

Local Voices S3 E2 - Jilchristina Vest

Air Date: 4.26.21

Length: 32:55

Music: AWEN - Your Voice

Produced by: Supervillain

SPEAKERS

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<https://www.wbppmural.com>

TRANSCRIPT

Francesca 00:03

Inspired by the art that emerged during the uprising for black lives in 2020 Jilchristina Vest is making history by organizing the first ever public art installation honoring the women of the Black Panther Party and the #SayHerName movement. Vest was disturbed and saddened by George Floyd's death, she quickly noticed that there were no protests for Breonna Taylor, a 26 year old Black American woman who was fatally shot while sleeping in her bed in Louisville, Kentucky. Acutely aware of how often black women and girls are overlooked in the socio-political discourses, Vest wanted to change this narrative by centering the leadership of black women who have always been the bedrock of black liberation movements. Jilchristina assembled an amazing team of artists and activists and the #SayHerName Mural was born, right where it belongs in West Oakland, on the corner of Dr. Huey Newton way. Join me and Jilchristina, as she explains the meaningful process of purchasing her first home, her roots and community and the powerful impact of the mural that now wraps her home. So I just want to start by asking you why that house, you know, what is the story of how you, you and that house came to be a couple?

Jilchristina 01:33

Yeah, and that's exactly what we are friend, you know, I don't have any children. This house is my baby. But the story of the house is in the early 90s, I was still in college at San Francisco State. I was working at a nonprofit in downtown Oakland called OCCUR. It was a beautiful nonprofit that was all about making sure that urban renewal was not at the deficit of black people in Oakland, my task there was to create these neighborhood profiles. And what that meant was I had to go into all the different neighborhoods or communities of Oakland like the San Antonio district and the Fruitvale district. And for each of those communities, neighborhoods, I would take photographs, I would do the research. And then I would also interview people in the community.

How long had they lived there, blah, blah, blah, when I got to West Oakland, that's where the story began. Because I then started learning all of this history about West Oakland that I didn't know. Like, I knew that the Black Panther Party had been birthed in Oakland. But this project allowed me to create so much more meaning around it. And West Oakland wasn't just where the Black Panther Party was, like, the first Sammy church had a huge history here and the Seventh Street corridor on the speakeasies and Esther's Orbit Room. It was this beautiful, bright, vibrant community filled with, you know, doctors and lawyers and teachers and schools and everything, and, and later on the Black Panther Party, but before the Black Panther Party, I was what I didn't know about. And when this community of West Oakland was essentially destroyed, and created and turned into a ghetto. And that happened using eminent domain where entire communities were destroyed to build the Nimitz freeway, and another entire community was destroyed to build the West Oakland, BART. And then another one was destroyed to build the West Oakland main post office. What what they did was they completely severed off this entire community on all sides, and basically turned it into a food desert, a ghetto, everything, there was nothing here that it was like a decade at a time, like if you can imagine one decade, this was built, the next decade this was built. So after 30 years, the task was complete. And it's what's happened across the country time and time again, when anytime you segregate black folks, and tell them you're not allowed to be here, and the black folks go someplace else and then become very successful on their own, thriving in a segregated environment. Every single time the machine of white supremacy comes in and destroys it. And you can talk to folks here in West Oakland that were here at the time, where their family's home was bulldozed, just completely bulldoze down beautiful Victorians blocks and blocks and blocks of them.

Francesca 04:48

Yeah, no, heartbreaking. It's heartbreaking.

Jilchristina 04:51

It is heartbreaking and I this is the information that I was finding when I worked at at OCCUR and so because of that and because of the Black Panther Party, I was like, in that moment, I was like, I'm gonna buy a house and my show Colin, I said, I want to live on those at that hallowed ground, I want to be in one of those Victorians. I want my feet to be on the ground where that history is. And at the time, you know, I'm still in college, I was trying to get all my girlfriend's like, we don't need to buy houses in West Oakland, we're going to create an entire compound. And we're going to open our own schools, and we're going to raise our kids and I had this whole thing of kind of like reinventing the Panther Party and opening our own school, everybody was just like, yeah, Jil, whatever, you're going to buy one of those dilapidated houses, you're crazy. And I was like, I'm doing it. I don't care. So a couple of years later, what after I'd graduated, it was 1998. I finally said, Okay, I need to start looking for this house. And I grew up in a Victorian in Chicago. I was born in 1966, which is the birth year of the Panther Party. Chicago is the place where the largest chapter of the Black Panther Party was, we have my sisters, and I have memories of benefiting from the free breakfast program. So I had this vision of the house that I wanted. And my realtor who is now my dear friend, Stephanie Parrot and lives down the street from me, she was showing me all these houses, it took two years to find this house, and I'm working three different jobs. I was in graduate school at the time. And every time she had a house, I would come look in bed, I'm like, Nope, it's not it, nope, it's not it. And she was like, What is going on? Jil? I'm showing you all these houses and I said, I'll know it.

