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Charles Gaines

*Charles Gaines: The Criticality and Aesthetics of the System*

Getty Trust Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes  
in 2019

Interviews sponsored by the J. Paul Getty Trust

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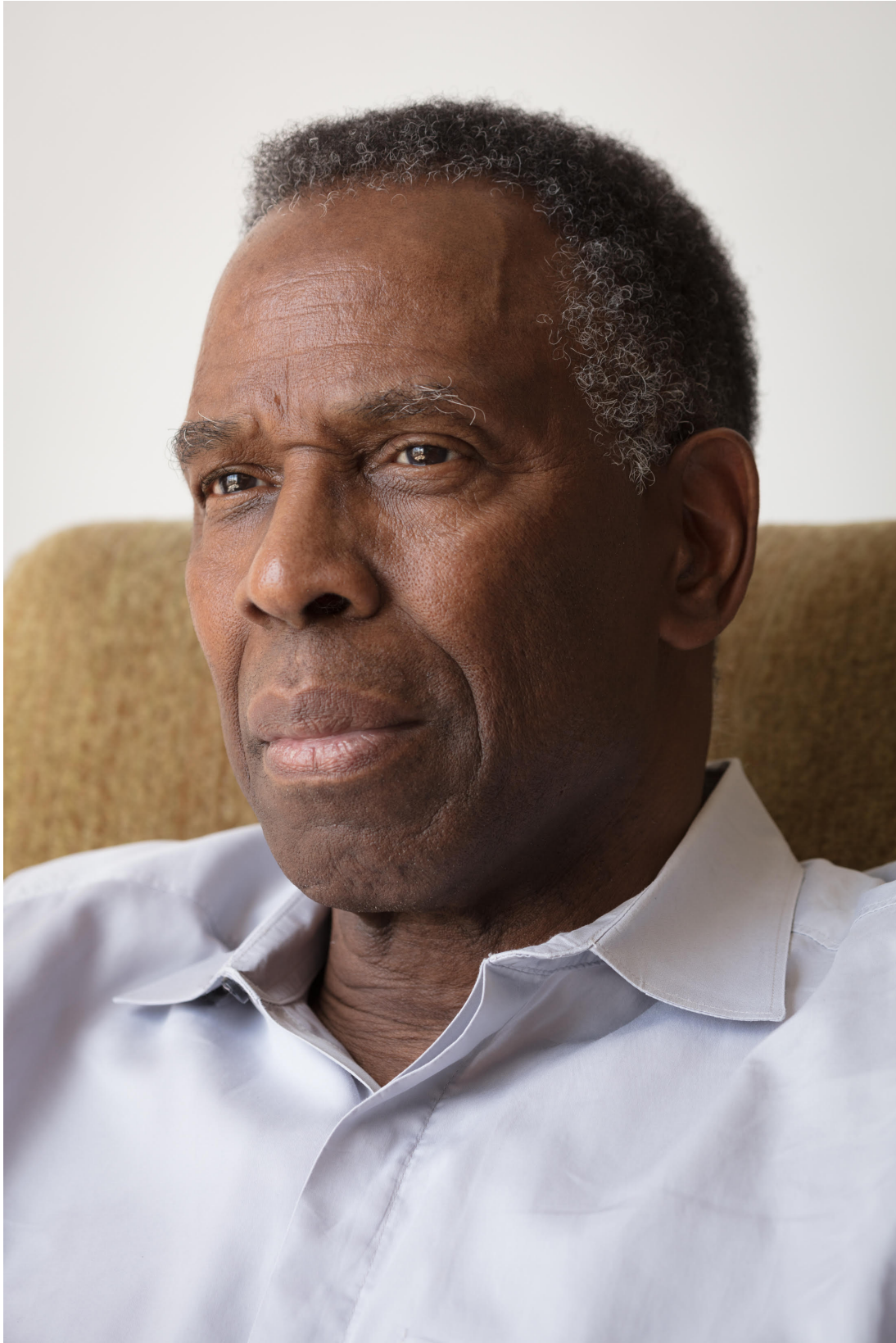
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Charles Gaines, 2018  
Photograph by Fredrick Nilsen

