

Sidedoor: Season 11, Episode 17 – Writing on the Wall

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: Living in a city like DC, I ride my bike a lot. It's how I get to work, meet up with friends, get groceries, and I so often find myself riding through Thomas Circle. It's one of the many roundabouts originally laid out to confuse invading armies who might try to march through the nation's capital. And every time I ride around it, I pass two women.

Lizzie: Okay, so it's evening time. I'm biking through.

Lizzie: Always there. Always the same.

Lizzie: There's a woman facing to the right, a woman facing to the left.

Lizzie: They stand back to back. They look serious, determined. And I'm not the only one they're watching over. I asked a few people walking by what they noticed.

Man: Yeah. Both have got spears. Like, what I see, I see a Native American with traditional Native attire because you even see the jewelry on her arm, and the earrings and stuff.

Man: It makes me sort of think of, like, women warriors.

Man: And the right does look like some kind of Egyptian warrior, because they look at the attire on the chest. It's like a shield of some sort.

Woman: It's beautiful.

Woman: I love the colors.

Man: That woman on the left is definitely stressed about something. Look at the gray in her hair. [laughs] Well, it's true!

Lizzie: As you've probably guessed, these aren't real women. They're painted on the side of a

building, looking out over the circle from six stories up. They definitely give off a vibe, but there's no explanation for them, which means people can just make their own interpretations.

Lizzie: *What does it make you think of or make you feel, if anything?*

Man: *Um ...*

Woman: *I have no feeling at all.*

Lizzie: *No feeling at all?*

Woman: *No.*

Lizzie: *Okay.*

Woman: *It's just nice.*

Lizzie: *It's just nice.*

Woman: *Yeah.*

Man: *Strong, I guess, womanhood. I don't know.*

Man: *It's the amalgamation of all these cultures that makes the society beautiful, eh?*

Woman: *The picture?*

Lizzie: *Yeah.*

Man: *Power. No fear. Knowledge.*

Woman: *It creates a feeling of, like, strength. They really feel like they're standing guard, and they're there to protect and oversee and support. They're ready.*

Lizzie: *If I'm honest, I spent years riding by this mural seeing it without really seeing it. And*

I'm not alone in that.

Sojin Kim: *We're so, like, caught up in the things that are happening at street level that we don't necessarily always look up.*

Lizzie: Sojin Kim is curator for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center's "Sightlines: Chinatown and Beyond." She says as we make our way around the city, it's easy to take the visual landscape for granted, things like this mural. But once you notice it ...

Sojin Kim: *You're like, "Wait." And then, "What would it have taken to put that up there on those multiple stories?"*

Lizzie: Where did these women come from? Who are they? Why are they here, and who put them there?

Lizzie: The figures painted on this building are mythical—Amazonian types decked in silver and gold, holding spears at the ready. But the woman behind this mural, called "Guardians of the Four Directions," is oh, so real.

Sojin Kim: *She has literally like left expressions of her creativity and artistry and her own family upbringing in the area through her murals. Her work is just prolific, it's there in the landscape. It's an important part of the built environment of Washington, DC.*

Lizzie: This time on Sidedoor, we get outside the museum walls to learn more about an artform you'll likely find in any American city: murals. How did a celebrated DC muralist discover her love for public art? And how does that art both reflect and impact the character of a city? We'll explore after the break.

[knocking]

Cita Sadeli: Hi, Lizzie!

Lizzie: Hello!

Lizzie: A lot of people would pay extra money to live far away from train tracks.

Lizzie: Will you show me where you work?

Cita Sadeli: Okay.

Lizzie: But not Cita Sadeli. When she and her partner were deciding on a house in Northeast DC ...

Cita Sadeli: *It was between this house, and a much bigger one down the street, but this one has train tracks right in the backyard. They go right across.*

Lizzie: For Cita, the trains were a perk—once you get past the noise.

