

Public Art, Representation, and Questions of Revising the Past

Jenny Roesel Ustick

94–109

Operating from the position of an artist with a mature practice in creating public art, this essay chronicles and contextualises the development of a series of works that consider the history, symbolism, interpretation, and evolving understanding of specific historic public artworks. There is a paradox in my development as a muralist: my significant experience while being affiliated with and working on behalf of a prominent community-based non-profit arts organization, where I repeatedly faced constraints upon the content and attitude of the work being created, earned me the notoriety and reputation that facilitates for-profit work that critiques design-by-committee at best, and malignant censorship at worst. Works in the series deal with the intersections of gender and race in the content of public artworks in tones that range from reverent to harshly critical and – in some cases – suggestive of reparative action.

#public art

#gender

#race

#censorship

#murals



Doing Right by People and Place

ArtWorks is a non-profit arts organization in Cincinnati whose mission is to provide employment opportunities for young people aged fourteen to twenty-one to assist in the creation of public artworks with professional artists like myself. I served as Project Manager on over ten mural projects before transitioning to independent work in 2017.

ArtWorks has done their research as an organization, employing the language and philosophy of controversial urbanist Richard Florida from his bestseller *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002). They have studied mural arts programmes in Philadelphia and Chicago and have become very successful at positioning the organisation as a major driver and contributor to urban revitalisation, all while working to remain conscious of characteristics that might invite criticism or do harm. The work they have done has earned them and its artists attention on the world stage – and well deserved. But Cincinnati is also emblematic of the problems outlined in Florida's own *The New Urban Crisis* (2017), and in the critiques and interrogations of authors like Bures (December 2017), Malanga (winter 2004) and Sussman (May 2017).

When gathering information for a mural, one might engage with communities experiencing generational economic inequality and disagreements about how and whether to provide equitable access to resources. The most common requests of any mural are that it be uplifting, inclusive, apolitical and joyful, which is sometimes a tall order, especially where there is pain, friction and few good-news stories. That friction can emerge within the painting process as well. I have been asked midstream on a mural to make unapproved race-based design revisions, change entire scopes of work, and lend an ear to communities that seem to need someone to listen more than they need a new mural. (Images 1 and 2).

Considering Correctness

My 2013 mural was an inflection point in my work. The piece honoured a set of mosaics created by artist Winold Reiss for Cincinnati's Union Terminal in the early 1930s. The mosaics are to many an unassailable example of perfect public art. However, Reiss excluded women from the murals depicting Cincinnati industry, though women appeared in Reiss' source photographs and in many workplaces (Hurley, 1993). I sought to correct this omission in my design. Additionally, I proposed to depict people of colour in leadership roles, rather than exclusively as low-wage workers. My direct illustrations of those concepts were rejected for different reasons. I subsequently created a new design that focused only on the hands of various people depicted in Reiss' original murals, while adding new hands that represented women and people of colour in leadership roles in their professions. The design was approved, and I managed to meet my objectives of representation.

After participating in the 2017 Women's March on Washington (Image 3), and observing, making, and wearing the ubiquitous Pink Pussy Hats, I became interested in the genealogy of the symbol, studying links to the *bonnet rouge* of the French Revolution (BBC News, January 2017; Coutts, October 2018).

That spring, as I attended my first mural residency in Buenos Aires, I created murals using pink knitting stitch motifs (Image 4) in an immediate response to the political situation in the US. I also brought curiosity, a hand-knitted and felted Phrygian cap (Images 5 and 6) and nascent research about the use of the symbol in the United States and other countries like Argentina. I had wanted to know why the Liberty Cap was widely used in early American symbolism but fell out of use and view. This is where race and gender converged in my work again, as I learned that a symbol that is both everywhere and nowhere in American visual

culture – the *Statue of Freedom* (Crawford, 1863) – was the product of a series of rejected and revised designs by the artist.

Overseeing the overall construction of the Capitol Dome was Jefferson Davis, the then-Secretary of War and eventual president of the Confederacy. Davis rejected the use of the Phrygian cap because of its representation of emancipated slaves, though it was slaves who finally cast the statue in bronze. Davis demanded Crawford revise his design (architect of the Capitol) to show *Freedom Wearing a*

Feathered Roman War Helmet. I posit that the statue is a unique form of Confederate monument and should be amended. That is what some of these works imagine: a fantastical approach to artistic restoration based in social justice and protest, the consideration of which could not be timelier.

It also aims to de-weaponize women's bodies in the justification of racial violence, as well as consider what our national symbolism should be going forward.

Figure 1 (opposite, top): Jenny Roesel Ustick, *The Hands That Built Our City*, 2013. Novacolor acrylic on masonry, 13.7 x 21.6 m. This work was inspired by and in honour of the glass mosaics by Winold Reiss at Cincinnati's Union Terminal. Rather than reiterating the white patriarchal value structures depicted in the original mosaics from the 1930s, I created a design that removed hierarchy among figures, while elating representation of women and people of colour.

