

ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Charles Gaines, by the Numbers

The artist on his new work at the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Alabama, the development of his practice and taking drum lessons from Jimmie Smith.

By Adam Bradley

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The conceptual artist Charles Gaines, best known for his rules-based grid works that he began making in the 1970s, had his imagination shaped by his experiences of difference. Born in Charleston, S.C., in 1944, a full decade before the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that desegregated public schools in law if not in life, he realized, he says, that "there was a whole cultural and social order based upon differences between white and Black people." So many of the adults around him seemed to accept Jim Crow segregation as immutable. "At the time, I didn't know how a whole set of cultural values could expand out of the idea of that difference," he says. "Even as a kid it seemed arbitrary to me."

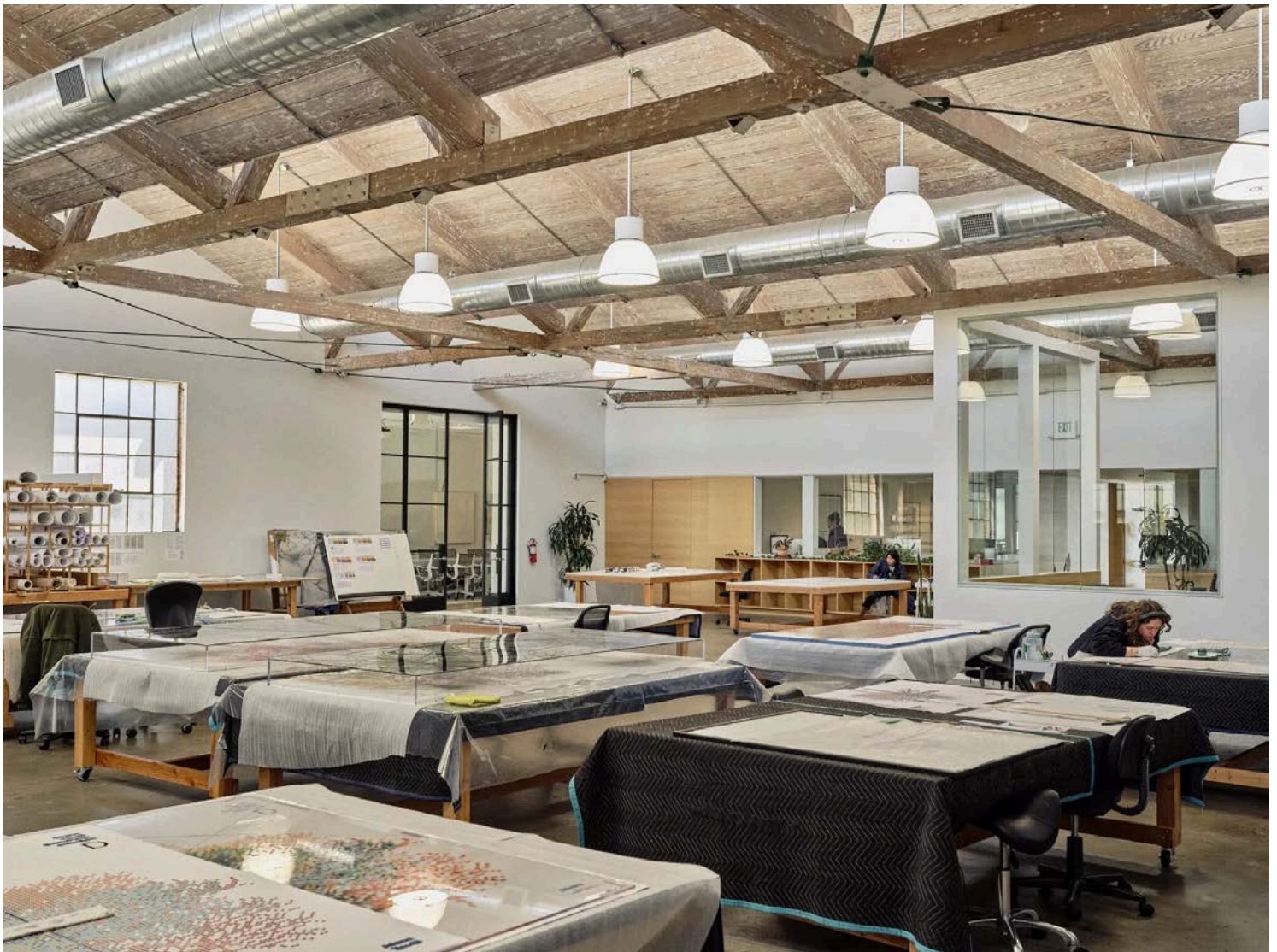
Soon after moving with his parents to Newark, N.J., at age 5, Gaines was recognized by his teachers for his art — but even then in a manner that called attention to difference. "My fourth-grade teacher told my mother she should encourage my art career because if I succeeded, I would be the first Black artist in the history of the world," he says with a laugh. "I appreciate her sentiment, but it shows the vast gap of knowledge, and why Black people are so mistreated." Trained in traditional art-making approaches from high school through college at Jersey City State College (now New Jersey City University) and graduate school at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Gaines was inspired by the minimalist and early conceptualists of the 1960s. Their work liberated him to think about art's

