

# A ‘Super PAC’ Where Art Meets Politics

By CELIA McGEE APRIL 24, 2016



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A Jim Goldberg photograph from the Postcards From America series. Jackie Smith, protesting gentrification in Memphis, at the site of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., now the National Civil Rights Museum. Credit Jim Goldberg

An unusual new “[super PAC](#),” run by artists, has cropped up on the political landscape — and it’s one that says it won’t support (or oppose) candidates or parties.

The super PAC, For Freedoms, which registered as a political action committee in January, is raising funds for national advertising, much of it based on original artworks, offering diverse views on issues such as campaign reform, racism, gender equality, gun control, reproductive rights and freedom of expression. The artworks are planned to be shown in a gallery exhibition.

Founded by Hank Willis Thomas, a photographer and conceptual artist, and Eric Gottesman, a video artist and activist, the super PAC is named after [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#)’s “Four Freedoms” [wartime address](#) in 1941 — a call to safeguard the freedoms of speech and worship, the freedom from want, and the freedom from fear.

Contributing artists and photographers include [Carrie Mae Weems](#), [Rashid Johnson](#), [Xaviera Simmons](#), [Alec Soth](#), Bayeté Ross Smith, [Fred Tomaselli](#) and [Marilyn Minter](#). Their works will be used for billboards, building signs, subway advertising, Internet memes, social media and select print advertising, potentially even yard signs, and ultimately an art show at the [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) in Chelsea. Mr. Thomas, 40, said in a telephone interview that the founders were also looking for media buys “in the heartland, where they’re cheapest.”



The first advertisement produced for For Freedoms, designed by Albert James Ignacio and Wyatt Gallery. Credit Albert James Ignacio and Wyatt Gallery

Mr. Gottesman, also 40, added, “We don’t have Koch brothers’ or Priorities USA Action money.”

Super PACs typically raise unlimited sums from any donor and are inherently partisan. “They function to influence elections like advertising agencies,” Mr. Gottesman said, adding that For Freedoms and its projects are intended to “elevate and expand the dialogue that no longer exists in our sound-bite culture, its ‘gotcha’ tactics, or in its oversimplified conversations.”

As more artists join, more divergent views will be seen. “There are not just two sides, conservative or liberal, black or white,” Mr. Thomas said. “The country is increasingly confronting how one person’s freedom may impinge on someone else’s.”

Mr. Smith, for example, who has taken over the super PAC’s Instagram arm, has made a

series of photographs of gun owners extolling their favorite weapons. The artist [Will Steacy](#), who describes himself as a “former union laborer,” makes collages that reveal a stance closer to Libertarianism.

For Freedoms has raised \$5,687 toward its \$50,000 goal through its website, [forfreedom.org](#), and an additional \$15,000 from art collectors and patrons such as Barbara Alford, John and Sharon Hoffman and Damany Weir. Its donors, ideally, are “people interested in art and politics,” Mr. Gottesman said.



The artist Alec Soth combined found objects in situ and photographed them in Cairo, Ill., for “At the Confluence.” Credit Alec Soth

Mr. Thomas said that he was intrigued by the influential series of magazine covers for The Saturday Evening Post based on four paintings that Roosevelt’s speech stirred Norman Rockwell to create. For the For Freedoms show, he is finishing a series of four highly stylized, staged photographs reinterpreting Rockwell’s imagery.

“We want people to think deeper,” he said, adding that the artists, evoking Rockwell, hope to “give voice to ordinary Americans.”

In that vein, For Freedoms’ first outing began on April 10, when members of its partner group, the [Postcards From America](#) photography collaborative, loosely affiliated with Magnum Photos, left Memphis for a road trip through the Mississippi Delta and along the Gulf Coast, with the Postcards’ co-founder Jim Goldberg, Gilles Peress, Mr. Soth and others.

It is modeled, through a contemporary lens, on the Farm Security

Administration commission by its director, Roy Stryker, to a now-legendary team of photographers during the Depression to chronicle the myriad, everyday facets of life across the country.

Christopher Klatell, a lawyer and contributing writer to the Postcards' project, said in an email from the road: "The photographers are moving through the world and trying to make a certain sense of it. We're certainly not looking for pictures of poverty, for instance." Mr. Klatell added: "One would have to put all one's effort into looking away not to see them. At the moment we're trying to be open, not closed, about what that work could look like, and what it might invoke."

The contributed works and Postcards From America photographs will go on view at the Shainman gallery on June 7, the last Super Tuesday of the presidential primary campaign, when a For Freedoms headquarters will open there as well. Donors who contribute between \$10,000 and \$50,000 will receive limited-edition portfolios. In an arrangement unusual in the commercial art world, a percentage of the proceeds from all sales will be split among For Freedoms, its artists and the galleries or dealers that represent them.