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SOUTH-CENTRAL

Posters and Documents Trace History of Black Panthers

Until the lions have their historians, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter.

This African proverb acts as a bookend to "All Power to the People," a showcase of protest posters, graphics, newspapers and government documents produced during the height of the Black Panther Party.

Compiled by the West Los Angeles-based Center for the Study of Political Graphics, the 94-piece exhibition is at the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, 6120 S. Vermont Ave., through Jan. 31.

"We can't understand the present if we don't understand history," said Carol Wells, one of the founders of the center and curator of the show. "If we really want to understand history, we have to look at these posters."

The 31-year-old library and the center are nonprofit operations that collect material on social struggles and political movements.

The exhibition, which borrows its name from a 1969 poster by Black Panther artist Emory Douglas, takes the viewer on a historical tour from the beginnings of the party to its triumphant days of political empowerment and its demise through government intervention and intra-party splintering.

"All the issues that the Panthers tried to struggle against—



MEL MELCON / For The Times

Show curator Carol Wells: "If we really want to understand history, we have to look at these posters."

racism, illiteracy, health care, hunger—are still issues today that need to be confronted," Wells said. "This is a show of what the Panthers wanted to accomplish and what happened to them. We are providing an introduction of what they were."

Scenes of police brutality and

racial violence captured on film or depicted by artists hang side-by-side, testament to the volatility of an era of black political empowerment that followed the 1965 Watts riots.

Part 1 of the series, "A Call to Arms," outlines how the party was modeled after the Communi-

ty Alert Patrol, a watchdog organization formed to protect black citizens of Watts from unlawful police actions. Founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party called on its members to bear weapons for self-defense.

The notorious 1970 poster of

Newton in Panther garb, sitting in a peacock chair wielding an African spear in one hand and a machine gun in the other, opens the second series, "Serving the People." Eighteen posters and other media report the party's political ambitions, from free medical health clinics to a grocery giveaway.

Three other sections depict how the party grew and then was dismantled by violence and government subversion. FBI documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act hang as evidence of government action to stymie the party's growth.

"The Struggle Continues," the last portion of the display, brings the party to the present with poster No. 90, "Free Geronimo Pratt." Pratt, who was the party's deputy minister of defense and head of the South-Central chapter, is serving a life sentence in the 1968 killing of a schoolteacher and the wounding of her husband. Pratt has steadfastly maintained that he was elsewhere at the time.

Because the Panthers split in 1970, Wells said, Pratt was forgotten during his trial by infighting party members.

"When we do these [types of] exhibits, we don't expect people to agree. There are different ways in seeing the world," Wells said. "In collecting these posters, we are the historians for the 'lions.'"

—ENRIQUE LAVIN