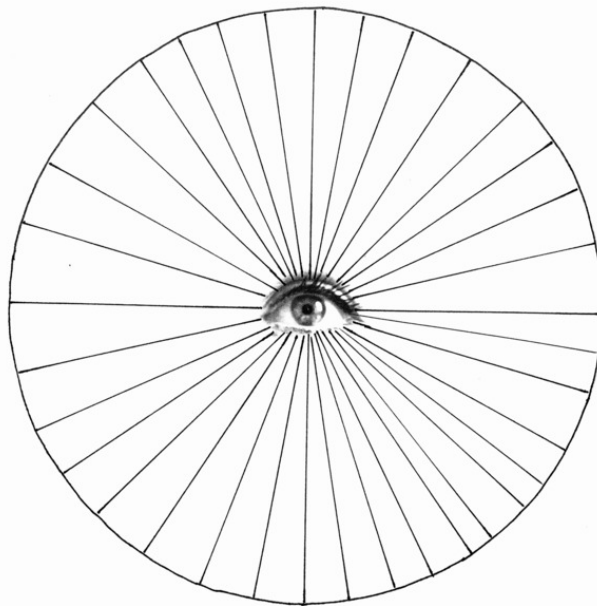


Six Local Artists Explain the Inspiration for Their HEMPHILL Coloring Book Pieces

They also discuss what they've worked on in quarantine.

Posted by **Jennifer Anne Mitchell** on August 20, 2020 at 9am



LOVE RULES

Nine artists at HEMPHILL created a coloring book during the COVID-19 stay-at-home mandate. The gallery printed limited editions and published a [downloadable digital copy](#) on July 15.

“Art endures and so will we,” HEMPHILL states in its opening pages.

At first glance, the project seems whimsical, but there is also depth to the artwork that speaks to the times, like shapes that are placed at a physical distance and Black fists that rise up from a chaotic scene.

City Paper, [which also put out a coloring book cover recently](#), spoke with the six contributing artists based in the Washington area—**Julie Wolfe**, **Renée Stout**, **Robin Rose**, **Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi**, **Steven Cushner**, and **Rushern Baker IV**—posing the same four questions to each of them to learn more about their HEMPHILL coloring book work and their art.

These interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.

[Julie Wolfe](#)

WCP: What motivates you to make art?

JW: It's a means of expression for me to translate what I'm seeing and feeling, and documenting it and sharing that.

WCP: What have you been making during quarantine?

JW: I did one drawing a day and stamped it with a library stamp with the date on each one. The images were mostly related to activities and observations [of] things that would happen during the day.

After I finished that, I started working on this other series. I published a book last year about dreams and the subconscious. I've deconstructed it and [made] silk-screened images of dreams that we're having now during COVID-19 that are much more vivid and intense than what we were having a year ago. I've been talking to people about their dreams. Each [page] has a screen print image on it that's covering the image that was there previously.

WCP: How has your artistic process changed during this time?

JW: I've been able to really focus more and spend more time on things. So my work has been much more detailed, thoughtful, and intentional.

WCP: What inspired your coloring book piece?

JW: It came from two series. One is called *Magnitude of Equality*—the radial sections [in the series] are all different colors. It's supposed to be a cross section of views, ideas, and backgrounds; you put it all together [and] it has more magnitude. The eye is from a series called *Dream Sequel: Seeing Again*. I have been photographing artists' eyes from all over the world. They're shown all together on a wall in a grid pattern. So I just took one of those eyes that I had photographed and used it in the center.

[Renée Stout](#)

WCP: What motivates you to make art?

RS: I can't remember a time when I didn't make art. I've been making art since I was a child, so I can't even explain the motivation.

WCP: What art have you been making during quarantine?

RS: When something's about to take place that's really traumatic, I get these anxieties, little tremors, [like] something's just not quite right. As early as 2015, before the 2016 election, the show I was having at HEMPHILL was [about how] I felt that the country was going to be at a major crossroads. Since 2015, all [my] work has been touching on the issues that have been coming up for the past three years.

WCP: How has your artistic process changed during this time?

RS: I think because I noticed things back in 2015 [and] some of that stuff is really coming to pass, it's fueling me to keep saying the things I need to say. I'm inspired to work more.

WCP: What inspired your coloring book piece?

RS: My coloring book piece is based on a piece that I did in the early '90s, an actual bullhorn. I stuffed it with all these magic substances [the piece features horn, cloth, bone, husk, twine, pigment, latex paint and shell], then decorated it and embellished it with beadwork and pigment. A collector bought it a long time ago, and a few years back it ended up in the collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. I got a chance to revisit it when the museum opened. So it's been on my mind recently, and when they wanted us to do a coloring book page, that thing

popped up. It's a nice shape. I could easily render a line drawing of it and make it into something interesting in a two-dimensional way.

[Robin Rose](#)

WCP: What motivates you to make art?

RR: I've always been incredibly inquisitive. I consider myself a finder. I'm like a frustrated archeologist, and basically motivated to find something that I don't see. If I saw it, I wouldn't make it.

