

By Coco Fusco / Special to The Sun

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2017 has been an unusually busy year for public debates about art's role in American society. The most heated discussions have centered on race, specifically how depictions of racially charged historical events resonate in the present day.

Across the U.S., people are fighting over whether public sculptures depicting Confederate officers should be treated as unacceptable racist symbols. Earlier this year, the art world was rocked by controversy over a painting of Emmett Till, the African-American youth brutally murdered by whites in Mississippi in 1955, who became an icon of the civil rights movement. These issues trouble us because the wounds of history are still open for many Americans.

This fall at the University of Florida, the School of Art and Art History will offer four free public events featuring internationally acclaimed artists who devote themselves to exploring how art can contribute to interracial understanding and social justice. Puerto Rican artist and University of Central Florida professor Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz is scheduled to kick off the lecture series on Sept. 12 (Editor's note: Hurricane Irma may delay this event).

A recent recipient of a Governor's Award for the Arts from the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Puerto Rican artist Pepon Osorio will visit UF's campus on Oct. 17 to discuss how he engages Latino communities in his art projects. MacArthur "Genius Grant" recipient LaToya Ruby Frazier will visit Gainesville on Oct. 23 to talk about her documentary photography about environmental racism. And African-American artist Cameron Rowland will speak at UF on Nov. 15 about his research into the exploitation of prison labor by American companies. All these events are open to the general public.

The notable creators in our lecture series ask us to open our minds and our hearts through art in order to imagine a better world by first understanding the one we live in from a different perspective. They create photographs, sculptures and performances that address racially inspired violence, the impact of mass incarceration on black and Latino communities, and the effects of industrial decline on minority populations. They tell stories in their art about the experiences of unemployed workers in the Rust Belt, about the residents of Flint, Michigan, whose health has been destroyed by the contaminated drinking water, and about families devastated by loss in the wake of the mass shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando in 2016

It may surprise some of you that contemporary artists would seek to tackle such weighty and painful events in their art. You may have assumed that art is supposed to be about beauty and deeply personal visions. But that view of art is only part of the story. Throughout history, many great artists have been drawn to challenging issues and ideas: Francisco de Goya and Pablo Picasso dealt with the horrors of war; Gordon Parks, Charles Moore and Danny Lyons made us look at the segregation during the civil rights movement.

The turbulent political times we are currently living in are prompting many artists to devote their creative energies to reckoning with the issues that divide us. Our fall lecture series offers a chance to contemplate those extraordinary efforts.