possibilities in an audaciously conceptual manner. “Being able to draw and being an artist are two entirely different universes; they’re not really related,” he says. “To be an artist is complicated and varied, depending on the individual and their circumstances.”



Gaines in front of his work "Numbers and Trees: Arizona Series 1, Tree #8, Cave" (2023). Philip Cheung

Gaines moved from making big abstract paintings in the style favored by his instructors to making process-oriented works following a systematized approach of his own design, in an effort to unmask how politically and ideologically driven concepts like creativity and genius really are. "I wanted to make a type of work whose production is of consequence to the system rather than my imagination," he says. This creates a selfless art, both in terms of extinguishing most signs of subjectivity and in the sense of its service to a broader community and a broader truth.



An assistant working in the Great Hall area of Gaines's studio. Philip Cheung

Nowhere was this more impactful than in 1993 when, along with the artist and writer Catherine Lord, he curated the landmark exhibition of Black art known as “The Theater of Refusal.” As early as 1989, Gaines had conceived of a show that would juxtapose powerful contemporary work by Black Americans with deprecating excerpts by art critics, highlighting the profound mismeasure of these artists’ achievements. By the time Gaines had secured a site for the exhibition at the University of California, Irvine, many of the neglected and disparaged artists featured in the show — Renée Green, Gary Simmons, David Hammons, Adrian Piper and Jean-Michel Basquiat — were now celebrated. This shifted, though certainly didn’t undercut, Gaines’s critique. High visibility and marginality can coexist, he argued. In an introductory essay for “The Theater of Refusal,” Gaines explains the concept of the exhibition was about how “the critical environment surrounding the works of these artists intentionally and unintentionally limits those works, creating a theater of refusal that punishes the work of Black artists by making it immune to history and by immunizing history against it.” Long out of print, the catalog for the exhibition will be republished in an expanded 30th anniversary edition later this fall.



Templates and plans for work in a corner of the Great Hall. Philip Cheung

Gaines's practice doesn't rely on making paintings or photographs or sculptures, though the work he's created over his long career has involved painting on paper and canvas, sculpting using metal and wood and photographing. Instead, his artistic aim, he says, is to "propose and develop concepts and ideas" using those materials. A trained musician, Gaines also increasingly involves sound. Among his most audacious efforts is his ongoing "Manifestos" series, in which Gaines selects textual excerpts of around 300 words from major political tracts (such as the 1857 Dred Scott supreme court decision that denied citizenship to Black people, and Frederick Douglass's impassioned response) and then transforms them letter by letter into musical notes. He uses the 12-tone scale, following a Baroque tradition, with the letter A corresponding to the A note, all the way through G (H becomes B

minor), and with all letters in the alphabet thereafter signaling a pause or a silence. Gaines then shapes a melody, builds a chord structure and scores the automatic composition for a nine-piece ensemble, in what ends up sounding like a purposeful Modernist composition.



