

RETRO *action*

(part two)

CHARLES GAINES
GARY SIMMONS and
LORNA SIMPSON
with EDGAR ARCENEUX
KEVIN BEASLEY
MARK BRADFORD
TORKWASE DYSON
LAUREN HALSEY
LESLIE HEWITT
RASHID JOHNSON
CAROLINE KENT
TONY LEWIS and
RODNEY MCMILLIAN.

Curated by Homi K. Bhabha, Charles Gaines,
Kate Fowle and Ellen Tani.

27 FEBRUARY – 5 MAY 2024



Gary Simmons (b. 1964)

Mr. Klan Man

1991

Wood, metal, cast concrete, paint, grass

‘My work, in general, comes from the memories of events and images that I—and I imagine others—are haunted by.’

In America, one of those specters is the 1915 film ‘The Birth of a Nation’ (D.W. Griffith) which became one of the highest grossing films in the 20th century while promoting a distorted interpretation of the Ku Klux Klan and inspiring their resurgence when it was released.

Simmons has described the Klan as ‘the clearest example of organized hate’ and in the early 1990s produced a number of works that could be seen to reference aspects of their iconography integrated into symbols of Americana. In ‘Mr. Klan Man’ (1991), Simmons plays on the racialized subliminal connotations of the lawn jockey in middle America—poised on well-kept grass, surrounded by a (gateless) white picket fence—while also summoning the haunting documentary images of KKK assemblies, wherein hundreds of white-clad, hooded men stood side-by-side to delineate an arena, inside which ceremonial pageants were played out by ringleaders.

Collection of Peter and Gwen Norton, New York



Gary Simmons (b. 1964)

Erasure Series (#1, black)

1992

Chalk and slate paint on paper

Collection of Peter and Gwen Norton, New York



Lorna Simpson (b. 1960)

Twenty Five Candles

1993

25 color Polaroid prints

In Lorna Simpson's first catalogue (published by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 1992), the cultural historian Saidiya Hartman writes of how the artist's work from that time not only speaks to forms of domination that produces identities, but also to other 'yearnings,' such as 'the possibility of a collective and transformative subjectivity ... The small instances of defiance—acts of remembrance, skilled negotiation of the public and private sphere, and the repositories of common experiences—are flashes of the reconstructive impulses in Simpson's deconstructive project.'

With 'Twenty Five Candles' (1993) Simpson recalls making the work in relation to the devastation of the AIDS crisis at the time. A segmented montage was created through the use of a large-format polaroid camera to capture an ephemeral moment with a sequence of unique 20 x 24 inch color Polaroids, photographs that have no negative.



Lorna Simpson (b. 1960)

Screen 3

1986

1 wooden accordion screen, 3 silver gelatin prints, vinyl lettering



Charles Gaines (b. 1944)
Submerged Text: Signifiers of Race #1
1991
Ink on paper, silkscreen on acrylic, 2 parts



Charles Gaines (b. 1944)
Submerged Text: Signifiers of Race #6
1991
Ink on paper, silkscreen on acrylic, 2 parts

In his Submerged Text series, Charles Gaines identified essays and articles that weren't implicitly about race (or art) and selected a few paragraphs from which to isolate words that reference race or hold racializing connotations. He then removed all the other words, substituting each letter that made up the words into numbers that were handwritten incrementally until another loaded term appeared, at which point the counting would go back to 1 again.

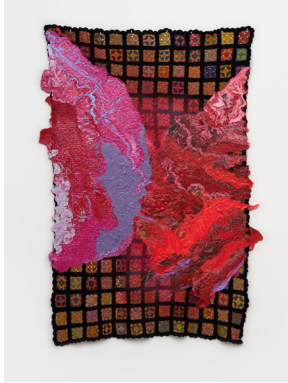
Gaines says of this body of work: 'Even though the chosen text was not about 'race,' the selected words form a text that produces the subject of race. The text is highly charged as we discover that the signifiers of 'race' are themselves politically charged. But this is due to cultural convention and not to the intention of the artist.'