Figure 2 (opposite, bottom): Jenny Roesel Ustick, *The Hands That Built Our City* (detail), 2013. Novacolor acrylic on masonry, 13.7 x 21.6 m. This panel depicts the hand of an employee of the facility within the building where the mural is painted.







Figure 3 (opposite): *Many marchers wore Pink Pussy Hats*, Women’s March on Washington (January 21, 2017). *Source: Shari Kerrigan.*

Figure 4 (top): Plaza Gurruchaga, Villa Crespo (detail), 2017. Sinteplast on stucco. Created in collaboration with Toia Grehan (Argentina) and Kiik Create: Manoela Madera and Gray Edgerton (USA). Facilitated by Alicia Candiani of La Fundación ‘ace el Arte Contemporáneo y el ‘acePirar Programa Internacional de Residencias Artísticas (International Artist Residency Program, Palimpsest Mural Residency), Buenos Aires, Argentina, June 2017. The outcomes of this residency and resulting projects evolved and were evident in the murals, paintings, and prints that follow. *Source: Jenny Roesel Ustick.*



Figure 5: Jenny Roesel Ustick, *Run It Up* (detail), 2017. Felted wool, wood, and plaster. This hand-knit, felted cap is displayed on a tilted Liberty Pole. It acts as a complicated flag, representing the hope for freedom that is haunted by the possibility of surrender. The phrase “run it up” and its equally complicated multiple meanings serve at once as a plea to decency, a cynical dismissal, and a celebration of power and greed.



Figure 6: Jenny Roesel Ustick, *Run It Up* (detail), 2017. Felted wool, wood, and plaster.

