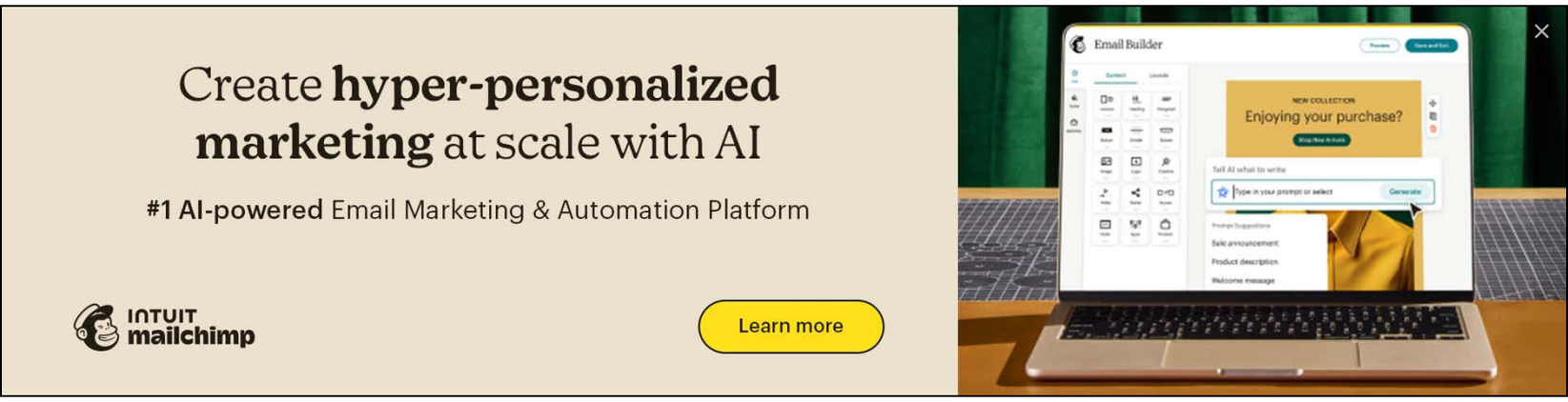

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Maryland artists push back against 'culture of censorship'

Artist Margaret Murphy, artist in her studio, before five pieces of her artwork with one that's partially entitled, "Banned Words." (Karl Merton Ferron/Staff)

By MARY CAROLE MCCAULEY
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Baltimore artist Margaret Murphy began working on a protest painting called "Banned Words" on Nov. 6, 2024 — the day after Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election.

At first glance, Murphy's painting resembles a conventional still life of a cantaloupe and four apples on a napkin. But as viewers lean closer, slightly raised words begin emerging almost ghostlike from the canvas: "abortion," "DEI," "victim," "intersectional" and "equality."

These terms, taken from a list of words that whistleblowers from the National Science Foundation said were flagged as unacceptable by the Trump administration on grant applications for research projects, recede into the background of Murphy's painting and nearly fade from view — an effect that operates almost subliminally.

"These paintings were a way for me to process my feelings," said Murphy, who directs the Johns Hopkins University's Center for Visual Arts and voted for Kamala Harris. "If you use the words 'women' or 'breastfeeding' in an application for a research grant, you're likely not going to get

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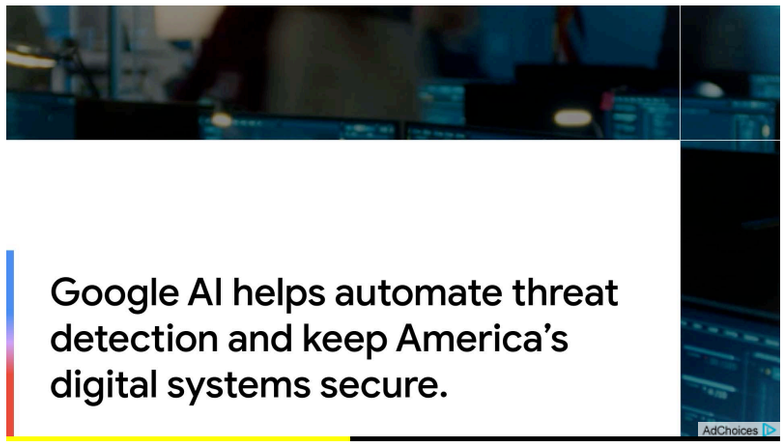
it. This is more than just rhetoric; it is having a real impact on women's lives."

