

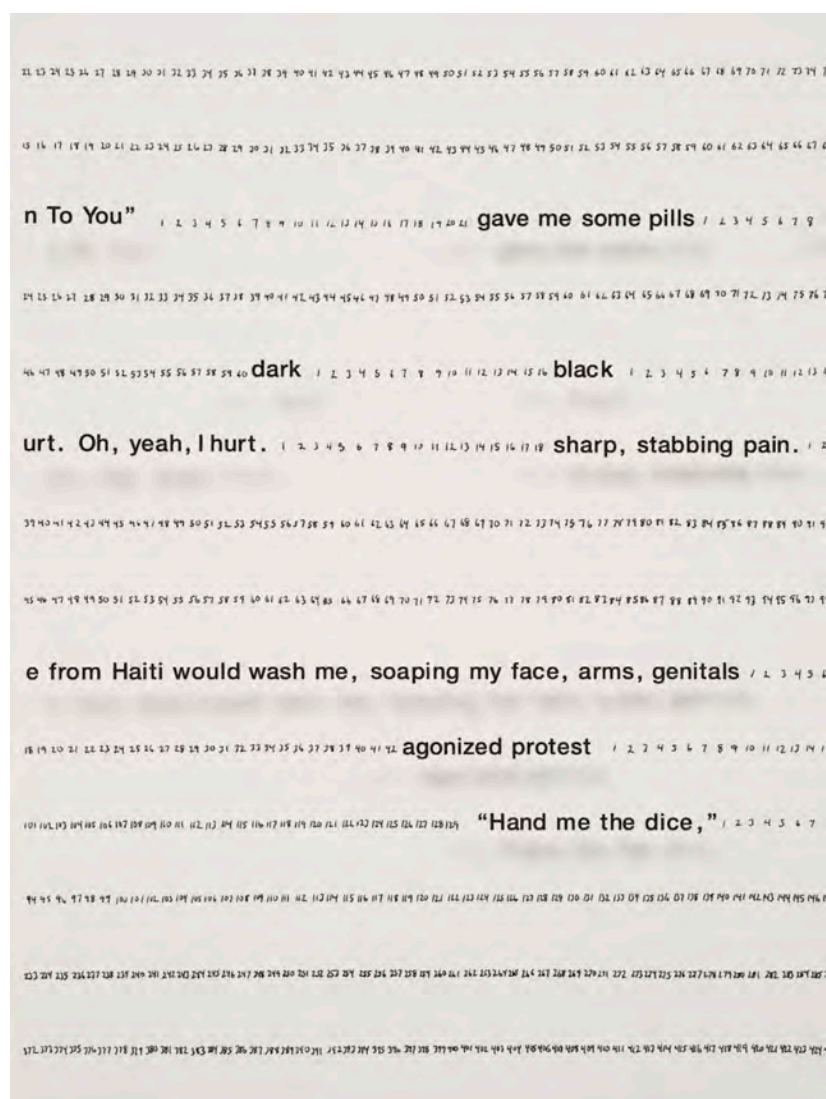
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INTERVIEW
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Charles Gaines by Ellen Tani

“It’s not that I’m a trailblazer, it’s that I decided to go somewhere for myself,” Charles Gaines says. In this expansive interview, one of our most profound critical thinkers, whose art redefines the American narrative, looks back on five decades of his career.

MARCH 15, 2024



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Charles-Gaines-2.jpg)

Detail of *Submerged Text: Signifiers of Race #4*, 1991, ink on paper and silkscreen on acrylic, two parts, each 37.25 × 31.25 × 1.5 inches (framed). Photo by Keith Lubow. Images courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth unless otherwise noted. Works © Charles Gaines.



SHARE

Since the early 1970s, Charles Gaines has made art through systems, from triptychs of hand-numbered grids that translate photographs into fields of text to musical notation derived from political manifestos and monumental machines that confront the dispossession and enslavement embedded in the foundational myth of the United States. Systems have enabled him to work on a structural level to explore how perception, cognition, and representation form meaning and to understand the political impact of that process. Long skeptical of the notion that works of art originate in an individual's creative subconscious, Gaines found in systems a method that both fulfilled his preoccupation with theory and distanced his own subjectivity from the work's aesthetics. His earliest series aligned with conceptual art in strategy and form—numbers, calculations, grids, and straight photos—but rather than develop a strictly informational or documentary apparatus, Gaines's systems work produced representations whose aesthetic effects and abstractions were indeterminate. Given his emergence within debates on Black art, Gaines's embrace of indeterminacy safeguarded against overdetermined interpretations of the work based on his racial identity.

Having shifted his focus from numerical systems in the 1970s to linguistic systems in the 1980s and political and ideological systems in the 1990s, Gaines's most recent work has a clarity of vision in its analysis of systemic conditions and the challenges of knowing them. He has retained a keen understanding of the legitimacy and limitations of discourse, and this criticality undergirds both his artistic practice and his pedagogical legacy: the work of students he has taught and artists he has mentored for fifty years. The prevalence of analytical and critical energy in his work belies the fact that Gaines is one of the kindest people I've had the privilege of studying and working with. A conceptual artist interested in postformalist strategies as well as issues of representation and social justice, Gaines stands at a unique art historical intersection—between conceptual art and Black art discourses and beyond debates of representation versus abstraction—that has yet to be explored.