A flat file cabinet in Gaines's studio. Philip Cheung

Gaines, 79, has been making art for more than half a century, but he's never been as busy — and as visible — as he is now. In 2018, he joined Hauser & Wirth, and he has since debuted major exhibitions and public commissions, most recently a site-specific installation with Bryan Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative that will be featured in Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery, Ala., a 17-acre site overlooking the Alabama River. Gaines has designed a 30-foot support structure

from which a bronze-cast oak tree hangs by a noose. Though mechanized, it appears to sway with the breeze. The installation is a striking riff on the “southern trees” of which the poet and composer Abel Meeropol wrote and Billie Holiday sang, an elegy for the thousands of Black Americans murdered by lynching. Like much of Gaines’s work, it is socially aware without being propagandistic, relying instead on a visitor’s direct experience of the site.

In March, I visited Gaines at his 11,000-square-foot warehouse studio, located in southeast Los Angeles’s Huntington Park neighborhood, where he answered T’s Artist’s Questionnaire.



More works from Gaines’s “Numbers and Trees” series. Philip Cheung

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

I don't think anyone's ever asked me that. My earliest memory [of making art] was in grammar school in Newark, N.J. In the fourth grade there was a mural, and I was asked to paint an image of the California gold rush: an image of someone panning for gold, standing in the river. I guess I'd call that an artwork in the oldest, most traditional sense. But the thing that probably informed my imagination the way I use it now is something else. I used to play this game — I was a Brooklyn Dodgers fan — outside our house. I used to mark out a diamond and put up some boards for the outfield, and I created this game where I would use my left hand to toss a piece of chalk to my right hand, which held a clothes pin. And then I'd swing. Wherever the chalk would go, I'd be Vin Scully and call the play. That happened quite early. And the reason I think of that as probably more indicative of what I do now as an artist is that it's the first instance where some kind of imaginative process took place that was completely of my own invention.