I'll know it when I find it. So I refused to compromise. And my friend was just like, I don't know what you're doing. But this is ridiculous. But okay. And I said, it's okay Stephanie, the house is there. I know it's there. We just have to find it. She's looking for me. I'm looking for her. We're going to find each other. And two years later, she called me one day, she said, Jil, I'm standing in your house, and I shall be right there. I left work. Got here came inside. Immediately I knew it was my house. But the comedy friend is if you saw the house, the tears would not have been of joy. I mean, there were squatters living in here. There was rodents everywhere rats and raccoons living in here. It was it was the you know half the house was falling from the '89 earthquake, the roof was caved in, it was raining inside the house. Puddles of water everywhere.

Francesca 07:38

That's the one that's the one for me.

Jilchristina 07:40

I was like, that's the one that I want. It was nuts. Meanwhile, I don't have any money. I don't have any credit. I don't have anything. But I'm like, I'm buying this house. And that again, you know, brings us back to this whole project of my community helped me buy this house. One, because my community believed in me. And they knew once I set my mind to something that I was going to get it done, and that they were going to help me no matter what. So my community helped me raise all of the money for the downpayment to close escrow. I'm talking like, I'll give you \$100 I'll lend you \$2000 I've got 25 You know, I've got five on it, whatever it like creates this community pride and this connection. And, and, and not ownership in the nefarious way, but in the prideful way. Like I helped create that. Right. I it exists because of me. And I got the keys on Valentine's Day, 2000. So going back to me in this house as a couple we just celebrated our 21st anniversary.

Francesca 08:48

Oh, that's so romantic. That's so you are a couple that's the most precise story I've ever heard. It's so powerful, I do believe in love at first sight. Even the realtor knew also walking it dilapidated, raining through the ceiling and was like, this is the house.

Jilchristina 09:10

You saw you know, when people see the bones of something, and it I've seen this beautiful house from day one. And it's actually come up again in conjunction with the mural in that there's these you know, 30 foot black women on my house now. And people are just like, you know, is it really hard getting used to like, do you get just kind of like, look up in shock. And I was like, No, I've they've been here with me from the beginning. And now everybody else can see them. I've always been able to see them.

Francesca 09:43

There's something I mean, it feels like it's always been there. I mean, they did the mural. I mean, I know it's just as completed or it's just about to be completed. But the space there that it feels like it's always belonged.

Jilchristina 09:55

It does. It's really amazing. And yeah, the first phase is done. We're still fundraising to complete it, and then seal it, basically. Um, but it is I don't know, it's a bizarre feeling because it Rachel Wolfe Goldsmith, such an amazing artist and did such a beautiful job taking what was in my brain and putting it on the house. And I'm like, yeah, that's exactly what I was seeing in my brain, but that it's also merged in a way that it like melts into the sky.

Francesca 10:32

Yeah, it always belongs there. It just makes sense. It's just a natural organic fit there.

Jilchristina 10:39

Absolutely, absolutely.

Francesca 10:41

Did you get pushback when you were like, I'm painting a mural?

Jilchristina 10:44

No, all of my friends were like, of course you are Jil? You know, my one friend, Tara was just like, this is your destiny. This is your house's destiny. This is what you've been talking about from the beginning, is the Black Panther Party, and the Say Her Name movement. Oh, my God, this makes so much sense Jil. I was like, yeah.

Francesca 11:06

Yeah, you know, we always talk about our work is sort of these puzzle pieces floating in the ether. And how do we like get the puzzle put together, you know, and this piece didn't work out and you find this piece, I feel like this is that journey.

Jilchristina 11:19

The emotion of sadness and grief and rage last summer was overwhelming for me. And it was taking me to a dark place. And I was terrified that I wasn't going to come back from it to I was just going to be depressed forever or angry forever, or sad forever. I don't know how to put it in words. I needed something else to focus on. And I needed that something to be based in joy, because that joy was was the biggest counterpart that I could come up with. Because Am I still angry? Absolutely. But I can speak about it with you in this moment and not cry. Because I've I figured out how to create some kind of balance in my brain and in my heart, and in my community.

