

# ART UNBOUND EPISODE 34 TRANSCRIPT



## DJ AMBUSH

This is Art Unbound, the official podcast for the Portland Art Museum and Northwest Film Center. My name is DJ Ambush and I'm the Operations and Content Manager at 96.7 The Numberz FM, a community-based radio station here in Portland, with the focus on representing Black culture and music. Back in the fall of 2019, we partnered up with the Portland Art Museum for their exhibition, Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal..., we set up live broadcast in the galleries and knew right away this was a solid partnership. When the pandemic hit last March, the Numberz and the Museum applied for a grant together from the Regional Arts and Culture Council. And thanks to the funding provided by that grant, we were able to work together again, pooling our resources. This partnership became even stronger in the summer of 2020 after the world took to the streets in response to the death of George Floyd, which raised awareness of many other deaths of innocent Black people at the hands of the police. These protests put Portland on the front page of newspapers around the world due to the heightened response by law enforcement officials. But as we know, the news doesn't tell the full story. As you're about to hear on this episode, Portland rose up in many different ways, and we have the opportunity to speak with one of the street artists who started it all, Emma Berger. As always, relevant links can be found in this episode's description, as well as at [PortlandArtMuseum.org/podcast](http://PortlandArtMuseum.org/podcast), where you can also find a full episode transcript. And now here's our very own Marceau Michel, aka DJ Passports, interviewing Portland artists, Emma Berger.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Hello, and welcome to the Portland Art Museum. This is a very special program that we have here hosted actually in the Museum like even in a COVID kind of world, the Museum is open just so you know. And we have a really special guest with us here: local artist, local creative, local resister, local protester, local feminist, local, local everything. We all local everything here. Emma Berger, thank you so much for being here and for being willing to have this conversation and talk about art, life, love. What else- what did we talk about pre getting on camera?

## EMMA BERGER

Yoga, mostly.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Yoga. We did talk about yoga and you're like I don't do yoga, I wrestle and I'm like, I got sisters. I don't wrestle. I don't wrestle.

## EMMA BERGER

I got brothers, you got to learn to wrestle.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

And you got to learn to wrestle. Like, someone tried to wrestle me yesterday, but that's an entirely different story.

## EMMA BERGER

That's for off-camera.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

That is- that might be for off-camera or it might be for like, I feel like there's always these points that you really help people grow. And I'm about to go off on this complete tangent about just like humanness...

## EMMA BERGER

do it

## MARCEAU MICHEL

...and things being human. It's like, I've been watching these, like TV shows lately, and more and more like there's depictions of homosexuality, right? And just like queerness and like seeing people's reaction to it. And in my head. I'm just like, it's just human. Like, like, people get all like, oh, they're doing it - they're putting on this agenda and I'm like, Nope, it's just- it's been going on as long as humans have been humans humaning.

## EMMA BERGER

There's an aspect to it of whatever you grew up with, I think and then learning a new- I grew up in Berkeley, everyone was gay. We had one of our friends. She turned into a girl sophomore year of high school, and no one batted an eye.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Yeah, I mean, and I think it's one of those things that just it's really affected by your community. But I think that when it like, I think sometimes we forget, like, Oh, it's just humans, right? Because there's there's wild things that will allow ourselves to watch- we'll allow ourselves to watch violence towards women, or allow ourselves to watch people be blown up and killed. And then we're like, wait two men? No, it's human. It's just humans being human.

## EMMA BERGER

They can't kiss. Oh no!

## MARCEAU MICHEL

It's like, it's like literally, it's like you're watching someone eat, you know, shellfish. You're like, I'm allergic. No, I can't watch that. It's- what does this got to do with you? Like, like, so. That's my little tangent.

## EMMA BERGER

That's my new favorite. I'm gonna just start using that analogy. When people are like, against anything gay. I'll just be like yeah, so you know, you're allergic to strawberries. You can't watch someone eat a strawberry? I'm so sorry.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

It ain't got nothing to do with you. You don't have to eat a strawberry. You're not going to have an allergic reaction.

## EMMA BERGER

Go buy blueberries! Become a blackberry person! You'll be okay. Leave the strawberries for people who like strawberries.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

On a scale of one to homophobia, how about none? Like that's all. So. So. I want to talk about just a bit of your journey with being here in Portland and you of course, you said you come from Berkeley. So maybe give us a little bit of background about okay, so you were- where you're from, and like what brought you to Portland and then I want to talk about like what your journey has been like in Portland especially recently.

### EMMA BERGER

So I grew up in Berkeley, California area, specifically Albany, but no one knows Albany. So I always say Berkeley. Albany's so tiny. It doesn't count.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

She's right over yonder

### EMMA BERGER

My whole family's artists, actually. And we all do different things, like no one ever learns-

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Different disciplines.

### EMMA BERGER

Different- Yeah. My dad is a draftsman, my mom's a sculptor, my brother's a potter. I kind of am a jack of all trades doing a little bit of everything. So yeah, I just grew up in like a big arts household. I also have an older brother, but he's the only one who doesn't do art. So, it's ok.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

He's the normie.

### EMMA BERGER

He's the normal one but yeah, grew up-

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Is he a banker, like something?

### EMMA BERGER

He just works in tech. He's a tech human, you know how they are.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

I know how they are.

