



FREEDOM OF SPEECH MURAL PROJECT

Cleveland Public Library - Rice Branch
11535 Shaker Blvd. Cleveland, Ohio 44104
Artist: Donald Black Jr.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This is one of three murals installed throughout Cleveland and commissioned by The City Club of Cleveland to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the original “Freedom of Speech” mural which hangs in the City Club auditorium. That mural was painted in 1942 by Elmer Brown (1909-1971), one of Cleveland’s most prominent African-American artists. Brown was originally affiliated with Karamu House where he met and befriended Langston Hughes, eventually illustrating some of his books. Brown also received several WPA commissions to execute murals in downtown public buildings, and then became a commercial artist for American Greetings.

Each local artist in this series was invited to create a mural exploring what freedom of speech means in Cleveland today. Here, Donald Black Jr., inspired by Brown’s work, uses shattered glass and the American flag to comment on America’s concept of freedom of speech.

The other artists featured in the Freedom of Speech Mural Project are Christopher Darling (displayed at New Tech Collinwood High School) and April Bleakney (displayed at Bonfoey Gallery).

ARTIST STATEMENT

We are taught that we have the freedom to say what we want. Conflict arises when we want to express what we feel and those expressions and thoughts are on the list of things we don’t talk about in this country. As a result, we become trapped in a cycle of generational silence. There is no such thing as true freedom of speech—it’s an illusion, just like the American flag as a symbol of freedom and equity.

In this work, “Your silence will not save you”, the flag represents dysfunctional and unfair systems. The shattered glass is a symbol of breaking the cycle of dysfunction, silence, and injustice. Freedom is not as solid as we project it to be. It is delicate, and like glass, it can be broken. It is time to break the silence and offer the microphone to Black people. This is the only way to free our individual and collective voices.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Donald Black Jr. is a Cleveland artist who works with video, installation, and photography. He is an alumni of Cleveland School of the Arts and studied commercial photography at Ohio University. Black received third place in Nikon's international photo competition. His work explores family relationships, racism, environment, and identity. Storytelling and technical process is key in Black's work. He is currently a member of acerbic, which is an interdisciplinary group of artists who go against the proper order of things.

SPONSORSHIP

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ABOUT THE CITY CLUB OF CLEVELAND

The City Club of Cleveland is one of the nation's great free speech forums. A product of the Progressive Era, we were founded in 1912 and are one of the nation's oldest continuous independent free speech forums, renowned for our tradition of debate and discussion. For more than 100 years, all of our speakers—from sitting presidents to community activists—have answered unfiltered, unrehearsed questions directly from the audience.



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