(<https://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/being-art-for-zhegagoynak-chicagoland.html>)



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Absent Figures: Rainier, Version 2, Nestler Files, 2000, photographs and silkscreened text over photograph, five parts, overall dimensions variable. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen.

Ellen Tani

Your artistic practice is committed to criticality, resulting in wide-ranging experimentation that supersedes any specific style or category of description. It's restless. Of course, you've made significant contributions to the field as both an artist and a teacher, and one of the things we learn in the learning process is how to develop criticality as we encounter information. Knowledge is not given but shaped, and we must understand the structure that produces and presents information in a certain way. How has teaching informed your art practice, and vice versa?

Charles Gaines

I've taught my whole adult life, starting at Mississippi Valley State in Itta Bena in 1967. I didn't have a firm sense of education or how one should be an educator in the arts, so I framed my early teaching according to the idea that I had to invest myself in topics and strategies that are interesting to me. The challenge, of course, was that the curricular environment might not permit me to do that. I could have been asked early on to teach technical courses, which would have been a problem for me. I learned technique, but I'm not suited to teach it because it doesn't help me think about making art. At Mississippi Valley State, though, I was asked to teach art history, which was really super. I had the fun of teaching myself basic art history— *Janson's History of Art* and *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*—because I only had a year of art history in undergraduate school. From this I realized that the best teaching environment is one in which I can learn as much as the people who are in the class.

Later on, when I went to teach at California State University, Fresno, in 1968, the teaching environment allowed me to evolve what I started in Mississippi. I was required to teach an atelier-style beginner painting course, but because Fresno State then had a fairly radical theory of curriculum, I could also conduct another course in whatever way I chose. I was allowed to invent my own course at Fresno State. This class I called Content and Form, and I taught it for the next fifty years. I used literature and texts to introduce theory into the context of studio art. It wasn't like a philosophy or theory class in an academic department but rather legitimately presented theory and criticality as part of a studio practice. When you're in the studio, sloshing paint around, you're thinking. I read books on the theory of painting so I could intellectualize the practice and create an environment for students to learn how to apply theory to production. Once students get past technical training, they have to access their subjectivity and expressivity, and Content and Form gave space to do that. When theory and criticality are brought into making art, they

automatically conflict with subjectivity. The line of thought in those days was that critical thinking was not a practice in the studio, where the work, the doing, was about expressivity.

“I had an understanding of art, and with that I wanted to introduce critical thinking into studio practice, not as something ancillary but central.”

— Charles Gaines

ET

Artists were taught a curriculum that assumed that art practice came from some creative subconscious, an idea you sought to teach against. That was the curriculum that you were taught, the place from which you developed your early abstract paintings. Your entry into conceptualism in the early 1970s came from “undisciplining” your own art education, in the sense that you understood creativity as determined by history rather than by the individual. In a studio note from 1980, you wrote, “Unlike the abstract painters and the surrealists, I do not associate the functioning unconscious with creativity. Creativity is a function determined by history, not by artists. The thing I like about systems is their purposelessness. This aspect of it undermines the connection between motive and result and causes the investigation itself to function as an image.” We see the investigation itself function as an image in your earliest “gridwork,” the Regression series, from 1973 to 1974, where you plotted mathematical regression calculations onto gridded paper, which generated abstract forms. But you were already thinking about arbitrary association (which systems enable) in some eponymous paintings from graduate school in the late '60s.

CG

You’re right. Of course, teaching against the idea of the creative subconscious was really about pleasing myself. The idea that making art came from this psychoanalytical notion of intuitive expression was odd, clearly, though an entire history of art was built around it. It’s at the basis of modernism. In graduate school, they throw you into the studio and say, “Make art.” Creating a teaching environment where I could engage theory and criticality as part of the studio operation was interesting to me because that’s what I was doing myself.

