

Artist Statement about

# The Promise of Elgin

My name is Pablo Serrano and I am the artist responsible for the mural titled *The Promise of Elgin* , dedicated to the people of Elgin.

I wanted to share what I've learned going through this cultural process alongside the Social Justice Collective that came together to launch the "Making Space" initiative to build on the activism against police brutality of 2020. Making Space is a useful term not just for the goal of activating social spaces with the purpose of engaging in challenging conversations, but it is also very appropriate to describe the goals of community muralism that seeks to invite democratic creativity to take ownership of the *physical* spaces that frame our real experiences. Instead of just taking the present for granted "Making Space" challenges all of us with the key question: How can we go from passive navigators of the cultural structures of our present to active shapers of our environment so we can make sure such spaces reflect the collective values we share? In this process of shaping our environments through public art we can also begin to analyze and understand how the past infuses ,for better or for worse, it's values into the physical spaces that live with us today.

The mural itself is a response to a highly problematic public artwork titled "American Nocturne" (2007) that was sourced from a lynching photograph without any reference to photograph's depiction of racial violence and terrorism of that time and it's connection to the present. Until it's discovery, 9 years later in 2016, did Elgin get to weigh in and make known its stance on that project. It became very obvious that working with such a source would elicit deeply personal and social reactions from people who grew up with elders and ancestors that had no choice but to carefully navigate a nationwide campaign of violence and discrimination that still influences us today.

The response is most importantly an affirmation I came to understand upon listening to community members speak incredibly highly of Elgin's capacity to, at critical moments, try hard to live up to not just the democratic promise of this community but of our overall American

society. That is where the story the mural shares begins. In 1853 and 1855 the great Frederick Douglass is invited to speak to abolitionists here in Elgin about abolishment of Slavery, he had himself escaped through education. Abolitionists that helped with the Underground Railroad and were a part of the 1st Baptist church of Elgin including Reverend Benjamin Thomas, Lt. Coronel John S. Wilcox (shown right of Frederick Douglass) and Reverend A. J Joslyn (Right of Col. Wilcox) are depicted alongside Douglass in one of Elgin's earliest expressions of multicultural solidarity. Those abolitionists would then be called to service at one of the most critical and bloody moments for the entire nation when the Civil War would explode. Local Elginites like Chaplain Benjamin Thomas and Wilcox upon coming upon the thousands of Slaves, who crossed union lines in pursuit of Freedom but where still treated as property or "contraband" wrote back to their fellow neighbors and asked if they could send some of these souls up north. Upon saying yes, 110 freed slaves consisting mostly of Children, women and elders are sent on an arduous journey North in Two Boxcars, referenced in the mural by the train tracks behind Douglass, Wilcox and Joslyn. The monumental struggle against slavery in the Civil War is referenced in the mural by the giant fist with a breaking chain at it's wrist and the children who experienced an unimaginable transition from Slavery to the beginning of their freedom here in Elgin. The young black man behind the children at the bottom is a reference to leaders like Arthur and Peter Newsome (not related) who served the Union Army as teenagers and came back to help organize and lead the nascent Black community of Elgin.

In the mural we transition to the deepening of the roots of this community by highlighting everyday people who took on extraordinary leadership roles in community life. During this time after the civil war, the segregation of Jim Crow would take hold and deepen racial divisions in community life. While the country moved on from slavery after the Civil War, the racism and prejudice that lay at it's core would express itself in the hyper segregation of communities of color to particular places and roles in the community. This racist cultural architecture still lives and shapes the cultural and economic contours of our communities today.

In the mural to the right of Reverend Joslyn we have Reverend Richard de Baptiste who became the first African American minister of the new 2nd Baptist Church of Elgin. To his right we have Mary Newsome Wheeler and her son Arthur Hall. Mary Wheeler Newsome was only two years old when she and her mother made the journey north alongside the other 109 freed slaves. Daughter of Arthur and Minerva Newsome she went on to play a vital role in her community during the turbulent times of the early 20th century. She helped lead "Liberation Day" (now celebrated as Juneteenth) celebrations commemorating the end of slavery in the US. She would be a founding member of the American War Mothers during WW1. Till her death in 1947, she lived and was active helping her community navigate segregated post civil war America.

Under her the mural depicts Sherman hunter and Alberta Fields who represent the later arrivals to Elgin via the great Black migration north in the early 20th century. They met at the 2nd Baptist Church where he was a Deacon. Sherman would serve as a Buffalo Soldier in World War II and in the postal service afterwards. Together their family were important anchors in the historic Black community on Fremont Street.

Behind them are three individuals not from Elgin but now connected to it because of their absence from the previous mural American Nocturne. I chose portray Abram Smith and Thomas Shipp who were the two young men who were lynched by a mob after being pulled out and beaten from the Marion Indiana County Jail. On that dreadful day on August 7th 1930 a photographer documented the heinous actions of a mob who brutalized and terrorized not just these two men but a third person named James Cameron who came close to being the third person hanging alongside Abram and Thomas. He survived and would spend his life teaching about the horrors of slavery and everything associated with it in his Black Holocaust Museum. He is depicted directly beneath Mary Wheeler Newsome and Arthur Hall, as an older man who had to grapple with the trauma of unimaginable horror and terror. Abram and Thomas who are tragically remembered in the now iconic photo of their lynching are depicted as everyday young men, visible where as in American Nocturne they were not.

As we move to the left towards the lower bottom we have a mirror surrounded by Ernie Broadnax, Ronald O'Neal, and Robert Gilliam who contributed entire lives to public service here in Elgin. Ronald O'Neal would become Elgin's first Black Principal at Elgin's Sheridan Elementary School and then at Larsen Middle School and Elgin High School. Robert Gilliam an educator, became Elgin's first Black Council Member. Ernie Broadnax helped create and produce the documentary film "Project 2-3-1" that conveys the history of the Black Community of Elgin and was very influential in informing this mural.

As we move to the left we see George Floyd whose tragic murder captured publicly via video catalyzed protests against police brutality all over the world including here in Elgin. To his right we see DeCynthia Clements who herself was killed during in a tragic officer involved shooting in 2018. DeCynthia is next to her only son, Tyri and next to him is Gianna Floyd, George Floyd's daughter. This sequence is meant to acknowledge the ongoing, generational, and troubled relationship between law enforcement and everyday members of the Black Community. Two young adults who were dragged out of a county jail and publicly brutalized and murdered for the entire world to see in 1930. George Floyd murdered by a Minneapolis Officer in broad daylight on an American Street. DeCynthia shot by an officer coming out of a burning car with a knife in a distressed state of mind. George and DeCynthia are survived by their families and in particular their children Gianna and Tyri who have to live with what happened to their parents. Everyday people of color caught up in horrendous encounters with law enforcement during different generations revealing deep inequality and injustice.

We then transition to the right side of the mural that features everyday people who felt compelled to take the streets in the summer of 2020 in response to not just the murder of George Floyd but by personal and generational experiences with law enforcement. This coalition was diverse, inter-generational and global. It challenged existing power structures to look hard at their own policies and relationships with communities of color to see if as public institutions they were living up to their ideals and being just and fair in their applications of laws and

policies. Here in Elgin it is impossible to grasp the magnitude of the social activism here if one does not understand the history of the struggle for equality and justice over time. One of the protest signs circles back to this important history of Elgin by quoting Frederick Douglass: “Where there is no struggle, there is no progress.”

Pablo Serrano

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