

TEACHERS' NOTES

Charles Gaines

Multiples of Nature, Trees and Faces

Hauser & Wirth London, 29 Jan – 1 May 2021



Charles Gaines in his Los Angeles studio, 2020, Photo: Fredrik Nilsen, © Charles Gaines, Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

About Charles Gaines

Charles Gaines (b. 1944, Charleston SC) lives and works in Los Angeles and has been a member of the CalArts School of Art faculty since 1989, an influential educator, he recently established a fellowship to provide critical scholarship support for Black students in the M.F.A Art programme. Gaines will also have a solo exhibition entitled 'New Work: Charles Gaines' at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) from Spring 2021 – Fall 2021.

Gaines' work is included in prominent public collections such as the the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn NY; Dia Art Foundation, New York NY; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles CA; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago IL; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles CA; Museum of Modern Art, New York NY; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco CA; Stadtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, Germany; The Studio Museum, Harlem NY; Tate Modern, London, UK; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York NY. His work has also been presented at the 1975 Whitney Biennial and the Venice

Biennale in 2007 and 2015. In addition to his artistic practice, Gaines has published several essays on contemporary art, including 'Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism' (University of California, Irvine, 1993) and 'The New Cosmopolitanism' (California State University, Fullerton, 2008). In 2019, Gaines received the 60th Edward MacDowell Medal.

What are the main themes in Charles Gaines' work?

Recognised as a conceptual artist, Charles Gaines works with formulas and systems to explore the relationships between the objective and subjective realms.

Systems

Gaines critiques systems and representation through his work that reveals the underpinnings and frameworks of certain forms.

Nature

The image of the tree has been central to Charles Gaines' work since the mid-1970s and his methodical examination of their form has continued, not necessarily as a concern for nature but as a systematic plotting of their form. The works in the exhibition are larger in scale than previous counterparts and are inspired by the vast English trees Gaines examined and photographed during a visit to Melbury in Dorset in early 2020. Gaines explored a number of iconic English gardens and forests before settling on Dorset as his site for the newest series, having noticed the immense width of the trees that would translate perfectly to the increased scale in which he wanted to work.



Numbers and Trees: London Series 1, Tree #5, Eldon Street, 2020, detail, Acrylic sheet, acrylic paint, photograph, Unique, 162.2 x 223.5 x 14.6 cm / 63 7/8 x 88 x 5 3/4 in © Charles Gaines, Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Identity Politics

The concept of identity politics has played a central role within Gaines' oeuvre since the 1970s, and the radical approach he employs addresses issues of race in ways that transcend the limits of representation. The newest chapter in Gaines' long-established practice comes in the form of 'Numbers and Faces: Multi-Racial/Ethnic Combinations Series 1', a continuation of the 'Faces' series that Gaines began in 1978. In this newest series, Gaines creates an amalgam of faces within one artwork and seeks to interrogate ideas of representation, and more specifically the political and cultural ideas that shape one's understanding of the concept of multi-racial identity.

What does Charles Gaines' work look like?

Gaines' work takes form in painting, drawing, photography, film, music, language and installations. The work in this exhibition is comprised of acrylic paint, photography and Plexiglas.

How did Gaines make the work in 'Multiples of Nature, Trees and Faces'?

Gaines uses photography first, then explores the use of mathematical and numeric systems to create soft, numbered marks in ink on a grid, with each drawing built upon the calculations of the last.

Each face depicted in this new series is assigned two colours: one for the contour lines of the face and the other for the space in between the contour lines. The faces are sequentially mapped out and overlaid one-by-one over the course of the series. According to Gaines, 'When the image is overlaid, the colours of the faces merge in areas and remain unaltered in other areas; over the course of the series the merging of contours produces different patterns and colour effects that dynamically and formally play out a binary relationship; the generalized structure of a face and the differences between faces.' Formal black and white photographs of each successive sitter appear on the back panel of each work.