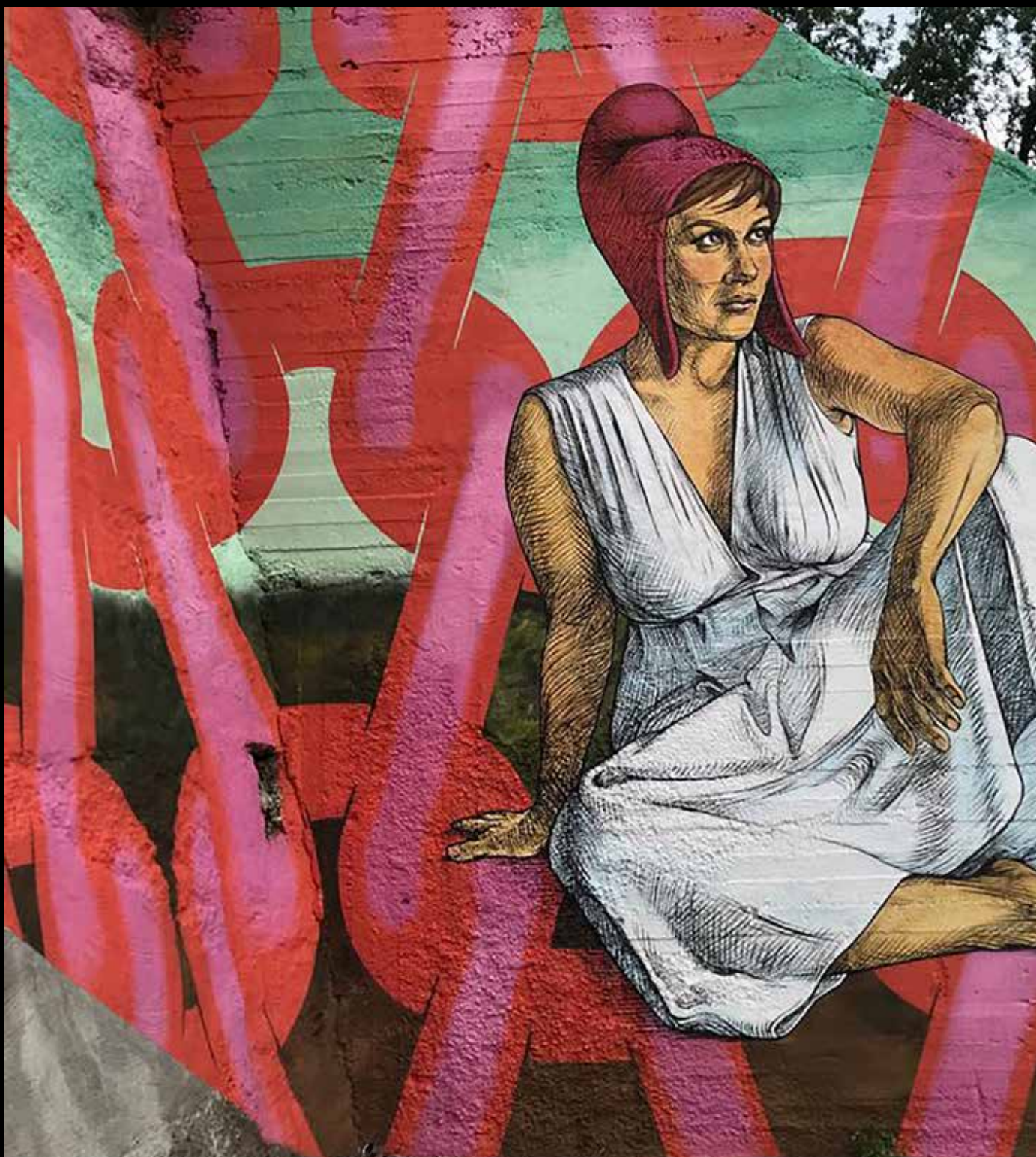




Figure 7: Jenny Roesel Ustick, *Reconstruction I* (detail), 2018. Acrylic on mixed masonry wall. Part of the Graniti Murales Residency with Art Project Graniti. Graniti Sicily, Messina, Italy. The background contains a stretched version of the Winslow Homer painting *The Brush Harrow* from the Reconstruction period following the American Civil War. The background is overlaid by a network of knitted stitches that were developed as a motif in 2017.



Figure 8: Jenny Roesel Ustick, *Crux*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 162.4 x 162.4 cm.



Figure 9: Jenny Roesel Ustick, *Right Side, Wrong Side*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 162.4 x 162.4 cm.



Figure 10: Jenny Roesel Ustick, *Reconstruction II*, 2018. Acrylic on panel.





Figure 11: Jenny Roesel Ustick, *Warrior*, 2019. Limited edition screen print, 66 x 50.8 cm. This depiction of Columbia is derived from the Boston Massacre monument at Boston Common, also referred to as the Crispus Attucks monument cast and dedicated post-reconstruction, in 1889.

#murals

#publicArt

#censorship

Bibliography

"Statue of Freedom," Architect of the Capitol, accessed June 2020, <https://www.aoc.gov/art/other-statues/statue-freedom>.

"Pussyhat' knitters join long tradition of crafty activism," BBC News, accessed June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38666373>.

Bures, Frank, "Richard Florida Can't Let Go of His Creative Class Theory. His Reputation Depends On It." In *Belt Magazine* (13 December 2017), accessed June 20, <https://beltmag.com/richard-florida-cant-let-go/>.

Coutts, Marion, "From the Liberty Cap to the Pussy Hat: A History of Radical Objects." In *The Economist 1843 Magazine* (17 October 2018), accessed June 2020, <https://www.1843magazine.com/culture/look-closer/from-the-liberty-cap-to-the-pussy-hat-a-history-of-radical-objects>.

Florida, Richard. *Rise of the Creative Class*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002.

Florida, Richard. *The New Urban Crisis*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017.

Homer Winslow, *The Brush Harrow*, 1865. Oil on canvas. 96.0 x 61.0 cm. Harvard Art Museums.

Hurley, Dan. "A Vision of Cincinnati: The Worker Murals of Winold Reiss." In *Queen City Heritage* (Summer/Fall 1993): pp. 81–92.

Malanga, Steven. "The Curse of the Creative Class." In *City Journal* (Winter 2004).

Robert Kraus, *Victory*, 1889.

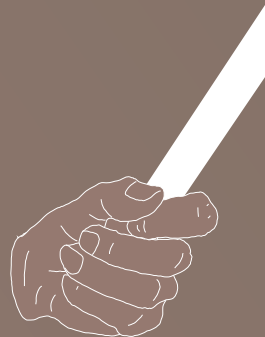
Suarez, Harrod. "Midterm Evaluations, Swing State Aesthetics". In *American Quarterly* 72, No. 1 (March 2020): pp. 207–220.

Sussman, Anna Louie. "Richard Florida on Why the Most Creative Cities Are the Most Unequal". In *Artsy* (9 May 2017), accessed June 2020, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-creative-cities-unequal>

Thomas Crawford, *Statue of Freedom*. 1863.

Bio

Jenny Roesel Ustick is associate professor of practice and foundations coordinator in the School of Art at DAAP, University of Cincinnati. She holds an MFA from the same program and a BFA from the Art Academy of Cincinnati. Ustick has become one of the most prominent muralists in her region and has painted around the US. Internationally, she has painted murals in Argentina and Sicily, and continues to expand her reach. Ustick's solo and collaborative studio works have been exhibited in numerous galleries and museum venues that include the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, the Dayton Art Institute, and the Cincinnati Art Museum. Ustick has contributed essays to *The Cincinnati Anthology* and *Still They Persist: Protest Art from the 2017 Women's Marches*. Her work has been featured in *American Quarterly*, the *Huffington Post*, *Hyperallergic*, and *La Sicilia*, as well as several local publications.



DOI: 10.31182/cubic.2022.5.53

CUBIC JOURNAL 2022

#race

#gender