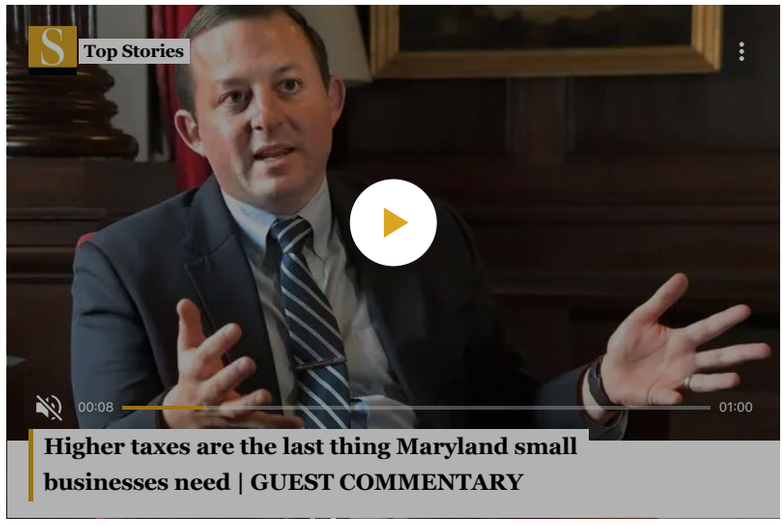


Free speech and censorship are coming to the forefront nationally as the Baltimore Museum of Art opened a controversial exhibit by the former Maryland artist Amy Sherald, who believes the Smithsonian Institute's National Portrait Gallery attempted to censor her work.

She's among the artists and cultural groups who individually and collectively are using paintbrushes, musical instruments and publications to push back against what they view as the Trump administration's attempt to curtail free speech.

Those efforts include Fall of Freedom, a series of live and online concerts, readings, comedy acts and exhibits that will take place coast to coast, including in Maryland, on Nov. 21 and 22. The initiative is being described as the first coordinated, nationwide "creative resistance" to the president's efforts to reframe American cultural life.

However, talk of censorship makes many conservatives roll their eyes. It is liberals, they say, who have been functioning as the nation's thought police.



Detail of a 2025 oil and vinyl painting on canvas by local artist Margaret Murphy entitled, "Banned Words - Still Life With Fruit" reveals raised letters of words. (Karl Merton Ferron/Staff)

David F. Tufaro, a real estate developer who was the Republican candidate for mayor of Baltimore in 1999, is disturbed by the removal of the Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument from his former neighborhood of Bolton Hill. it was among four Confederate monuments taken down by former Mayor Catherine Pugh under cover of darkness in 2017, days after a "Unite the Right" rally in Virginia turned violent, claiming three lives.

Tufaro pointed out that removing monuments because they espouse an unpopular political viewpoint is an act of censorship in and of itself.

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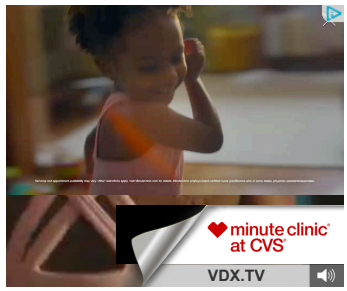
“I was shocked when this beautiful monument to Confederate soldiers who died in battle was removed without public discussion or debate,” he said. “It should be restored to its rightful place.”

(Trump later ordered that many of the monuments removed nationwide in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd be reinstalled, though his directive didn’t apply to Baltimore because the monuments weren’t on federal land.)



Although censorship is an especially hot-button topic right now, this isn’t the first time in American history that tensions between opposing political factions have spilled over into efforts to muzzle dissenting points of view. Charges of censorship were lobbed during the Sedition Act of 1798, during 1950s-era McCarthyism and during the culture wars of the 1990s.

“Censorship can be imposed by the political left or the political right,” said Janet Marstine, a former museum studies professor and author of an book about censorship called “Curating Under Pressure.”

“The problem is that censors erase complex areas of history. In order to create an anachronistic, nostalgic view of America, you have to reduce the gray areas to all black or white. When you take away opportunities for audiences to engage in critical thinking about history and culture and science, we become a citizenry that can’t think critically about other things, including voting. And that’s scary.”

Of course, not all reasons for withholding artworks from public view are politically motivated. For instance, the American Visionary Art Museum decided this fall to include Koreloy Wildrekinde-McWhirter’s sequence on child rape in its yearlong mega-exhibition, “Fantastic Realities.” But curators left out one etching that served as the crux of the series because they feared it was so graphic it would distress visitors.

But most headline-grabbing anti-censorship protests are political.

Fall of Freedom, which is being organized out of New York, has already begun generating buzz. That’s partly because it has attracted such influential supporters as the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage, filmmaker Michael Moore, musician John Legend and author Jennifer Egan.