Numbers and Faces: Multi-Racial/Ethnic Combinations Series 1, Set A: Face #11, Martina Crouch (Nigerian Igbo Tribe/White), 2020, Acrylic paint, acrylic sheet and photograph, 96.5 × 81.3 × 8.9 cm / 38 × 32 × 3 1/2 in © Charles Gaines, Photo: Fredrik Nilsen, Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth



Numbers and Faces: Multi-Racial/Ethnic Combinations Series 1, Set A: Face #11, Martina Crouch (Nigerian Igbo Tribe/White), 2020, Detail, Acrylic paint, acrylic sheet and photograph, 96.5 × 81.3 × 8.9 cm / 38 × 32 × 3 1/2 in © Charles Gaines, Photo: Fredrik Nilsen, Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

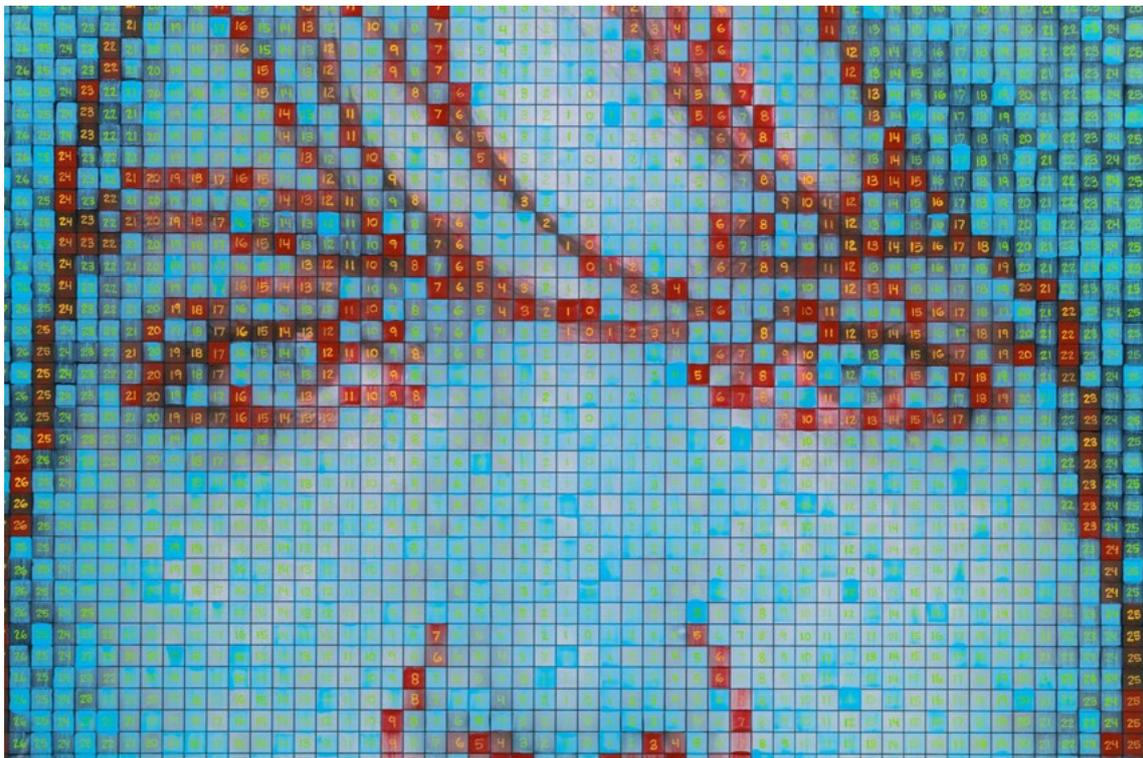
Gaines plots each London tree by assigning it a distinctive colour and a numbered grid that reflects the full form of the tree depicted in the detail photograph on the back panel of the work. Each successive work is realised by overlaying the forms of trees one at a time and in progression, following Gaines' systematic sequencing process. These works call into question both the objective nature of the trees within them, and the subjective natural and material human actions that surround them. Gaines reflects on his process, 'As I watch the systems and works evolve, and images being produced, I'm totally reminded that what I'm seeing is not a product of my intention but is a product of a system, and the system has a completely arbitrary relationship with the object that's being represented'.

