, dredging up memories of being a high school student during the riots of the sixties. In a flash I saw how I would update Rockwell's most significant masterpiece, *The Problem We All Live With*. I would have the little girl, Ruby Bridges, walking to school through the rubble of Ferguson, just as determined as ever to get her education. I cried and sobbed the entire time it took me to make that image, about four hours straight, tears streaming down my face. Because I realized it had been 50 years since Rockwell painted his original piece, and hardly any real progress had been made. I lost hope I would ever see the time where all people could be free in this country.

I was so moved by the events in the news that I was inspired with a new way to present Rockwell's *Freedom from Fear*. I would show a loving Black family tucking their children into bed, but worried about what awaits them outside their front door. This became *Freedom from What? (I Can't Breathe)*, which you have given such a spot of honor in this exhibition. Then I updated *Freedom of Speech*, showing a Black woman as the speaker at the town hall. Her gender and color were the updates, but the real message came from the utter frustration in her face. She represents not only

Black women, but anybody who has ever been stymied by the government's bureaucracy, even in a small town. I call it, *What the Hell?*

" I want people to contemplate the love that binds family together, and always will, no matter how rabid is the wolf just outside the door. **"**

– Pops Peterson



(https://d26jxt5097u8sr.cloudfront.net/s3fs-public/Pops-Peterson_Freedom-from-What-I-Can%2527t-Breathe_0.jpg)

Maurice "Pops" Peterson

American, born in New York City in 1952; lives in Stockbridge, MA

Freedom from What? I Can't Breathe

2015

Digital photograph on canvas

Private collection

One of your most famous pieces is on view at the museum—*Freedom from What? (I Can't Breathe)*—which you made after Eric Garner's death six years ago. Can you explain what it was like to make the artwork and what it feels like now that it's even more "relevant" after George Floyd's death?

Ironically, *Freedom from What? (I Can't Breathe)* was the first picture I ever made in a photo studio, and I also shot it on my iPhone 6s. This was just the fourth in my new series. I saw clearly in my head exactly how I wanted it to look but, more importantly, I knew the complex emotions I wanted to project. There was the love and tenderness from the nurturing parents tucking their children into bed versus the uncertainty and fear on their faces, as the blue lights of a patrol car intrude through the curtains.

I chose "I Can't Breathe," for the headline on the father's newspaper, because Eric Garner's last words had just been seared into the conscience of America. I wanted to commemorate what was certainly one of the most heinous incidents of police misconduct in the modern era, captured on video, a moment that would never be surpassed in nefariousness, brutality, and tragedy. I never would have imagined that six years later there would be an even more horrendous video in the news, with the same words cried out by an unarmed, nonviolent handcuffed, Black victim. I now recognize that the power of this painting is derived from the pain the victims experienced as their lives was so senselessly snuffed out, by the grief and loss in their families. I did not create the power of the image, I merely channeled it into a visual form. No matter how hauntingly beautiful my picture may be, it is those dying words that strike its indelible mark.

So I find myself being praised for something that perhaps never would have gained attention were it not for hate crimes. Not one, not two, but multiple hate crimes in which Black men lost their lives saying those very words, "I can't breathe," on camera—and surely many more times off camera. I must take solace in the fact I am not taking part in or exploiting a crime. I am just an artist bearing witness to this fathomless pain and injustice, to enlighten the public today and, hopefully, through time.

This is a “digital photograph on canvas.” Can you share how you create your artworks? What’s your creative process?

I believe my process is the modern-day version of Rockwell’s own, the way he would be painting if he were here in the digital age. Rockwell achieved his realism not just from his master’s touch with the paintbrush, he also used the imaging technology of the day to quicken and enhance his painting process. He would start with a photo—taken by his photographer, not himself. These photos were shot in a photo studio, just as mine are. Then he would project the images onto his canvas using an early slide projector called a “balopticon.” This enabled him to place, size and trace his outlines onto the canvas to assemble his composition with perfect accuracy and detail. Then he would color and shade the outlines to bring them to life. Rockwell was a painter who used optical tools to make paintings that look like photographs.

I am the opposite, a photographer using optical tools to make photographs that look like paintings. I start in the studio, shooting various elements at different times, sometimes even different places, and then I compose them together in Photoshop. The last thing I do in my computer studio is what Rockwell did first, drawing the outlines.

But this describes only the mechanical process. The artistic process begins as a feeling or thought you have that propels a story you want to tell. It begins when you feel the comfort and joy of your daughter’s smile or the wag of a dog’s tail. Or when you witness the horror of hundreds of people being gunned down by a sniper in Las Vegas. The art is all about the feeling you want to share and the information you want to impart. The technical process is never important.

“ The most important thing for an artist to understand is that truth is the most powerful force in the universe. Tell your truth and focus on your pain. ”

– Pops Peterson

Rockwell's Four Freedoms pushed an agenda created by President Roosevelt. What do you think is the role of the arts and artists today in a time of a pandemic and increased calls for social justice?

The role of the artist is to show the world what they see, what they think, and what they feel. That's what artists do: We express our emotions and thoughts to the world, giving them a solid, tactile form, preserving them for posterity. Back in the days when we had a serious president, someone who actually cared for the country and led us into better days, I was making Pop Art cartoons, gunning for laughs. Then the times changed and the community drafted me into activist art. I am proud of the role I play, but I long for the days when my bawdy cartoons seemed relevant.

What are you working on now?

My next stop is the [Norman Rockwell Museum](#)! They've chosen to feature about a dozen works from my Rockwell series as a feature within the *Reimagining the Four Freedoms* exhibition when it makes its final stop at NRM'S home base in Stockbridge. They've even selected a piece that's not finished yet, so I'm doing my darndest to make it my best, most joyous painting ever, *Pride and Joy*. I can't even express how honored and grateful I am for this amazing feature!

Is there anything else you'd like people to know about you or your work?

I have been an art student and artist for nearly 65 years, since I first took piano lessons at age four. From that moment on I've always been studying, always producing my artworks, knocking on doors, rising and falling. Trying this, trying that and then this again, all in hopes of one day offering the world something of timeless value. Now, nearly 70 years old, I couldn't be more delighted to find myself as an artist and speaker, the new kid on the block! If this one moment would turn out to be the zenith of my career, I would still be grateful for every step and misstep along the way. And I would keep on making my art.

Image at top: Courtesy of the artist. Based on his tribute to the Women's March *Freedom of Assembly, (I'm With Her)*.