Cita Sadeli: *So you have to kind of get used to the house shaking a little bit, but it's worth it because the artwork is just amazing.*

Lizzie: See, train cars are prime real estate for graffiti artists. They're like traveling canvasses.

Cita Sadeli: *They're just rolling galleries of artwork that go by when you're, you know, waking up in the morning, you're on the toilet, and you're just looking out of the window and seeing this amazing, like, inspiration.*

Lizzie: *This is wild! I mean, most people say, "Oh, we went with the larger house farther from all the train noise." And you're like, "No, no. It was such a find! The smaller house, next to the train tracks."*

Lizzie: This is just one of many ways in which Cita Sadeli sees things that fade into the background for many of us. In fact, some of the turning points that have defined her life's trajectory were visuals that almost seemed to grab her against her will. We'll get to those soon.

Cita Sadeli: *So this space is kind of interesting because it's not like a one plane, right? It's in a stairwell.*

Lizzie: But right now, Cita is showing me early sketches of a mural she's working on, stretching left to right up a staircase. On the left, she's painted tea fields.

Cita Sadeli: *And it just puts you in that place, right? Like you kind of know, okay, tropics.*

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Lizzie: *Green, mountainous.*

Lizzie: That place specifically, is Java, Indonesia, where her mother was born.

Cita Sadeli: *And then superimposed in front of that is an old Polaroid.*

Lizzie: A black-and-white snapshot of a young girl in a crisp white shirt and dark braids, surrounded by family members.

Cita Sadeli: *So those are all ancestors in Java.*

Lizzie: Cita's mother is the inspiration for this mural—and for Cita herself. See, her mom moved from Java to the United States in her 20s on a Fulbright scholarship to study at the University of Indiana. She got married and had four children, then got divorced, and after finishing her graduate degree, moved with her four kids to Washington, DC.

Cita Sadeli: *There's a pair of cranes flying above her, sort of symbolizing migration, movement from one place to the next. And you see the Capitol Building in the background.*

Lizzie: In DC, her mom worked for the Library of Congress, and later became a celebrated broadcast journalist for Voice of America.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Sri Sadeli Kuhns: [speaking Javanese]]

Lizzie: She also taught Javanese diplomats, wrote freelance essays and served in the US Navy Reserves, all while supporting all four kids.

Cita Sadeli: *She always had this quote, "If you have the energy and the optimism, you can achieve anything." And she did.*

Lizzie: Cita was the youngest of the four. She grew up here in the DC area, far from the tea fields of Java. But Indonesian culture was still a big part of her childhood. Each week, she and her siblings would go with their mother to the Indonesian embassy, where her mother would practice gamelan music with other musicians.

Cita Sadeli: We kind of had the run of the place because it was in the evening when the embassy was closed. So we were going all up and down the stairs and into the offices and just being naughty little kids.

Lizzie: The embassy was a 50-room historic mansion built in 1903, and it became Cita's home away from home.

Cita Sadeli: Everything is like this carved, beautiful wood. There's a grand staircase, and these wonderful statues everywhere.

Lizzie: While her mother played music, Cita and her siblings would lie on the carpeted floor of the salon for hours, gazing up at the ornate ceiling and listening.

Cita Sadeli: We would just be, like, lulled by this beautiful, melodic music, just like clove cigarettes wafting through the air.

Lizzie: What you're hearing is actually Cita's mother's gamelan group.

Lizzie: Driving across the city every week to spend evenings at the embassy gave Cita a sense of both her own home and her ancestral home. But it's also how she made an important discovery.

Cita Sadeli: So driving up and down the same road, getting to and from your house, like, as a kid is like the most boring thing, so you notice anything that's different because all you're doing is staring out that window and just like, "Ugh, 20-minute drive."

Lizzie: One day, she was in the backseat of her mom's car, probably resting her head against the window the way you do when you're a kid with nothing to do but watch the same gas stations and stop lights go by, when—boom! Out of nowhere, something was different. The big empty wall next to the fast food place, it wasn't empty anymore.

