

Seattle's MOHAI reopens with a new exhibit on democracy; take a peek | The Seattle Times

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1 of 3 | This protest guitar, made by Seattle artist Scott MacIntire, is part of the "Stand Up Seattle" exhibit's "Resistance" display. (Courtesy of MOHAI)

By Gemma Alexander
Special to The Seattle Times

shocking than the last. “But nothing happens by itself out of the blue. You unpack it a little bit and you see a lot of history there that explains how we got to this moment, and hopefully gives us clues on how to move forward in a positive way,” said Leonard Garfield, executive director of the Museum of History & Industry (MOHAI). That’s what the museum’s next exhibit, “Stand Up Seattle: The Democracy Project,” aims to do.

The new exhibit at MOHAI, which reopened April 2 for the first time since the pandemic began, explores the power of the democratic process by placing recent events like the presidential election and Black Lives Matter protests in a local, historical context.

Before the pandemic, MOHAI was working with the Smithsonian to host a national traveling exhibit about American democracy. They planned to enhance that exhibit with local materials highlighting the democratic process in our region. The touring exhibit was canceled due to the pandemic. But with politics and protests dominating headlines, MOHAI continued to develop the Seattle-centered exhibit.

Including artifacts, images, personal stories and interactive

specific political issues or stances, the MOHAI exhibit is focused on the participatory nature of democratic systems.

“We hope that they [visitors] will feel better informed and more committed to being a part of our democracy. Because one of the lessons of this is to remind us, whether we’re young people or whether we’re people who’ve participated for a long time, that democracy is only as strong as we collectively make it,” said Garfield.

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In that spirit, MOHAI worked to make the exhibit as inclusive as possible.

“We worked with a lot of different community members to make sure that it wasn’t MOHAI telling the story of



Case studies of local communities impacted by systemic racism are displayed in MOHAI's "Stand Up Seattle: The Democracy Project" exhibit. (Courtesy of MOHAI)

In addition to local Indigenous groups and leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement, MOHAI consulted its own Youth Advisors group, which helped develop a section of the exhibit on youth engagement that shows how local teens have made an impact.

“They know that they can’t vote, but they also know that they can participate in democracy,” said Garfield. Thanks in part to the contributions of young people, Garfield says that while the exhibit is designed for upper elementary school students through adults, even children as young as 6 can learn something from it.

“I think civic education or civic literacy really begins at a very young age, younger than you’d think. Young people absorb the notion that it’s a participatory system. They understand that the people in their lives are a part of that system,” said Garfield.

All visitors ages 3 and older must wear a mask and follow social-distancing guidelines. ADVERTISING Guests can request a stylus for use with interactive elements. Bag and coat check services are suspended but lockers are available. The cafe remains closed, but prepackaged snacks can be purchased at the gift shop.

“That authentic experience with the real stuff is what makes museums so special, and that’s what MOHAI offers in ‘Stand Up Seattle,’ ” said Garfield. However, for now, weekly programs and special events will continue to be held virtually. And families who don’t want to visit in person can explore MOHAI’s extensive online resources, including an interactive digital companion experience to the “Stand Up” exhibit and an online collection of many artifacts included in the exhibit.