ET

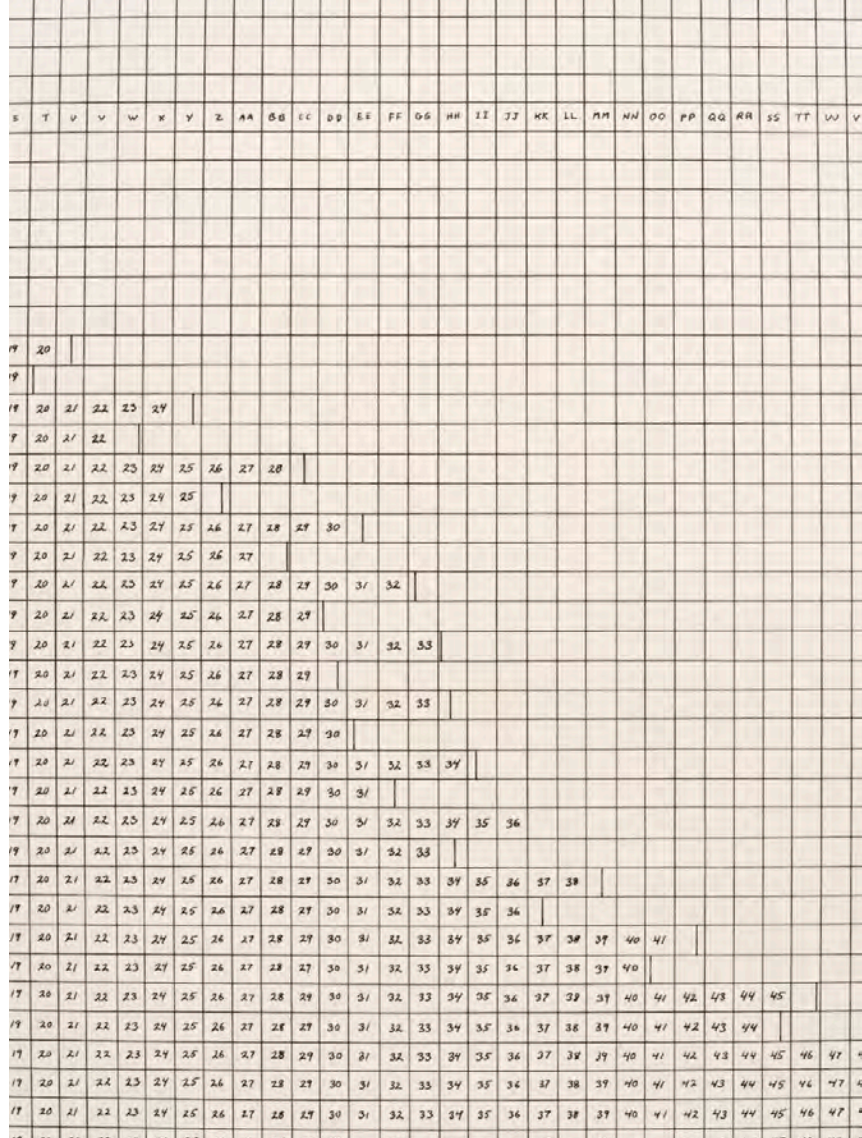
You taught yourself art history with *Janson’s* and *Gardner’s* for that first class at Mississippi Valley State, but your worldview as an artist was already shaped by Henri Focillon’s *The Life of Forms in Art* and George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, writings about the history of art that actually are not art

history, in a disciplinary sense. In your origin as an artist and teacher, there's tension between these undisciplinary works and these very conventional histories of art.

CG

They seem in conflict, but each engaged a certain aspect of my understanding. David Hayes, a curator at the Guggenheim, introduced me to Focillon and Kubler in graduate school. Their ideas with respect to art and history introduced me to forces in art practice that were more important than artistic ego, will, and creativity. Hayes also introduced me to the contemporary art of the time, which was essentially pop, minimalism, and conceptual art, which in 1966 wasn't very well defined. I discovered from him a dimension of art that made me think that making art was something I wanted to do.

Because I wasn't saddled with teaching technical courses at Fresno State, I could do whatever I pleased, which gave me an idea about how to shape teaching. That led me to introduce the ideas of Focillon and Kubler. Their books really affected the way I made art, but teaching myself art history via *Janson's* and *Gardner's* affected the way that I thought about the ideas by Focillon and Kubler that I later put forth. Making art and teaching merged by the time I got to Fresno State. In studio courses I found that it was perfectly okay to introduce ideas that had little to do with technique. I had an understanding of art, and with that I wanted to introduce critical thinking into studio practice, not as something ancillary but central.



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Detail of *Regression: Group #1*, 1973–74, ink on paper, seven parts, each 23 × 29 inches (unframed); 29 × 35 × 2 inches (framed). Photo by Jeff McLane.

ET

Was it rare in the 1960s to have a studio curriculum that involved critical theory?

CG

It was unheard of! There was no model out there for this kind of education, and it's still somewhat novel. What helped me along in this work was a course I took in undergraduate school at Jersey City State College with Dr. Vogel, who introduced me to what Gregory Babcock and Calvin Tomkins called the "new art." That was my first introduction to Fluxus and radical ideas about artistic practice, from which I understood the charge to put in proper context technique's role in the production of art. The idea of the avant-garde was then very useful to articulate this transition, and I think that the avant-garde gave me the license to create this new pedagogy—of course, there were other things the avant-garde didn't tell me to do. Contemporary artists then were taking radical approaches to making art, but teachers remained very conservative, so there was a gap between what was going on in the

art world and in the classroom. I was a young person learning the idea of making art, but encountering ideas of the avant-garde in education was unusual because they were thought of as heretical and problematic.

ET

Avant-garde work was probably too contemporary to have been addressed in some of these conventional art history survey texts.

CG

We were struggling with Pollock. (*laughter*) Avant-garde artists thought Pollock was the real problem. They understood that the modernist notion of subjective expression was interfering with their aims of making new art and critiquing accepted strategies and practices. The only way you encountered that kind of idea was if you were lucky enough to have a teacher who brought them to you. When I was in Jersey City, Dr. Vogel gave me access to these ideas in an academic format, not a studio environment. By the time I got to graduate school and met David Hayes, I already had a primer to engage with them.

ET

Your work's nonalignment with conventional artistic modalities and positions has proved both inspiring and challenging for you. In an unpublished artist statement from 1980, you wrote, "I believe good work undermines categories, and its test (and its death) is its success." To me, this recalls the shifting circumstances of support and legibility your work has been subjected to. Critical discourse lagged behind your output, even as you exhibited with prominent galleries and institutions. Criticality is so central to your career, both how it characterizes your artistic practice and how its absence conditions your experience as an artist. The exhibition that you and Catherine Lord organized in 1993, *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, pointed directly to the problem of critical discourse that was not equipped to address the work of Black artists.