### EMMA BERGER

Yeah. And just I grew up. And so when I wanted to go to art school, it was just that was a no brainer. I think if I'd wanted to be like an accountant or lawyer, like my parents would have been, like, kind of worried. But I was like, artist! And they were like Great! Join the family business. And so went out to art school out in Brooklyn, a school called Pratt. And then I ended up moving to LA for a couple years kind of landing in the film industry, actually. And then I actually came up here because of LAIKA, I work in their- I work as a fabricator there when you know, I have a job. And yeah, and that's kind of what brought me here. And I bounced around a lot and actually lived in Europe for a time and kind of going everywhere. And this was the first place that- I got here, and I was like, Oh, this feels like home. It's kind of like Berkeley and Brooklyn had a baby and then someone kinda like put a forest in it.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Right. I see. I'm originally from New York City and lived in Brooklyn before moving here. So like, there was something that reminded me of a bit of that here, but it was not nearly-

### EMMA BERGER

It's very neighborhoody and it's very kind of there's just, there's just so much happening. And it's almost so much happening that you almost feel like nothing's happening. Because you're not- until you like pick something and

then you like pick one topic. You're like, I'm gonna look at salsa dancing, or like, oh my god, there's like 25 different places to go salsa dancing. It's kind of like that here where there's like, so much community and it's so thick with local everything.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

It's a city of many micro communities. Just like if you have a very specific interest in a very specific kind of thing...

**EMMA BERGER**

Yeah.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

...you can find a community in Portland that really rallies for it.

**EMMA BERGER**

It's been- well it's not even- to use that point, I'd actually never really done that much street art or anything in Portland because I just- I was working in a movie studio, just day job that takes up a lot of time. And so it actually wasn't until recently that I kind of met this whole other community of artists that I didn't really even know- I didn't even know existed, like I didn't know that they were all there and that they were all working on things and building things and kind of like making stuff happen. And so it wasn't till a couple months ago that I kind of became accidentally part of that community.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

So prior to a couple of months ago, you hadn't done any street art.

**EMMA BERGER**

No. I did a couple murals. I had done a mural inside of Ben & Esther's bagel shop, just a bunch of bagels. And I'd done some murals down in Albany. And...

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

Ben & Esther's is like right by my house.

**EMMA BERGER**

What? Really?

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

Ben & Esther's is like around the corner from my house.

**EMMA BERGER**

We live next to each other.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

Do we really? Where do you live?

**EMMA BERGER**

\*CENSORED\* Where do you live?

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

\*CENSORED\*

**EMMA BERGER**

We have to talk after this. I'm not gonna tell them.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

This just got weird.

**EMMA BERGER**

We're neighbors!

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

I'm worried. I'm worried.

**EMMA BERGER**

Oh, yeah. The owner and I got into a fight-

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

She might know about the person who tried to wrestle me yesterday. Damn it.

**EMMA BERGER**

Very possible. The guy who owns Ben & Esther's, we got into a fight about matzoh-ball soup. And lo and behold, I ended up painting his whole shop.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

That is so awesome. Portland is really a small town. Like -

**EMMA BERGER**

This is what I'm talking about. I met him today.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

Right! Literally, and like we live on the same block.

**EMMA BERGER**

Yeah. This is gonna get- Yeah

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

This is gonna get weird.

**EMMA BERGER**

I can give you a ride home later.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

We'll talk! So then life comes into- so you know, we get into like, the last few months of what it's been like, or just 2020.

**EMMA BERGER**

Hmmm. What a decade this has been.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

What a, like, what a worst case scenario. This is, like, you know, like, I'm a- I'm the kind of person that plays out, like, what's the worst thing that could happen? Well, this, this, this, this, and then there's 2020. Right? Which, for me is a mixed bag. I would say 2020 was a mixed bag of like god awful things and like incredibly important things. Right? And

so, you know, being here in Portland, I don't know how many days we're into this resistance that's happening, because I don't like to call it a protest. I like to call it a resistance.

### EMMA BERGER

I keep calling it in my head like a civil war.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Right. Right. And we're definitely waging something against the other side. And so with the protesting that was happening nationally, like that happened everywhere in the country for about like a week or two. And then there was Portland.

### EMMA BERGER

Yeah.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

And who was like, nah we're gonna go hard on the paint for a while, like, we got plenty of seconds on the shot clock. We gonna keep going. And so how was that for you? How did you come into just the protest space? What was your introduction to it, to protest?

### EMMA BERGER

I remember when the first big night of protesting happened. It was like- maybe not the first big night, it already started happening and you know, we kind of- COVID was in the midst and we have asthmatic household members. So we were staying quite safe. And I remember one of my best friends, he actually he went down there. And he didn't really tell anyone that he was going, he just went to go see what was happening. And he came back the next day and was like, Whoa, and it turns out, my number was the one on his arm. And I was like, tell me that you're going to these things. Put my number on your arm. You know, because he could get arrested or something. And so I just have- I remember just hearing all about it and all these things. And then it was Monday morning, I woke up and it was when that was- Sunday night was when all the looting I think happened. That was a big night of smashing windows and all the things or maybe that was Saturday, I get them all mixed up.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

If I'm recalling, I feel like that was a Thursday to a Friday. It was like, the like the whole thing started on a Thursday into a Friday. By the weekend, that first weekend. Like I think the looting had already happened. And I remember the first time that I went to any kind of thing was that Sunday.

