

Prospect.3 artist Joe Ray's work echoes recent Ferguson and New York incidents

By Doug McCash

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Artist Joe Ray, 70, was born in Alexandria, La., but spent most of his life in Los Angeles. He painted the suite of symbolic canvases in New Orleans' international art festival, Prospect.3, 21 years ago when newspaper headlines were eerily similar to those today.

As the Contemporary Arts Center website explains:

"The works featured in Prospect.3 were completed in 1993, just a year after the riots that were sparked by the acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department officers



of (charges of) assault and excessive force against Rodney King. The paintings probe issues of identity and racial justice."

To express the cultural collision of 1992, Ray combined signs of African identity such as kente fabric and an antelope mask with symbols of oppression such as a whip painted white and a cross-painted fire red. Atop everything are splatters of black paint that imply anger, grief and violence and fragile flowers that imply hope.

Ray's politics aren't subtle. In their time, his 1993 paintings were fiery artistic protest banners. But over the years, they had become artifacts of an incident receding into the blur of history.

Then, the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., snapped Ray's paintings back into focus. Including the references to the Rodney King incident in Prospect.3 seemed especially resonant.

The international arts festival was well under way when the grand jury decided not to press charges against the police officer who had shot Brown. Suddenly, Ray's paintings became crystal balls that seemed to foretell the legal outcome and the unrest that followed.

The best art is always made of more than mere paint on canvas. At times, it is made of passion, politics, humanity and catharsis. Encountering Ray's paintings and reading their backstory in the fall of 2014 was a chilling experience that emphasized art's power to mark a moment ... or moments. Wow.