

Black History and Beyond: Landmark Pop Art

By Helen Silvis
Of *The Skanner News*

Visit Portland City Hall this week to check out “Portland Black History and Beyond: Landmark Pop Art.” The art exhibit tells the story of African Americans in Portland through its historic buildings, revealing hidden truths about each location.

On display on the ground floor of Portland City Hall, 1221 S.W. 4th Ave, the exhibit is open to the public from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Feb. 21 – 24. The schedule of events will include a reception with catered soul food, Feb. 22, and the screening of the groundbreaking documentary “Local Color,” Feb. 24, which will be accompanied by “A Taste of Soul Food,” featuring dishes by local soul food vendors.

“This exhibit is for the families of Portland,” said Teressa Raiford, one of the organizers. “Regardless of your ethnicity and your background, you need to see this. It’s an asset to our community, and it shows people where we’re going and where we came from.”

“It’s the only art exhibit that will be displayed here in City Hall for Black History 2012.”

Raiford, currently running for Portland City Commissioner, created the project with Willard Bennett, a key player in creating the Golden West Project; and Evelyn Murray. (Murray recently acted in episode 2 of this season’s “Portlandia.”) They commissioned artist Fenix LAX, who was born and raised in Los Angeles, to create his own unique form of Pop Art.

The show will have a special significance for young people of color, Raiford said.

“You need your history in order to determine your future. You have to know you came from somewhere. So this is bringing that value to youth—that understanding of what we had and who we were before

now—that will help us decide what our goals should be.”

LAX said his first step was to research the history of Black Americans in Portland. Encouraged by Raiford, he hit the books. “Cornerstones of Community: Buildings of Portland’s African American History,” published by the historic preservation nonprofit the Bosco Milligan Foundation, was just one of several sources he devoured.

“That really inspired me,” he said. “You learn so much by finding out about the cultural history of different groups of people.”

“The moment I met Teressa Raiford, I was impressed. She made me think, and she taught me that whatever you want to do in life you can achieve it, if you work hard enough.”

“So I came back to her and I said, ‘I’ve read everything you told me and you’re right. We’ve got to do this and how can we get the youth involved. How can we get this message out to kids so it is no longer a big secret?’”

LAX selected photographs of several key buildings in Portland and overlaid them with messages. He chose his words carefully to express truths he had discovered, about events that happened at those sites. The result is a series of photographs bearing telling messages.

A photograph of the Crystal Ballroom, for example, features the message, “You get the payment you negotiate, not what you deserve.”

Curious? You can find out why those words matched this photograph, when you see the exhibit.

Will Bennett is known to many as Portland Black History because of his efforts to gain recognition for the contributions of African Americans to Portland. Bennett explains that he was following in the footsteps of Katherine Bogle, who was his case worker at Boys and Girls Aid Society,



Pictured from left: William Travis III, co-owner of Mack & Dub's restaurants and catering; Willard Bennett; Grace, publicist; Teressa Raiford; Evelyn Murray; Cameron Whitten, mayoral candidate; Fenix LAX, creative director of "Portland Black History and Beyond: Landmark Pop Art."

where he was put up for adoption. Bogle handed down her knowledge that the Golden West Hotel had been a crucial center of Black Portland life. In the early years of the 20th Century, the Golden West was the only place where out-of-town Black visitors could stay.

But African Americans were pushed out of the Westside, as they would be later from Albina. And during the Depression the Golden West degenerated into a dive hotel. It even lost its name. For decades it was known as The Broadmoor.

Bogle and Michael Chappie Grice formed

Friends of the Golden West Hotel, and succeeded in having a display mounted to the outside of the building. Over time, however, weather damage obscured its message.

But 20 years later, Bennett picked up the baton and found a willing partner in Central City Concern, the nonprofit that today uses the building to house homeless people.

“It was so damaged by weather that I had to do something,” Bennett said. “It was symbolic of the whole history. No-one’s taking care of it.”

An official reception will run from 4-7

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