

Press Release

Charles Gaines. Numbers and Trees, The Tanzania Baobabs

19 February – 24 May 2025
Hauser & Wirth West Hollywood

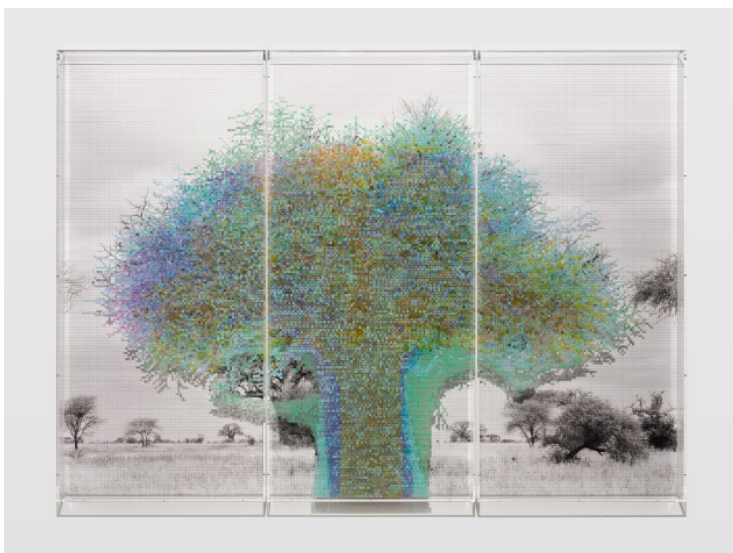


Los Angeles...For nearly six decades, pioneering conceptual artist Charles Gaines has used systems to create series of works that mine the complex relationship between perception and meaning. This February, following a major 2023 – 24 museum survey and an acclaimed public commission, Gaines returns to his hometown of Los Angeles to present a new sequence of his signature Plexiglas works at Hauser & Wirth West Hollywood—the most elaborate treatment yet of his ongoing Numbers and Trees series, first conceived by the artist in 1987. Consisting of nine large-scale triptychs and a suite of new watercolor diptychs, all works are based on photographs of baobab trees the artist shot during a trip to Tanzania in 2023.

Trees have been a central motif in Gaines' practice since the 1970s, when he first began plotting their forms through systems of numbered grids in the Walnut Tree Orchard series (1975 – 2014). By converting the tree form into a gridded geometry, Gaines devised a distinctive process for charting and comparing differences. This approach invited viewers into the gap between what things appear to be and what they mean, while also challenging the dominance of subjectivity in artistic expression. Gaines' argument—that aesthetic experience is not transcendent but rather firmly rooted in and shaped by culture—has broadened the conversation about art history and influenced generations of artists.

In this iteration of Numbers and Trees, Gaines implements a combination of systems never before brought together. The silhouetted baobab tree is meticulously transformed through a rigorous set of self-determined rules and procedures. Each tree is assigned a distinctive color and number sequence, creating layers of astonishingly detailed visual information within and on the planes of the Plexiglas box. For the first time, in half of the works, the back panel depicts the sequential progression of trees amid an enlarged detail of the tree crown, an application the artist refers to as an 'explosion.' This process breaks down his original photographic composition into individual cells which collectively challenge our perception and thwart conventional interpretation. The grandeur of the

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baobab—revered as the ‘tree of life’—mirrors the magnificence of Gaines’ process, where proliferating cells of color radiate in intricate branch-like patterns, each seeming to emerge from the unique form of every tree.

With ‘Numbers and Trees, The Tanzania Baobabs,’ Gaines reflects on his trip to Tanzania and the country’s historical context, particularly in relation to the colonial enterprise, slave trade and personal identity. However, a profound ambiguity exists in the relationship between the ancient trees he photographed on that sojourn—these natural witnesses to social and evolutionary epochs—and the deliberate, systematic breakdown of their image. This gap, like the space between the Plexiglas panels of each work, invites the viewer to interpret different layers of possible meaning. As Gaines notes, ‘What you bring to the image, adds to the image.’

Accompanying the Plexiglas works on view is an intimate series of watercolors, each composed of tiny painted cells that take the shape of a tree’s specific form. As this series progresses, its overlapping tree forms create a cacophony of cells and varied hues that both blur and retain each baobab tree’s distinct character. Gaines succeeds in cataloging minute yet essential differences between things, while also mapping the very process through which he does so in a deep but intentionally inconclusive excavation of meaning.

‘Numbers and Trees, The Tanzania Baobabs,’ coincides with the surveys ‘Charles Gaines: 1992 – 2023’ (30 October 2024 – 9 March 2025) and ‘Charles Gaines: Arizona Series’ (30 October 2024 – 20 July 2025) at the Phoenix Art Museum.

About the artist

Charles Gaines (b. 1944, Charleston SC) lives and works in Los Angeles. He has been the subject of numerous exhibitions in the United States and around the world, most notably a major traveling survey at The Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; a mid-career survey at the Pomona College Museum of Art and the Pitzer College Art Gallery in Claremont CA; a museum survey of early works at The Studio Museum, Harlem NY and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles CA; and presentations at the 1975 Whitney Biennial and the Venice Biennale in 2007 and 2015. An exhibition of his work is also currently on long-term view at Dia:Beacon in New York. In 2022, Gaines launched his most ambitious public art project yet, ‘The American Manifest,’ presented by Creative Time, Governors Island and Times Square Arts. The third and final chapter of ‘The American Manifest,’ organized by Creative Time, will travel to the banks of the Ohio River in June 2025. Additional forthcoming public commissions include the mural ‘Numbers and Trees: Cincinnati Cottonwoods,’ organized by Cincinnati nonprofit ArtWorks (June 2025); ‘Hanging Tree’ at Equal Justice Initiative’s Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery AL

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(June 2025); and a new work for the Intuit Dome in Inglewood CA (spring 2026). Gaines will be an artist-in-residence at Hauser & Wirth Somerset in spring 2025 and a book of his collected writings will be released by Hauser & Wirth Publishers in spring 2026.

In addition to his artistic practice, Gaines was on the faculty at CalArts School of Art for over 30 years, establishing a fellowship to provide critical scholarship support for Black students in the M.F.A. Art program. He 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. He was inducted into the National Academy of Design's 2020 class of National Academicians and the American Academy of Arts and Letters in May 2022.

Gaines' work is included in prominent public collections such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York NY; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York NY; The Studio Museum, Harlem NY; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago IL; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles CA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles CA; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco CA; and Tate, London, UK.

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Numbers and Trees: Tanzania Series 1, Baobab, Tree #4, Maasai
2024
Acrylic sheet, acrylic paint, photograph, 3 parts
241.3 x 335.9 x 14.6 cm / 95 x 132 1/4 x 5 3/4 in

Numbers and Trees: Tanzania Series 1, Baobab, Tree #5, Rangji
2024
Acrylic sheet, acrylic paint, photograph, 3 parts
241.3 x 335.9 x 14.6 cm / 95 x 132 1/4 x 5 3/4 in

Numbers and Trees: Tanzania Series 1, Baobab, Tree #5, Rangji (detail)
2024
Acrylic sheet, acrylic paint, photograph, 3 parts
241.3 x 335.9 x 14.6 cm / 95 x 132 1/4 x 5 3/4 in