Cita Sadeli: I don't remember the colors exactly, but I just remember not understanding really what it was because I was a kid.

Lizzie: There was writing on the wall, or something between writing and a picture—vibrant colors and shapes that seemed to pop right off the wall. It had attitude and character. It was like music for the eyes. It was graffiti.

Cita Sadeli: It resonated in a way that I didn't understand, but I knew I was super into it.

Lizzie: She started to notice more. Near her house, a mural showing a man on a porch with a woman behind him stopped her in her tracks.

Cita Sadeli: *I didn't know why. I was just really drawn to it. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Who did that? How did you do it? How long did it—you know, all of these questions that you have when you see a piece of artwork and you hadn't seen it go up. You don't know who did that, how it was created.*

Lizzie: *There is a mystery inherent with public art.*

Cita Sadeli: *It was a mystery, yeah.*

Lizzie: By this time, Cita was already drawing and sketching a lot—mostly copying Garfield comics and Pink Panther cartoons. But she was the youngest of four kids, which means she was tagging along with her older siblings. And the wider world of art started opening up to her: fashion and music. When she was 11 she discovered punk rock.

Cita Sadeli: *In the early eighties in DC, there were these punk rock shows, and they were all ages. So anyone can go. They were like literal kids. There was never alcohol served or anything like that. It was just about the music.*

Lizzie: DC was home to punk rock bands like Bad Brains, Minor Threat and Fugazi.

Cita Sadeli: *It was a culture that was very thoughtful, but also that raw energy of punk rock. So you got to be that teenager and, like, get crazy and let out all your angst, but still, like, learning about, like, veganism and meditation afterwards. And, you know, my friends were all, like, studying Chinese martial arts and restricting their sugar intake, and ...*

Lizzie: *Wow, you guys were progressive!*

Cita Sadeli: *Well, we were in DC, right? So we were thinking about systems and systems of power and, you know, bucking the system. It was just what punk rock is all about. There were constantly actions and protests and marches and things that we could get involved in.*

Lizzie: One day when Cita was supposed to be at middle school, she headed to an anti-nuclear protest, and she got all dressed up for the occasion.

Cita Sadeli: *I did what I could to make myself look cool with the safety pins and, you know,*

the Elmer's glue with water in my hair, making, like, a mohawk or, like, spikes. Wearing, like, one Chuck Taylor that was one color and the other one was like another color.

Lizzie: Like many protests, this one was right by the US Capitol, which was a problem for Cita, because ...

Cita Sadeli: *The march line was going right by my mom's work, and I started to get nervous. [laughs] Like, what if, you know, she sees me out the window or something?*

Lizzie: Cita's mom was pretty strict. She would not be pleased to discover Cita was out in the streets with glue in her hair instead of in algebra class.

Cita Sadeli: *So I went around the back.*

Lizzie: But at that very moment, her mother was leaving work. Out the back door.

Cita Sadeli: *And she saw me and she was like "Cita! Come here!"*

Lizzie: Cita took off running.

Cita Sadeli: *She just chased me down—I felt like it was on the—like, the little highways, like the 395, like, off ramp. Like, down by the major roadway.*

Lizzie: [laughs]

Cita Sadeli: *She's got her attaché case, and she's, like, running after me with her finger wagging and I'm just, like, freaking out. I'm like "Gah! The one thing I didn't want to have happen!"*

Lizzie: [laughs]

Cita Sadeli: *I mean, I don't think she had time to be proud that "Oh you're protesting nuclear arms. You know, wow that's really interesting, or noble, maybe." But she's just—I was supposed to be in school and that was not cool. So I got in trouble for that one.*

Lizzie: But it was actually at school where Cita discovered a key that would really unlock the world of public art for her. At the counselor's office one day, she noticed an anti-drug

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pamphlet laid out on the table.

Cita Sadeli: *It was a long, sort of skinny pamphlet.*

Lizzie: She picked it up. Opened it up. And inside ...