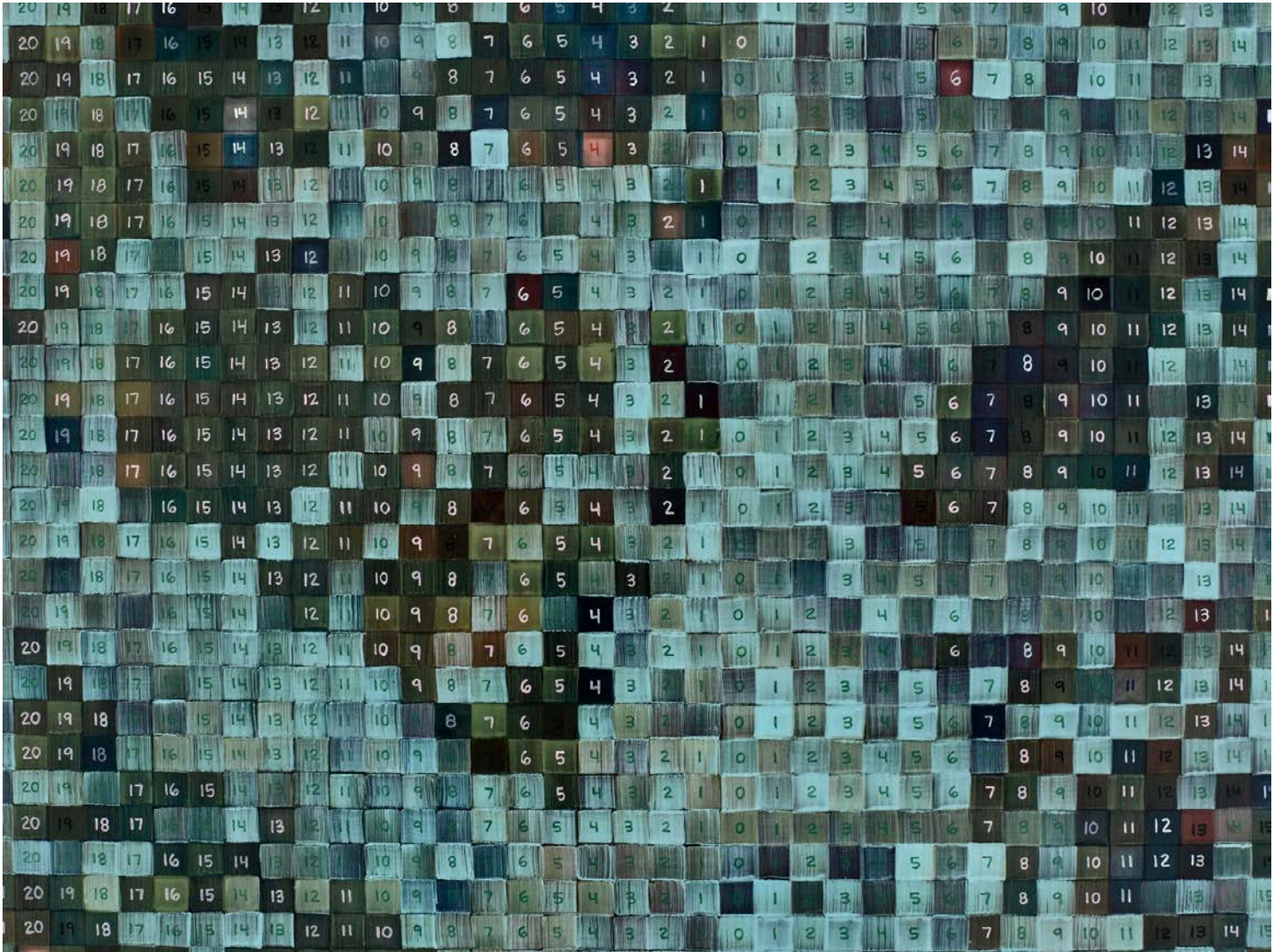


“Numbers and Trees: Arizona Series 1, Tree #8, Cave” (2023). Philip Cheung

When did you first allow yourself the freedom to define art as something other than subjective mark making?

That was in undergraduate [in the 1960s at Jersey City State College], when I had a course that introduced me to that whole area of practice in New York called the New Art, those artists [among them Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and Frank Stella] that [the art critic] Calvin Tomkins talked about. Part of what’s important in that time and before is to break these barriers of standard genres — painting and sculpture and stuff like that — and treat them as ordinary objects, questioning the received or accepted technical strategies. In unpacking that, they made all this art that was intentionally critical of the genres of painting and sculpture and even critical of the boundaries that

separated the arts — dance and music and so forth. Later, all this became reinforced when I got over to New York and actually met some of these artists. I was still a kid, but I was able to go to some of these events and began to experience directly some of the objects that the Pop artists and the minimalists and the early, early conceptual artists were producing [at the beginning of the 1960s].



Detail of “Numbers and Trees: Arizona Series 1, Tree #8, Cave” (2023). Philip Cheung

When did you first consider yourself an artist?

That was at Newark Arts High School. That was a very valuable experience because, even without having much thought about it, it allowed me to see this idea of being an artist as normal. I wasn't the best student in the world at that time, so I

didn't take full advantage of the experiences as I could. But that idea of being an artist was something that I know is important: 'What does it mean to be an artist?' A lot of people struggle to bring that idea into normality, but I didn't have to struggle because the school presented it as a normal experience.