### EMMA BERGER

Yeah, cuz it was I remember Sunday, I think was when they started putting up the board. That's when shop, like, shops were like, we gotta like, you know, and I remember hearing like we were reading, our whole household was like, we were watching all the live streams. We were reading all the news. We were reading about just shopkeepers in other states who were saying no, like, if what you have to do is break my window, do it because like, this is the time and this is like they're like, yeah, if my store has to burn down and make this right, like, do it. And we're just, we're all very moved. We're all just kind of reading all these things. And so Monday morning, I woke up and I just was all in a mood. And I was like I- you know, we've been reading all these things. It's every live stream, like our day was filled with the news. And I was like, I just have to go and like see it for myself. Because you can only read so much news. And I drove down there. And I remember, I drove on- parked on the east side and actually physically walked across the street because like, I don't know what's there. Like what if something happens and I can't leave? And I just walked for like 20 minutes and it was silent. Like there was like No, no one really out. It was all these like cleaning crews and like no one was really out. And I remember just walking and then slowly the boards started appearing and I started walking more and more into downtown. The boards were just more and more boards. And it was just- like I'm getting chills right now. It's also kinda cold, but \*LAUGHS\* but it was just- it was eerie. And it was just this awe inspiring thing of just every store, I got

to like a point by the Apple Store. And just everything was boards, everything was boards, and everything was silent. And it was like having like 11 in the morning. And just everything was quiet and everything was boards. And I just it was freaky. It was just like, Whoa, like, this is something.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

You go there and you feel like you've walked into a war zone. You're just like...

**EMMA BERGER**

yeah, it felt...

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

...everything is like shut and boarded. And you're just like, what city am I in? Like, where am I?

**EMMA BERGER**

It was- Yeah, it was just and I was you know, and so I called up my, my best friend from college. She was living- she lives out in Ohio. And she's a Black woman and I called her up and I was just like, this is insane. What's it like where you are? And she was like, it's the same. And she was super active in the protests where she lives. And I remember walking by the Apple Store and all I could think, I was like, they painted it black. I was like, that's just a canvas. I was like- and I was talking to her, I was like I want to go paint it. She was like go paint it. I was like, Okay, I'm gonna go home and get some paint.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

So this was day one?

**EMMA BERGER**

This was day one.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

So day one, you go out. And you see a black...

**EMMA BERGER**

Yeah, giant black board.

**MARCEAU MICHEL**

...board and you're like, Oh, I know what to do here.

**EMMA BERGER**

It was the only thing- I think everyone has their skill sets. And the thing that kind of got it for me was um, my best friend out there. She was saying like in the protest for them, like they were super active and everyone had very different roles. And she was just telling me all about like the different roles that everyone has. And like, she found that she was better in triage. She was like better at helping people who had been gassed or like our friend, he's like this just giant person and he would link arms with people and pull them away from police and like I forget what the name of it's called so they're all these different jobs. And I kept thinking like everyone has a different things that they're good at. Some people are doing all the social media, some people are writing. There were all these amazing spoken word pieces and some of the protests, the peaceful ones on the side, and like I just was like, I'm just gonna go paint something it just like was a gut feeling where I was like, I'm just gonna go put something on the wall and yeah, I just grabbed, I like actually forgot a ladder because I didn't think I'd be able to- I thought I'd get chased away. So I like brought like only the stuff that I didn't mind losing. And my favorite brush, which I was like, I can just hold on to that and sprint. And yeah, and I just kind of started.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

So tell us about that first piece that you did.

## EMMA BERGER

So the first piece was George Floyd and it's of the main photo that was circulating and the big reason for me for like- I was trying to think of like, what to paint and you know, the whole lot cuz I drove home got paints and came back to that whole time I'm like, What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do? And it wasn't until like I really got there that I was like I'm gonna do his face. And for anyone who draws or paints, it takes a long time. Like, I'm a pretty quick artist, but it still takes about two hours for me to paint someone's face. That whole time, you're looking at their face. You're looking very detailed at their face...

## MARCEAU MICHEL

That's intense

## EMMA BERGER

...You're looking at the crease of their eye, you're looking at like the shape of their lips, or looking at the shadow under their cheek, you're spending so much time paying attention to someone's face. And if you think about, like, if someone were to sit and stare at you for two hours, that's a very, like, intimate moment.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Well, it requires a lot of vulnerability. I mean, as a, as an artist, the level of vulnerability that it takes to just stare at something and try to see everything that it is.

## EMMA BERGER

Yeah.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

And then to the best of your abilities depict that. Right?

## EMMA BERGER

And it's- Yeah, and I think, yeah, for me, I kind of just wanted to have a moment with him and to paint him as I saw him. And just to kind of- Yeah, like, just to look at him for a long time. Because if you just you just become so familiar with their face, and so familiar with the lines and the things that you might not have paid attention to before. And I actually have pretty bad facial recognition, which I've learned recently. But so to really pay attention to someone, it's kind of a- it's an interesting thing, it's an interesting practice. And so, for me, he kind of was the obvious. Yeah. And then I ended up writing the words and stuff because I- that was more- people were kind of Actually, it was a pretty positive reaction. And so I kind of just- I was feeling like, full of adrenaline, so I kind of just kept going.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

That's awesome. Yeah, that's, I mean, you've got to follow the wave of energy. So after doing that piece, and the reaction to that piece, how did that lead you to doing more?

