

PEOPLE

In Wake of Baltimore Protests, Artist Paul Rucker Spotlights Racism's Legacy

Ben Davis, Wednesday, May 13, 2015

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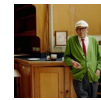
Artist Paul Rucker installing his "Excessive Use" series.
Photo: Courtesy of Paul Rucker.

Two weeks ago, I went down to Baltimore to see what an American city under occupation looked like. Armored personnel carriers and reporters still filled the streets of Sandtown, the neighborhood where Freddie Gray, the young man who suffered a shattered spine and died while in police custody, had lived.

I wasn't there as an art critic. I was there to express solidarity with those standing up against police violence. On my way to march from Penn Station to City Hall, I met up with Gary, a black Baltimore resident, fire fighter, and activist. He was talking excitedly about seizing the moment when all eyes were on Baltimore to bring positive change, and passing out copies of a 34-page newspaper, titled *Rewind*, its pages stuffed with facts and figures about the history of racism in the United States, the prison system, and the parallels between them.

Gary told me he'd picked up the papers at an art show in March; he had been to the show four times. "Read this," he said, putting a copy in my hand. "It says it all." And that's how I got to know the work of artist Paul Rucker.

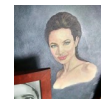
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Formerly of Seattle, Rucker has for the last two years called Baltimore his home, where he is currently Robert W. Deutsch Foundation Artist in Residence and Research at Maryland Institute College of Art. Thoroughly multidisciplinary, he works as a composer and performer as well as a sculptor and installation artist—but always with a focus on finding fresh ways to dramatize how the history of racism insinuates itself into the power structures of the present. *Rewind* the newspaper was a product of “Rewind” the show, held from February to March as part of Rucker's residency at the Maryland Institute College of Art and Creative Alliance .



REWIND Installation Time Lapse

from Jimmy Best Productions

03:24

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I recently gave Rucker a call to discuss his prescient work and his experience in Baltimore over the last few turbulent weeks.

Ben Davis: In the MICA press release you said, “Baltimore is America amplified. It's where the North meets the South, and has so much historical information. I couldn't be in a better place to do this project.”

Paul Rucker: They actually left out part of my statement: “Baltimore is America amplified—the good and the bad.” There are a lot of places where you can avoid talking about these issues. My work is about research around incarceration, the prison system, slavery, racial disparities, and this history that affects what's going on today. So Baltimore, for me, is one of the best places to live. It's a very unique place.

I live in a quote-unquote nice neighborhood, Bolton Hill. But I go a few blocks over and I am in the area where Freddie Gray was killed, where there's 52 percent unemployment, kids are seven times more likely to get lead poisoning; the life expectancy on Freddy Gray's side of town is 19 years less than on the other side of Baltimore—I mean, there are a whole myriad of problems. There's something in the air here. You can feel it.

What do you mean?

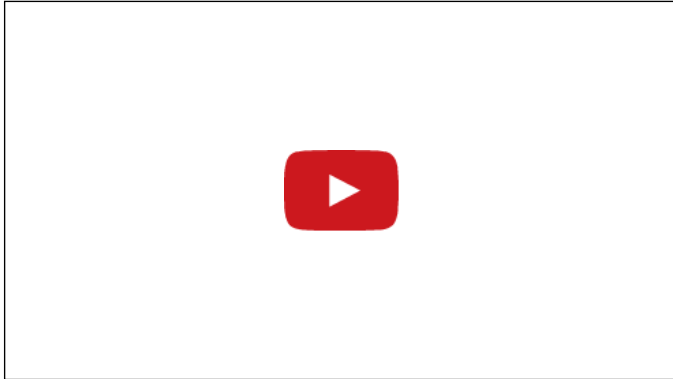
This is a city that needs to address the elephants in the room. Why is the white community average income twice that of the black community? Why do we have these two Baltimores? Does one group have what they have because they are smarter or they worked harder? Or is there something else that got us to where we are today, including the selective enforcement of laws?

Last night, when the protesters were asked to leave the streets, the black folks were asked to leave in a very different way than the white folks. People have been making fun of that, but it's a symbol of how it is here on a daily basis.

I'm a black male, and as a black male you are looked at in a very different way. You are basically guilty until proven innocent, in the eyes of people who don't even know you. People assume I have a criminal record. These archetypes that we have in our heads, they are extremely damaging to the psyche. In the 1980s, when Reagan would talk about “a welfare mother

driving a Cadillac," he was invoking a certain archetype. He didn't have to say what color she was.

Now, when the word "thug" is being thrown around now—well, I did a TED Talk over a year ago in Berkeley talking about how they were using the word "thug" to describe Trayvon [Martin]. I said, "'thug' is the new 'nigger.'" It's a kind of coded language. And even the smartest people are not aware of how this language is being used. It gets into the news, even into the textbooks.



