



**Statement from Wesley Wofford, Wofford Sculpture Studio  
Philadelphia's Permanent Harriet Tubman Statue**

July 2022

**Regarding The Journey to Freedom Traveling Exhibition**

The original monument The Journey to Freedom was a commission from an existing client and we built a traveling copy as a direct result of the public wanting to see it in person. In our design of the traveling sculpture, we considered the financial risk to ourselves because we had no idea if it would actually work or be received, and decided it was just too important and a unique way to elevate Harriet Tubman's legacy. We wanted it to be accessible to small locations that may not have the means to host an expensive statue, so we kept the 'rental' fee at a no profit model of \$2000 per month. Over time (roughly 4 years), this pays for the management and the logistics, as well as pays off the actual costs of the bronze casting and fabrication work. Our Studio Director Odyssey is responsible for scheduling and moving the sculpture around and she is constantly receiving inquiries about potentially hosting the exhibition at particular venues. We do not pitch it to venues, they have all reached out to us. We sell nothing at any venue, we assist with programming when requested, and donate time speaking with school age children or community members if asked. Each location has a group of activists or organizers that build specific programming around telling Harriet-centric stories as well as lifting other black American stories. Odyssey and I both feel that this is one of the most meaningful and change-affecting events we have ever participated in, and we are grateful for all of our partners that have used it as a launchpad for so many initiatives elevating her story in such a positive and healing way. It is one of the best ways we know how we can assist and contribute to this important national dialogue that needs to be happening, and it has awakened an activism in our work that will resonate for decades. The Journey to Freedom has emotionally reached a large audience as is evident by the millions of views, shares, and positive social media comments. When people view a sculpture, they are bringing their own life experiences and perspectives to engage with that tribute, and as an artist the goal is to emotionally engage the viewers in a universal language. I think the response to this piece illustrates a hunger for inspiring symbols of underrepresented groups and accomplishments in our national history and spotlights the inequities of representation of these underrepresented groups in our public spaces.

**Regarding a Permanent Piece in Philadelphia**

We were contacted by the OACCE to discuss Philadelphia hosting the traveling sculpture to raise public awareness about Harriet Tubman's Philadelphia history in celebration of her 200th anniversary. After the sculpture was unveiled and their planned programming was underway, they received such positivity from the community they reached back out to us about a permanent Tubman sculpture. Currently the city has been collecting community

feedback about possible themes and narratives to explore and they have begun to share these details with me, and conceptual seeds are starting to sprout. I do not currently have a design as the community's voice is what will direct the final sculpture, and there is an advisory committee that will guide that voice. The feedback during the public zoom forum was primarily negative, but there has also been an enormous amount of positive responses and support from many people that I feel was not reflected in that specific conversation. I think the elephant in the room is my gender and the color of my skin and it would be naïve to not acknowledge and discuss that, so I did expect to perhaps have a conversation about that specifically. But I was definitely surprised by the personal attacks based on assumptions about who I am as a human being or why I am producing the works I am currently working on. Some have asked if I have considered withdrawing from the commission. By this metric, if I as an artist is approached by a group of black women (as in this case), I should say no I only sculpt white men because I am a white man? Based on my experience in the last couple of years with other activist groups around the country, saying no would not only be insulting to them but would rob us all collectively of building the healing bridges and symbols that will bring us together. Almost 175 years ago Harriet Tubman escaped from slavery and found refuge in the free city of Philadelphia. She subsequently spent many years in the city planning and staging her raids back south to liberate as many enslaved people as possible. She is an American hero that could have monuments and statues in multiple places around the city and has never been honored in this way. The Journey to Freedom started a dialogue exposing this inequity and led to the city's decision to rectify this wrong and was almost universally loved by the citizens of Philadelphia, so I can understand why the OACCE reached out to me directly to discuss a permanent statue. This will be 'a' Harriet Tubman statue, not 'the' Harriet Tubman statue. In this specific scenario, asking another artist to produce a work inspired by mine would be unfair to them as an artist. How many Benjamin Franklin statues exist within the city, both publicly and privately funded? I can think of several geographic specific locations within the city that would further amplify her legacy and tell her important story and I think the greater Philadelphia community should pursue them all. It has taken this long for the city to consider honoring Harriet Tubman in a public space and to take that momentous step in the right direction, and it is an event to be celebrated, and I hope it is the first of many.

### **Regarding Building an Equitable American Public Art Collection**

Backing up and looking at the bigger picture of our national public art collection, I do not think that every public piece needs to be a Call to Artists. Artists generate works reflecting the times they live in, and many times some of the most powerful works are not a result of a competition or a committee driven process but just a raw artistic reaction. I think our public spaces should have a combination of purchases of already existing works, a selection of specific artists for specific works, and open Calls to Artists for specific works. This will collectively give us a robust and diverse body of work that speaks of our collective civilization in the most authentic way. I am an ally of the untold stories, and if asked, I want to assist in people telling their stories in our public spaces. When I look at National Monument Audit by Monument Lab, the job we have ahead of us is enormous. I do believe

that not only do we as a nation need more monuments representing underrepresented groups, but we also need more underrepresented creators of those works. The problem is, if every living American figurative artist of every gender and ethnicity were to work full-time on monuments commemorating underrepresented groups and stories, it will still take us decades to even begin to level the playing field in our public squares. We all need to work together to make our public spaces represent our collective, authentic, and diverse achievements that built the world in which we all now live.