## EMMA BERGER

So that one I- The funny thing was, so I finished that piece. And I was so full of adrenaline. And so some friends of mine, we're gonna go to one of the protests that was supposed to march into downtown. And so I just raced back to back across the river, parked my car and joined them. And then we happened to walk right by there, I had no idea that like, the spot that I had picked was the central location. Like, there wasn't any like, this is gonna get a lot of views like type of spot, it was just a big black wall. And so I ended up walking right by it and I was like, Oh, my God, they walked right by it like, this is amazing. And some graffiti artists had already kind of started tagging the left side of it. And I was like, Oh, this is wow. Like, if this is where people are hanging out, this is really cool. And I was like, well, then I'll go put

up another face. Like, I'll go paint someone else then. Because there's an unspoken rule with graffiti artists or street artists or tigers, or muralists, as far as I'm aware, where you just you don't cover someone else's work. If you cover their work, it gives them the opportunity to cover your work. So they had kind of covered like the left side. I was like, okay, the right side's still free. I'll come back tomorrow. And so I showed up the next day, a little bit more confident that I wasn't going to get chased off. I think I actually brought a ladder that time. And I painted Breonna's face. And I believe that was the same day I painted Ahmaud's. Yeah, and the other words on there, and then it kind of just grew and it just kind of be- once their faces were up, it was kind of catching on and people people were liking it and a lot of people just kind of wanted to help and I was like okay, so I- you know, with the help of like a lot of the actually the movie industry that I'm a part of, a lot of us were unemployed, so I just kind of called upon everyone. You know, I'm going to go out and buy a couple hundred dollars worth of paint, anyone who wants to help paint the background, show up and we can all paint it. And we got people off the street and I was by that time already getting calls from people in Portland to paint specific people, So Kendra James, Deonte J. Keller. Jason Washington's whole family texted me at once and then later apologized. I got like woke up by like 12 different people. Same message. So they- his family came down and it just kind of, I think that's when it started to snowball and that's when everyone- the community realized that it was okay for them to put their mark on the wall, as well.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Right.

### EMMA BERGER

Because I think before that it had been- people were kind of worried about whose face it is, if they're, you know, if they're infringing on an artist, if they're, you know, what's allowed what's not? And that same day, that was when Louis Vuitton painted their boards black. I think they realized that if they painted their boards, then they'd get painted as well. And then it kind of took off, like and then I you know, I'd go back to paint the smaller faces up above, but it just I showed up like a couple days later, and it was so covered. And there was so much like someone had left chalk, and like there was I'd left some paint and there was just, it just took a life of its own. And I honestly like, I feel like I can't claim credit for it anymore. Like, I can't like be like, That's mine. I'm like, No, that's like a lot of people's work.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Yeah. That's lot of people.

### EMMA BERGER

There's a great artist named SkeeZ, who and his apprentice Atloux, who painted the George Floyd face on the other side. That got a lot of lovely attention. They're amazing artists as well. But yeah, it just kind of took off. And so many people just started adding to it and adding to the areas around it. And now there's like full square blocks of artwork.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

I mean, the it's, it's interesting, in Portland in general, that the way- the ways that we show up to this resistance, right, is really different than other cities. I know other cities have art and, you know, have murals. But I think Portland specifically, I mean, around the different kinds of protests that we've had, the ones that are for kids, I've seen art therapy protests, you know, I you know, it's like there's, you know, the drum circles and there's, you know, Portland has been a place that has really redefined in a way what it looks like to have a protest and for it to sustainably continue, right? And for and for it to exist for 100 and something days now.

### EMMA BERGER

It's such a community. I think Portland takes things personally. Like as a city, we take things personally. And I think that, especially when the feds were there, I remember I went on one of the nights, Saturday night, and there were- it was one of the largest, like, there were thousands of people.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

I think I was there that night, too.

## EMMA BERGER

I was- I could run into people I knew like, you know, it's a small it's a small community, but

## MARCEAU MICHEL

We probably were there because we live on my block, so we were probably there at the same time.

## EMMA BERGER

We could have carpoled. I just remember standing there and watching- they were putting fireworks off against the building.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Yes. And they Oh, yes, I was Yes.

## EMMA BERGER

Yeah. And the crazy thing, I just I remember standing there, standing on like one of the streets kind of in the middle. And I could just- I was just amazed at the way everyone who was there had a job. Everyone there was doing their job and no one was saying, Look at me, I'm doing my job. Look at me, I'm doing my job. Isn't my job so great? I'm like contributing. Look at me helping with this resistance. Everyone is just like quietly and furiously doing their job. And whether that's like just being a body in the crowd, whether it's being a medic, whether it's like the dozens of people walking around handing out things, whether it's people giving out food, or the people who like, you know, when one group gets gassed, another group goes in, you know, it's just like, it just became this, like, seamless group of individuals who all are like quietly fighting loudly together. It's like, no one's trying to like, be like, I'm the best protester look at me and my hockey stick. Everyone is working together. And it was just, it was awe inspiring for me, at least. I was just like, this is amazing. This is a community of people that like when people tell you to sit down every you know, 400 other people stand up.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I mean, it really is a such a community here. And I think that white community here in Portland really has, like, many really have understood the importance of showing up consistently and, and, and sticking with it. So you got started doing these murals. And that's, of course, led to other opportunities to create, how do you see yourself wanting to continue to use your art when it comes to protesting?

