

SOUTH JERSEY

Rowan art exhibit looks at race and inequality

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When he brings up the prison industrial complex in class, Rowan University professor John Mills said, “probably 90 percent of them say ‘what is the prison industrial complex?’”

“I think it just hasn’t resonated with them,” Mills said. “Unless they’ve been touched by it personally, I don’t know that they are really paying attention.”

Mills, the assistant director for the Multicultural and Inclusion Programs in the Office of Social Justice, Inclusion and Conflict Resolution at Rowan University, made it a goal to raise students’ awareness of the high level of incarceration in the U.S. through not just the group dialogues run by the Office of Social Justice, but also through a more unique approach.

“About a year ago I was talking with the Office of Social Justice and they wanted to know what exhibits we were planning because they wanted to know if there was any room for us to collaborate,” said Mary Salvante, the curator, gallery and exhibitions director at Rowan.

“Being able to pull in anyone who’s interested in art – it’s one thing to be teaching this in a class but I want to reach people I don’t come face to face with,” Mills said.

When Salvante found out about their mission, she drew up a list of artists tackling the issue, and one name rose to the top: Dread Scott.

Unlike many other artists, Scott isn't defined by his medium, but rather by the way his work engages the public.

"I tell people I make revolutionary art to propel history forward," Scott said of his breadth of work that spans photography, video, installation and involves community participation.

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"Dread Scott: A Sharp Divide," which is open at Rowan's High Street art gallery through Saturday, Nov. 5, is a survey of some of Scott's work on the issues of racial profiling and incarceration that spans from 1987 to 2014.

While the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) estimates the black or African American population to be 13.3 percent nationwide, the [Federal Bureau of Prisons](#) reports that the black population in prisons is 37.7 percent.

These topics have been a focal point of Scott's work for years. But Ferguson and subsequent killings of African Americans by police in the two years since Michael Brown was shot and killed have changed the national conversation around the position of black people in society, Scott said.

"The past few years has had an invigorated interest in my work and it has very little to do with my work," he said.

Scott was recently in the news for a banner he made over the summer and hung outside a Manhattan gallery that read "A Man Was Lynched By Police Yesterday," a reference to recent police shootings and inspired by an historic National Association for the Advancement of Colored People banner.

It isn't his intention to change the minds of those who don't agree with his opinions, he said, but to spark a conversation among those who do.

“For people who feel somewhat victimized by America – and that is a very broad section of society – there has been a lot of reception and enjoyment and support for my work,” he said.

It calls to mind the cliché of “preaching to the choir,” he said, but “There’s a broad choir out there of millions of people who are disheartened by how the world is and I have questions to pose to them.”

One of the early pieces in the exhibit actively includes the viewer in that conversation. In “American Newspeak ... Please Feel Free,” photographs are hung across the wall with related titles, phrases pulled from the “Newspeak” of George Orwell’s book “1984.”

Underneath are a stack of posters of the work; visitors are invited to take one, and write in the notebook provided why they did or did not take a poster.

“It is easier to uphold our own ignorance than to expose it,” someone wrote in the book beneath the photo entitled “Ignorance is Strength.”

“If it’s given to you, it ain’t freedom,” someone responded to “Freedom is Slavery.”

These journals are a time-stamped story of the artwork’s history, dated from the exhibitions they were a part of in 1988 and 1989. Many of the views expressed on those pages would fit neatly into the modern-day comment sections of news websites and blogs.

“Wanted” was a highly collaborative piece. Scott had youth in Harlem meet with adults who then described their likenesses to a former police sketch artist.

The result is a collection of generic portraits and descriptions, rife with stereotypes, turned into posters that Scott persuaded local business owners to hang in their establishments.

At the beginning of the project, he said, he spoke to youth and parents about what it might be like to have their images up on fake Wanted posters in the community.

“And the response was, look, we already have a target on our backs,” he said.

Rounding out the exhibit, “Harmed & Dangerous” uses photography and installation to take aim at violent racial stereotypes and “Lockdown,” humanizes prisoners through portraiture and voice recordings of them telling their personal stories.

“With ‘Lockdown,’ I really wanted to talk to people who have been criminalized and imprisoned,” Scott said. “A lot of my audience may think we don’t need 2.4 million people in prison but they haven’t actually heard their voices. What does it mean when you think of prisoners as people with brains and agency and see them as human beings?”

Eastern State Penitentiary has focused on race and justice in recent years, through exhibits and their sculpture “The Big Graph.” Over the summer, the African American Museum in Philadelphia exhibited “Arresting Patterns: perspectives on race, criminal justice, artistic expression and community,” including “Stop,” an immense video work by Scott with recordings of black men in New York and Liverpool, United Kingdom, stating the number of times they have been stopped and frisked.

The issue is definitely something that has been on people’s minds, Salvante said. She met with Glassboro police officers over the summer to let them know Rowan was doing the exhibit, and explain that it wasn’t attacking police officers, but pointing out systematic issues of discrimination.

Rowan is hosting a panel discussion on the topic prior to the opening reception of the exhibit on Thursday, Sept. 15. The panelists, Detective Corporal Louis J. Butler of the Glassboro Police Department, Dr. Sandra Joy, assistant professor of sociology at Rowan and Bob Witanek, co-founder of Decarcerate the Garden State, will discuss what is behind racial imbalance in incarceration and profiling.

“This is just a reflection that there are a lot of problems in the criminal justice system and policing policies,” Salvante said. “Why are these things happening? Why

do they keep happening? There's no reason to kill somebody just because they're not following your orders to get out of the car."

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If you go

"Dread Scott: A Sharp Divide" will be open through Saturday, Nov. 5 at the Rowan University Art Gallery at 301 High St. West in Glassboro.

The gallery will host a panel discussion from 5:30 to 7 p.m. at the Eynon Ballroom in the Student Center, and follow with the opening reception for the gallery from 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., both on Thursday, Sept. 15.

For more information on the exhibit, call (856) 256-4521 or visit rowan.edu/artgallery.

For more information on Dread Scott and his work, visit dreadscott.net.