

ARTS

' I would not be who I am without Phoenix': How this artist maintains her hometown ties



Sofia Krusmark
Arizona Republic

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It was a Friday afternoon in Lichtenberg, Germany.

Phoenix native and artist Antoinette Cauley was used to going on long drives and listening to music in Phoenix, her hometown. She couldn't do that in Germany.

So she hopped on a train without plans to go anywhere in particular.

"Blackbird" by the Beatles was up next on her playlist. All at once a series of lyrics pierced Cauley's soul:

"Blackbird singing in the dead of night. Take these broken wings and learn to fly. All your life, You were only waiting for this moment to arise."

Tears slowly rolled down her face as she heard lyrics ring so true to her story.

The moment on the train birthed Cauley's next body of work, "Blackbird Fly," which will be on display at GateWay Community College from April 8 through mid July. The exhibition features 14 paintings of Black girls, teens and women from Phoenix.

Cauley came back from Berlin, where she's resided as an artist in residence, to celebrate these women, Cauley said.

"I felt like, 'wow, I have been waiting for this moment all my life,'" Cauley said about her experience in Germany. "I was just this little Black girl from south Phoenix who statistically shouldn't have been there but I was determined to get there, and I know that there will be so many others like me who can because I did. I wish I could tell Paul McCartney."

Cauley's journey as an artist began when she was a child

Cauley's artistic journey started back when she was just 4 years old.

In the summers, her aunt Julie Ann would give Cauley and her cousins' daily art projects. Her father, a woodworker, made model cars out of little wooden sets with Cauley. Evenings were spent with her mom, coloring in bed, crayons and pencils buried in the sheets.

It made the grey days easier, Cauley, who moved multiple times throughout her childhood, said. Her mom was diagnosed with cancer when she was 10. High medical bills meant evictions for Cauley and her family. Art became her distraction.

"It was my medicine," Cauley said. "There became this innate sense of 'I can't give up because there's so many people who are meant to have what I was meant to give.'"

Minutes spent making art turned into hours of drawing. By the time Cauley was 14, she'd reached a collegiate level as a visual artist.

"I got to art class in high school and my art teacher said, 'wow I have nothing to offer you,'" Cauley said, laughing.

At 19, Cauley began studying fashion design at Mesa Community College. Yet she turned to painting and after two years, she moved on from school. It was time for her to spend time developing her art style, she says.

Years later, she found it.

'Onward and Upward': Phoenix Center for the Arts picks former west Valley leader as new CEO

Cauley calls her style 'Hood Whimsical'

Cauley calls it "Hood Whimsical" — with a twinkle in her eye and a smile on her face.

"It's this combination of Black American hood culture," Cauley said. "It's like Black feminism, but there's also a touch of whimsy in it. What would whimsy look like in the hood? You know, it's bubblegum pink with toy guns and, like, some glitter on there. It's really cutesy, fun things in juxtaposition with very serious and real issues."

The style is cemented in each of Cauley's 14 paintings in "Blackbird Fly."

Before leaving for Germany, Cauley collected more than 500 photographs of Black girls, teens and women across the Valley.

She knew some of them, some she didn't. One girl Cauley painted is from an art class she taught at Phoenix Center for the Arts. Another girl, Rhyan Johnson, is a 17-year-old rising artist in the Valley. Cauley will have one of Johnson's paintings on display at her exhibition.

“I think there's a whole generation of young Black girls who are going to come up after me and I'll be able to give them this blueprint,” Cauley said. “I look at my career as a blueprint, and I feel like it's my duty to do that specifically for my community.”

Moving to Germany during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement

Three years into her professional artistic career, Cauley began applying for artist residencies across the country and across the globe.

“The Black Community doesn't really have access to the art industry,” Cauley said. “It's been a big mission of mine to expose them to that. Part of that is showing them that there are resources outside of America. Next up on my resume checklist was a residency.”

Cauley was accepted to an artist's residency right around the time that George Floyd was killed by a police officer in Minneapolis. It was this event that made Cauley realize it was time to leave, she said.

“It was overwhelming,” Cauley said. “There came to me this sense of, ‘I have to get out of this country. This country was never meant for us and it'll never be for us.’”

On Jan. 8, 2021, Cauley boarded her flight to Berlin. At the time, she didn't know that she would ultimately leave her residency to create her own artistic journey, this time, in Germany.

Nine months into her residency, Cauley left the program and opened up her own studio with two other women from the United States and Mexico in the heart of Berlin.

What was the hardest part of her artistic career — creating opportunities for herself while knowing no one in a foreign country — became the most rewarding period, Cauley said.

It was the cobblestone streets, the graffitied walls, the art shops found at almost every corner and the glowing night skies in Berlin that carried her through an entire year in the

“It became the most magical city in the world to me,” Cauley says.

There in Berlin, Cauley developed her art works into paintings that featured not just people’s faces, but also their entire bodies. She also began painting more detailed backgrounds. Now, cities like Paris, Berlin and Phoenix are included in the background of her paintings.

At the same time her body of work, “Blackbird Fly,” developed, GateWay Community College reached out to Cauley and offered to fly her back to Phoenix for an exhibition. The timing was perfect.

“Every piece is a moment of this Berlin journey for me,” Cauley says.

Why Cauley won’t stop coming back to Phoenix

Cauley will return to Berlin this summer. She’ll resume working in her studio space.

It’s become a place where she thrives as an artist, but it will never be home.

Phoenix holds that place in her heart.

'He's loved by Arizona': This new mural honors the life and work of Nick Oza

That’s exactly why she’ll keep coming home, to encourage, to motivate and to thank all her Phoenix “Blackbirds,” she said.

“Whether I’m showing art in a coffee shop or working for a commission for Beyoncé, I would not be who I am without Phoenix,” Cauley said. “I tell people all the time, ‘man, I’m really lucky to have Phoenix.’”

“It feels like they put me on their shoulders and carry me around,” she continued, as a few tears clouded her eyes. “My journey is the city's journey. It’s bigger than me, and so no matter what, I'm always gonna come home because I wouldn't be doing anything without the city.”

'Blackbird Fly' at GateWay Community College

Tickets for opening night are no longer available. Cauley will be giving a lecture at GateWay Community College at 6 p.m., April 13 in the Integrated Education Building. Guests must register to attend.

Cauley's work will be on display from April 8 through July 28 at the GateWay Community College Art Gallery, 108 N. 40th St., Phoenix. Hours are 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday-Thursday. There is no admission charge to see the exhibition. https://instagram.com/antoinettecauley?utm_medium=copy_link

Reach the reporter at sofia.krusmark@gannett.com. Follow her on Instagram @[sofia.krusmark](https://www.instagram.com/sofia.krusmark)