CG

In the '70s, I experienced this paradox of major representation but little critical consideration. It's a complicated argument. What I was trying to do was not really being attempted by other artists, but no one was interested in thinking about it, which can be explained by the range of what was accepted discourse at the time. This condition might affect any artist. I achieved major representation—there were only two or three Black artists of my generation whose work was shown on this level—but there was this curious glass ceiling I couldn't get beyond. On the one hand, there's a natural resistance to ideas that are different from what's accepted, and an artist must fight through this consensus. On the other hand, there's the reality of the racist art world, which is more complicated than the general social-cultural space where people of different races and cultures have to coexist. Generally artists tend to be—I say

“tend to be” — more liberal and critical in their social views. On an individual basis, you can have these ordinary relationships with white people, but eventually you become aware that there is a determining factor standing in your way. A white person can be unfettered and move in a certain direction, but you can’t, and you encounter these walls in various ways. That was my experience, and other Black artists also found that they weren’t allowed to participate in the social space of art.

This happens covertly and overtly. *Numerals, 1924–1977* my first show at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1978, the one that got me representation, traveled. Rainer Crone, the curator, wasn’t thinking about race. Sol LeWitt, who recommended me to Rainer, wasn’t thinking about race either, he just thought the work needed to be seen. At that level, I could see how I was being treated like anybody else in the social space of art, but when I got closer to institutional structures, the walls went up. The first wall I ran into was at the opening at Dartmouth College, where my mere presence caused a problem. People were shocked, and I found out later it was because they didn’t expect me. This awkward situation transpired in which people, including the chief curator of the museum, apologized to me that I was not invited to dinner with everyone else because the restaurant wouldn’t serve Black people. This was 1978. I thought, Why would they go to a restaurant that wouldn’t serve Black people? There’s a point where white people face the wrath of the institutional structure that makes Black people incommensurable and give into it. They refuse to violate the institutional structure that they profess to condemn and thereby reinforce it. Every single Black artist that I know, all people who are very well known now, were marginalized in precisely the same way.

So many minority artists were working in New York City and in Los Angeles in those days, but few managed to get through the wall. I managed to get through for a particular moment, but the discourse never really caught up with my work anyway. When it came to conceptual art, the modernists were not interested in the idea of theorizing art but rather in art as an activity of theorization. My work was too invested in representation, and they were not at all invested in the idea of a studio practice being a critical analysis of culture. But I was! So, even within the radical avant-garde, the discursive space that permitted me was limited. In the 1980s, there was this push to kill conceptual art, because it’s boring, and bring back painting. Certain artists wanted to get back to poetry—German neo-expressionism and figuration came back—and there was this belief that conceptual art was not poetic. I couldn’t develop a discourse around my practice in this environment because my work wasn’t permitted.

“There’s a point where white people face the wrath of the institutional structure that makes Black people incommensurable and give into it.

They refuse to violate the institutional structure that they profess to condemn and thereby reinforce it.”

— Charles Gaines

ET

And in the '70s and '80s, people asked you, “Why are you making ‘white art’?” If you had been making Black art, Leo Castelli and John Weber would not have shown your work.

