

Creating Magic through Art

Cathren Housley is a local artist (and Motif contributor) who believes magic can be conjured when a group of people collectively create something. And she's harnessing that magic with her current project, the United American Peace Flag. When complete, the United American Peace Flag will be a quilt of sorts — a reimagined American flag made from 300 panels of Rhode Islanders' drawn art. "I've moved from personal expression to social expression," she said of her artistic pursuits.

This isn't Housley's first piece of collaborative art or even her first flag. She created her first flag in 2015 after discovering The Peace Flag Project, an RI organization started in 2004. Project organizers gave Rhode Islanders the opportunity to draw their inner hopes for the world on a panel of fabric, which were then strung like Tibetan peace flags and displayed at events around the state. "Getting involved with The Peace Flag Project restored my faith in mankind," said Housley. "I have been involved in a lot of industries where people don't support each other and even try to get each other. Worlds of betrayals, competition and appearances and nothing about substance. It seemed like the world lost its soul."

Then Housley discovered The Peace Flag Project. "All they wanted to do was show people how to be peacemakers and I thought, 'Wow! There are people in the world who care.'"

In 2015, Housley began to think about ways she could give the peace flags more impact and drew on her experiences with collaborative community projects. She decided to collect 300 peace flags and stitch these representations of people's individual hopes into the symbol of our country — an American flag mural called the Great American Peace Project. "It makes a really strong statement about rebuilding this country into something better," said Housley.

I asked Housley if her current project, the United American Peace Flag, is a reaction to today's political climate. "We are apolitical," she said. "We don't care what your politics are. We don't want to fight. We just want to create something better." She did admit, however, that her project benefits from people's politics. "It's drawing better energy when people are fighting." Amidst all the fighting, people must be yearning for peace.

The United American Peace Flag differs from her first flag project in that it aims to represent the diversity of Rhode Island. "Political figures, doctors, dancers, Eastern medicine practitioners all made a flag," said Housley. "We're combining all their best wishes for a better world."

I recently took part in Housley's project when she conducted a workshop at a bar on the West Side. She asked me to choose a panel of fabric from a rainbow of colors spread across her table, then I settled down in front of a pile of colored markers with my orange fabric in hand. "Draw your hopes," said Housley. "Imbue your fabric with your wishes for the world." It was a tall order and I was intimidated. But I took a swig of beer, dropped my perfectionist tendencies, and drew the most peaceful and powerful image I could think of: a branch bursting with flowers that I used as a visualization during my eldest son's birth. When I was finished, Housley took my drawing, snapped my photo, asked me to fill out a short identifying form and sent me on my way. The next day, I received an email from Housley complimenting my drawing. I was flattered, but learned during our later conversation that her attraction to my art wasn't a singular experience.

"When I attach each flag to the larger project, I try to link with the intent of the artist and hold that in

my mind," said Housley. By doing so, she imbues power and binds positive energy into the project. "You have to do it in a very ritualistic manner," explained Housley of creating the large flag. "I am the only one who touches the flag. I sew the backing by hand. I use the powers of creative visualization to transfer energy. It's just this giant talismanic object.

"Great art is not something that's a visual representation. It can actually change the people who view it." And that's her long-term goal for her current project. The flag isn't the entire project, but more a means to an end. "[The flag will] create something as people view it. I see this as an opportunity to create a strong, positive, powerful energy."

When the United American Peace Flag is complete, it will be put on display with the Great American Peace Project and the photos of contributors at the Atrium Gallery in PVD. Housley is continuing to collect flags; to be part of the collaborative art project, contact her through thepeaceflagproject.org/contact