**Abstract**

Charles Gaines is an artist specializing in conceptual art, as well as a professor of art at California Institute of the Arts. Gaines was born in South Carolina in 1944, but grew up in Newark, New Jersey. He attended Arts High School in Newark, graduated from Jersey City State College in 1966, and earned an MFA from the School of Art and Design at the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1967. Beginning in 1967, he taught at several colleges, including Mississippi Valley State College, Fresno State University, and California Institute of the Arts. Gaines has written several academic texts, including "Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism" in 1993 and "Reconsidering Metaphor/Metonymy: Art and the Suppression of Thought" in 2009. His influential artwork includes *Manifesto Series*, *Numbers and Trees*, and *Sound Text*; and he exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and 2015. Gaines is the recipient of several awards, including Guggenheim Fellowship in 2013 and REDCAT Award in 2018.

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## Interview 1: April 1, 2019

01-00:00:02

Tewes: This is a first interview with Charles Gaines for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes at Mr. Gaines's studio in Los Angeles, California, on April 1, 2019. Thank you for joining us. Bridget, why don't you kick us off?

01-00:00:25

Cooks: Okay. So, Charles, I wanted to start at the beginning and ask you some questions so that you can talk to us about your childhood and your family. If you can tell us when you were born and where you were born, and then I have some more questions about your experience growing up.

01-00:00:47

Gaines: Sure. It's interesting because today is April 1, which is April Fools' Day. Am I supposed to tell the truth?

01-00:00:55

Cooks: [laughs] Well, you don't have to, no, and we might not know the difference, actually, so it's up to you. Yeah, it's for the record, so we'll see. Tell us where you were born.

01-00:01:11

Gaines: I was born in Charleston, South Carolina.

01-00:01:13

Cooks: Okay, and what year were you born?

01-00:01:16

Gaines: June 23, 1944.

01-00:01:17

Cooks: Okay. Can you give us some information about your parents? You had your mother and father living with you in the house growing up?

01-00:01:30

Gaines: Yeah, that's right. As I said, I was born in Charleston. My mother was from Charleston. My father, they met because he was stationed at the naval base in Charleston, but he was originally from Madison, Florida. They met there and they got married, and to the consternation of my—this is my [maternal] grandfather, I guess, didn't particularly approve of it, but they get married anyway. [My father] was still serving, and so he was off again because World War II was going on at this time. So I grew up in my grandparents' house with my mother. Actually, I didn't grow up [there]; I was very young. I grew up in Charleston for the first five years of my life and for the first couple of years. My father was in the Navy, and so I lived with my mom in my grandparents' house. My mom's mother had thirteen kids. So we all lived in this house, my

uncles and aunts, because they're all very young. My youngest aunt is only six years older than I—or that I am or was.

And so at a certain point, my father was going to come out of the service, and he arranged to move to Newark. You can safely say that he was part of the Great Migration, the Second Great Migration from the South to the North that the family is a part of. He went up ahead and secured a place to live, and then my mother and myself had followed him. As I said, he was probably—the date's a little vague to me, but I lived in Florida until I was five years old. So from '44 to '49 I was living in Florida, and sometime around '48, '49 my father got out of the Navy and then began this process of moving to the East Coast.

01-00:04:33

Cooks:

So those first five years, you were living in Charleston, and then your dad went to Newark and got a job, and then the family moved. What kind of work did he do? What about your mom, what kind of work did she do?

01-00:04:50

Gaines:

Well, what I understand, his first job was driving a bakery truck, and my mother was at home. We lived in a small apartment in Newark. Just before we moved, my sister was born, so my mother had myself and my sister. She didn't work then. Two years after that, my brother was born, my younger brother's born. And so she, for a couple of years, she didn't work until my brother was old enough that she could go out and get a job. I don't know how, but she started working right away, and I don't know how—what duration this was around. What's the term for it, but taking care of—

01-00:05:53

Cooks:

Childcare, daycare.

01-00:05:53

Gaines:

Childcare, I have no idea how childcare was taken up. I did know that other relatives had moved to New Jersey prior to that, and so on both my father and mother's side—in fact, the reason my father moved to Newark is because his brother had moved to—or his half-brother, they said—had moved to Newark.

01-00:06:19

Cooks:

Did you have a community when you were there, like a family community, or were there other black families who were part of the migration at that time that you were connected with?