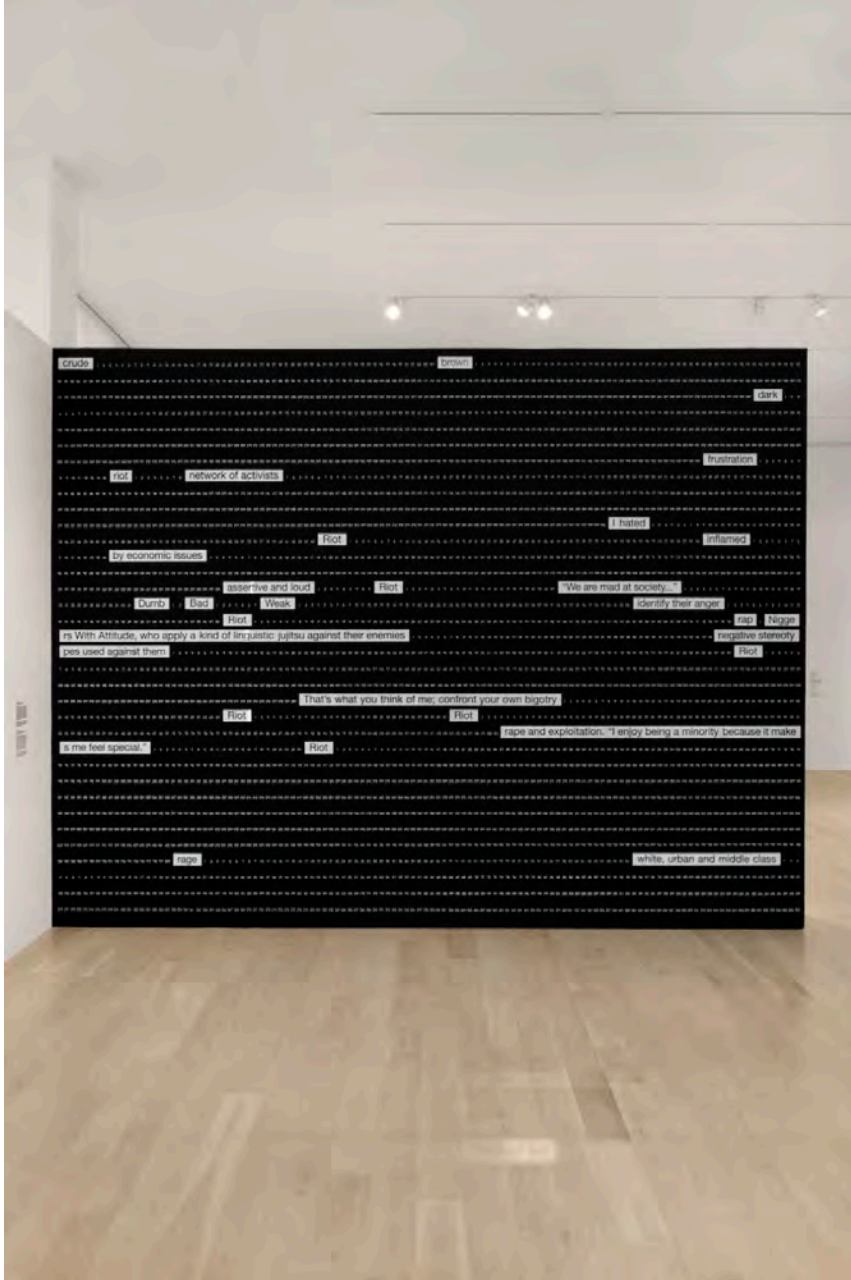
CG

They would not.

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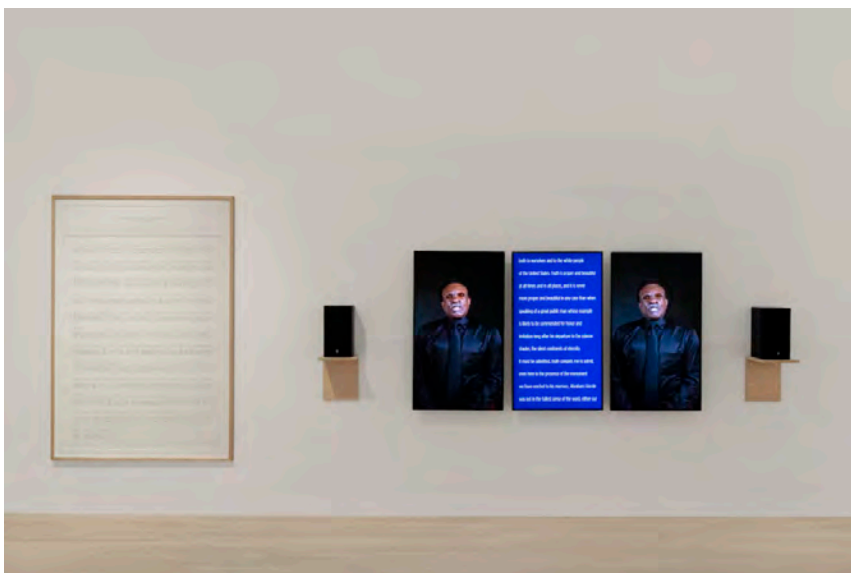
You managed to make a career between a rock and a hard place, amid the demands of representation and the challenges imposed by the segregated art world. In the 1970s, many Black artists believed that their work needed to contribute to the progressive aims of cultural and social betterment. As a conceptual artist interested in questions of representation, however, you resisted that, thinking beyond the possibility of those legitimizing structures.

Finding a fruitful place for exploration and inquiry within this paradox, instead of a paralyzing dead end, is one of the gifts of your practice. So much of your work explores a state of incommensurability or brings together different fields of knowledge, aesthetic devices, or contents and forms that don't seem like they can work in the same space but do. And that generates a poetics. You, as a conceptual artist, are introducing poetics into a set of methods and tactics that lays the groundwork for later generations of artists who are interested in representation and poiesis. A real spirit of generosity characterizes the way you move in the world. Where does that come from?



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SubmergedText: Signifiers of Race #11, 1993–2023, UV print on acrylic, paper, and acrylic paint on wall, installation dimensions variable. Photo by Zachary Balber.



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Installation view of *Manifestos 5*, 2023, three-channel video (color, sound, 5 minutes 24 seconds), one graphite drawing on paper, three monitors, two speakers, two hanging speaker shelves, installation dimensions variable. Photo by Zachary Balber.

CG

What you might call “generosity” comes from teaching, though I’m unsure if it’s actually a completely generous or self-effacing act. Not being invested in subjectivity, I decided early on that I couldn’t rely on my intuition to get beyond my habits and expectations. Even if intuition could do that, I wouldn’t recognize it as moving beyond because, according to that practice of art, you’re not supposed to think about what you intuit. To go beyond the limits and use art as an activity of invention, I’ve had to access the minds of others. From books, conversations with other artists, and the Content and Form class and other seminars, I’ve learned a lot. With my students, I’ve created situations in which they could be free from intellectual constraints. It’s a tough job, but I’ve tried to free them, and we’ve gotten into this space where anything’s possible. I can access their perspectives, which I otherwise wouldn’t know. Keeping the general framework unframed, I’ve found that I could imagine and invent things that I would never be able to otherwise. That started quite early. So generosity is an outcome of creating these open situations, which is essential to our production as artists and as thinkers.