Lauren Halsey (b. 1987)
portal hoppin hood poppin
2023
Mixed media on foil-insulated foam and wood



Lauren Halsey (b. 1987)
Untitled
2023
Acrylic, enamel, CDs on acrylic and wood



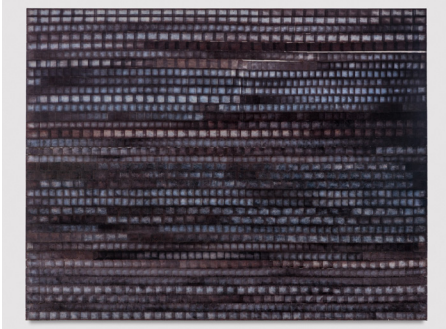
Rodney McMillian (b. 1969)
Untitled (2 Orbs)
2023
Acrylic on baby blanket



Rodney McMillian (b. 1969)
Untitled (Red Sunset)
2023
Latex, acrylic on blanket



Caroline Kent (b. 1975)
They won't find us here
2021
Acrylic on raw Belgian linen, acrylic on wood
Private Collection, New York



Mark Bradford (b. 1961)
Study for Thelxiepeia #2
2016
Mixed media on canvas
Courtesy of the Artist



Caroline Kent (b. 1975)
The stillness of life when we look back
2023
Acrylic on Belgian linen and walnut, MDF



Rashid Johnson (b. 1977)
Untitled Anxious Audience
2016
White ceramic tile, black soap, wax



Edgar Arceneaux (b. 1972)
Skinning the Mirror #55 (A+B)
2022
Silver nitrate, acrylic paint, glass, paper on canvas (diptych)

The fractured surface of this expansive work reflects only light, not us. And yet it is made from a skinned mirror, whose reflective silver nitrate surface the artist has laboriously peeled away, allowing for the collateral damage therein. Its surface appears weathered with time and erosion, an effect that points not to decades of exposure to the elements but rather to the artist's intense, painful, and fragile manipulation of silver nitrate as painting medium. In many of his earlier works, Arceneaux employed the mirror as a reflective device to prompt a confrontation with self-relation. The mirror surface is here alienated from its glass substrate, yielding cracks and irregular planes, and allowing color to seep and texture to wrinkle. Arceneaux's mother, Merc Arceneaux Sr., passed away of dementia during the creation of this body of work, and it merges his experience of caretaking, mourning, and witnessing the fracturing of memory. The labor of such care often brings a physical and spiritual weathering that feels exponentially (rather than directly) reflective of its temporal duration. Arceneaux imbues the work with the poetics of grief and loss: the mirror does not reflect the self, but rather absorbs, abstracts, and engulfs it. The title references the unpredictable reveal at the end of the work's creation, when the artist peels back the canvas from the mirrors. Like Beasley, who layers his slabs with materials from the front to the back, the final appearance of work remains something of a mystery.



Kevin Beasley (b. 1985)

Patch

2022

Polyurethane resin, raw Virginia cotton,
altered housedresses, altered t-shirts, shoelaces



Torkwase Dyson (b. 1973)
I Am Everything That Will Save Me
(Inner Vision-Bird and Lava 1)
2023

Wood, graphite, acrylic, string

Courtesy of the Artist and Pace Gallery



Torkwase Dyson (b. 1973)
I Am Everything That Will Save Me
(Inner Vision-Bird and Lava 2)
2023

Wood, graphite, acrylic, string

Abstraction, for Torkwase Dyson, is not a style—it is a subject, a tool, and a form of critique. In her multi-media work, abstract geometries explore how Black bodies interact with built environments, and how those spaces have been used for resistance and survival. Through scientific and cultural research methods, she analyzes geographic, architectural, and infrastructural spaces that speak both to the transatlantic slave trade and the imbrication of modernism, climate change, and dispossession. That process yielded a vocabulary of ‘hypershapes’: conceptually loaded geometric abstractions that reference liberatory infrastructures. (A rectangle evokes the crate in which enslaved Henry ‘Box’ Brown shipped himself to abolitionists in Philadelphia from Virginia in 1849; a triangle conjures the narrow garret in which Harriet Jacobs, the author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, hid for seven years to avoid capture. A curved line echoes the ship’s hull in which Anthony Burns, an enslaved man in Virginia, stowed away to Boston in 1854).

