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## Artist Paul Rucker's Klan Robes Expose America's Racist Underbelly

After being censored in 2017, the artist has brought his KKK robes to New York City.  
Sarah Cascone | Jul 23, 2025



Paul Rucker's exhibition "Rewind Resurrection." Photo: courtesy of the artist.

A decade after their debut, Paul Rucker's Klan robes remain as shocking as ever, their pointed hoods reimagined in an array of bold and colorful fabrics with striking prints. A circle of nine of these menacing figures, surrounding three tiny toddler Klansmen, greet visitors to "Rewind Resurrection" in New York, the 10-year anniversary restaging of the artist's traveling exhibition delving into the long history of racism in the U.S.

"They each symbolize some things. The pink robe is about how the Ku Klux Klan did not like gay people, just like the Nazis did not like gay people. The Kente cloth is about the Dutch wax fabric, which is a product of African colonization by the Dutch, and also about Nathan Bedford Forrest, the first Grand Wizard of the Klan, who was also a millionaire slave trader, connecting Africa and the Ku Klux Klan," Rucker told me.

"The signature piece of the show is the camouflage robe, which is about the stealth aspect of racism, how it hides in plain sight," he added. "You don't have to be in an outfit." It was the robes that led to the censoring of "Rewind" at York College of Pennsylvania in 2017, after a violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville that year. The college closed the show to the public, only allowing students and faculty to visit. The show had traveled without issue before that. It debuted at the Creative Alliance in Baltimore and then the Baltimore Museum of Art before appearing in Seattle; Ellensburg, Wash.; and Ferguson, Mo. But this is its first outing since.



A case of KKK memorabilia collected by Paul Rucker on view in "Rewind Resurrection." Photo: by Nehemiah A Prince, courtesy of the artist.

"I've gone where people have asked me to come and bring the work," Rucker said. "I went to Eastern Washington because someone there was recruiting for the Klan, and the community invited me. I went to Ferguson after Mike Brown's killing because the community reached out."

This is the artist's first show in New York, and it's entirely self-funded, in a rented Chelsea gallery. Rucker is hoping that an institution will acquire the exhibition, which he considers a collective installation, in its entirety.

The show may seem especially timely now, as President Donald Trump looks to ban



museums and schools from acknowledging the destructive legacy of enslavement and racism as an underpinning of our society. But Rucker warns that his show is bigger than any single administration, and that Democrats are far from blameless.

"It's about the general culture of our country, which went seamlessly from enslavement to incarceration," he said.

Part of the display is of shocking artifacts that Rucker has spent years collecting, such as racist books, Nazi armbands, a real KKK hood, and the physical restraints that kept enslaved people in bondage. (He is also building a museum, called Cary Forward, in Richmond, Virginia, to showcase similar objects.)

Paul Rucker in 2015. Photo: by Mike Morgan, courtesy of the artist.

And then there are his own artworks, such as blankets he ordered online to reproduce historic lynching postcards and other found images on woven tapestries. (Despite the disturbing nature of the images, none of the business owners ever questioned these orders.) There are videos visualizing data of the shocking proliferation of prison facilities, and gorgeous wooden relief sculptures recalling the silhouette of string instruments, with f-holes, each paying tribute to a different victim of racial violence.

“These are people who may not be well known as the civil rights leaders that we talk about all the time Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. These are lesser-known people like the Scottsboro Boys, or Jesse Washington, who was burned alive in 1916, or James Bird Jr., who was killed in Jasper, Texas, in 1998.”



Paul Rucker, Proliferation, an animation of new facilities being built for the U.S. prison system.  
Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Rucker carries the weight of history on his shoulders, uncovering the tragic stories of all-but forgotten individuals and events, such as the Red Summer race massacres of 1919. And while art is a tool to keep the evils of the past of being forgotten—even as some are now seemingly being repeated—he is aware that it is not enough.

“Art by itself will inherently fail to get people to move. It will help bring awareness to these atrocities of the past, and it will make people feel something, but to have real action beyond that takes another step beyond art,” Rucker said. “Hitting a like button on Instagram is not enough. We have got to move beyond following the algorithms that make us feel good because we have someone that validates our feelings with a post. It’s very dangerous right now to feel that we’re making progress by hitting a like button.”

“Rewind Resurrection” is on view at 545 West 23rd Street, New York, New York, July 1–23, 2025.