

Layered Time: Shea Justice

(The 4th and final show of 4 thematically connected solo exhibitions)

Exhibition Dates: September 13th to October 23rd 2021
Spoke Gallery

Layered Time is a series of four solo exhibitions connected thematically by how each artist incorporates facets of time into their work. *Layered Time: Shea Justice-Scrolls of Justice* is the fourth and final solo exhibition in this series. *Layered Time* was originally conceived as a group show that was reformatted to be four solo shows for Spoke Gallery's new space. The three additional artists who were featured in 2021 with solo exhibitions are: David Lloyd Brown, Naoe Suzuki, and Allison Maria Rodriguez.

For his solo show, *Scrolls of Justice*, visual artist Shea Justice is showing six of his paper scrolls that he started in the early to mid 2000's. The impetus of this body of work was the start of the U.S.'s War on terror and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Many of his scrolls are hundreds of feet long. Justice has specifically chosen each section of the scrolls that are on display for this exhibition. It was during the preparation for this solo show that he decided to name his scrolls. Each date associated with a scroll denotes the year he started that particular scroll. All of these scrolls, with the exception of the scroll entitled, "2003 War on Terror: The Beginnings" are completed works. Justice's hand written text is a key element of these works. These scrolls, like most of his other bodies of work, explore issues of war, politics, daily news events, pop culture, social justice, and race. The rights of women and children are also a key threads in many of his scroll sections that address the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. All of his artworks question "main stream" history and highlight some of the many key people and events that have been consciously omitted from the U.S. and/or global historical main stream narrative.

His interest in politics and his dedication to social justice dates to back to his childhood: "*One of the most significant memories of my life growing up was the summer visits to see my grandparents in Harrisonburg, Virginia. They were antique collectors and their house was filled with many interesting items that were on display throughout. I can remember as a child being fascinated by a turning display case that had presidential political campaign buttons in it. As a child about five years old I can remember turning it and trying to sound out names like Robert Kennedy, Spiro Agnew and Richard M. Nixon. I believe it contributed to my fascination with politics when I was able to make connections to those people and the things said about them on the news.... Another experience that had a lifelong impact on me was going to a week long summer camp called Anytown sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews . It was a week spent staying at Rolling Ridge Conference Center in Andover. The week consisted of adult counselors and staff and 60 high school students from diverse backgrounds and locations that would participate in workshops and activities exploring racism, sexism and homophobia. The activities forced a number of students to look at discrimination and challenged many beliefs that they had grown up having about the " other". By the end of the week many students learned the importance of intersectionality and had to come off with some kind of strategic plan to affect change in their schools and communities. This has been something I have tried to do for many years from, working on political campaigns (Former counselor and mayoral candidate Tito Jackson had attended the camp as well) and with visuals and murals I have put up and displayed at places I've worked at including my current school Lincoln Sudbury Regional High School.*"

Justice is also debuting a new scroll entitled, "2021 Critical Race Facts", for this exhibition. This newest scroll is a hybrid of his scrolls, sketch books, and collages. Unlike his other scrolls on view, this new art work was not made using rice paper. It was made from pages of one of his sketchbooks and he shares, "I just took the pages out and connected them to be one large piece." The title of this piece is play on words for the term and teachings of Critical Race Theory. Justice maintains the teachings are not theory, but are facts and should be taught as such. This new work, like all of his works, calls out and challenges institutional racism and white supremacy in all of its manifestations. The largest drawing of this scroll is of an image that was shown globally that depicts the murder of George Floyd by convicted former

Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. It is the chilling image that depicts Chauvin's hand in his pocket with his knee on George Floyd's neck.

Much like Naoe Suzuki's choice to use historical maps to create her *Extinction Studies* and David Lloyd Brown's use of templates that are inspired by shapes, symbols, and patterns that can be found throughout human history, Shea Justice's choice to use scrolls to make this body of work is significant and has many historical references. The use of scrolls dates back to ancient Egypt and in many "*ancient literate cultures, scrolls were the earliest format for longer documents written in ink or paint on a flexible background, preceding bound books.*" His choice to use rice paper for several of these works is another historical reference to the diverse cultures that have created and used scrolls. The use of "*Scrolls continued...longer in East Asian cultures like China, Korea and Japan.*" (1)

The English language is a key visual element in all of Shea Justice's works on display at Spoke. The English text usually comes first and the drawings and image usually follow. The texts in his scrolls are his personal commentary and are always in his own printed hand writing. He also includes quotes and will also collage words and phrases from newspapers and magazines onto scrolls. The use of text/printed English language was also a key element in the works Naoe Suzuki showed for her solo show at Spoke Gallery. However, unlike the other artists in the *Layered Time* series, Justice's works, in addition to having many multiple layers of connected socio-political content, offers viewers a portal into his deeply held person views and thoughts. As he has often said: "*My scroll, my thoughts, my feelings.*"

He further shares, "*My work is very political in content. I try to create art as a form of documenting experiences and realities involving people and mainstream pop culture during times of war in the digital age. By using rice scrolls, I create longstanding timelines about how a government's war from its inception until its conclusion. These works explore how war and the government actions impact the ideology and lives of the citizens through propaganda. The text on the scrolls includes information, commentary and dates that are from around the time the events occur. Many of the images on the scrolls are of people who make policy decisions, those who are affected by them, and how it impacts me on a day to day basis.*"