## EMMA BERGER

It's been kind of figuring it out. A lot of it's kind of just contributing when, you know, it's like, if it's a Black Lives Matter thing, or just, you know, waive costs, just figure it out, you know? Finding paint donations has actually been pretty easy for it. So just kind of getting that going. And people reach out to like help design posters or like, you know, help with kind of like, all these things, but a big part of it, for me has actually been because I am a white artist and I kind of helped open the door of just people being able to put art on walls, I just kind of became a go to to find the other artists. Like it just I started there's just like, all of a sudden it was a network and I could, people have asked, hey, do you you know, we'd like like, I get a lot of Instagram messages like, hey, there's this wall and I could pass them along to somebody, or someone being like, hey, like I'm looking for, you know, a piece of this until I was actually doing a lot less artwork myself and more passing work on to other people.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Delegating, yeah.

### EMMA BERGER

And like helping out like, said there was some artists who just hadn't really done murals before and I grew up kind of- I didn't grow up doing street art, but I grew up doing murals like my mother's a muralist. Like I grew up doing it and so I could help with advice or get donations or kind of pass along materials and kind of like, I accidentally became that like channel of people who know people and being able to kind of give work to the to the other artists and kind of let their voices rise up and like give them the floor more than, cause I don't really need it. I want them to like, raise themselves up and make more art. And there's been like so many amazing artists who've just like blossomed, and a lot of the like, I feel like I'm ranting in the wrong way. There's so many artists who I met, who never painted in daylight. That was like a big thing. Like I'd never there all these artists that I met who had never painted in daylight, they'd always been these street artists that kind of were in the dark. And all of a sudden, they were out in the light and out painting during the day and being paid for it. And like, kind of watching that grow has been really rewarding and watching that community kind of- like slipping into that community and then like helping it out. Because I'm not a huge part of that community. I just kind of have, like, gotten to know it recently. And so I think that that's been a big way that I've helped is just kind of helping to pass along work. But I don't really know. I'm rambling now. Help.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Oh, no . You're fine. I'm like, I'm just like, oh, and this is a piece of your art as well.

### EMMA BERGER

This is a piece of my art that usually sits in my studio that I look at before I make something new.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Really? How old is this piece or how long have you had this piece?

### EMMA BERGER

It's not very old. It's- I actually only started using color in my work like this year. I usually work in black and white.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Wow.

### EMMA BERGER

Yeah.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Very cool.

### EMMA BERGER

This was like, Yeah, they like I'm gonna paint with colors.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

So where would you like to take your art? Like going forward from here? Like what like What kinds of things do you want to create?

### EMMA BERGER

I want to create giant things.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

That's great.

## EMMA BERGER

So over the last couple of months, I've been working with different artists of many different backgrounds and ethnicities and all different like, just we've been collaborating and kind of creating bigger pieces together. And that's been really nice to just, like, see all of that and I kind of just want to, like, get more of that art to happen because this great artist named Jamaali Roberts he said it best and I'm going to try and sloppily reiterate him. But public art becomes- it's free art for people. People get to walk through the streets and like see it and get inspired by it and so art that really represents them and their own people and kind of like helps just kind of ground the community and ground the fact that like, No, you are here. This is your space. This is your art. This is your like, beautiful thing that you get to look at, kind of just creating that and really involving people of so many different backgrounds to kind of help make that a standing of does that we're all in it together and just yeah, and so kind of I really want to create giant things. I want to paint giant walls. I had- there's like the stairwell below the Burnside Bridge that I just wanted to paint like a giant Louis Armstrong.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Right on.

## EMMA BERGER

It's the right shape. And I was like, oh, get that trumpet in there be so good. Yeah, I just I just think that public art, it becomes free art for people, and it creates the space that becomes much more your own space and, and more for the community and everyone kind of works together on it. And I think also having all these people of different backgrounds, different, you know, lifestyles and ethnicities, different religions, different everything and kind of bringing that all together into a big swirl. And just getting all of those different walks of life all up on the walls. I would love to just be a muralist for life. It's kind of hard to just snap and make that a career, but that's what I'd like to do.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Well, you're speaking it into existence, like you're here like you're saying it's

## EMMA BERGER

I'm like hey, hire me.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

You're saying it, it's happening, like you're getting those opportunities to create art and it's outdoors, and it's like, people see the art that you created driving down the street and walking in the neighborhood, whether there's protesters there or not and...

## EMMA BERGER

Yeah. it's there's I think my favorite, one of my favorite pieces that are created since the protests began is actually the Neil Kelly building on the corner of Alberta and Albina. And they call- they wanted a Black Lives Matter like mural. So we painted- we decided just these two beautiful portraits of a Black woman and a Black man and just all of these florals. And that one, I think for- I don't know, for me that was my favorite of just putting- I just a lot of like the community there came up while I was painting it. I was like, This is awesome.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Yeah?

## EMMA BERGER

And I was a fit. It is awesome, right? Yeah, it gets cool. I think just kind of having more of the- those visuals and just kind of making- making the world around you a beautiful place and making it a place that's meant for you and and that's, you know, you kind of as a community grow it and yeah, I don't know, makes it homey.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Now, how has that been sharing space with other artists, with other Black artists? Like how has that been for you sharing space with all of them?