This is stuff you have been thinking about for a while. Tell me about "Rewind" and what you were trying to do with that show.

"Rewind" is about exactly what Baltimore is going through right now, what Ferguson is going through, what New York is going through, what pretty much every major city in America is going through. My sister lives in north Charleston, where Walter Scott was shot in the back. This is a story that I have been following intensely since my 24th birthday, which was April 29th, 1992—the day of the LA riots.

I started following these stories of abuse by police, and their outcomes. And I started drawing parallels with lynchings. The same with the prison system—I started drawing a parallel between the prison system and slavery. There are all these parallels of old systems with new systems. That's what "Rewind" is about, connecting the past and the present, and asking how we got here.

I had historic objects in the show, to go with my own art. I had a Confederate 100 dollar bill, which has slaves on it; I had the 1860 census, which I also created a video for; I had a book called *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination*; I had a gavel from 1860—all these objects. In general, people don't know about the economic impact of cotton: In 1860 cotton sales alone generated \$200 million. Adjusting for inflation, that would be \$5 billion today. It's a huge industry that made a lot of people really, really wealthy, and it involved not just the cotton trade but the slaves who picked the cotton.

One of the main catalysts for doing this show is that I found myself getting in conversations with people who would want to discuss, or sometimes argue, about how they felt [about racism]. And often they had no facts to back up the things that they were feeling. They would say, "Oh we're discriminated against too," and I would say, "Well, can you tell me how?"

You're speaking about white viewers?

Yes, but actually, sometimes I have just as much issue with black viewers. There are black folks who have made it and are doing fine, and they ignore their communities. The situation in Baltimore is in this respect not like Ferguson. We have a black mayor. We have a black police chief. We have blacks on the city council. Half of the police force is black. And three of the six people involved in this atrocity against Freddie Gray are black.

So, for instance, during my show, I had to have a heavy discussion with a

young black lady who came to a talk. She wanted my show to be about race, and I said, "It's not about race; it's about power." Race is a tool used to divide us. United we stand; divided we fall. Listen to Martin Luther King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech from 1967. He talks clearly about uniting the poor. If we were actually to truly unite because things were getting bad, we could make change. We could control our government again. Because of special interests and lobbyists, we don't truly have control now. We've allowed that control to be taken.

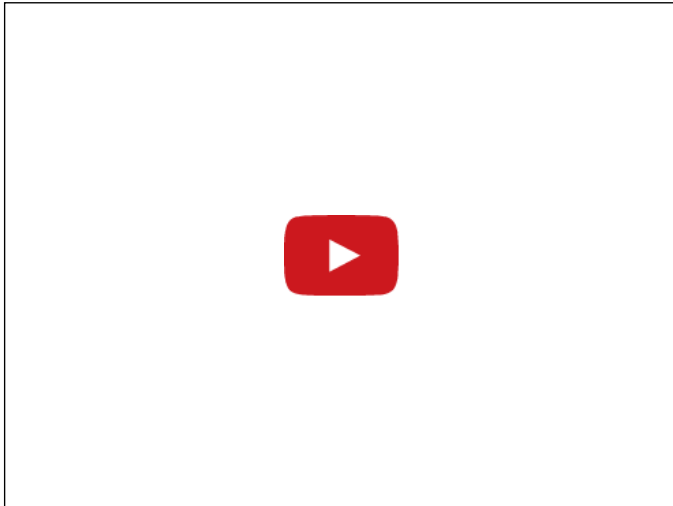
One of the works that stood out to me is *Proliferation*, the video that's based on a map from the Prison Policy Initiative, a work of music and graphics illustrating the spread of the prison industrial complex.

I attended a prison issues residency in 2009 at Blue Mountain Center. I actually went to the residency wanting to help people who were wrongfully incarcerated. But through the residency, I learned about all the other problems with the system, from health care to mandatory sentencing. I wasn't really aware prior to that of the numbers of people in prison. Once you are aware, and you start having conversations about these issues, you see how people get really defensive about it, which makes it difficult to bring them in.

I wanted to create a show that gave factual information. I didn't put any emotions in the newspaper for *Rewind* at all. It's all research.

For *Proliferation*, I did some research online, and I found these maps. I emailed the Prison Policy Initiative, and asked them, "Can I use this material to make an animation?" And they actually said, "Well, someone else was actually going to do that—but they never did. Go for it."

I had received a fellowship right before that for \$7,500, and I used all that money to do this video. I made 1,000 video tapes that I have given to people like Michelle Alexander and Angela Davis. I've given it to people from Homeland Security; really anyone who asks for it, I give it to them. It's in universities; it's gone to different parts of the world. And it's also online. I think we finally broke 10,000 views on YouTube, which is great. It's not a cat playing piano, but I'm glad people are looking at it.