WCP: What art have you been making during quarantine?

RR: I usually work in sequences or episodes. It all started [in] March. The first one was "Breathe." I'm working on a new diptych right now, and I'm trying to just document my own experience during this time.

WCP: How has your artistic process changed during this time?

RR: Each painting really has to count. I'm at a point in my life where I don't need a sense of hyperbole. I'm not interested in painting a painting; I'm interested in painting the painting. I don't need a lot of preliminary work, sketches, second go-arounds. It's got to be the painting. It's got to be committed totally. I think that's the way it's always been, but it's more profound and pronounced now.

WCP: What inspired your coloring book piece?

RR: About five years ago, we bought a 1960s beach house in Rehoboth Beach [Delaware]. When [the pandemic] happened, [my wife] Judy and I, and Hannah, my daughter, decided to come out here.

I was a musician as well, so I see visual experiences rhythmically, in a way. I spend a lot of time on YouTube because it's such a teaching tool, especially if you're a visual person. I found the Victoria Crater on Mars, and inside the crater are these incredible rhythm patterns. It must have been produced by something. Whatever that material [is], it reminds me of the beach and watching the sand shift, the rhythmic patterns of the waves coming in and coming out. In the coloring book, I just kind of wanted to point that out.

[Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi](#)

WCP: What motivates you to make art?

HJI: I think it's just a need. I've always wanted to use my hands, and the idea of creating something out of nothing appeals to me.

WCP: What art have you been making during quarantine?

HJI: For a couple months, I was stuck and I couldn't make new work. It took a while to find something playful but that also related to the pandemic. I started to use colors that are a bit more toxic in their look and had an acidic sense. So I used neons, acidic colors, combining accidental paint splatters with layers of pattern.

WCP: How has your artistic process changed during this time?

HJI: One thing that changed was using colors that were harsher, which I wanted to relate to the virus, sort of an organic, uncontrolled substance. It was really difficult to work in the house, so I'm really happy to be back in the studio. It's a group space, so we have to find a schedule.

WCP: What inspired your coloring book piece?

HJI: I do a lot of patterning in my work, from Persian or Islamic patterns. I thought that would really fit well with the idea of coloring. So I took an older drawing I had for a piece, and I created two shapes so they're almost mirroring; one of them is flipped. It's almost like two figures coming together and having that kind of gap, thinking about distancing that we've been going through.

Steven Cushner

WCP: What motivates you to make art?

SC: It allows me to exercise a part of my personality that I don't think I can exercise in public. I tend to be a little bit reserved. In my painting, I tend to be much more impulsive. It's like any kind of physical activity. I try to paint every day. I'm a better person for it. I feel better. I think better. I'm easier to be around.

WCP: What art have you been making during quarantine?

SC: I feel both guilty and lucky [that] I have a studio at home, so I've been able to get probably more work done than I would have in normal times. I think I probably went through the same kind of emotional roller coaster that most people did. For the first six weeks, I found it very difficult to focus. The idea of business as usual didn't seem to make any sense, and in some ways doesn't seem to make any sense still. If or when we're lucky enough to come out of this, the world is going to look different, and the priorities for everybody, both the world at large and on an individual level, may be rethought.

WCP: How has your artistic process changed during this time?

SC: I have a little bit more patience because I know I have unlimited time. I'm thinking a little bit more as I'm working. And I'm thinking a little bit less of myself and my work, and maybe a little bit more about its place in the world.

WCP: What inspired your coloring book piece?

SC: The way I work is I have my major work, paintings, but I always have work on paper going simultaneously, and every few years I'll change my materials as a way to challenge myself. For the last year or so, I've been working on some smaller wood cuts in my studio. The piece in the coloring book is a woodcut, but it was kind of an artist's proof that then developed into an image in full color.

Rushern Baker IV

WCP: What motivates you to make art?

RB: I draw inspiration from historical moments and current events. In all of my work, there is this sense of urgency and energy but also chaos that comes from a sense of anxiety that surrounds the work. We're living in a pandemic [with] societal threats on a micro and macro level. Then, also thinking about navigating the world as a Black man in the United States and the micro level threats of racial animus. That, on top of all the big picture things, it all seeps into the way that I think about my paintings.

WCP: What art have you been making during quarantine?

RB: I've been looking at these old **Kurz** and **Allison** prints of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the first all-Black unit to serve in the Civil War. I've been taking some of that iconography and imagery and incorporating that into a new series of prints and paintings. It feels really relevant right now.

WCP: How has your artistic process changed during this time?

RB: In the past, [my] work tended to be more of an objective form of abstraction. It was still speaking to the history of Black abstraction from people like **Sam Gilliam**. With all of the political upheaval happening right now, the work has been getting more specific and more explicit.

WCP: What inspired your coloring book piece?

RB: This coloring book image was based off [of] a collection of paintings I made that I kind of traced over to allow whoever would be coloring this in [to] go in and add color. The only area I colored in for them were the Black fists that were arising out of the chaotic moment of the composition. I think it speaks, again, to current events.