01-00:06:31

Gaines:

In response to that, I have no idea. But within our family that participated, almost everybody did. And so over the course of the next ten years, those people who were young, they moved to Newark. Some moved to New York, to Harlem. As I said, my father, his mother lived in Newark and his half-brother lived in Newark. And so you put two and two together, it's probably why we didn't move to Detroit: because they were already there.



01-00:07:07

Cooks:

Can you tell us what it was like growing up in Newark? Did you feel like it was its own community, or did you feel like there was this draw to go to New York or to go to other places, or you felt like this was a kind of a home base for you?

01-00:07:28

Gaines:

Well, there's my life in Newark as a kid, and then my life as a teenager. They're two different narratives, you see? Because I didn't theorize my life in Newark when I was a kid.

The conditions, they were pretty terrible, that as bad as the South was, the North had its own problems. Black people moved up there to find work that simply wasn't available in the South because the North was industrialized and the South wasn't. The same social stratifications existed, but based on different sort of terms and mores. There's certain jobs that were available to black people at the time, and there weren't many. And so, the upward mobility pretty much was—for most black people—was either moving into some kind of industrial work, working for a plant or something that—or construction work. For my father, he started out driving the bakery truck, and then found that he was able to get into the construction workers' union. Well, the construction workers' union was divided between white and black workers, and so they were entirely two different unions, even though they're part of the same sort of—in other words, the benefits given to the white union workers weren't passed over to the black union workers; the black union workers had to fight for their own benefits. And so of course, with that kind of system, the black workers [are] going to be incredibly underpaid.

Growing up in Newark as a kid was—when I reflect back on it, it was pretty rough. At the time, I didn't think about those things. If I can try to put myself in the mind that I was then, it was a normal life. I can only sort of imagine how deprivations were a part of my life by comparing it to what I know now retrospectively, as it were.

But my father had this idea of wanting to [form a] family. He had some sense, some idea of a responsibility that he had as a husband and father to do that. He searched for certain markers of success, which again were difficult and small in relation to what's possible. But his whole idea was to buy a house, so at a certain point he did. He bought a house on Academy Street after working for the construction workers' union. We moved from this very tiny apartment into this house. I think that we probably lived in the small apartment for maybe three or four years, and then moved into this house.

01-00:11:26

Cooks:

Yeah, I like what you're [saying] about your dad. You're imagining feeling this desire to fulfill a kind of a role of being a provider and a husband and a father. Did he also have some values or goals that he made clear to you and

your siblings about being a kid, or growing up and being successful? What kind of things did they kind of impart into you as a kid? What was important?

01-00:12:00

Gaines:

Yeah well, ultimately, we understood we had a complicated relationship with our dad. He, of course, had these certain values and certain responsibilities—that you didn't do anything illegal, you obeyed your parents. As a kid, you had to not—I think a most common phrase I heard was "don't talk back." You had to show some kind of respect to adults. That type of social behavior, that particular type in terms of his idea of responsible behavior. He was aggressive about punishing us, so if we—he believed in corporal punishment, so if you stood outside of it, then he said, "You're going to get it, big time."

He didn't understand, I don't think—and this is thinking retrospectively—he didn't understand the mechanisms of success. I mean, the issue was that he found that he could live and function within this very sort of highly bounded social space and economic space that black people were permitted to operate, and he didn't imagine himself being outside of that. So the values that he taught were values that were heavily informed by what you needed to do to survive as a black person within the social space. And then certain things he didn't understand. Like for example, he had sort of a general understanding of the value of an education, but he didn't graduate from high school and so he had difficulty imagining a life beyond, for example, what he achieved. That is that ultimately you go to school like he did, but then you just go get a job and you raise a family. He couldn't imagine what it was like outside of that space.

What I'm saying is that there are whole sets of ideas and terms that one could learn about more broadly about success that I didn't get from the family, that I had to sort of learn on my own and learn the hard way.

01-00:15:20

Cooks:

Well so, what was school for you? Because you're a lifelong educator now. When did you get a sense that education could be a different path for you? Were you a good student when you were in public school?