## EMMA BERGER

Um, I think I have discovered why most artists work alone because we're very interesting collaborators. There is a small group that Jamaali Roberts, who I mentioned before, and also this guy named Travis Fields that we all realize we work very, very well together. And we kind of started a mini collective of, we just we would do a lot of projects together. But it's been amazing to kind of see the different styles. There's also this artist named Rozzell Mendez, I'm gonna, I hope that's the right last name- that we worked on a project up in St. John's, and he has this very interesting like, line work. And it's kind of, I think that for working with all the various artists, it hasn't really, like there's never been a difference of like, you know what background they're in. It's kind of everyone's egos at bay. And so it's like, whether I'm working I work with, I think I've worked with Jamaali actually the most, and he's a Black artist. And, yeah, there's never been any kind of, I think like the most that happened was, I prefer actually to paint portraits of people of color. I, this is one of the few white people I painted. But I just find the colors and, and just various skin tones just much more fun and much more expressive and much more colorful, but I feel very, I don't ever want to put anyone in traditional garb. I feel like that's- so I just make everyone naked. I'm like, y'all can be naked. Because and I talked to him. And he's like that, that makes sense. He's like, because you can paint someone of color, and that can represent them, but you don't want to take their culture. And I think that that's a fine line that I've kind of as a white artist painting people of color have, I never want to betray that line. I want to...

## MARCEAU MICHEL

And that's a- that kind of brings me to what I wanted, what I wanted to ask is that as a white artist that's very active in this Black Lives Matter movement, and creating a lot of art that is in support of that, that is indicative of that, that is expressive of that like riding that line of not appropriating or not, like imposing too much of like that. So it's interesting that you said that you you know you were painting people naked? Or you know, because it's like, because that's the thing is that like, putting clothes onto people is putting culture onto someone. Right?

## EMMA BERGER

And I yeah, and I feel like it's not my place to do that. And it's kind of the same, like I'm a, I'm a Jew, I'm a Jewish woman. And, you know, if a bunch of Catholics went and painted a Jewish person, I don't know how, you know, they like made them like really Jewish. I'm like, Okay, what are you doing?

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Like, what do you know about that, like, yeah.

## EMMA BERGER

And so you know, and I don't know offhand how I feel. But I feel like that's, it's not my place to put that. And so that's been the line, the fine line of like, where I, where I don't want to, I don't want to be misread as doing something the wrong way. And I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings or be, you know, offensive in that. So it's kind of- that's been more difficult. And so the-

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Have you had challenges or what like, what like, what have you had negative feedback? Or have you had things that like challenges that have arisen in doing this?

## EMMA BERGER

I think I mostly just have had people question, if you're a white woman, why are you painting people of color?

## MARCEAU MICHEL

And that came from Black people? From white people? From everyone?

## EMMA BERGER

It actually comes more from white people.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

White people be like that, though.

## EMMA BERGER

It comes much more from white people. I actually specifically to the painting the portraits that I just said before, on the Alberta and Albina streets, there is like this wonderful Black woman who come up. She was just like, this is amazing. And I was like, and I said, I'm sorry if it's weird. I'm a white woman painting a Black person. She was like, nah, you got to do it if I can't. I was like, okay, you know, I like that. But I think that that's definitely- I get more backlash, I think, from the white community who feel that it's inappropriate that I'm doing that more than I have from anyone of color. But that being said, I'm still on that fine line. I don't want you know, don't be like, well, it's only the white people who have a problem like no, no, it's, I still want to like keep it in check.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

So even beyond art, beyond your art, like what do you want to see happen with white community here in Portland? What are ways that you think white community can grow and white community can shift or things that- like, what are the things that you've learned? I mean, you've had a bird's eye view of this movement, as a creator and also as a protester, right? And like, what are things that you would love to see more of and see less of?

## EMMA BERGER

I think a lot of it comes down to paying attention. There's this conversation I had with a Black woman up in... She was in the St. John's area. And she was telling me it was a phone conversation. But she was telling me how the protests and the acting like, for the shootings and all this, it's it's a big standing moment. And she's like, but it's a fad. And I'm worried that when the fad dies, nothing will actually change. She's like, because the Yeah, these things are terrible, they need to stop. But my day to day life hasn't changed. She's like, I'm invisible. And I think that you know, and she's like, as a Black woman, I'm invisible. And I with the problems that I have in my life, I'm invisible to so many people. And I think that there's a lot of aspects that I don't have any, like, immediate, like, this is the solution to that. But I think paying attention to that. And Portland, Oregon is a really white place and recognizing that it is a very, very, it's a very, very white place.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Ain't that the damn truth.

## EMMA BERGER

Uh huh.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

But that doesn't have to be a bad thing. Right? It is what it is, right?

## EMMA BERGER

It is what it is. But I think understanding and paying attention to that and paying attention to where that becomes the problem. And after that, you know, we're in this resistance, but making the resistance- paying attention to these aspects of life that actually start- that matter, the smaller aspects of life that like, you know, there's like these grand scheme things that need to change ASAP. They should have changed years ago, you know, we're working on it.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

They should have never existed in the first place. That part. But, there's the issue that we're facing in this country that you'd be like, we hadn't fixed this 40 years ago? Like y'all are still...

### EMMA BERGER

Yeah.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

You know, we're still having some of the same struggles. So I'm totally into like what you mean.

### EMMA BERGER

No, no, no, no, you're exactly right. I think that that's, that's the bit that like, as people we need to, like, recognize also the smaller bits, the bits that, you know, trickle down and affect a huge community of people that are invisible.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Right.