Francesca 12:10

So important than because you lead by example. I mean, you've set this beautiful model where then others can feel that joy, others can see the mural, have participated in the mural, have had an outlet that they didn't have otherwise. I mean, I think that's what it is, is finding an outlet through art of how do you know that anger? How do you channel like that pain, that deep, hopelessness.

Jilchristina 12:32

Right. And a lot of people you know, were channeling it through all the beautiful murals in downtown Oakland, which was also part of the birth of this mural was these amazing murals. And they were, you know, there was a revolving door of murals, they would get painted over and a new one would come and this one would come and all of these things, and they were just amazing. But it was block after block after block of dead black bodies. So these artists, were absolutely channeling their rage and their adoration and their love of black people through these murals. But it was all a memorial to everything that had been done to us, that can't be the only thing that we're looking at as black people. And even more importantly, it can't be what everybody else is always looking at when it comes to black people. I don't want black people to be known as the ones that get killed by the police. We're so much more than that. But we're so regulated to these positions of oppression all the time. And all that does to us in our psyches is keep reminding us we're the ones that are killed by the police we're the ones that were slaves we're the ones that are oppressed. And those things are true. But we're also freedom fighters we're also amazing, brilliant geniuses. We're also hyper talented, and and thrive under the most insane conditions. That's also who we are. Right? And we have to remind ourselves of that. And that's where the joy comes from, you know, remind myself that I descend from greatness. I want a mural that reminds us of who we are.

Fran 14:21

I know I mean, the work of the Black Panthers is like biblical feed the hungry, you clothe the naked you. I mean, it's just unbelievable. The way the media, the way the government, the CIA, you know, the way they're portrayed as these violent murders.

Jilchristina 14:36

These people think the Black Panthers are terrorists, you know, and that's what was so important about this mural is changing the narrative of who the Black Panthers are, literally who they were in that they weren't all men. They were 70% women. Two thirds of the Panthers were women at the height of their membership and having babies and raising children, you know, and as you've probably heard Erica say, as many people has said, and, you know, brothers in the Panther Party have said there would have been no Black Panther Party without the women. So I've said that, you know, the main goal of this mural is for black women and black girls, to come to this mural and look at these women, and have their shoulders go back and have their spine straighten, and have them say, Yeah, I come from that, that's me, and have that pride. If it's just for five minutes, it can last a lifetime. You know, when you see yourself reflected.

Francesca 15:41

It's the most empowering thing in the world, I mean, the elders set a blueprint of how to view yourself, how you see your future, you see strong, intelligent, confident women. There I am, yes, that's given to me, that is a game changer. I was gonna ask, What have been some of the biggest challenges? Are you getting pushback from anyone and too I mean, have you ever doubted this project?

Jilchristina 16:07

I never doubted the importance of the project, or the beauty of the project, I never doubted what it was that was in my heart, or what I was saying, in my mind. The most difficult part of this process has been my negative self talk. There were other difficulties of misogyny and homophobia and hateration. And trying to include people into the process and make it a collaborative event. And that blowing up in my face, but ending up with the exact right person that was supposed to do the mural. And the exact right team that everybody started is going to be here in the end. And that was real clear from the very beginning. And that does, that doesn't matter. I'm still here, the house is still here, and the mural is here. That's all that matters.

Francesca 16:58

Which is perfect. And then how does Rachel fit in? So then you have the muralist on top of that.

Jilchristina 17:04

So I started the project that was really important to me from the very beginning, that I wanted to have a black male lead as the artist, it was very important to me that black men played a role in uplifting black women, and played a role in the visibility of black women, because they have played a role in our invisibility. Right. So if you're going to be a part of the solution, this was one of those opportunities. So the first person I chose created the initial palette of color and the initial design based on multiple conversations that we had. And that initial design that he created, those initial sketches is basically what's on the house, but more fleshed out. And after a couple of months working with him, I realized that he was in over his head. It was a project that he didn't have the experience to execute, and wasn't able to say that. And so I tapped him out. And I just said, I don't want you to fail. And I don't want this project to fail. And I'm tapping you out so that we can keep moving.

Francesca 18:14

You know, and I have to ask though, I mean, it's interesting, too, that you wanted a male, because I would be concerned about the male gaze. You know, the idea of having these strong, powerful, beautiful, amazing women painted by a man. I mean, it's just an interesting because I hear what you're saying that invisibility and having men support men.