01-00:15:43

Gaines:

In public school I was just average; I was a C student. In high school, I was just barely a C student. I just never had the model of a certain kind of disciplined behavior to achieve well in school. I knew that around me there were other classmates who worked very hard and did their work, and I did what was just barely, barely required. I knew that it wasn't right, but I didn't have the discipline to do more. I went through a process of understanding and learning the importance of that discipline, that it was necessary. It wasn't inculcated in me, nor in any of us: my brother and sister. I don't want to go too far ahead of the narrative, but at a certain point—it didn't occur to me until my third year in college that [that was] the kind of system that I was operating in. And also, that was pretty serious at that point. I had to think about what I wanted to do with my life, and I began to learn all the possibilities of what I

wanted to do for my life from my peers, from the other students, and so forth. So through school I was able to go beyond the limited imagination that was my father's.

01-00:17:39

Cooks: Was there—

01-00:17:40

Gaines: Yeah, but I wanted to—

01-00:17:41

Cooks: Go ahead.

01-00:17:41

Gaines: The person who had the biggest impact in my life is my mother. With respect to this idea of moving beyond your imagined space or spaces that are socially constructed for you, my mother was—as a young girl, my mother was a singer. She was actually trained as an operatic vocalist, and not so much in music school, but when she was like still in high school, by the church. There were people in Charleston who were trained musicians. My mother had an extraordinary voice, and so they picked up on it and began to teach her. You've got to remember, this is like in the 1930s, you know? And so, moving to the forties when she was being trained, she got some notoriety in Charleston in the black community as a singer. She was given a radio show, where once a week, every Sunday, she would sing on the radio for, I think it was half an hour. She would sing Negro spirituals. The person who gave her voice [lessons] tried to convince her—to arrange to have her go North to study in music school. Instead of doing that, she met my father and then got pregnant with me, and she decided to forgo that possibility in order to be married to my father and move north.

01-00:20:01

So, that put an abrupt stop to her music training. All the years she lived in the North, she continued to sing in the church, but there was much more—a good deal more potential—a greater potential to her life that didn't play itself out. It's complicated, because it's in part the difficulty of achievement for black people; you're socialized not to be that ambitious. Leaving music training was—it was her choice, of course, but what I'm saying is that I see a variety of constraints and limitations that are placed upon the black subject that minimize what's possible in their life. It was only later that I began to appreciate that. Because what I was trying to describe, in terms of talking about my father, is that he created a space of values, but these values were limited in terms of ambitions. But my mother's narrative had always been there, and we always knew she could sing but that didn't mean anything to us in terms of widening that space that we could imagine until later. I'd be glad to go on [about] all of this later when we talk about high school and college.

My sister—well, one of the lucky things that happened in our life is that we moved into a neighborhood in Newark that was near an arts high school, an art, music—

01-00:22:18

Cooks: Okay—

01-00:22:18

Gaines: —which—

01-00:22:18

Cooks: —when your parents bought the house, it was close to Arts High School?

01-00:22:21

Gaines: Yes. [They didn't have] anything called a magnet school in those days, but it was the first high school of music and art in the country. It's called Arts High School. We lived near there. You had to take a test to get into the school, an art or a music test, but it was available to anybody in Newark who could pass the test. We lived [near] there, and I was encouraged to go there in junior high—I went to eighth grade in elementary school and then to high school ninth to twelfth—and my elementary school teachers encouraged me to pursue art because they thought that I could draw. So it's like, you go.

Similarly, my sister, she has an amazing voice. They encouraged her, too, so she went there for music.

My brother, on the other hand, went to another high school, Central High, which is surprising to me that he survived Central High School. He's doing extraordinarily well, but he had to go through his own learning process. The one thing that I have to sort of give to my father is that he wanted us to obey certain disciplined behaviors as human beings—something came through, we learned to scrutinize or critically think about the environment we were living in. So, it encouraged critical thinking—it was easier for me than my brother because I went to the art high school and that just immediately set me on a different path, but he went to tough Central High, and so it was definitely—he had a bigger challenge. He had this ability to critically think about the neighborhood and environment and the kids around him and what they were doing with their lives and separated himself from that. It was just quite remarkable he was able to do that, so—

01-00:24:48

Cooks: Did he have artistic talent or was he encouraged through the arts, or because he didn't he went to a different high school?