The recent series *Bird and Lava* is introspective and deeply personal. Freedom, the artist observes, exists on various scales; it can be at times airy and at others molten. Various poetic verses accompany these works on the artist’s website. One of them reads:

to be of space
to be of scale
to be of blue
to be of black

The shape of an encircled portal or throughway echoes across a dark horizon, and a string links the two forms in a gesture of centering or alignment. They invite us to reflect on the multidimensional, on reorienting our gaze, and on how to hold emptiness—a kind of meditation.



Tony Lewis (b. 1986)
Untitled 6 (2016-ongoing)

2024

Graphite powder, paper, paint, masking tape

Both drawing and sculpture, the crumpled form of 'Untitled 6 (2016-ongoing)' in this gallery indexes a phase in its lifespan. Lewis has created numerous process-oriented floor drawings since 2011, each one's shape mirroring the floor surface on which it was originally installed. This work dates to 2016 when it was installed at the Museo Marino Marini in Florence as part of Lewis' exhibition 'Alms, Comity, and Plunder,' where it mapped the original floorplan of the 10th-century crypt of the church of San Pancrazio. The paper is laid down and painted before undergoing an extremely physical drawing process of applying graphite to its surface—scrubbing, rubbing, dancing, resting, sweeping and vacuuming—often by a group of people. When it is removed at the end of the exhibition, another series of physical processes—wrestling, poking, prodding, pulling, ripping—alters its condition and it is packed away until it is installed in a different sculptural form. Preserving the unruliness of graphite powder in tension with the physicality of abstraction and the perceived excesses of dark-skinned bodies, the artist connects the use of language in his work (as in 'X' (2019) in the reading room) as a form of secondary abstraction that emerges from the 'pure, cosmic abstraction endowed by the supernatural energy of one's body.' Like a body, the work carries the weathered state of how it lives now, conceptually channeling the character of 'nowness' that animates the spirit of this exhibition. And while the drawings are 'living things that can be anywhere,' the artist reflects, 'what I'm interested in seeing long-term is the death of the drawing within the exhibition format.'



Leslie Hewitt (b. 1977)
Untitled (Bay Valley Rift)
2022
Bronze



Leslie Hewitt (b. 1977)
Untitled (Shinnecock Bay Atlantic Sound)
2022
Bronze



Leslie Hewitt (b. 1977)
Untitled (Basin Hmm or Hum or Hymn)
2022
Bronze

Three bronze sculptures reference bodies of water on the East End of Long Island, New York—namely, the Shinnecock, Peconic and Mecox Bay. These are spaces where the land meets the sea, and key regions of entanglement where the survival and dispossession of Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans and European settlers are entwined. That juncture has a name: the ‘shoal,’ a space that author Tiffany Lethabo King has theorized in relation to Indigenous and African diasporic histories (see ‘The Black Shoals’ in the reading room). The outlines of their surfaces loosely trace and extend the shape of the bays, while their undulating volumes, sand-cast in bronze, reference the depths of the Atlantic floor. Conceptually, they merge geologic and geographic formations across scale and distance, while their immediate sensory impact—their highly polished surface—depends on atmospheric conditions. The works collapse the unimaginable vastness of these bodies of water into a discrete object. ‘Like the movement of the tides,’ writes curator Matilde Guidelli-Guidi, ‘the ambivalence in material, scale and temporality—rock and water, quotidian and geological, inside and outside—in these works is a function of Hewitt’s process of abstraction.’



Tony Lewis (b. 1986)

X

2019

Pencil, colored pencil and graphite on paper