You have no ability to control how you’re defined in the world. It’s not up to you. This narrative formed about what I was trying to do and how I had made certain possibilities for other artists—it was almost like a metonymy, but without cause and effect. It was a description of my influence, but it mostly described an illusion. I didn’t embrace it initially, not out of humility but because I needed to feel that I had made change happen, and in this case I did not. Metonymy is not how ideas and human relationships evolve. Absolutely not. Influence is a very complex prism, it’s reflective and deflective, so you have to give people who think about the narratives of influence a lot of credit. Thelma Golden has told me several times about the contributions that I’ve made and how my work has made a real impression on other artists, for example, the idea that as a Black artist, you can do anything, make any kind of work. Being in the gallery legitimated my effort to make more expansive work, or at least work that was different from whatever else was going on at the time, opening the opportunity for other artists to make their own explorations.

Coinciding with the reactionary discourse of neo-expressionism was the introduction of more language-based and literary interpretations of works of art, which made it possible to deal with issues of gender and race in a universal manner. The idea of universality, at least as its proponents argued, was not encumbered by the fact that artists were investigating their own genders or races. A lot of people said that I and other Black artists working in

the 1970s helped this transition into practices informed by language that gave younger artists license to make the work they wanted to make. This is not the way I experienced it, but I give credit to the people who developed these narratives, even though this history evolved not through cause and effect. It's not that I'm a trailblazer, it's that I decided to go somewhere for myself. It's a very complicated situation, but at this point I am willing to embrace these narratives with the caveat that influence is never so direct.

ET

As a human subject, you have little control over the aesthetic effect of the work, which establishes its value of indeterminacy. You became interested in questions of representation because they're really questions about culture, and culture is not determined by the artist but rather in the mind of the viewer. Artists can't set out with an intention to have their work mean a certain thing because viewers, who are shaped by their own cultural backgrounds and contexts, generate meaning.

With this in mind, I want to ask you about the series of works from the mid-1990s to early 2000s referred to collectively as *Disaster Narratives*— *Night/Crimes*, *Missing Figures*, *Absent Figures*—that combine a photograph of a person with a narrative description and some reference to nature or space that forces the viewer to draw a meaningful relationship between them, even though the association is arbitrary. To me, these works carry forward some of the ideas from the early gridwork— combining text and image in adjacent relationships in series—but are updated with the critical theory of the 1980s. The *Disaster Narratives* series explore how viewers make meaning from pieces of information, linguistic and visual. Did the *Disaster Narratives* help you solve problems that were going on with the work, or respond to some contemporary event?

“I wanted to demonstrate how our poetic and aesthetic judgments are embodied within discourse, rather than being totally free properties, and to explain why I wasn't interested in subjectivity as a tool of production.”

— Charles Gaines

CG

I'm from a generation of autodidacts that studied postcolonial theory, semiotics, poststructuralism, feminist theory, race theory, “critical theory,” if only because there was nowhere else for us to go. Developing my Content and Form class directly from Focillon and Kubler led me into structuralism and poststructuralism. I saw a relationship between those thinkers and Derrida and Foucault, which of course they'd strongly reject. (*laughter*) I was interested in

relationships and sequencing, and really it was through Kubler that I started thinking about structures, which led me to study sociology, which led to a shift in my thinking. My interest with the gridworks was to demonstrate how the art object is as an aesthetic object produced by a system. Certainly I'm not the first person to use systems to make works of art, but my interest in doing so was probably more critical than others'. I wanted to demonstrate how our poetic and aesthetic judgments are embodied within discourse, rather than being totally free properties, and to explain why I wasn't interested in subjectivity as a tool of production. Reading Focillon and Kubler, there are so many properties that determine a work of art and have nothing to do with the artist's subjectivity. We're taught the opposite case, that art is totally determined by the artist's intuition and subjectivity, and a talented artist is one who makes the object that can unify differences among people. Genius, right? This premise is a lie, which has only now been embraced by discourse.

Quite early on, I started thinking about how this lie concretizes the significant positions of certain people in the history of modernism. As I got into reading critical theorists and deconstruction, I realized that if I dealt with language, then I could show how thought is discursively framed, particularly poetic thought. Language is my subject in this case. And so, with the *Disaster Narratives—Night/Crimes* is probably pivotal to this work—I was demonstrating how it's impossible to put two or more elements together without forming a meaningful relationship between them. If I did some blatantly arbitrary gesture, the viewer would inevitably make meaning from it because our cognitive and perceptual apparatus automatically operates in this way. The big ideas that we have in the world do not only come from arbitrary genius intuition but rather also from our experiences. Our experiences create a reality even more real than the one created by the poetic utterances of a certain subject.

The second critique that I foregrounded with the *Disaster Narratives*, which is also related to subjectivity, was how the poetic comes from our intuition or imagination, which we've been conditioned to understand are absolutely free and unfettered. The role of the artist, supposedly, is to remove inhibitions to our imagination. This is why artists think reading is bad, right? (*laughter*) I wanted to show that the ideological intent of modernism is to create this false notion that we can only have an aesthetic or poetic experience through the unfettered imagination. If random elements make meaning, as they do in the disasters, then that undermines the notion of the subjective imagination as the sole source of poetic experience in works of art. I thought I could reveal the ideological reasons for perpetuating the myth of the poetic genius through the *Disaster Narratives* by using tragedy, one of the most powerful and consummate tropes of human

emotion. Tragedy creates narrative, which can be employed to uphold ideology, and narrative is a synonym for the modernist ideology of the unfettered imagination.