01-00:24:57

Gaines: Yeah, no, he wasn't interested in art. He has a pretty good voice, but I don't know—my sister was always encouraged to sing all the way through school. He had none of that kind of encouragement, and so he really wasn't interested in it, and—

01-00:25:20

Cooks:

But your teachers thought that you could draw early on. Did you think you could draw? Were you interested in art in elementary school or eighth grade, or not until high school?

01-00:25:34

Gaines:

Yeah well, I was told that I could draw enough times that I thought that I could, and I was given all the visual arts projects to execute. I had to do the Christmas arrangements, and class murals and so forth. It was just everybody understood that I could draw. I remember that my fourth-grade elementary school teacher pointed this out to my mother. She was going to try to encourage my mother to encourage my art, because they identified drawing skills as an indicator of artistic talent, they connected this with art, history of art, and so forth, which it's *not*. Make sure that that's on the record: that because you can draw does not mean you should be an artist, eye-hand coordination did not mean you had any business being an artist. But this is the way people perceived it at the time, that it was an essential talent for artists. And so, she told my mom that she should encourage me to follow the arts because if I did and I established a career as an artist, I would be the first black artist in the history of the United States.

01-00:27:09

Cooks:

So, did you— [both laugh] Okay. Did you know anything about artists, and did you know anything about black artists at such a—

01-00:27:18

Gaines:

No.

01-00:27:18

Cooks:

—young age? No.

01-00:27:20

Gaines:

No, no. Art meant doing it, and so it meant that you painted and drew, that's what you did—we had an art teacher that came to the class once a week and gave an art lesson, something that hardly happens anymore, which is really a shame, but it was a normal part of education back in those days. We also had a music teacher who came in once a week and had us play the flutophone. And then when I went to high school, it was when I began to learn that these processes are connected to a history.

01-00:28:11

Cooks:

Did you meet other black students that were interested in being artists? Or did you even think of yourself as being an artist, or just someone who could draw and had a kind of artistic talent?

01-00:28:25

Gaines:

Well, not in elementary school.

01-00:28:27

Cooks:

In high school, later on as a teenager, did it start to show?

01-00:28:31

Gaines:

Yeah, in high school the population of blacks to whites in Newark was probably, I don't know, about 20, 25 percent. I think that in those days—not in the fifties, in the sixties, particularly in the sixties—the black population of Newark when I was a kid was around 25 percent, if I can remember. Eventually, all the white people moved out. [laughs] They're trying to move back in now, but they all moved out. But when I was there, it was an integrated, interesting cultural and creative environment. At the high school that I went to, 20 percent of us were black. I saw there were other black kids who were making art and doing things, and so what happened to them paid off in terms of what they decided to do afterwards, in terms of—most of us went on to college.

I went to Jersey City State College, which is now Jersey City State University [New Jersey City University]. When I got out of high school and went into the art program there—which is essentially art education, teaching undergraduate art education. It wasn't really an art school where you'd be professionally trained as an artist, although part of that training included the idea of studio practice. So you took painting and drawing classes and so forth just to learn the discipline, to learn the practice, but all that was contextualized at that time by the idea that you were going to go into education. I went there, and the other kids, some of them—the people that I remember the most specifically did not go into art, but there were other black kids who did either [go] on from high school to art schools in Philadelphia and New York. So there were people that I knew of that—I actually only kept up after that with one friend who I still regard as one of my best friends, but I don't know what happened to the others in terms of their pursuit of art. I know that they didn't do it to the degree that I did, because I would've run into them. It didn't happen.

01-00:31:30

So, it's an interesting thing to talk about, because again, the opportunity, you know—as a black person, you still have to be able to imagine yourself doing that, having a future in art. I know that at the time that—well, it's a mystery to this day, because I could sort of imagine myself moving on to making art—even though I didn't know what it meant, I could imagine myself that whatever that was, being an artist, I have to go to an art school. I got that from looking at what happened to the white kids that were in school, but I still didn't know what it meant. And so, that's the only reason I always just assumed that I—I told you I was getting mediocre grades in the first two years, but I began to think about it and imagine myself moving along a path outside of being a public school teacher. Again, I don't understand why I became aware at a certain point, but when I became aware, I became obsessive about it, that I knew that I had to do something about my grades, if I'm going to get into grad school. So I pretty much maintained an A minus average for the last two years, which raised my grades from a low C average to what I graduated with, a B, which is enough to at least have schools look at

me—graduate schools just [didn't] dismiss me outright. But then I still had a lot of difficulty getting into graduate school.