### EMMA BERGER

And I think that it's that invisible community that needs to be seen and needs to be listened to, and taken care of, and, like, helped out and helped out in a way that's not demeaning. And like, given the chance to, you know, live a good life and not, not made invisible. And I think that that's kind of- The ways that that works and the ways that that you know, to help that. I am not equipped with those answers. But I think that, yeah, that's- That conversation, I think struck me really hard. I've just kind of being like, yeah, I've talked cuz she was just like, yeah, this is these protests are amazing. Thank God everything's happening, you know, this is for me and my people, and, but like, what happens actually at the end of it, and she's like, what are all the small life bits that are going to change? And I was like, that is a thought.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Yeah, I mean, I think that's the, I think that part can get a bit like diluted. And a bit like conflated, right, is like...

### EMMA BERGER

What does conflated mean?

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Conflated means that like, it just gets confused with other stuff, or it gets almost like, like, washed over, right, or, or just like, you know, just the wires get crossed. Right. Or, you know, and so, I think that when, when we're looking at- when we're thinking of this term that like Black Lives Matter, that it's not just about the police.

### EMMA BERGER

Yeah

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Right? It's not just about like, the police shouldn't have the right to kill Black people easily, as they currently do. But it's really about something much bigger involving Black Lives, right?

### EMMA BERGER

It's it's actually Ahmaud Arbery's the one portrait that I painted on the Apple mural that I think he was the only one not killed by police. And it's actually a personal thing for me of just how two white guys can go grab a gun and go drive down the street and shoot someone jogging and how that is just...

## MARCEAU MICHEL

And then they went home afterwards. And they had dinner. They were chilling for a couple of months.

## EMMA BERGER

It boggles my mind how that is the thought process, how that is deemed as even slightly acceptable for some people. And I just, it just doesn't make, like I remember when that happened. And I was just stunned. And I was like, I don't- I don't understand.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

I think that this year for a lot of white people was really like, oh, like, it was a wake up call for a lot of white people, just things that they saw just like wait two men could just go down and like shoot a guy who's jogging, and then go home and chill? Or you know, and like, this police officer can like, keep their knee on someone's neck who's clearly dying. And and it's like, or they can just like go do a drive by shooting at this girl's home, mistakenly, and so I think that for a lot of white community here in Portland like that, like people are just like, this is wild like this is- And you know, unfortunately, for Black people, none of this is shocking, like, none of this is like, there's a thought that I had that like for Black people, it's almost like when these things happen, we can't take them too personally. Because if we take it too personally, like, we'll go crazy. So it's like we, there's a certain level of like, emotional detachment that we have to have with it, there's a certain amount of emotional detachment that a Black person has to have at all times while living in a society. And not like truly taking all of the things personal, right? Because there's so many things that are that are just built up against us from jump, right. And so you try not to even like you're like, Oh, another person was killed. Okay, how do I mourn this, but not take it too personally because if I take it too, personally, then I'm gonna go burn something. Right? I'm gonna go crazy. Right, like, and so I think that that's been I think that for white community, they're getting a taste of that...

## EMMA BERGER

Yeah.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

...in terms of like, and I think, I think also white community, especially in Portland and those who have really engaged with this in a meaningful way, it brings you closer to your humanity. Which- and I think that for a long time whiteness is on the other spectrum of humanity. It's not a part, it's a thing. It's not really a part of humanity. It's just a thing, right? It's a thing that someone made up and called a thing but whiteness isn't that isn't a part of humanity. It's just like, a thing, right? Oh, this means something, but it really doesn't. Because we really are all just human beings. Right?

## EMMA BERGER

Goes back to the very first point you made.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

See? See how I'll bring it back? See how I'll bring it back? But it really comes back to this concept of humanity. And like everyone getting closer to it at a you know, and it's interesting, because like, for me when I was participating in the protests and going out with on the east side and doing the marches into all the neighborhoods and speaking at those marches and leading the chants and like, really seeing a lot of white community atoning, right? Like feeling the pain and, and feeling- and like crying their eyes out and just really, like, really atoning for their parents, for their grandparents for for because that's the thing is that, like, all of the things that have happened has happened as a part of a society that we all participate in. Right? Like, so it's on all of us. It's on. Like, that's the thing is that, like, if I see a woman being raped down the street, it's on me, too. Like, whoever's doing that is the worst. And they should not be doing that if I see some a child being attacked, if I see, like, we've all been a part of a society that has valued men over women, has valued white lives over Black lives, has valued white lives over everyone's life.

## EMMA BERGER

Has valued straight over gay.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

And the thing about is a lot of times we think that if it's not personally me, I'm not doing that. But it's not personally me. So really doesn't have anything to do with me. And I think Portland and this movement is like people realizing like, if I don't do anything, that means that like, I'm super chill with this.

## EMMA BERGER

Yeah.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

The funniest thing to me is like, it's like, oh, yeah, there's racism. Racism is like an airborne pathogen that no one actually really has personally, but we agree that it's everywhere. Like, it's like white people are like oh, no, I'm not racist. But society is racist, but not me specifically, like, like, no, I couldn't be it just in the air, but it's like, there's so many things that we all do, that are complicit with a society that, you know, and it's like, there's so many things that we don't even notice.

## EMMA BERGER

Well, there's a lot of things we don't notice, but things that we're not really told in a way that like, is public, like sentencing, like sentencing is messed up. And, you know, and just people's lives are like, you know, just tossed upside down because of sentencing. Because of the way that the judicial system kind of has that upper hand and the way the judicial system is run by a bunch of old white guys.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Right.

## EMMA BERGER

And, you know, and that is like, you know, that's another one like, you know, it's a big part, but it's like one of the small parts of like, the day to day life, like if you get caught with something versus like a white guy gets caught with something. It just, it's just become, it's just different. And that's messed up. I mean, like, that's one of the small things that like, we don't see that on a day to day life. Like we don't see that like on the streets.