Cita Sadeli: *It hit me like a ton of bricks. It was like a cartoon kind of, but it was, like, letters at the same time. And at first it just looked like a cool collection of forms, but then looking at it, you could see it said something.*

Lizzie: It said ...

Cita Sadeli: *"Just Say No," in yellow. And then it has the outlines and the bubble that goes around it.*

Lizzie: The pamphlet is now in the exhibition curated by Sojin Kim.

Cita Sadeli: *It's like it's sort of exploding on the wall, or on the page of this pamphlet. I was just—I was hooked.*

Lizzie: Not on drugs. On this style of writing.

Cita Sadeli: *Wildstyle graffiti letters. These are the early graffiti letters.*

Lizzie: Energetic, interlocking letters and shapes, twisting and layering in a colorful labyrinth that's nearly impossible to read to the untrained eye. Cita took the pamphlet home, and just like she'd copied her favorite comics ...

Cita Sadeli: *I took those letter forms and I just went to town. I started just writing my name and, like, my friends' names and, like, all of these slogans. I didn't have a friend that did it. I didn't know anything. There was no internet back then, so I didn't—I couldn't connect with anyone else that was doing it and build from there. I just had this one little bible. So that's where it all kicked off for me.*

Lizzie: She got pretty good at wild style. She started airbrushing jean jackets for her friends.

Cita Sadeli: All the kids were like, "Oh, I want you to make me a, you know, a jacket set." You know, they'd give me the denim and I would spray paint their names and, like, where they're from on the back. So that was a really cool way to explore the culture.

Lizzie: Cita says most young people discover graffiti through hip hop culture, because graffiti is one of the five pillars of hip hop, along with MCing, DJing, breakdancing and knowledge. But she stumbled on graffiti on its own.

Cita Sadeli: It was out of context, but I saw it for what it was. As I started to hang out with other folks, I found my tribe. I found where people were painting, and it just took off from there.

Lizzie: She and her friends would gather with their sketchbooks, working on drawings, usually in someone's bedroom.

Cita Sadeli: So there'd be, like, a mom aspect, and there'd be some food smells and, like, some snacks.

Lizzie: A mom aspect. [laughs]

Cita Sadeli: You know, it wasn't like—we weren't old enough to have our own houses or anything. So there's always that, like, structure. There's like a little brother or sister that wanted to hang out.

Lizzie: They'd listen to music and sketch and just lose time together.

Cita Sadeli: You could do that for hours. Like, time just, like, stretched on and nobody felt it. You're just in the zone. It was so exciting.

Lizzie: Little by little, she was uncovering the hidden world of public writing. Learning the rules and hierarchies. Because contrary to what I, and I think a lot of people, probably assume when I think of graffiti, it's not all just willy-nilly spray painting.

Cita Sadeli: I think what I certainly didn't realize, and most people don't, is that it's a system of sort of, you can call it style writing. Like, since the dawn of time, the ancient cultures have been, you know, putting images and words as sort of religious and political expression. Maybe signals, maybe telling stories. So, you know, think about a kid, too. They pick up a crayon. Where do they want to draw?

Lizzie: On the wall.

Cita Sadeli: You know what I mean? So it's a super natural inclination.

Lizzie: And there was something about making a mark on something big, practicing hard and getting it right, that felt satisfying to Cita.

Cita Sadeli: Graffiti really traditionally came from creating this sort of localized identity. So you can say whatever you want to say and step away and it lives on.

Lizzie: Cita graduated from high school and attended the Corcoran School of Art. Then she set down her spray cans and channeled her creative energy into graphic and web design, co-founding her own interactive design firm. She spent over a decade working on animation, graphic design, websites.

Cita Sadeli: More on the sort of bread and butter, dry kind of design. You know, things for the NIH. You know, pamphlets about anxiety and things like that. [laughs]

Lizzie: Who says pamphlets can't change lives? But when she was in her early 30s, building her career as an artist, Cita's life was upended by a sudden tragedy. Her mother, driving to work one morning, was hit and killed by a drunk driver, and the depth of her loss would work its way into Cita's art, and by extension, into the heart of the DC landscape itself.