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Night/Crimes: Taurus, 1995, photographs and silkscreened text on acrylic, 60 x 44.75 x 2.

ET

Looking at those works, I wouldn't think they critique ideology. If you're a self-conscious critical thinker, they don't point to anything other than your own subjectivity.

CG

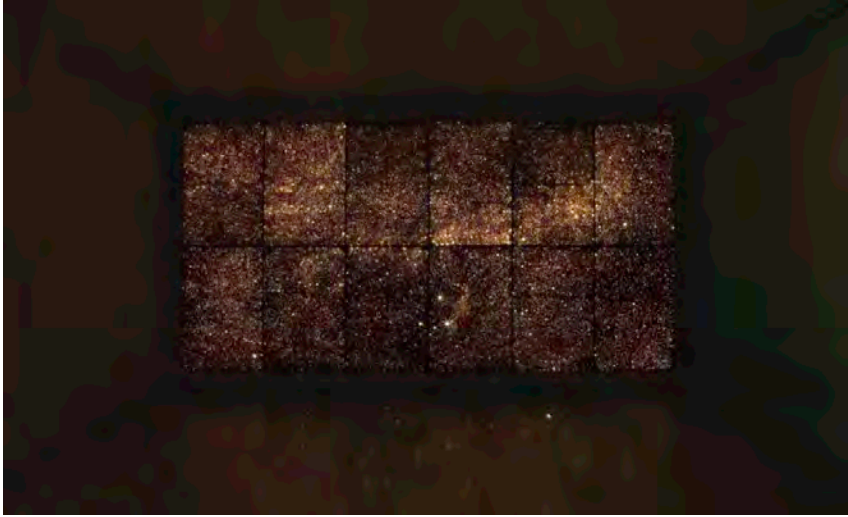
What happens then is that my claims are held to be suspicious. I knew that was going to happen, so that's why I did it.

ET

The kind of strategic undermining that you're doing in these works is so subtle. It isn't easy to register as a political act or as an artistic act.

CG

Because it doesn't follow the standard way a political subject is addressed. As you go through those earlier pieces, the question is, Well, what are they about? I'm making transparent how the works assemble their own invention. That invention doesn't overtake the experience because we're fully aware of how a system produced it. This continues with the *Manifestos* series and the *Sound Text* pieces. When poetry happens in the music, it conventionally means intention, that the source of this experience, the art, is the artist's imagination. But at the same time, you know that it isn't purely imagination because you're aware that the work was put together by a randomizing system. Viewers go off in many directions to resolve this paradox, but one common response is that I'm still using my imagination—and I am. The pieces are products of my imagination, but the experience of them is unknown to me. Viewers insist that it is indeed known to me to resolve the problem of the work, but paradox persists, and the question of the work's subject arises. Is it about the subject, or is it about the construction of that subject through the intervention of language, how language produces the subject? I have argued for a long time that in my work the subject was how the structure that determines meaning operates as a set of rules and conditions, not its direct object. I shifted later to being more direct because I was criticized for being obtuse or indirect about what the subject of the work is, what is being critiqued. Even though the experience of the work is quite powerful, both the artwork and the viewer produce it. The subject that produces this paradox between what is arbitrary and what is intended is so obscured that people started yelling at me for that. *(laughter)* That was when I decided to take on the issue of subjects, in this case, the political subject. I believed I was already involved in a political critique, but in the new work the politics became more obvious.



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Sky Box II, 2020, acrylic, digital print, aluminum, polyester film, and LED lights, 12 x 24 feet. Photo by Katherine du Tiel.

ET

You've retained some of that oblique approach in your more recent work, a strategy that, to me, registers as a practice of Black conceptualism. But within your broader practice, you've grappled with the expectation that as a Black artist your work should reflect your lived experience. This goes back to the question you were asked about making "white art."

CG

I always believed I wasn't making "white art." What was the basis of that belief? That I couldn't figure out for a long time.

ET

But there is a sense in the work of turning to a system to enable that obliqueness by mediating your subjectivity in relation to the aesthetic effect of the work. There's no easily traceable line back to you, Charles Gaines, a living person in the world. Perhaps this obliqueness or elusiveness is why your work wasn't largely historicized, or theorized, or appreciated until quite late in your career.

It's fascinating to see your work orient itself toward political histories, say, in the 2013 series *Manifestos* and *Notes on Social Justice*, but even as early as 2006 in the first *Explosion* drawings, which paired a drawing of an unknown explosion with a handwritten "appendix" that referenced political histories. While political histories might not have been present as a subject in the earlier work, what remains consistent is your attention to systems, whether of artistic production, ideology, or the systematic conditions of segregation. In the last two years, you've made *Moving Chains*, a gigantic, kinetic public sculpture about histories of the transatlantic slave trade and Indigenous dispossession in New York City. You're moving more in a direction that your work began to turn to in the 2000s.

CG

Right, I'm glad you noticed that. *(laughter)*

ET

It's the most literal, mechanical interpretation of your work.