Kennedy Center fans, artists weigh boycotts under Trump: ‘I won’t pay money to be disgusted’

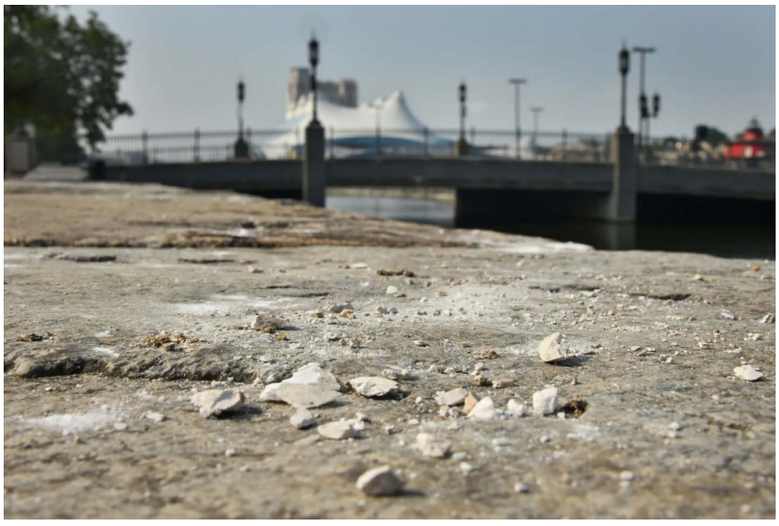
Ticket sales have decreased, and cultural groups are refusing to perform at the Kennedy Center to protest its takeover by the Trump administration.

Baltimore Sun

Organizers are encouraging artists nationwide to mount a series of simultaneous public events that take aim at such Trump administration initiatives as the January takeover of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the abrupt dismissal of former Librarian of Congress (and Baltimore resident) Carla Hayden and the defunding of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

“Fascism isn’t going to wait,” Brooklyn-based artist Dread Scott said during an October planning session for Fall of Freedom. “If artists wait for a year and a half to speak up, the world won’t look the same as it does today.”

People from opposite ends of the political spectrum often use the same words and phrases — “censorship” and “partisan ideology” and “rewriting history” — to talk about the actions to which they object, whether that’s liberals toppling the statue of Christopher Columbus into the Inner Harbor in 2020, or the Trump administration ordering a comprehensive review of Smithsonian exhibitions to ensure that museum administrators are not “replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth,” according to the president’s March 27 executive order.



Marble fragments from the Christopher Columbus statue rest on the stone wall where protesters dumped the statue in the Inner Harbor after pulling the statue down from its base at Columbus Piazza. July 5, 2020

Fall of Freedom participants are not unaware of the irony. Some say that any event aimed at combatting censorship is morally obligated to make room for opposing points of view.

“Democracy does not look like silencing the voice of your opponents or pulling funding from your opponents,” said Stevie Walker-Webb, artistic director of Baltimore Center stage, which will participate in Fall of Freedom by reopening and expanding the theater’s Indigenous Art Gallery.

“When fascist regimes take over, two things tend to happen,” he said. “Some people fall into line, and some people resist. We at Center Stage have a third response, which is to create something so joyful that maybe it makes people in the other line rethink their politics.”

For Walker-Webb, that means everyone is welcome at Center Stage — including the commander in chief.

“I would honestly love it,” he said, “if the president wanted to come and experience the work we’re doing.”

As of noon Friday, six Maryland groups had registered to participate in Fall of Freedom, according to an interactive map on its website.

Those events include a screening of the 1993 David Grubin film “Degenerative Art” in Hyattsville, a pro-Democracy dance party at Baltimore’s Penn Station and artist talks at Bmore Art by local creators whose work deals with issues ranging from immigration to global warming to the plight of Baltimore’s squeegee workers.

“This is a moment when it’s really important for every voice to be heard,” said Inés Sanchez de Lozada, Bmore Art’s gallery coordinator.

“Artists are very resilient and strong and they know how to fight for their freedoms. No matter what this administration does, artists are not going anywhere and art is going to continue to happen.”

Some cultural workers are mounting independent protests against censorship that align with Fall of Freedom ideals but that aren’t necessarily part of its of public events.

"Amy Sherald: American Sublime" opens Nov. 2 at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Sherald, the artist who painted the official portrait of Michelle Obama, recently pulled her planned solo show from the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery because she feared that "Trans Forming Liberty," a painting of a trans woman posed as the Statue of Liberty, would be censored. (Kim Hairston/staff)

For example, earlier this fall, Sherald cited censorship concerns after her painting of a transgender woman posed as the Statue of Liberty drew Trump administration backlash. Although Smithsonian officials attributed the brouhaha to a misunderstanding, “Amy Sherald: American Sublime,” is running instead at the BMA through April 5.

"At a time when transgender people are being legislated against, silenced, and endangered across our nation, silence is not an option," Sherald wrote in a statement explaining her reasons for canceling the Washington show. "I cannot in good conscience comply with a culture of censorship, especially when it targets vulnerable communities."

Have a news tip? Contact Mary Carole McCauley at mmccauley@baltsun.com and 410-294-0169.

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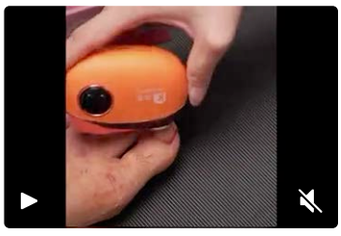

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