Like all of the other artists who exhibited in the *Layered Time* series, research is a key part of Justice's artistic practice. He reads newspaper articles, magazines, books, listens to radio shows, views documentaries for source material and he also started to watch military media channels. He diligently factchecks his source materials and the information he includes in his works. His influences are diverse, "*The political context of my work has been influenced by diverse people from artists like Sue Coe and Dana Chandler to political writers like James Baldwin and Noam Chomsky*" Before adding a quote by someone, "*he makes sure it is attributed to the person said it.*" Dana Chandler, before he retired as the founding director of the African American Master Artist in Residency Program at Northeastern University (AAMARP), added Shea Justice as member of the program. Chandler started the program in 1974 and all though it is was the first program of its kind in the U.S. and is still highly regarded, it now in jeopardy. (2) (3)

Portraits of people are the next dominant visual element found in Shea Justice's scrolls and other works. In addition to depicting "*people who make policy decisions, those who are affected by them*", he also draws images of those he admires and/or considers heroes. Some of the people in this latter category that inhabit his works on paper are: James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Michele Obama, Barack Obama, Fredric Douglas, Sister Theresa, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Gandhi, the Dali Lama, Noam Chomsky, Ted Kennedy, and Bree Newsome, to name a few.

Justice has always wanted to be an editorial illustrator cartoonist for a major paper. His love of cartoons and comics can be seen in his scrolls and he often incorporates cartoons and comics into these works. Before the global COVID-19 pandemic, he attended Comic-Con conferences on a regular basis. He frequently creates panels and boxes for the images depicted in his scrolls and these are the techniques that are used by comic book artists, illustrators, and cartoonists. He was a student journalist for his

high school newspaper and “*was given an opportunity to meet and ask questions of former president Gerald Ford and discuss the War Powers Act and the issue of divestment in South Africa.*” When he first started working on the scrolls, he used pens, pencils and markers. Later, he introduced watercolor paint and started to make the images look like photographs from the early part of the 20th century. He shares, “*The series of scrolls I’ve done are based on the traditional Asian techniques used to relate stories. By using Chinese ink, watercolor paint and pencil drawings on many parts, I try to archive a visual sense of change depending on the time and situations that occur.*”

It is important to note that some parts of the scrolls have large white spaces devoid of content. Justice made a conscious choice to leave these sections blank and to not to go back to finish these parts of his scrolls. These works are in sense time capsules that capture interconnected contemporary and historical socio-political issues and events. One example of this layered history or layered time is his linking former members of the Nixon administration with their roles in the George W. Bush administration. Like the work of Allison Maria Rodriguez, many of his scrolls reference and record key family and autobiographical milestones. For example, some sections of the scrolls have his son’s drawings, hand prints, and/or foot prints.

Spoke’s Flat File project is also showing three framed mixed media drawings on paper from Justice’s “*We The People*” series: The three works are: “*Constitution and Black Women*”, “*Lynching: A Proud American Tradition*”, and “*The U.S Justice System and the Constitution*”. These pieces directly confront the institutional white supremacy that founded this country. The paper replicas of the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution he used for these works were sourced from merchants located in Boston’s Faneuil Hall. It should be pointed out that there is a movement to rename this hall due to who it is named after. The original historical hall was donated to Boston in “*1742 by Peter Faneuil, a wealthy slave owner and slave trader who lived lavishly on Beacon Hill from the money he made in part by shipping enslaved Africans to sugar plantations in the West Indies.*” (4)

A fitting coincidence that further underscores the importance and relevance of Justice’s art work and vision, is that his two thematically connect shows at SPOKE were installed on the 20th anniversary of 9/11 and a couple of weeks after the end of the U.S. War in Afghanistan. His work, although deeply personal, is universal in its scope and subject matter. He wants the viewer to both question and to research what is considered history and historic truth. His work, like the work of both Naoe Suzuki and Allison Maria Rodriguez is a call to action to those who take the time to read and visually digest his compelling artworks. A fundamental question his works asks: *What happens to heroes who try to make the world a better place?*

--[Kathleen Bitetti](#), curator

To see images of one of his scrolls and to hear him speak about it, visit this link: [Shea Justice political art scroll with commentary, plus "how it was done" at end](#)

- (1) Information and quotes from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_scroll
- (2) AAMARP is currently fighting to keep its space and program open.
- (3) Links about AMMARP <https://blackactivism.library.northeastern.edu/programs/>
<https://www.baystatebanner.com/2020/07/02/black-artists-locked-out-of-nu-studio-space/>
<https://gregcookland.com/wonderland/2020/06/26/aamarp/>
- (4) Information and quotes from: <https://historyofmassachusetts.org/faneuil-hall-was-built-with-slave-money/>

About the Artist: Shea Justice grew up in Roxbury, Massachusetts. As a child he developed a passion for art from watching Drawing From Nature with Captain Bob Cottle and reading comic books. After attending Boston University where he got a BFA in art education, he taught in Fort Lauderdale Florida and later in the Boston Public school system. He later got an MFA in art from the Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University. Currently he is a teacher at Lincoln Sudbury Regional High school. He has participated in art exhibitions throughout the Boston area. He has work permanently on display at the Grove Hall Library (Boston). For over twenty years, he has been a member of Northeastern University’s AAMARP group (African American Master Artist Residency Program).