The artist's paint brushes. Philip Cheung

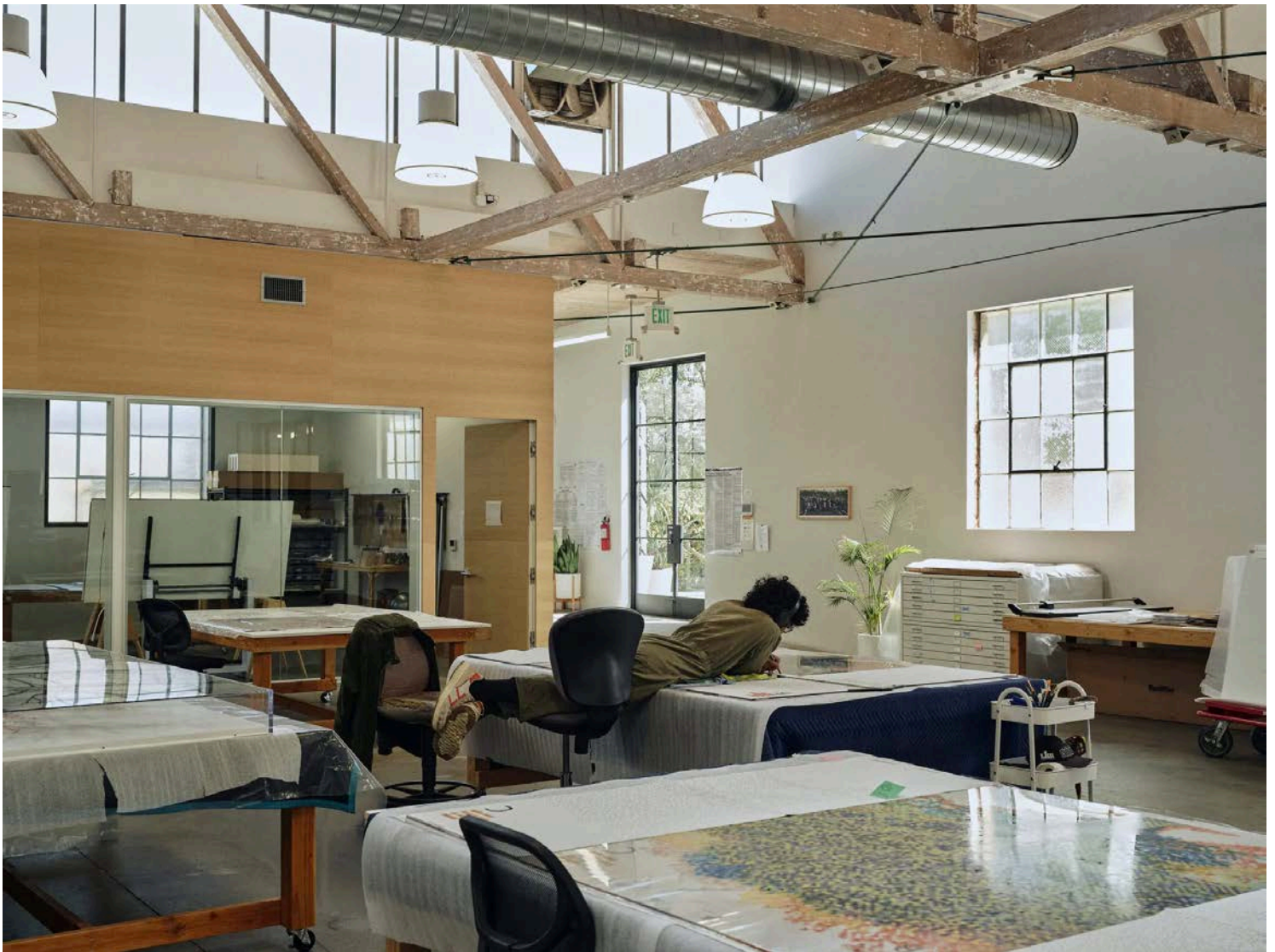
Is that where you started learning to play the drums?

Even earlier. I'd been buying some albums — particularly early Miles [Davis] — and I set up this kind of drum set: an old typewriter was the cymbal, and I had a real snare drum that our downstairs neighbor Nick gave to me. I didn't have a bass drum, so I just stomped my foot. And I'd play along to the records. Of course, I

didn't know what I was doing — except I'd seen people sitting behind a drum kit. Nick, who worked at a nightclub, said that he knew [the jazz drummer] Jimmie Smith, and I started taking lessons from [him]. That lasted through high school and into college. By then, Jimmie's career was zooming [playing with the hard bop organists Jimmy McGriff and Groove Holmes and later as a sideman for the piano giant Erroll Garner]. That's when I started playing in blues clubs.

You were a serious musician.

I practiced two to three hours a day, and this was while I was going to school. I didn't apply that rigor to my studies, though. I was pretty much a C+ student all through high school and my first two years of college. That changed during my third year [at college] when my art history teacher asked me, "What are you going to do with your life?" For about a third of my life, I think I was generally unconscious. That question made me think. I realized that if I wanted to stay in art, I had to go to graduate school. And if I wanted to go to grad school, that meant I had to get good grades.



An assistant on a table in the Great Hall. Philip Cheung

What music do you listen to when you're making art?

I don't. At least I don't now. In my early years, I did most of the visual work myself and, during that time, I actually did listen more to music — pretty much a combination of jazz and classical music, put on as background. It couldn't be anything that would draw my attention. And then as I got older, I started listening to the radio, news radio stations like National Public Radio. Even today, I'll put on MSNBC as background. I very rarely work in silence, except when I'm composing music.

