

# Detroit Free Press

## ARTS

# Gallery dedicated to artists with disabilities unlocks hidden creativity



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Detroit Free Press

Published 6:01 a.m. ET June 2, 2022 | Updated 12:51 p.m. ET June 2, 2022

This weekend offers the last chance to see the inaugural exhibit of Detroit's first gallery dedicated to artists with disabilities.

The exhibit, titled "Liberty Realm," opened last month in the Eastern Market storefront conference center of The Vella Group, in collaboration with Progressive Art Studio Collective (PASC). It closes June 5.

The pop-up gallery will host three more exhibits throughout 2022. Artist Ashley Hawkins, whose colorful, Motown-inspired pieces sold quickly, said working with PASC on the exhibition has been a joyful experience.

"Doing my art allows me to express myself and how I really feel," she said. "I get to use beautiful colors. I just love being creative."

The artists are clients of Services to Enhance Potential (STEP), a nonprofit that provides service and support to Wayne County residents with developmental disabilities and mental health needs.

"Since being introduced to PASC, I have witnessed amazing work come to life and the incredible joy it brings to the artists, especially when it is shared with the public," said Detroit artist James Benjamin Franklin, who curated the first exhibit. "This program has such a positive impact on the community because it shows the magic we unlock when people are shown a path to express themselves creatively."

Lewis Foster, who has also sold several pieces, called the opportunity "outrageous."

"I like to draw something and then they put it up where people can see my artwork and buy it, and I get the credit for it," he said.

PASC program manager Anthony Marcellini said more than 100 guests attended the exhibit's May opening.

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"It was a great turnout," he said. "And we sold half the show that night, which was really exciting. Half of the artists were there as well, so that was really great; they're not always able to get to the exhibitions, but they made it to this one, and were able to speak about their work as well."

“And the response was super enthusiastic. People were saying to me, ‘It doesn’t matter who made the work, this is a great exhibition.’”

Marcellini said the program is the first of its kind in Wayne County.

“There are programs like this in other cities across the U.S. that have been around since the 1970s and ‘80s,” he said, “but there’s never been an official program like this in Wayne County. I think it’s really, really important that this is happening here.”

Vella Group founder and CEO Jim Vella, a longtime arts supporter, said working with PASC and the artists was a perfect match.

“We’re very proud to have these artworks in our conference center,” he said. “Part of the reason this business is in Eastern Market is because there’s an arts and culture community in this area, and we wanted to be embedded in the community we serve. The conference room used to be an art gallery, in fact.

“Some of the artists, their family members were telling me, ‘Oh, they don’t go out much,’ ‘They don’t speak in front of other people,’ and then some of them got up at the opening and talked in front of their artwork. It was very touching to me that we were able to give them an opportunity. PASC gets the credit, though — Anthony has done an amazing job working with these artists. There’s a really, really good vibe with them.”

Vella purchased a piece to hang in the office as a tribute to the artists.

“I think it all shows,” he said, “that when you give opportunities to folks who may not have had them otherwise, they can be very successful. And that’s really the coolest piece of it.”

The "Liberty Realm" exhibition can be viewed Friday through Sunday from 1 to 6 p.m. The next exhibition will open June 10. For more information, visit [ProgressiveArtStudioCollective.com](https://www.progressiveartstudiocollective.com).