What other artists' work does it relate to?

His work is rooted in Conceptual Art in that he uses art to critique art itself and certain ideas of artistic practice, certain artistic values. This approach relates to other artists such as Sol LeWitt, Hanne Darboven, and Adrian Piper.

Gaines often reminds us that he was one of the only African-American conceptual artists working in the 1970s, a time when political expressionism was a prevailing concern among African-American artists. However, it is only recently that his work is more politically charged for example, the importance of the faces are not exactly who they are but the fact that they are multi-racial.

Gaines' use of systems in his work, can be linked to composition and this is evident in his repeated use of musical scores associations can be made to the methods of the composer John Cage.



Numbers and Faces: Multi-Racial/Ethnic Combinations Series 1, Set A: Face #1, Nour Mobarak (Levantine/White European), 2019, Detail, Acrylic paint, acrylic sheet and photograph, 96.5 x 81.3 x 8.9 cm / 38 x 32 x 3 1/2 in, © Charles Gaines, Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Glossary

Art Historical Canon

The conventional timeline of artists who are sometimes considered as 'Old Masters' or 'Great Artists'.

John Cage

John Cage (1912 – 1992) was an American composer, music theorist, artist, and philosopher. A pioneer of indeterminacy in music, electroacoustic music, and non-standard use of musical instruments, Cage was one of the leading figures of the post-war avant-garde.

Conceptual Art

In the 1960s, artists began experimenting with art that emphasized ideas over a physical product. In 1967, artist Sol LeWitt gave this new art a name in his essay "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." He wrote, "The idea itself, even if it is not made visual, is as much of a work of art as any finished product." Conceptual artists used their work to question the notion of what art is.

Hanne Darboven

Hanne Darboven (1941 – 2009) was a German conceptual artist, best known for her large-scale minimalist installations consisting of handwritten tables of numbers.

Identity Politics

Identity politics describes a political approach in relation to people of a particular religion, race, social background, class or other identifying factor. They may develop political agendas based on systems of oppression that affect their lives and come from their various identities.

Multidisciplinary

Combining or involving several academic disciplines or professional specializations in an approach to a topic or problem.

Adrian Piper

Adrian Piper (born 1948) is an American conceptual artist and philosopher. Her work addresses how and why those involved in more than one discipline may experience professional ostracism, otherness, racial passing, and racism by using various traditional and non-traditional media to provoke self-analysis.

Practical activity prompts and ideas for discussion:

Can an idea be art? How can you create your own system to respond to the world around you. Try selecting a piece of music and working out a way to draw or paint what you hear: include a repetitive rhythm, what happened when the sound becomes louder or quieter etc?

Using graph paper and pencil, plot the landscape that you can see out of a window.

What do we mean by subjective? Discuss what this means and how the term related to the work of artists. Is it possible for artists to be detached from what they make – what do you think?

Other activities

Focussing on the tree, as a vital component of our ecology system and a metaphor for life, we invite you to stop and observe the world around you afresh, to engage in your immediate environment and create your own new visual languages. How can you respond to the tree in a new way, to challenge yourself to represent a tree in an alternative format and not simply to draw how you generally see it.

You could

- draw the sound of a tree
- the texture of bark
- the age of a tree, a map of all the trees in the world
- draw a family tree
- a tree of the future
- a mechanical tree...

What else can you think of? Download our resource sheet to take part [here](#).

Share your artwork using #HauserWirthBigDraw #ClimateOfChange and tag @hauserwirth @TheBigDraw to be a part of our global campaign. You can also join our Facebook community [here](#).

Supplementary Research

Charles Gaines, www.hauserwirth.com/artists/21845-charles-gaines

Charles Gaines: Palm Trees and Other Works, Hauser & Wirth Publishers, 2019