Jilchristina 18:33

Yeah, there's intention. And then there's reality, right? Because what I was intending turns out wasn't possible. Oh, because there was an issue with the male gaze of, you know, well, why did you paint them with makeup on? They don't have makeup on these photographs? And why did you paint them light skinned? They're not light skinned? And why did you narrow their noses and thin their lips? And why does their hair look like that? So now that's very real, Fran. It was it was this constant thing of just like, but you're, you're reproducing existing photographs. So why does your drawing not look like the photograph? It was gross. It was gross. So I moved on to and I chose another male that I thought, you know, had history with the Panther Party had history with West Oakland, turned out to be just a misogynistic, homophobic, horrible person that, you know, the, you know, several days into it of just silencing me and disregarding what I was saying and shushing me. And it was so ironic. And it was one of those things where there's times I've had the same like, but but this is my house. But this is this is this is my project, but I've hired you to do what I want this, this isn't your wall. This isn't your mural.

This wasn't your idea. This isn't your vision, but his misogyny was so deeply rooted. And after touching the house for three days, I stopped the project entirely. The last straw was when he said he wasn't going to put all of the names on the house. And I was speechless. The entire purpose of this mural is for people to walk up to it and speak these women's names. This came after him refusing to use Panther blue as the base of the mural. The third strike was him refusing to put all the names. I brought in the elders, I brought in some Panther women, I brought in some mediators, because now I'm just like, I'm about to terminate the second male, I don't want this to be about me. Let's get somebody else in and the other women came in there, we had three separate meetings. And they were just like, no, Jil, after the third meeting, the main mediator person that I brought in was just like, and that was after, you know, his son put his finger up to her in the zoom to shush her. This is an elder, and a 20 something year old kid, that put his finger up to a black woman's face. I'm telling you, the level of disrespect that the two of these people brought was really foul. But it was very clear that anything we asked this brother to do, he refused to do. He was just going to put his mural on my house. And it had nothing to do with me. So then he was fired. And he took \$6,000, the first artists had Rachel Wolfe on his team. So that's when I first met her. And also at that time, I had many people in my life were just like, But Jil, why do you have a black man as the lead like you should a black woman should be paying this. I was like, there's a method to my madness. I don't live in a world where just only black women are. I live in a world with all these people. And if we're going to attain liberation, we have to do it together. And we can't, you know, but it's the same thing that was coming out of the rebellions of 2020 was, for the first time because of Trump. That was the other thing. We had Trump, we had COVID, we had Breonna, we had George. I mean, it was just, it was a lot. It was a lot. And for the first time, in many of these movements, there were entire protests and entire cities, whereas 90%, white people shutting down bridges for Black Lives Matter. And nothing is going to change until that happens. Because if it's only the oppressed, that are constantly crying about being oppressed, and the oppressor just keeps looking at you. Quit your caterwauling. That's all you do is complain about being oppressed. What are you talking about? It's not until the oppressor or people that are benefiting from your oppression. start realizing Oh, I actually do see there's an injustice here. You know what, now I'm on your side, let me speak out against this. That's when things are going to change. And it's the same thing when it comes to misogyny and and sexism and chauvinism. As long as it's just us women saying equal pay needs to happen, and I should be able to walk alone at night without fear of being raped, and you know, I shouldn't have to worry about what I dress like or if I drink too much in order to protect the sanctity of my body. Until men are saying those things. It doesn't matter how many times we say them. So that was the method of my madness behind wanting this to be a collaborative event. Could I have made it all black women from the beginning? Absolutely. Absolutely. So Rachel was somebody who was on the group who was on the team from the beginning. And even then, I reached out to her. I sidebarred with her and I was like, this is Jil, this is the homeowner, you know, I'm getting really worried about the ability of the bandwidth and did it on you know, is this something that you could possibly take over? And she was Oh, no, it's okay. It's okay. We're gonna be fine. First artist gets tapped out, second artist gets brought in. She's on that team as well. And, you know, also is saying she's like, why is this taking so long and what is he talking about? It's going to take four months to paint the mural. And what is ihe talking about? \$50,000? What all of these things, which is what I was saying, you know, and I reached out to her again, when things were going south with the second person, and I said, Can you please take this over? Can you please become the lead artist, when it was really going south, apparently, other people in her community, were texting her saying, Rachel, I

really think you're the person that's supposed to be taking this mural is like his nose diving, you need to get in there, you need to duh duh duh duh. And finally, she was just like, clearly, I'm the person that's supposed to be doing this mural. And this is the comedy is that her partner when she was hemming and I, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know, her partner is the one who said, but babe, they were just gonna have you paint the entire thing anyway, you're the only person with this skill. They were going to get all the accolades. But you were going to do all the work. Listen to the irony of that when you think about all of these Black Panther women who was getting the accolades versus who was doing the work. You know, all of these layers that we go through, she was always going to be the person that painted these women. So she took over as the lead artist in December. So we started the process in June, we switch to a second artist in September, fired that artist in December, and she came on immediately as the lead. And it was her that said, you know what, let's just leave 2020 behind. I actually can't think of anything better than opening up 2021 with the blessing of these black women and the community. And I said perfect.

