

Paul Rucker



Gallery One exhibit explores the KKK with music, art and history

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Artist and musician Paul Rucker poses with decorated Klan robes he made with his sister-in-law. These robes will be part of his exhibit titled "Rewind" at Gallery One on Friday

In 1989, Paul Rucker was eating his lunch outside while on a break from performing in the Augusta Opera Company. All of a sudden, he was interrupted.

“Do you know what’s going on?” a reporter asked him.

“No, what?” Rucker said.

“A Klan rally,” the reporter said.

Rucker recalls his response wasn’t much, but the moment of seeing the Klan rally walk past him on the street never left him. Rucker has since gone on to collect a great deal of racist literature and slave-era artifacts, some of which will be on display alongside his own work at an exhibition titled “Rewind” at Gallery One in Ellensburg on Friday. There will be an artist discussion from 3:30-4:45 p.m. with an opening reception from 5-8 p.m.

Rucker combines music with his art, which will be showcased from 6:30-8 p.m. in the Elmira Building.

Rucker not only wants to elicit emotion from people with pieces like decorated Klan robes, but also build a dialogue.

“I think if you asked the average person about the Klan they’d say, ‘Oh they’re bad,’” Rucker said. “But they can’t tell you anything else about the Klan or what they’re about.

“I think they assume the Klan is about hate, but they’re not about hate as much as they’re about preserving the white race, because they say there was a big threat about the white race being diminished or lost because of integration.”

Rucker’s art alongside historical literature and slave-era artifacts like shackles and branding irons keep the exhibit rooted in facts which Rucker is trying to let his patrons know about.

“I’ve been collecting books on pro slavery and separation, to show we have this history,” Rucker said.

One book he’ll have on display is called “The Negro a Beast” which was published in 1900. It’s a rare book, which also is on display at the Smithsonian, and talks about how black people are not of Adam and Eve, but the product of a white woman being raped by an animal.

Another document Rucker says resonates with him today, despite it being written more than 100 years ago, is “The Negro Problem and Immigration.”

“You’d think that it was written right now because of the same concerns,” he said.

Music and art

Rucker writes the music for his exhibits, and said he got the inspiration from his mother, who earned her music degree from a mail-order course and put on a recital herself.

“I wasn’t fearful of because I saw my mom do it and I figured we were related so I could do it too,” Rucker said. “I don’t have a music degree, I don’t have an art degree, I’m a conceptual artist.”

In 2015, he worked with his seamstress sister-in-law to make a Klan robe every single week. Following his Ellensburg show, Rucker is taking those robes across the country to Ferguson, Missouri, York, Pennsylvania, and to Virginia Commonwealth University at the new institute of Contemporary Art, which opens in October.

Coming to Ellensburg

Gallery One’s executive director Monica Miller has known Rucker a long time and has been following his work and how it has shifted over the years. At the same time KKK literature was distributed around Ellensburg late last year, Rucker and Miller ran into each other at a conference in Minnesota, and decided it would be a great opportunity to show his work at Gallery One, and keep the discussion going.

After Not in Our KittCo was formed and the community held a peace march, the Gallery One board of directors was revising its 2017-20 strategic plan. The fifth point on the list was the gallery “can be a powerful tool for racial and gender equality,” which Miller said fits Rucker’s work perfectly.

“I’m a little nervous about presenting the work because it is hard,” Miller said. “The community overall is very supportive of the exhibit and wants to have this conversation.”

Rucker applauded the gallery for displaying his work.

“It’s courageous to actually have work around divisive issues,” Rucker said. “I commend the gallery for bringing me in. ... This is a much bigger version of the show, but it’s still relevant then, still relevant now. It’s been relevant for a couple hundred years.”