## MARCEAU MICHEL

Right, right. It's like the underlying thing is, is I think that what a lot of white community is learning right now is like the actual power of their voices. Right? Is that like, oh, like If I speak up, this has weight to it, that there's a tension that's brought to this thing. And I think in that way, Portland is a great prototype for a lot of the world, a lot of the city is that it really needs this, this change that needs to happen in American society is not with Black people, like, you don't have to convince Black people that our lives are worth something. Right? Or that you shouldn't be killing us in the street. Like, I don't need a bunch of Black people like marching like, Look, we should, we're trying to tell you we should be doing it's like, we need white community to show up. Because like this systemic thing has existed in the deepest parts of whiteness.

## EMMA BERGER

Well, we also just need to adjust our main mode of thinking and like a lot of that my best friend that I talked about earlier, she also works in film. And we have this huge discussion about media and the media that we grew up with, and the TV shows and the movies that we get used to and the way that people are portrayed in that and the way that you start to see characters form and the people you root for and like, you know, the people you know, are going to die at some point during the film, or the people that like the evil character, you know, you start to learn the world. And a lot of people don't travel, a lot of people are like, you know, kind of, they don't go that far. And you start to learn the

world through these movies and these TV shows. And if they're like they need to step up also and start kind of telling more stories and more like stories that aren't like, you know, if there's a Black person, they're not living in the ghetto, they have a house, they have a frickin family, they have a car, they have a job, like everything is normal. And just telling those stories and normalizing the fact that they're human, just like you and and i think that's...

### MARCEAU MICHEL

It comes back to humanity.

### EMMA BERGER

...it comes back to humanity. And I think just normalizing- You know, just bringing it- bringing the the media and making it more apparent and making, you know, the main characters, not always like, you know, a white guy.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Right. And I think I think that brings us back to art, right? And like, how art depicts life, right. And for so long, a lot of art we've seen were depictions from white artists, right? Like, from the film industry to high fine art, too, you know, it's like, and so having more space to show more of a variety of humanity and realize that like, it's not about like, Oh, just Black Lives Matter. It's about like, Black lives are human.

### EMMA BERGER

They're human lives.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

They're human just like everyone else, that they are human like that they have the same highs and lows, they have the same aspirations and depressions, like-

### EMMA BERGER

They have the same emotions, they have the same goals. They're the same. They're they're human, they're their lives. And I think there's a quote that I grew up with that art is not to recreate reality, but to create a reality of the same intensity.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Yeah.

### EMMA BERGER

And I think it's like art kind of shows people like what's possible, like, It depicts this big thing of just like, I'm going to put, you know, I can't, I don't see it in front of me, because you have to create something you don't see in front of you. So I'm going to create something new.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

You can project something. You can amplify something.

### EMMA BERGER

I'm going to create something that you can look at and look towards and see. And I think art plays a big role in that of, yeah, just kind of having something that people can look up to and look at and look forward to. And like it's very physical.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Aspire to like, I thank you for doing that with your art. Thank you for using your skills to amplify this movement. And to amplify other Black artists in the process. It really is like, we're all really in this together. And we need to work all together, and we need to, like, collaborate and create together. And that's how we reenvision the future. That's how we

create a future that we actually want to live in.

### EMMA BERGER

And I think it's a way that we get more voices and that and I think like, like I, I kind of take personally very small responsibility for the artwork downtown. I think I just opened the door. I think I just kind of let people know they weren't going to get dragged away for putting something on the wall. And then I took a big step back. Because when I look at that wall now I see so many other people's words and pieces and artwork. And I think that, yeah, it's just it's many voices we need it's many different voices. And I think that we need different voices from different backgrounds at different colors. So I'll be like, Hey, did you know that I'm human too?

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Right. Right.

### EMMA BERGER

By the way, I'm a human.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

I know historically, you guys didn't count me as human, but we're not there. We're not there anymore, so like, let's let's like, accept that everyone's human. Right? And that everyone's life has value. Our whole society improves when we accept that fact.

### EMMA BERGER

And our whole society improves when we experience everyone's culture. So when we get everyone's aspects of their life, and like everyone gets to amplify it and everyone gets stronger and like, the food will be so much better and like, everybody. Yeah, you know, and I think that it counts. Yeah.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Yeah. That's awesome. Emma, thank you so much for sitting and chatting in the Portland Art Museum.

### EMMA BERGER

Thanks for letting me ramble.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

No. I'm a rambler. Like, what do I start? I started with a whole tangent about humanity at the beginning of this like, but thank you so much. What are ways that if someone wants to find you, look you up. Like what are ways that people can do that?

### EMMA BERGER

Instagram @flatrabbiststudio or flatrabbiststudio.com. Those are usually the best ways to find me.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

Yeah. Thank you for sitting with me in the Portland Art Museum and for continuing to create art that actually really helps to change culture. Thanks again.

### EMMA BERGER

Thanks, man.

### MARCEAU MICHEL

It was great to meet you.

## **EMMA BERGER**

I'm all giddy.

## **MARCEAU MICHEL**

Thank you.

## **DJ AMBUSH**

Thank you for listening to Art Unbound. I'd like to thank Emma Berger for sitting down with Marceau Michel and telling your story. We hope that you will all follow Emma's lead and use your talents to help promote change in our community.