Francesca 26:52

Wow. And she just was on the right page and understood. I mean, it's friends network. Really.

Jilchristina 26:58

Yeah. And that male gaze was real, that male gaze was real. And when I talked to the Panther women like Erica Huggins and M. Gayle "Assali" Dixon, both of them were just like, there can't be the white gaze, and there can't be the male gaze on these women. So it's not about them being voluptuous, and buxom. It's not about them being light skinned and narrowed features is that about them being sexualized or anything, it's like a fierce, powerful, dark skinned woman with a full afro is the sexiest woman you're ever gonna see. She did just such a beautiful job and such an amazing job. And we had many conversations going back and forth of you know, I was very adamant about it being monochromatic. And I wanted it to be Panther blue, black and white, and maybe a slate gray. And making the most thing that pops was be the chocolate brown skin.

Francesca 27:55

Because I really want to make sure we talk about Sandra Bland, when you started talking about putting Sandra Bland on the back of your house, I started to cry. I mean, she just beautiful, powerful person. And like Breonna Taylor, it was just like forgotten, you know, I mean, no one did anything for her and brilliant beloved pillar of society.

Jilchristina 28:16

So Sandra Bland, like, you know, has all these amazing podcasts and has all these amazing wishes and beliefs and wants for the poor and oppressed and black people. And I've watched those podcasts as well. And one of the quotes stood out to me and I watched it over and over again. And that's the quote that's going to be on the back of the house. And it is as you know, Fran, she starts all of her talks with "Hello, my beautiful kings and queens." She says in one of them "know that somebody loves you, know that somebody cares for you, and believe that you can go out there and do great things." That's gonna be on the back of the house and it faces the elementary school so they can see it from the playground. It's going to be giant letters. And it's not only what

kids need to see, but it's what I need to see every day. And I need to be reminded of that every day, let's not memorialize or constantly memorialize what's being done to us. Can we please honor what we do? What we do when we're alive the greatness that we create when we're alive? I had the honor to speak to her sister, but what I said to her sister was I feel like myself that Sandra Bland born in a different era would have been a Black Panther. And before I finished the sentence her sister was like, absolutely. Absolutely. I feel that about myself. I feel that about Sandra Bland, and I feel like it's very poignant and fitting for them to share the house together is that their message was the same. The mural is also about the permanence of blackness. And that black people are so often and easily displaced constantly, you know, this house, I'm working on it becoming an historic landmark so that nobody can ever touch it. Nobody can ever paint over these women, that there's a permanence to us in this country, and in this community and in Oakland. And the other aspect of it that has become the new tagline of the mural is you cannot approach this house without looking up to black women. And that is this unintended and beautiful and powerful side effect of this mural is, you come and you physically have to look up to black women. And that's so powerful to me and so necessary and so important.

Francesca 31:09

"Hello, my beautiful kings and queens. Somebody cares about you, somebody loves you, and somebody knows you can do great things." - Sandra Bland.

Thank you to the #SayHerName mural project. This quote is now the backdrop of a schoolyard in West Oakland, empowering and inspiring and ensuring those children grow up knowing their value. Jilchristina Vest has turned her home into a living monument. The outside radiates empowerment and love while acknowledging the struggle and paying tribute to those we've lost too soon. The inside is still evolving, but will be an educational space celebrating history and building strength and community to move forward. The impact of this mural spans generations, centering the resiliency, compassion, kindness, strength of black women.

Thank you to Jilchristina Vest, Ericka Huggins, Taylor, Nicole Price, Rachel Wolfe Goldsmith and the Wolfepack and the West Oakland community who all worked so hard to bring this important mural to life. Please join us next week when we sit down with Fredrika Newton and the Dr. Huey Newton Foundation. We will learn more about their process and philosophies as they work tirelessly to update false narratives, break stereotypes and build empathy through public art.

I'm Francesca D'Alessio, and I oversee public programs initiatives at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and I'm your host for this series. Please visit our website, deyoung.famsf.org/programs/localvoices to find transcripts for this episode and to be sure to subscribe to the museum's email newsletters to learn all about what's going on here at the de Young.