(laughter) I remember seeing *Sky Box I* in your studio, when you were developing how the lights in the room would work and how the perforations in the surface of the lightboxes would register the appearance of a night sky and show texts by Gerrard Winstanley, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and Ho Chi Minh. When the lights are up, *Sky Box II* shows Supreme Court documents related to the Dred Scott case, the legal text that established that African Americans were not entitled to the rights of US citizens by way of belonging to a "lesser race." As the lights in the room fade, the text becomes inscrutable as the lightbox transforms into an image of the night sky. In this beautiful articulation of the incommensurable as the space of possibility, we are left to compare the opacity of legal language as a tool of power to the universe beyond and to ponder the question of race, of who gives value to difference.

I think this relates to your growing up in South Carolina and asking existential questions like, *Why is a pig a pig?* and, *Why is a bird a bird?* while grappling with the arbitrary structures of differentiation imposed by Jim Crow-era segregation: *Why can't I drink from this fountain?* Your lived experience of systemic racism shapes your understanding of how meaning is made in the world. Race structures our lives and our ability to make meaning in the world, and racism is an effect of our perceptual cognitive apparatus: we associate a meaning with what we see, and that idea perpetuates. *Sky Box II* investigates incommensurability by presenting how two entities are rendered incompatible, arbitrarily and very consciously.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Charles-Gaines_10.jpg)

Moving Chains, 2022, sapele (African mahogany), aluminized steel chains, rockwool, marine-grade plywood, stainless steel and zinc-plated hardware, Plexiglas, rubber, and electric motors, unique, 17 × 18 × 110 feet. Photo by Timothy Schenck. Presented by Creative Time and Governors Island Arts.

CG

How can assumption describe a very complex set of experiences? The question “Why are you making ‘white art?’” didn’t make any sense to me, but still I thought it was a good question to deal with, particularly with respect to myself. After reading half a library of theoretical texts, I began to form an argument about how my work was a property of my lived experience. I think that is crucial in works of art; it’s the firewall between the old modernist idea of the universal and the critique of subjectivity. After coming to this position, I was interviewed by the brilliant theorist Saidiya Hartman at the convening for *Moving Chains*, and I tried to explain how incommensurability is the lived experience of Black people. The power of structural racism is to keep a space of inviolability between elements, to enforce a “natural” reason why two things can’t be brought together. In my work, anything can be brought together into discursivity. The lived experience of Black people is to understand they’re living in the space of incommensurability. For example, the Jim Crow laws or the Black Codes, very specific sets of rules, did not create a highly defined pattern of understanding who you are and where your space should be but rather an incommensurate space that produced a certain elasticity of definition. Even as a five-year-old living under Jim Crow, I said, This just doesn’t make any sense! Under what terms am I—me, my consciousness—barred from drinking from this fountain? After you dismantle the order that way, you’re left in an incommensurate space. I think that is the natural conscious space of all minorities, and I decided to use that logic to unpack the world through works of art. There are different politics for dealing with the reality of this incommensurability, and some of them try to create new concrete spaces that are commensurable, but these new spaces are constructs coming out of the incommensurable. White people don’t experience this because they naturalized this arbitrary system as a logical construct centuries ago.

Within the context of a single life, the pattern of the commensurate is there. It doesn’t seem like it’s something that was created, it just seems natural. It extends back to, at least in terms of our lives as Western people, European colonial and imperial desire. The long view of the history of Black people, or people of color generally, is not available to them as it is to white people. Cutting off one’s history produces, again, this incommensurability. I’m still coming from my experiences in the Jim Crow South, but I’m not trying to overcome the incommensurable, I’m trying to reveal the power in incommensurability because the idea of normalcy, of ordinariness, of the natural is a fiction created by white people. It’s pure fiction. It’s empowering to recognize that. If I could show how this operates in the world through making works of art and critical theory and analysis, then that’s just what I have to do.

ET

Questioning codes of normalcy and critically interrogating what we take for granted as normal is so relevant to your project and to contemporary art practices that extend far beyond conversations around racial difference. In the series *Submerged Text: Signifiers of Race*, you extrude the racializing language in articles and texts whose subjects are neither race nor art to argue that racism is embedded in language, regardless of the author's intent. You directed this pointed critique toward mainstream art criticism in the exhibition *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, which you curated with Catherine Lord in 1993. This criticality extends logically to the decolonial project, which you and I have had the opportunity to explore as cocurators in our revisitation of *The Theater of Refusal* as part of *RETROaction*, which mobilizes the show's original curatorial framework to interrogate how Black artists working in abstraction rigorously engage decolonial thinking from unexpected perspectives. Considering that arc, I wonder if you might reflect on your survey at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, and what it tells you about your own trajectory of thought.

CG

It covers the last thirty years, and if I compare it with the earlier survey at the Studio Museum in Harlem, *Gridworks 1974–1989*, which explored one aspect of my practice, the difference is that the later survey reinforces a certain consistency of practice, even though the strategies I used to make work over three decades are quite diverse. This is thanks to how Gean Moreno organized the exhibition: it looks and feels like a project. The gaps between series can seem quite wide, but with this totalizing look at what's gone on in my practice, everything can be explained because each work expresses a process.

When I'm making the work, all kinds of ideas flow through me, and I just hope that there's a certain consistency. *Consistency* is a dangerous word, but what I mean is that artists should very consciously be involved in a project that contributes ideas to the world that improve the world. Artists do not just create objects that make people feel good or excite some interest but rather rethink whole aspects of knowledge and human existence. As an artist, I want to think that the project of making art has this goal of shaping discourse, that this is what it does for the world.

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