I titled it *Proliferation*, not *Too Many Prisons* or *We Gotta Stop Building Prisons*, because I wanted to bring the viewer in with the facts. Since 1976, the US has built on average one new prison a week. In the 80s, even though the crime rate was going down, the prison system spiked. The map I created has green dots that correlate to prisons built from 1776 to 1900; then yellow dots that correspond to 1901 to 1940; then orange dots that correspond to 1941-1980. But the biggest spike is 1981 to 2005. It's huge.

In that period, we had the privatization of prisons, the war on drugs, and policies like "three strikes." Many of them were created under [president Bill] Clinton. He was a major architect of some bad ideas. Hillary recently spoke out against mass incarceration, and I think she's trying to cover

those tracks, because she was there when it all happened.

The show closed in March. What was the reaction at the time?

It was great. I had a great turnout. A minister brought in his congregation. Schools were busing in students. I did tours for young kids.

Were there works that stood out to people?

Some of the images I show, like the throws with lynching images on them, of Leo Frank and other people who were lynched in the early 1900s, are kind of hard to look at. There was a series of sculptures as well, representing different deaths in the hands of police, of significant Civil Rights figures like Emmett Till. I have a set of custom speaker boxes that whistle every 67 minutes—that's how long the jury in Till's case took to acquit all the people involved in the killing; the jury in that case actually stayed in an extra 15 minutes to drink a soda to make it look good.

I have a string quartet about the Alabama Church bombing [in 1963], representing each of the four girls who were killed. I have a James Byrd Jr. piece, about the man who was dragged to death in Jasper, Texas [in 1998]. I also make work using a semi-automatic pistol; I had some targets using archival white paper and I would shoot into the paper to correlate the number of times that a police officer shot a victim: one bullet for Oscar Grant; 50 for Sean Bell; 41 for Amadou Diallo.

All the pieces are named after dates and places. One, for instance, correlates to this event in Cleveland on November 28, 2012—the trial is happening right now—where officers shot 137 times into a car. This couple was passing by the police station and the policemen thought they heard a pop. A third of the patrol officers violated at least one policy during the chase. The verdict will be announced any day now. The only cop who actually went to trial stood on the car and fired an additional 15 shots into it after everyone was ordered to stop. He reloaded three times during this 20 minute ordeal and fired 49 shots.

I'm working on animating a series of historic postcards depicting lynching, taking black-and-white images, adding movement and color. That will be a show I do later this fall.

Have you done a piece about Freddie Gray?

One's coming up real soon.

Talk about your experience in Baltimore in the last couple of weeks.

I spent my birthday marching from Penn Station to City Hall and back. I loved the diversity in the crowd. One march drew far more white people than black people. There's been a great turn out, families bringing their kids, going into west Baltimore, where the uprising took place and buildings burned.

People are actually very excited right now. Many major cities have had indictments against cops, but this is big for Baltimore to actually have an indictment. I don't think they have ever had a major indictment like this, ever.

At the same time, I worry. The announcement of the indictment happened on May Day, when there were a lot of people in town to support the protests. I think the authorities wanted to give that audience a victory to calm them down. Think about it: The uprising was just after Freddie Gray's funeral. But if you remember the LA Riots, they came after the acquittal of the cops. So they're just delaying things. This is a community that has been ignored, and we are at a tipping point here where we can't ignore the community anymore.

I love this city. There are beautiful, wonderful things about this city. I like the rawness and honesty of it, and I love the communities; there is something very special about this place and its energy. But the disparities are hard to ignore. You can't ignore this vibration in the air. People want

to be free to walk down the street without being stopped.

I'm the same way. No one cares that I am an artist; no one cares what I am or what I do. When I walk outside I am a black male. When I drive my car, I am a black male. And that concerns me.

What do you think happens next?

There's a lot of fear about what's going to come later, with the verdict. I'm actually writing a piece right now called *The Verdict*. It's about 20 minutes long. I'm going to debut it at Creative Alliance, a place where I am in residency across town.

During the protests last week, I ran into an activist passing out the newspapers from "Rewind." How does that make you feel?

That's great. I printed 5,000 of them. People have been taking them and passing them out, and some people are trying to sell them on eBay. I had a talk yesterday at Peabody Conservatory and I took 100 copies there, and people took them to spread the word.

I hope people read and see that we have been here before, so that hopefully we can figure out a way to stay mobilized and keep moving, and win some clear positive results. It's not always that clear what victory would look like. There's a lot of political theater going on right now.



Paul Rucker giving an artist talk during "Rewind"

We're a country that hasn't done any healing when it comes to the legacy of slavery. The best analogy I can think of is that we have this festering wound, and what we try to do is cover up the wound with bandages. But it has to be cut open and cleaned out. That's addressing history. Until we do that there is no hope in moving forward.

I have hope, but I know it is going to take a lot of work, and a lot of sincere soul-searching.

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