Music is very important to me. The first work of art that really did something to me was by Sonny Rollins. That just change my life. But in art, that didn't happen until later, when I was in college, and it was the René Magritte show at MoMA [in 1965]. It changed my perspective in the broadest sense.



Jars of paint in Gaines's studio. Philip Cheung

What was so impactful about that show?

I was surrounded at the time by Abstract Expressionism. A lot of my teachers painted that way. And so that's what I thought the visual language of art was. When I went to the Magritte show, it was the first time I thought that a work of art — and a painting particularly — was much more than that. I remember being

fascinated by the ambiguity of Magritte's content, this play between the real and the imaginary. Through him, I saw that painting allowed you to do things to objects that couldn't happen in reality, but you can do in a painting and occupy a space that seemed real. So I was interested in that version of the material: things burning that can't burn, things floating that can't float. I saw that as a certain kind of play with content that I didn't even think was an option in making works of art.



Color tests in Gaines's studio. Philip Cheung

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

I work in series, so we'll only do two, three pieces a year. When I thought of taking on the process of using systems rather than my imagination in order to make work, that became the leitmotif of my entire life's production. It's not a freewheeling tabula rasa subjectivity where I can only work from my impulse and my intuition. It offers a much more rigid framework than that.

How do you know when you're done?

Well, sometimes they're closed systems. For example, there's one piece where I decide I will rotate a plant four or five times and, when the rotation is complete, then that particular part of the series is over. But then most of [my works] are open systems, so there is no ending. Instead, the ending's mostly limited by the installation situation. Say there's an exhibition where we're going to put in this work with large plexi boxes, and it turns out that I can get eight of them in the gallery. So I'll do that. Without that constraint, it just can go on infinitely, to the point of boring people stiff!

An in-progress ink drawing, called “Shadows XIV: Aloe,” 2024. Philip Cheung

How many assistants do you have?

Right now, 22.

Have you assisted other artists before?

No, I never did. Nor did I ever have artist mentors. The closest was Jimmie Smith — as a drummer, he was quite a wonderful mentor, but as a human being. ... I think it was a phenomenon of the time, a time of great transition. I wasn't in an environment where I could easily encounter a mentor. There were a lot of minority artists, but they were cloistered; you didn't have access to them unless you actually lived in New York, for example. And the white artists. ... Sol LeWitt wasn't a mentor, but he was quite important to me and my career.

Test photos for a future project. Philip Cheung

You may not have had a mentor, but you’ve been a mentor to many — Mark Bradford, Rodney McMillian, Andrea Bowers, Sam Durant, Laura Owens, Henry Taylor, Lauren Halsey: The list goes on. As a professor for most of your adult life, up until retiring from Cal Arts last year, what relationship does your artistic practice have to your teaching?

Teaching itself has been a crucial part of my studio practice. When I was in graduate school, I had the same question I had to face in undergraduate: “What are you gonna do now?” A lot of friends were getting jobs, but I waited so late. It just so happened, though, that there was a guy who was studying with me up in Rochester who headed an art department in Mississippi. He invited me to come teach down there. I’d never taught before. I taught a painting class, but I also

taught art history, so I had to teach myself art history as I was teaching it to the students. Through art history, I got a clearer sense of critical thinking because art history is an intellectual practice. The way that art was taught to us was that artists did not get involved in intellectual practices because it interfered with the idea of creating things. I knew that that was the problem. In fact, my difficulty in really bonding myself with the idea of artistic practice was caused by that prescription. I wanted to expand that idea of a more unconstrained art practice by underscoring that part of art was an intellectual practice.

That tension helped me form a course that I taught for years [“Content and Form”]. That course was very useful to me in finding out what kind of work I wanted to do because it got me involved. I was introduced to two influential books: “The Shape of Time” (1962) by George Kubler, and the other was Henri Focillon’s “The Life of Forms in Art” (1942), both written by art historians. I thought that the art criticism at the time, the whole idea of aesthetics at the time, was a disaster. It made art so uninteresting. Thankfully, those two books expanded my understanding of art [by centering formal and conceptual connections rather than biographical and historical ones alone] and confirmed my general notion that if you really want to find out new ideas, you have to go to the thoughts of others. Because if you rely on your own subjectivity alone, you’re just going to run around in a circle.

This interview has been edited and condensed.