Lizzie: That's coming up, after the break.

Lizzie: In 2011, Cita Sadeli got a big opportunity. A local nonprofit invited her to paint a mural in a Northwest DC neighborhood called Adams Morgan.

Cita Sadeli: It was my first offer for a large-scale public art commission, and I was super excited.

Lizzie: Off she went to check out the site: the whole side of a row house next to an empty lot.

Cita Sadeli: You know, I was just looking at this, you know, 20-foot-by-30-foot wall and just saying, "Wow, you know, finally I get my chance!"

Lizzie: Unlike the illicit art of her youth, this was legit.

Cita Sadeli: *I had a lift. You know, I had a cherry picker. It was parked there. There were cones. You know, like the whole sidewalk was, like, shut down, and I had carte blanche to do whatever I want. And I was just so excited to get up there.*

Lizzie: But before she could start painting, Cita needed to figure out what to paint. Here she had this giant canvas, a bigger canvas than she'd ever had. But it was not a canvas you could take with you, or send off to Paris to show in an exhibition. It lived in this community. And she wanted to make something that belonged here. She thought, who is this mural for?

Cita Sadeli: *And then I turned around and I saw an elementary school. And I said, "Huh. Let me go over there and see what it looks like from over there." So I imagined being on that playground and seeing this wall every day. And I thought, "Well, this is the audience. It's these kids."*

Lizzie: She wanted to make something the kids wouldn't get tired of looking at. A kind of visual treasure hunt. She decided to call it, "Every Day I See Something New."

Cita Sadeli: *So first I started out with a sketch. I basically tried to brainstorm what are all the things that I know? Because I'm from here. I grew up here. I spent a lot of time on the streets.*

Lizzie: Cita sketched out dozens of symbols representing places, people and things that people in the neighborhood would recognize. She took her sketch and drew a grid over it. Then drew a grid on the wall and started filling it in, working from the basket of a cherry picker—one of those machines that lifts utility workers to fix power lines.

Cita Sadeli: *The first time you go up in it, it's like being in a—you know, in a carnival or something and going up in this ride. It's definitely—you know, it gets your blood pumping.*

Lizzie: But she had some good practice in her pocket.

Cita Sadeli: *You know, early days in graffiti showed me how to work at large scale, which when you're first starting out is not easy.*

Lizzie: Anyone who's ever tried to free hand a poster board knows this. How many Happy Birthday signs have I made that came out "HAPPY BIRFY?"

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Cita Sadeli: *And how to still create strong work, solid lines when you are in a rush.*

Lizzie: You're painting outside on a wall, up high, on deadline. It's not easy.

Cita Sadeli: *It's like a multi-sensory overload, from environment to weather to paint spills and, you know, trying to navigate around power lines.*

Lizzie: To equipment failures, getting rained on.

Cita Sadeli: *Getting roasted in the sun, or the wind is—you know, you have to track the wind. Is it above a certain mile an hour, because then it's actually illegal to be out there because it's unsafe. Or do you hear thunder, you have to get down, you're in a metal, you know, enclosure. So there are so many conditions you have to look out for. and then you have to be great and, like, paint this thing really well.*

Sojin Kim: *It's hard enough just to draw or paint something on an easel or on a desk, but again, doing it on an unstable surface that maybe sways with the wind ...*

Lizzie: Curator Sojin Kim says physical stamina is one of the skills a muralist has to have.

Sojin Kim: *We see the stuff, it's beautiful, it's complete, it's up there, it's part of the environment. But we should also appreciate the incredible effort and strength and labor it took to physically put it up there.*

Lizzie: Yeah. I mean, now that you mention it, I painted a wall once.

