

# Artist Feature: Mel Chin and A Bill for IL



**MacArthur Fellow Mel Chin at the opening of *Toward Common Cause* at the Smart Museum of Art.**

Photo by Spencer Bibbs

An open guitar case bearing a green stencil that reads FUNDREDS is installed on a low platform in a gallery. Standing behind the installation, the artist Mel Chin, speaks to a semi-circle of people.

The *Toward Common Cause* projects of artist-MacArthur Fellow Mel Chin, on display at the Smart Museum, Sweet Water Foundation, and Hyde Park Art Center, are lively entities in constant states of transformation that challenge traditional museum and artistic practice. For *Toward Common Cause*, Chin's Fundred Project is assuming its latest avatar, *Chicago Fundred Initiative: A Bill for IL*.

The survival of my own ideas may not be as important as a condition I might create for others' ideas to be realized.



**Mel Chin, *Fundred Project*, 2008–ongoing. Courtesy of the artist.**

Photo by Michael Tropea

A black guitar case is open on a round white plinth next to two glass-fronted briefcases. In the guitar case

and briefcases are hundreds of Fundreds. Next to the guitar case is one Fundred and a blue and white click-top pen.



## Description

The Fundred Project, a national campaign built around the need to end childhood lead poisoning, began in 2008 when the artist visited New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and learned of the extent of lead contamination in the city, which was extreme before the hurricane and exacerbated by it. Chin decided that the only creative response to the problem was one of equal magnitude to what the people of New Orleans had endured. At its inception, the Fundred concept was straightforward: people all over the US would draw or paint their own interpretations of \$100 bills, “Fundred” dollar bills, with the goal of exchanging the value of creative currency and public voice into real resources to leverage universal lead prevention. The Fundreds would be collected and exhibited in, among other places, Washington, D.C., to prompt legislative attention to this significant issue.

A person, a child, their mind,  
their health, matters. We found  
lead undoing these basic



human rights thirteen years ago  
in New Orleans and we find it  
still doing it here in Chicago.



**Fabricating *Safehouse Temple*  
Door. Courtesy of UNC Asheville.**

Photo by UNC Asheville STEAM  
Studio

A welder wearing a mask and thick  
gloves stands behind a piece of the  
Safehouse Temple Door, creating  
bright blue sparks as they work on the  
metal.

## Description

Lead contamination is a widespread problem in the U.S. in soil, water, and housing, and with each increasingly severe report of a crisis of health and homicide—from Cleveland to Flint to Chicago—the Fundred Project expanded to encompass thousands more drawings by children, displayed en masse and demanding accountability. To date, the campaign has generated millions of Fundreds around the country. The project is culminating in Chicago with symbolic installations and programs that underscore the wealth of community while engaging residents, advocates, and policy makers around opportunities for legislative action. Through work with the [Hyde Park Art Center](#), the [Sweet Water Foundation](#), the [Smart Museum](#), and [S.O.U.R.C.E. Studio](#), the accumulated Fundreds will make up the Chicago Fundred Reserve, raising awareness and demanding action to end lead exposure.

It looks like a bank vault, and it should...it is made to seriously value the voices of people, speaking out through art against being poisoned by lead in their community.





**Mel Chin, Safehouse Temple Door,  
2021, Installation at the Civic Arts  
Church, Chciago. Courtesy of UNC  
Asheville.**

Photo by UNC Asheville STEAM  
Studio

A side view of the Safehouse Temple Door, a large bank vault-style door. The door is at the top of a set of steps, the side painted red, in its installation at the Sweet Water Foundation.



Toggle Media

## Description

*Safehouse Temple Door*, a physical manifestation of the goals of the Fundred Project, is a functioning 10-foot steel bank-vault door installed on the facade of the Sweet Water Foundation's historic Civic Arts Church. This *Safehouse* is designed as a permanent installation to be actively integrated into Sweet Water's practice of regenerative neighborhood development. Signifying safety and community, the design is a poignant and fitting gesture that amplifies the mission of Sweet Water and the Fundred Project: to address environmental racism and invest in neighborhood renewal with action-oriented solutions.

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Written by Ellen Wiese

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