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What does a libertarian art show look like? The Cato Institute is finding out.

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The charcoal-and-pencil drawing is slightly larger than a sheet of 8½ -by-11 paper. It shows a crowd assembled on the steps of the Capitol; protest signs poking out read "Reform Healthcare" and "Universal single payer." The title of the piece, "Rally for Universal Healthcare," is no surprise. What *is* surprising is where it appeared: at an art exhibit titled "Freedom: Art as the Messenger," which is being hosted by the Cato Institute, Washington's leading libertarian think tank.

The drawing simply presents the protesters as-is and doesn't editorialize; still, it's perhaps an awkward fit at a think tank that — in keeping with its small-government philosophy — is no friend to single-payer health care. "Government involvement in the health care sector," Cato's website says, "is harmful to patients and is a large and growing encroachment on individual liberty."

Peter Goettler, a retired investment banker and Cato's president and chief executive, admits wishing "Rally for Universal Healthcare" — and several other works he didn't name — had not been included in the show. But he stands by the decision not to interfere with the outside curators, local artists Harriet Lesser and June Linowitz, who put the exhibit together. "We may disagree completely with that artist," he says, "but that artist has the right to their point of view."

The exhibit — which opened April 11 and runs through June 14 — was Lesser's idea. She approached Goettler a year ago about using an art show to welcome new visitors and adorn otherwise-bare Cato walls. "She was pushing on an open door," Goettler says. "She didn't have to talk me into it."

In their call for submissions, the curators wrote, "This exhibition invites all investigative points of view in all media; 2-D, 3-D, audio, and video. A full spectrum of interpretation is invited — whether personal, emotional, general, realistic or imagined, communal, or individual — addressing Freedom in all its manifestations through art." They received 2,138 submissions and chose 89, all of which are for sale. Prices range from \$100 to \$15,000, with artists taking home 70 percent.

Boston artist Sara Dilliplane, who created the universal health care drawing (which sold for \$300), says she was vaguely familiar with Cato's mission when she learned about the show. From the call for art, she gleaned that the think tank would be open to perspectives alternative to its own. Art, notes Dilliplane, can describe the gray within the black-and-white of U.S. politics: "While I have my own personal opinions on one political issue or another, I don't think it is ever as simple as 'right' and 'wrong' as portrayed in the media. An art exhibit calling for any interpretation on the subject of American freedom is an opportunity to explain this."

The exhibit contains other political pieces as well — including a work that portrays a man wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat on a train, titled “Isolation Theory.” Meanwhile, Shanden Simmons’s massive charcoal-and-white conté drawing “The Profile” — which won best-in-show — explores police brutality. More-clichéd, freedom-themed works — American flags, the Lincoln Memorial, a Cubist-inspired Statue of Liberty — are also on display. And some pieces, such as a sumi ink drawing on rice paper titled “Elusive Dragon,” are less literal.

Goettler has bought two works from the show to hang at home: Dennis Carrie’s portrait of Frederick Douglass and Zenos Frudakis’s bronze “Maquette for Freedom.” They will join Ansel Adams photos of Japanese American internment camps during World War II, which Goettler downloaded from the Library of Congress website and had framed.



Shanden Simmons’s massive charcoal-and-white conté drawing “The Profile,” which explores police brutality, is part of the “Freedom: Art as the Messenger” exhibit at the Cato Institute. (Courtesy of the Cato Institute)

Nadine Strossen, a former president of the American Civil Liberties Union, hasn’t seen the exhibit yet. But she praised Cato’s effort to support the arts, including pieces that aren’t in lock-step with the think tank’s positions. In divisive times, she says, it’s harder but more important than ever to support freedom of controversial speech, especially when that speech potentially runs afoul of funders.

And Cato has had some famously opinionated funders. It was founded by Charles Koch and Edward Crane in 1977; for years, it received millions from foundations affiliated with Koch and his brother David. Crane stepped down in 2012 as part of a compromise to end a lawsuit filed by the Koch brothers, who were seeking control of the think tank. Other conservative foundations that have been major donors include the Sarah Scaife Foundation, the Searle Freedom Trust and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation.

Goettler says so far, he has gotten nothing but positive feedback about the exhibit from board members — who, he says, “emphasized they thought this was a great initiative to bring new visitors to our building and introduce new people to Cato and our work.” He wants people to know the institute is “neither the red nor the blue team.”

Even if any of Cato’s funders did grumble, Cato spokeswoman Khristine Brookes says the think tank maintains its independence from both public and private patrons by not accepting government money, be it foreign or domestic, and by making sure that no more than 10 percent of its annual revenue comes from a single source. “None of our current or former contributors have ever gotten close to that threshold,” Brookes notes.

In the policy realm, Cato has been pointed about the effect of patronage on speech. It has regularly called to defund the National Endowment for the Arts, arguing that art and state must be separated because when government support is involved, certain artists’ views will inevitably be favored over those of others. But Goettler says the show was not meant to be a vehicle for discussing arts funding.

There are no plans for the think tank to host regular exhibitions. Having devoted two staffers to the project, and given the price of transforming the lobby and basement into a gallery, Goettler says that Cato is likely to lose some money even if all of the pieces sell — but that was the plan from the start.

The show is already a success in Goettler’s eyes. The opening, he notes, drew more than 500 people — a third of whom hadn’t visited the institute before — making it the largest-ever crowd for a public event there. Rather than preaching to the choir, Goettler says, Cato wants to welcome visitors with different values so they can learn more about the think tank and vice versa. And as is customary at Cato, nearly everyone who stopped in for the show was offered a copy of the Constitution.