Sojin Kim: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: *It was hard! My back hurt for weeks! Muralists are endurance athletes.*

Sojin Kim: *They are. They're extreme athletes and artists.*

Lizzie: Cita painted the entire wall black. Then she started adding in those symbols—pops of playful, luscious color against the dark background. Things kids would see—a drum to signify the weekly drum circle in nearby Malcolm X Park. A bike courier.

Cita Sadeli: She's got her mag wheels.

Lizzie: A policeman on a Segway. A cat with a snipped ear from DC's catch-and-release program. A deer.

Cita Sadeli: *There would always be deer roaming around on 16th Street, you know, like just in the street chilling.*

Lizzie: A squirrel. A caterpillar. A gingko leaf from DC's iconic gingko trees.

Cita Sadeli: *It's as beautiful as the cherry blossoms, but it's all yellow, this bright yellow. But they drop these ginkgo berries.*

Lizzie: *We call them vomit pods.*

Cita Sadeli: *Yeah they don't smell good. It's not a nice scent, for sure. [laughs]*

Lizzie: And places to eat, like Julia's Empanadas.

Cita Sadeli: *It's like a nice place to go. They're open late. The Wu Tang ice cream truck.*

Lizzie: There's a lady doing yoga in the park.

Lizzie: *And is that a salamander doing yoga next to her?*

Cita Sadeli: Yes.

Sojin Kim: *I love seeing all of the music references in it.*

Lizzie: Curator Sojin Kim picked up on some symbols I didn't even recognize.

Sojin Kim: *The bars and Xs from DC's straight edge punk rock scene. The glasses that Chuck Brown wore. Godfather of go go. He used to wear these EK sunglasses.*

Lizzie: And not all the elements of the mural were planned.

Lizzie: Like what's this little—is this a purple wombat?

Cita Sadeli: [laughs] So that is not a wombat, but that's a really good idea. So this site was loaded with rats, and the cool thing about it—if something could be cool about that—is this one time I looked down, and I swear the rat did a cartwheel. Like, it went up on this rock, and it jumped and flipped and it was just—I was tired from painting anyway, but I was just like, "Did you see that?" So they had to get in there.

Lizzie: Like a stunt rat. Frolicking, living its best rat life.

Cita Sadeli: It was like "Okay, I see you rat. I have respect."

Lizzie: [laughs]

Cita Sadeli: "I'm in your space. This is your house, but I'm making it beautiful! You know what I'm saying?"

Lizzie: And Acrobat Rat—Acro-Rat?—wasn't the only unplanned addition to the mural. Other members of the community made cameos too.

Cita Sadeli: So there was a fire company that drove by and they were like, "Hey, we like the mural!" Stopped, came back, were like, "Hey, this is our patch. Do you think you could, like, put our patch somewhere?"

Lizzie: Cita thought, "Why not?" She said to her assistant ...

Cita Sadeli: And I was like, "Metas, you paint that." And so I said, "Cool." And then I was like, "Wait a minute, we don't have brushes that small." He got a blade of grass and literally painted all the details, and he just worked it out with a—with a blade of grass. It's just like, "You go." I've never seen anybody do that before. I was like, "You go, Metas!"

Lizzie: But there's one element probably only Cita's family members or closest friends would recognize. In the middle of the mural is a lady in a beret riding a motorized scooter.

Cita Sadeli: My mom was not in a motorized wheelchair, but when I lived at 9th and O, there would be these gangs of older folks and their motorized scooters just all over the place. And

we just thought it was so cool. They would just all hang out together and drive around in packs.

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Cita Sadeli: *But that was my opportunity to put my mom. She used to wear, like, a French beret a lot in the wintertime. And I always put her name in the piece.*

Lizzie: Cita's mother's nickname was "Enny." And there's a flag on the back of the scooter.

Cita Sadeli: *So in the flag, you see E-N-N-Y.*

Lizzie: By the time she finished the mural, Cita had created a mix of references; there was something for everyone. The kids, the parents, people in the neighborhood walking by. But Cita's probably the only one who would get every single one. A lot goes right over my head.

