

# Speaking Out

“If it’s a global issue, it’s also a local issue,” says Steven Pennell, coordinator of URI’s Urban Arts and Culture Program. Their newest exhibit is “Speaking Out — A Call To Action — The Art of Protest — Agents of Change in Rhode Island.” This exhibit, which features a number of local artists in various media, “deals with a variety of issues,” says Pennell. “There are works that deal with COVID, materialism, Black Lives Matter, immigration, anxiety and depression, environmental issues, women’s rights, LGBTQ rights ... these are pieces from artists who deal with social justice issues and raise protest.” It’s on display at the URI Providence Campus at 80 Washington St through February 26.

“Arts call people to action, they educate and sometimes they incite, they call for people to be aware,” says Pennell. Putting together an art exhibit during a pandemic is difficult, and URI has made the exhibit available through a virtual tour on their website for those who are unable to visit the gallery in person. For those who are interested, Pennell brings small, masked and socially distanced groups through the exhibit on Thursdays and Fridays at 3:30, 4:00, and 4:30pm. Some art is also visible from the street, and QR codes give outside viewers an introductory explanation of the material.

One particular challenge for Pennell was incorporating the performing arts. “Under other circumstances I might have performances in the theater or in the gallery,” says Pennell, “I do performing arts all the time, but with COVID I have not been able to.” Luckily, Pennell was able to team up with The Wilbury Group to feature a film of their performance *OUR STORY // OUR SONG*, by local poet Christopher Johnson and musician Big Lux. That piece was originally performed outdoors in December at the WaterFire Arts Center’s Theater Under The Stars; the edited film version runs in the gallery 24/7.

Other notable pieces include a series of paintings by Monique Rolle-Johnson and protest photography by Don Mays.

“My hope is that the exhibit can inspire people to take action,” says Pennell, “that it will cause you to stop and think about what is going on around you, and that every issue is your issue, whoever you are. Hopefully it causes people to think about those issues and think about what they can do to make a difference.”