

Paul Rucker



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Hate, social injustice take center stage in York College exhibit called 'Rewind'

By Ivey DeJesus
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Baltimore artist Paul Rucker explores racism and racial injustice in this country in his installation entitled "Rewind," now installed at York College's Wolf Hall. The installation takes a provocative look at the aftereffects of slavery and racism past and present. (Ivey DeJesus/PENNLIVE)

The American cultural landscape has rarely been devoid of the debate over racism and social injustice, but seldom have these topics commandeered the national discourse to the degree seen in recent years.

Now, amid a backdrop of increased hate crimes and heightened racism, York College this month is featuring an art exhibition that pushes the comfort levels of audiences with a provocative statement on the evolution and inter-connectedness of those forces.

Entitled "Rewind," Paul Rucker's study of that difficult history weaves the threads of slavery's legacy and social injustice with the narratives and symbols of hate, intolerance and police brutality that have permeated the modern-day national consciousness - as names such as Ferguson, Freddie Gray and Trayvon Martin join the timeline of race relations in this country. Using an arsenal of mixed media - among them textile, video, sculpture and written words - Rucker conceptualizes the forces that have driven racial gulfs in this country, offering images in uncomfortable true-to-life form as well as in the probing abstract.



From Paul Rucker's 'Rewind' installation at York College. (Ivey DeJesus/PENNLIVE)

Arguably no other component of the exhibition evokes as visceral a reaction than "Birth of a Nation," an installation of mannequins outfitted with KKK-inspired robes fashioned in a profusion of color and texture in fabrics ranging from bold primary hues to camouflage and Kente cloth.

"I think the most important role of an artist is to make the unseen seen and at least more understood," Rucker said during a phone call Thursday. "I think there is nothing more provocative than real life. Our American history is what I'm addressing. There are things that weren't talked about in school and that is part of the show is facing the narrative and systems that were in place."

Rucker, a 2017 John Simon Guggenheim Foundation fellow, explores a swath of that history, from lynching and Jim Crow to convict leasing. Indeed, the scope of his work transcends the neat confines of racism.

"This is about education," Rucker said. "There is a disparity in wealth and power in this country. You wonder, how did that come about? A lot of my work is about power."

"Rewind" doesn't reveal itself in its space gradually but rather commands an immediate reaction from the audience.

That is what York resident Andrea Linebaugh posted Wednesday on Facebook after taking in the exhibit, which is installed in Wolf Hall: "You walk alone through this room with a narrow passage between you and them. It is powerful. I was sad, afraid, overwhelmed, intimidated. This is why they wear the robes and hoods. It is intimidating. I was angry, I wanted to tear their hoods off and punch them."

Another installation, "Excessive Use," explores police brutality via the medium of paper - which depict bullet holes made by Glock 22 semi-automatic pistols along with the names of cities and dates of events.

In "Soundless Series," Rucker, a cellist, carves wood sculptures to resemble the stringed instrument - marked with the dates and locations of deaths now ingrained in our history - from that of Trayvon Martin's on Feb. 26, 2012, to the Sept. 15, 1963, bombing death of four little girls in a Birmingham, Ala., church.

Still, Rucker - who is originally from Seattle but now makes Baltimore home - says he doesn't create art to make anyone feel good, and that includes progressives.

"My biggest concern right now is not guys in pointy hats," he told *The Baltimore Sun* in July. "It's white liberals who don't understand that they're benefiting from racism as much as -- if not more than -- rural conservatives." Rucker noted to *The Sun* that "blacks" at times have suggested he is "giving white people a pass" by making his brand of art.

The artist noted that three police officers on trial for Freddie Gray's death were black, as well as the police chief. Baltimore Mayor Catherine Pugh, he added, struck down a measure to raise the minimum wage.

"There's no guarantee that you're going to be protected by members of your own race," he told *The Sun*.

Indeed, Rucker, who has in recent years earned national distinction, offers his captivating images to foster - at times force - dialogue. An artist, composer and musician (cello), he continues to garner recognition and awards.

He is an iCubed Visiting Arts Fellow at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University. This fall, Rucker's work will be featured at the university's Institute for Contemporary Art in its inaugural exhibition, "Declaration."

The exhibition, while opened to York College students and staff, is opened to the public by appointment. Spokeswoman Mary Dolheimer explained that the show was not advertised outside the campus community because of its provocative nature, and rather was contained to the college community in order to foster conversation.



Paul Rucker's exhibit 'Rewind' arrived at York College shortly after the Charlottesville, Va., incident. Public access to the show is limited. (Ivey DeJesus/PENNLIVE)

The exhibition arrived on the campus shortly after the Charlottesville incident and the administration decided the images could not be viewed outside of the current cultural context.

"The context could be provided and discussions could be encouraged," she said. "It was not meant to play into any sensationalism of those images without that context."

She said that the images, while powerful, are provocative and potentially disturbing to some.

"This is especially the case without the benefit of an understanding of the intended educational context of the exhibit," Dolheimer said in a statement.

Rucker said he hopes the college will have a change of mind and give the show full public access.

"I brought it to York for a reason," he said. "I wanted to bring it to areas like York and Ferguson and Ellensburg, Washington, where the KKK is actively recruiting. I could have easily taken the show to Seattle or Philadelphia, but I felt it was really important to take it to York, Pennsylvania, instead. It's more important to go to these areas that were blue that turned red. . . . People need to understand that the Klan is not about hate as much as preserving the way of life where they maintain and keep power."



Paul Rucker, on his show: This is about education. There is a disparity in wealth and power in this country.' (*Maryland Institute College of Art photo*)

Rucker has received some negative feedback from national audiences, but this week, the York College audience was mostly appreciative.

"It's really frightening," said York College sophomore Meghan Fox, who on Thursday lingered at the exhibition after taking it in. "It's a difficult conversation but it's something we need to talk about."

York College junior Zakiya Hawkins, who as a former Morgan State University student was used to such provocative art shows, reflected that Rucker's show forced her to examine generations-old ideas about race and race relations in this country.

"It's a real eye-opener," she said. "It's more than just looking at things as they are. It leads you to question [if it's] right or wrong? It makes you try to understand social injustice to a point where you realize you can't keep throwing these issue to the back but you have to sit back down and reconstruct them - racial issues, police brutality, all of it."

Hawkins, who is African-American, said she was surprised that the installation evoked in her not resentment towards police - but a desire to foster a relationship.

"We have to bring back that sense that police are good people, that they are not here to kill people but are the ones we call when we need help," she said.