Cita Sadeli: *But no, like, that's the fun thing about public art and these mural opportunities is you can present these things that prompt questions for folks, for visitors. Like, "What is that? Why do I keep seeing this thing?"*

Sojin Kim: *It's intriguing, it's fun, it's accessible, but it's also informative. So that's the way I see it exemplifying public art in a really great way. And it's striking.*

Lizzie: As a public artist, Cita couldn't take her artwork with her. When she finally finished the mural, she packed up her brushes, cleaned up the area and left.

Cita Sadeli: *And then afterwards, what was cool is folks started to use the space.*

Lizzie: And the story Cita painted started to become a part of other stories. And some of those stories found their way back to her, like when her neighbor realized she'd painted that mural.

Cita Sadeli: *He said, "You painted that? Oh my God, I have such a story there because somebody broke up with me there, and I just sat there and cried on this bench!"*

Lizzie: People started having wedding ceremonies in front of the wall. Engagements. Graduation photos. Family pictures. Over the last 14 years, a lot of stuff has happened in front of that mural.

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Cita Sadeli: *You never know what's gonna happen once you leave this baby that you've birthed, right? And you leave it there, and it just creates this whole other life, sparks all of these other memories and experiences that you'll never know about. Unless someone tags you in social media.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Cita Sadeli: *Some people do, but so many people don't, either. And I just—there's stories that I'll never know, but I'm so glad it's happening.*

Lizzie: The mural, "Every Day I See Something New" is reproduced to fit on a wall of the "Sightlines" exhibition, on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. As her first major commission, it has a special place in Cita's story. But she's made dozens more murals since that first one. She's been hired to paint parking garages, apartment complexes, hotel faces, coffee shops, interiors, exteriors, ceilings. But as varied as these places are, Cita always starts with the same questions: Who is here? What happened here? Who is this for?

Cita Sadeli: *I like to think of us public artists as sort of like cultural interpreters or, you know, cultural storytellers. It's through our lens, but it's hopefully reflecting the people that are there, the stories that are there, or even something that folks there can appreciate.*

Lizzie: By now she's been painting murals for well over a decade. Her work is all over the city, but every time she starts a new project she feels like a beginner because every space has its own special challenges. Like, in 2020, she accepted a job from a new hotel in Thomas Circle. She was charged with designing a mural that would celebrate women warriors. But the site was a bit of a challenge. The front of the hotel was covered in columns of windows, so she only had four tall, thin strips of building to paint on.

Cita Sadeli: *I treated this sort of like looking through slats of a fence. And it worked out to where I had these two figures, these two women back to back, separated by the windows in the center, that are facing outward, holding these spears, sort of like as guardians.*

Sojin Kim: *She has thought about this verticality, she has integrated these so beautifully into the existing architecture, and made really great use of these four vertical spaces.*

Lizzie: Cita worked with the hotel to finalize her design, and she started to paint. It was March, 2020. Halfway through the month, the city shut down due to COVID 19. As a painter, Cita was deemed an essential worker.

Cita Sadeli: I was alone up in this basket watching everything take place in the city.

Lizzie: What did that look like? What do you mean "take place?"

Cita Sadeli: People were starting to work from home. They were dragging their chairs across the circle, you know, with their, you know, laptops underneath their arms. And they were just making this transition, and kind of being penned into their homes and apartments.

Lizzie: Without the distractions of daily routine, people noticed Cita. They watched as she painted.

Cita Sadeli: "Oh, she's got the face in there." "Oh my, there's another figure on the right side." "Oh, okay. Cool!"

Lizzie: People would call up to her with encouragement.

Cita Sadeli: "Yeah, you go, girl!"

Lizzie: One woman found Cita on Instagram and wrote ...

Cita Sadeli: "Things are really crazy right now, and I don't know what's happening. There's a lot of fear. And as a woman, I'm out here walking alone at night, just trying to make sense of the world, and I look up and I see these women and it makes me feel stronger." I'm like, "Hey, I'm doing my job. That's all I need to know." [laughs]

Lizzie: We form relationships with the places where we live. It's easy to think of the landscape as static, but we impact those spaces, and we're affected by them. Knowing the artist behind the "Guardians of the Four Directions" mural has made me feel connected to it, and to the story behind it—Cita's story. Now when I bike through Thomas Circle, I see something I never would have.

