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## 2009 Professional Practices Program

### Art of Democracy: A Recorded History

### Montgomery County, Alabama

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During the 2008 election cycle The Montgomery Election Center developed a community based project influenced by the Depression-era Works Progress Administration. The WPA effort capitalized upon bringing art into civic spaces and provided thousands with economic sustainability during one of America's most financially turbulent times. Scores of libraries, courthouses, post offices, and other public places are adorned with wonderful murals that were painted by the WPA artists subscribing to President Roosevelt's New Deal. Montgomery, Alabama, internationally known as the birth place of the modern civil rights movement, is home to a wonderful art community. Many WPA works have been preserved in Montgomery and in other areas of rural Alabama. Influenced by the WPA works, Trey Granger, Director of Elections for Montgomery County, created an election and educational initiative, *The Art of Democracy*, to visually record Election Day, Montgomery's polling places both rural and urban, as well as the faces of polling officials and the voting process for future generations.

Fourteen local artists were invited to participate in the inaugural project. The initiative incorporated the following goals: create a wonderful collection of art that could be used to generate interest in local, state, and federal elections in 2008; position an opportunity for community based voter education; develop visual resources that could be incorporated into public service announcements and other election/educational literature; and foster a more comprehensive appreciation for the arts in Montgomery, Alabama. As the project was launched, it found a strong foundation in the collective effort of "celebrating the arts, elections, and education in Montgomery, Alabama."

During the February 2008 Presidential Preference Primary, each of the 14 participating artists was deployed to a polling location where they could set up their easel and begin work. The artists were provided a large 4' x 4' piece of masonite and canvas, a drop cloth and other necessary supplies, and asked to capture the events of the day – voters, polling officials, the venue and other interesting aspects of the experience that would capture the voting process during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What resulted was amazing – oils, collage, portraiture, folk art, as well as, pen and ink.

As the art was being finalized, framed, and photographed, other aspects of *The Art of Democracy* were taking shape. The Montgomery Election Center collaborated with several local entities, agencies, businesses and institutions to develop a unique approach to voter education while creating an enhanced interest in voter registration, voter participation, and service as a polling official. A primary focus was upon voter education for first time voters. In collaboration with Auburn University, the Montgomery Election Center designed, developed and implemented a workshop for high school seniors, civic leaders and members of the public. The workshop was held at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, ironically one of Montgomery County's 56 polling places.

The Museum's auditorium was designed to resemble the Nominating Convention of one of the major political parties. Each of the 200 participating students was assigned to one of the delegations identified by one of the nine "faces" in Clark Walker's painting which, in the fashion of Andy Warhol, depicted nine diverse and unique voters in Montgomery, Alabama. The exercise focused on a hypothetical issue designed as a "proposed" constitutional amendment relating to high school truancy. Local leaders, educators, philanthropists, clergy, public officials, media representatives, business persons, and artists served as small group facilitators in the morning program entitled "What if

Everyone Voted?” This aspect of the program included facilitation by Dr. Paula Bobrowski of Auburn University, student actors from a local high school, and retired Federal Judge Vanzetta McPherson. The program illustrated that approximately 50% of the community is not registered to vote, that approximately one half of those that are registered to vote “show up” on Election Day, therefore approximately 25% of the community make the decisions for everyone. The exercise had a dramatic impact on all participants and was replicated in over 40 local public and independent schools in the metropolitan area. Local art historian and educator, Connie Deal, presented a historical overview of over 100 significant artworks that have impacted our democracy spanning from the American Revolution to the modern era.

In the rotunda of the Museum, each of the 200 participants had a working lunch spent with a small group facilitator and created a “mural of democracy” out of small items iconic of democracy (i.e.: small flags, toy soldiers, currency) that each participant brought from home. After lunch each of the teams spent time with each of the 14 artists in a session entitled “Art Talk.” During this session, each artist offered dialogue regarding his or her creation, his or her journey as an artist, and how his or her work reflects our democracy. The day’s events closed with a public dedication of the 14 works and reception in honor of the participating artists.

The art created by participating artists in *The Art of Democracy* has been and shall be used as a cornerstone for voter education and education literature developed by the Montgomery Election Center. During the 2008, 2009 and future elections, an artist’s work will be featured. For example, Clark Walker’s depiction of nine Montgomery voters has been used as the cover of the 2008 General Election Polling Official Handbook, featured in a Voter’s Guide, and was included on a magnet mailed to each Montgomery County household in preparation for the 2008 General Election. Likewise, Wendy Slaton’s depiction of a rural polling place was included in literature for the 2009 Municipal Election.

*The Art of Democracy* impacted voters in Montgomery in many diverse and unique ways. The collection has been the recipient of extensive media coverage and now hangs in the newly designed and state-of-the-art Montgomery Election Center. The Montgomery Election Center is a community based resource that conducts all local, state, and federal elections in Montgomery, Alabama. The first of its kind election center is visually attractive, functional and has made sustainability a priority. The Election Center is currently collaborating with Auburn University and other organizations to explore a statewide and possibly national implementation of *The Art of Democracy*.

The collection that embodies *The Art of Democracy* embraces the unique aspects of the community and the dedication of the Montgomery “election family” especially the wealth of civic responsibility that is demonstrated on those Tuesdays we call “Election Day.” The works of these inspiring artists, and future contributors, will hang for generations in the Montgomery Election Center. This wonderful collection all donated by the participating artists, but appraised at over \$400,000.00, has been and shall be utilized to celebrate and contemplate the importance and historical significance of the arts, elections, and education in the community we cherish – Montgomery, Alabama.