

# Vintage violence

## Delta Arts shows reflections on racially motivated murders

BY TOM PATTERSON

Special Correspondent

The history of race relations in the United States is replete with situations and circumstances that reflect deep-seated prejudice and egregious injustice. In his solo exhibition at the Delta Arts Center, artist



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Tyler Starr focuses on specific examples from the 1960s, when the American South erupted with brutal attacks by white thugs on innocent black citizens, far too many

of whom didn't survive these encounters.

As suggested by the show's title, "Redress Papers," Starr's motive for revisiting these shocking episodes from our relatively recent history is to provide a belated remedy of sorts — at least to the extent of acknowledging and raising awareness about these events. The underlying implication is that such a painfully honest approach is necessary to the larger goal of healing this country's ongoing racial divisions.

Originally from Connecticut, Starr began to educate himself about the South only after he moved to this part of the country five years ago to teach at Davidson College, where he is an assistant professor of art. "Redress Papers" is one of the projects he has developed as an outgrowth of this self-education process, he explained in a related talk he gave at the Delta Arts Center earlier this month.

The project involved extensive research of declassified FBI documents about unresolved cold cases of murder and terrorism by the Ku Klux Klan and its sympathizers during the Civil Rights era. Starr combined photographs and other information from these documents with additional imagery in order to create the works on view.

The show consists mostly of



TYLER STARR

"Wharlest Jackson's 1958 Green Chevy Pick-up, Natchez, Mississippi"

uniformly framed, black-and-white photogravures, produced from photographic negatives transferred to metal plates. The graininess of the imagery in these works historically grounds them in an earlier era, but the violent racism of which they're reminders is a problem that's unfortunately still with us.

Nearly half of the latter works are from photos of cars whose black owners were driving when they were murdered by white racists. The cars in two of these images indicate severe damage from wrecks that occurred after the drivers were shot and lost control of their still-moving vehicles, and the victims are named in these car images' titles.

Also framed in this part of the exhibition is a reproduction of a related article from *Jet* magazine, about the drive-by shooting of Lemuel Penn, a black colonel who was driving through rural Georgia on his way home from Army-reserves

### If you go

**Who:** Tyler Starr  
**What:** "Redress Papers"  
**Where:** Delta Arts Center, 2611 New Walkertown Road, through Aug. 31; open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Friday; 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday. Closed on third Saturday of each month.  
**Information:** (336) 722-2625; [www.deltaartscenter.org](http://www.deltaartscenter.org)

training. The article includes a quotation from the minister who spoke at Penn's funeral, exhorting mourners to weep for the murderer's mother "who gave birth to a monstrosity she thought was a man."

Picking up on the "monstrosity" reference, Starr incorporated several images from Japanese films about giant monsters into this part of the show. As explained in a related wall text, these movie monsters represent "theatrical attempts to redress humanity's transgressions," and in this context they

tracked down color photographs corresponding to each of the Klan motorcade's 92 cars, identified in FBI documents by their make, model, color and year. The small images of cars — all manufactured between 1948 and 1965 — are set off against a neutral ground in two long rows above an array of buildings Starr recently photographed along the parade route through downtown Montgomery.

Also incorporated into the piece are a couple of collaged texts. One of these is an FBI summary of the investigation into Liuzzo's murder, including the names of all four suspects, none of whom were ever convicted. Even more shocking is the other text, a classified advertisement published in a Montgomery newspaper following the murder and investigation. In the ad, the car in which Liuzzo was murdered is offered for sale with "bullet holes and everything still intact," rendering it "ideal to bring in a crowd."

In his talk at the Delta Arts Center, Starr said that this exhibition grew out of an earlier project in which he used similar methods to reconsider the "Greensboro massacre." Five participants in a Greensboro anti-Klan rally in November 1979 were killed and 10 others wounded during this confrontation with regional members of the KKK and the American Nazi party. All of the defendants in subsequent state and federal trials of suspects in the attack were eventually acquitted, but the jury in a 1980 civil suit declared these groups liable for \$350,000 in damages and blamed the Greensboro Police Department for failing to act forcefully to prevent the assault.

This earlier project took the form of a fold-out brochure that included images of cars driven by the attackers and participants in the anti-Klan rally.

Starr's soberingly thought-provoking exhibition is the first in the Delta Arts Center's People's Gallery, a newly designated space for showing art intended as a social catalyst.

allude to Starr's experience of living in Japan for seven years while attending graduate school at Tokyo University of the Arts. Also juxtaposed with other imagery in the photogravures are Starr's own photos of illuminated overhead lamps, symbolizing his attempt to shed new light on the historical injustices on which his project centers.

Augmenting the photogravures is a much larger, full-color piece with a long, descriptive title — "KKK Redress Papers: Identification of Cars Participating in Klan Rally at Montgomery Alabama, March 21, 1965." This long, horizontal digital print visually reconstructs a Ku Klux Klan motorcade linked to the murder, four days later, of Viola Liuzzo, a black civil-rights worker while she was inside her 1963 Oldsmobile. The resultant FBI investigation determined that her killer or killers were traveling in a car that had been in the motorcade.

To create this piece, Starr

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