Cita Sadeli: So if you look at her sort of like shoulder pad shield thingy.

Lizzie: Oh yeah. Uh-huh?

Cita Sadeli: Her name is right in there.

Lizzie: Oh my gosh!

Lizzie: Enny. Cita's mother.

Lizzie: Oh, wow!

Cita Sadeli: So you're not gonna be able to pick it out at first, but if you're looking for it, you can definitely find it over time.

Lizzie: Wow!

Cita Sadeli: I always like hiding those things. [laughs]

Lizzie: She's in everything that you've made.

Cita Sadeli: I hope she is. She's in all of me.

Lizzie: Cita's identity influences all of her art, but her identity was influenced by the city she grew up in, a mother who immigrated from Indonesia and worked for the US federal government, DC's punk rock scene of the 1980s, hip hop culture that left its mark on the walls of a city for Cita to discover. That's why her work is part of the "Sightlines" exhibition, which is all about the impact of Asian Americans on the landscape of DC.

Sojin Kim: Cita's work is so important to the messages and the ideas we wanted to convey in "Sightlines" because identity is really complicated. Like, if you're talking about community identity or individual identity, it's not just one thing. Any individual, really, is the sum of so many different types of experiences and interactions in communities.

Lizzie: Cita takes her responsibility seriously. As a public artist, she says, her work is not for her.

Cita Sadeli: I don't want to just come in and do my thing, you know? Because it's not about me. I'm the sort of hand that writes the story, but it's not my story.

Lizzie: So as you move around your city or town, what kind of public art do you notice? Do you know who put it there? What is it saying?

Sojin Kim: And what I think is so important about the idea of public space is public space is literally where we can all be, and where we can all intersect and where we potentially can all engage. So I think just being aware of the great potential of public space to bring you into connection with different people and ideas. And it's not just the space between where you're going.

Lizzie: It's hard to remember when you're in a rush, but public art is a conversation happening right in front of you. If you look around, you can start to hear it. Or see it. Maybe even join it.

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Lizzie: Cita Sadeli signs her work with her artist name, Miss Chelove. To see her work, you can go to her website CHELOVE.com—that's C-H-E-L-O-V-E.com. We'll share visuals of her work on our social media @SidedoorPod. We'll also share pictures of some of the objects in the exhibition "Sightlines: Chinatown and Beyond." The exhibition has more examples of Cita's work and influences—pictures of her mother as a young girl in Java and later as a professional journalist in DC. It has the "Just Say No" pamphlet, early punk rock show posters, and paint-spattered milk crates. It's presented by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, and you can see it at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Lizzie: And show us what you're seeing! share photos of murals in your city and tag us on social media @SidedoorPod.

Lizzie: For help with this episode, we want to thank Sojin Kim, Cita Sadeli and Rick Lee. Special thanks this episode to composer Sean Dwyer, whose original composition, "Cita's Theme," you heard in this episode. The piece was originally composed for the documentary film, "Miss Chelove: From Java to the Streets of DC," produced and directed by Sara T. Gama. You can find that film online at PBS.org. Thanks also to Marc Meisnere.

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison, and me, Lizzie Peabody. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Fact checking by Nathalie Boyd. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Transcripts are done by Russell Gragg. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and most of today's episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. Other music in the episode came from recording archives from the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Lizzie: If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at Sidedoor [at] si [dot] edu. If you want to

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Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

***Lizzie:** And I, being a musical ignoramus, go go and the punk rock references are totally lost on me. I'm all, like, "Ooh, a squirrel!"*

Cita Sadeli: [laughs]

Lizzie: "Ice cream truck!"

Cita Sadeli: [laughs] Love that.

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