

Life, Liberty & the Pursuit of Happiness

Individual ideas about liberty

By Michael O'Sullivan
Washington Post Staff Writer
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"Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" covers a lot of ground.

Among the rights-themed subjects touched on by the American Visionary Art Museum's timely new mega-exhibition are the following: Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib; gay rights; immigration; Afghanistan and Iraq; freedom of speech; racial and religious prejudice; economic inequity; and the U.S. penal system. It's as if it was curated by a lawyer from the ACLU.

Practically the only thing missing? Health-care reform.

That's because the debate over whether universal medical coverage is a fundamental human right -- or yet another example of intrusive Big Government -- is too recent to have been digested into art yet. Michael Moore aside, the country needs time to process, according to Roger Manley (the show's actual curator). Having recently returned to the United States from France, where the photographer, folklorist, writer and filmmaker spent nine years working on a television documentary, Manley certainly has an opinion. "I tell people: If you're uninsured and you need major dental work, it's actually cheaper to fly to France -- including the hotel and air fare -- than to get it here."

This is not, however, talk radio. To the extent that the show expresses an opinion, it's this: Let your freak flag fly.

Adam Morales's "Star Spangled Banner" will do. Fashioned from scraps of painted driftwood, the tattered facsimile of Old Glory that flies over the folk artist's "Statue of Liberty" on the museum's second floor is as good an emblem as any of the show's central theme of E pluribus unum. Manley puts it this way: "We tend to forget that it's individuals that make this country what it is, not classes of people."

In that regard, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" is less about specific civil rights than it is about a more generalized exhortation to follow your bliss.

To be sure, there are works that cite famous rights cases. Take "Scottsboro Boys," by the late Dick Lubinsky, an artist from the Bronx. The 1963 mixed-media work on paper depicts the defendants in a landmark 1931 case in which nine black men were accused of rape. It ultimately went to the Supreme Court, leading to the decision that all defendants are entitled to effective counsel and that juries may not be selected based on race.

Renaldo Kuhler's art is more typical. A scientific illustrator by profession, Kuhler invented a mythological country called Rocaterrania when he was a teenager, living with his authoritarian German-immigrant parents in remote Colorado. His contribution to "Life" consists of several pictures documenting the inhabitants, history and culture of this nonexistent -- albeit meticulously documented -- world.

And what do they have to do with human rights? Superficially, not much. Except perhaps as an expression of our inalienable right to escape into a fantasy. On closer consideration, there's a bit more going on. Rocaterrania, it seems, began as a fascist monarchy. Over time, however,

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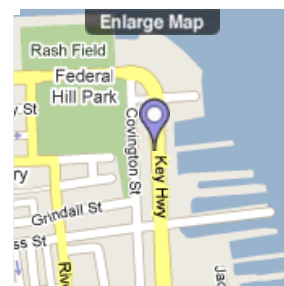
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land (located somewhere between Upstate New York and Canada) has evolved into a democracy.

No government, it seems, can guarantee happiness. Only the right to chase -- or, in some cases, invent -- it.