01-00:33:28

Cooks:

Just to clarify, the professors that you had at Jersey City, they were training you to be an art teacher in public school. Is that right? Were they artists themselves, or they were teachers teaching you how to be an art teacher?

01-00:33:49

Gaines:

There is a category of people who are trained in studio practices and consider themselves being artists, but who are also educators. There's another category of people who are just educators who know about art and who know about practicing art, but they have no interest in becoming professional artists. The teachers that I worked with at Jersey City imagined themselves as professional artists, but for whatever reason didn't pursue it professionally. They were sometimes [doing] small shows and so forth and so on; they didn't really do what's necessary to push it as a professional career. So, that was the environment that I went to, a school where there were teachers—some of them very good—who imagined themselves having professional practices, but who didn't do the things that's necessary to do that, and lived a sort of double life their whole lives as teachers, college teachers. This happens mostly on the college level, where, as opposed to art, teaching can provide some kind of security; being professional artists offers no security, and it's pretty scary. So the good thing about that is that for the student, it did help build this idea of a professional practice outside of school. It did build that in me, and—

01-00:36:13

Cooks:

And you figured out that somehow—it seems like you didn't necessarily have a model for a full-time professional artist or a full-time professional artist who also teaches, but that it's something that you were imagining for your future: if you could get your grades up and get into graduate school, that that became your goal.

01-00:36:35

Gaines:

Yeah, that began in high school; then in college I was exposed to the history of art. So I knew that there were famous artists who made these interesting paintings, and I knew that that existed out there. I guess I knew that I wanted to be a part of that, but I still really didn't understand it at the time. Even when I went to graduate school, I didn't quite understand it, but I began to understand it when I went to Rochester Institute of Technology. I began to understand it because of some meetings I had [with] people who were truly from the art world there, and this helped me grow my understanding of the idea of professional practice.

01-00:37:36

Cooks:

When you were at Jersey City, did you start going to galleries and museums, or did that start even earlier, or did it come later? I was thinking about

traveling to New York City, and going to galleries and getting a bigger sense of the art world.

01-00:37:53

Gaines:

There were museum field trips, the whole thing. We didn't really do gallery field trips. We went into museums and saw things, famous artists, both in contemporary museums and encyclopedic museums. We were exposed to that work, and so I knew that that was out there. I had some bifurcated notion that it's something that I wanted to be a part of, but I couldn't imagine myself [being] *that*, looking at those [paintings by] Cézanne and Matisse. Abstract expressionism was still sort of a—at the time I was in high school and in college, that was a living movement. I don't know that I understood it, but I was very interested in it. But I never thought that I could be those people. I had this weird bifurcation where I thought I wanted to be a part of this, but I didn't think I'd ever be in this museum.

01-00:39:09

Cooks:

Did you think of yourself as a painter or someone who did drawing, or did you have a particular media that you were interested in at the time?

01-00:39:19

Gaines:

Pretty much a painter. The idea of art in those days was painting and drawing and sculpture. There were movements that were breaking out of those models, but they were operating on a radical fringe that even my teachers didn't sort of understand. So I didn't—at that time—didn't sort of have an understanding of those to form ideas that you can actually build other models as a practice, and so I just fell naturally into painting.

01-00:39:58

Cooks:

Do you remember why you picked RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology]? Was there a connection, or something you had read or heard about the school that drew you to it?

01-00:40:08

Gaines:

My college teachers at Jersey City knew that I wanted to go to an art school, and so one of them gave me the RIT catalog. There were schools that I knew about in New York City, and so I applied to all of them: applied to Hunter and applied to the art school in Philadelphia. I forget the name of it.

01-00:40:47

Cooks:

The Academy, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts?

01-00:40:52

Gaines:

No, it wasn't the Pennsylvania Academy. The Tyler School of Art. But anyway, applied to those two. My teacher gave me the RIT catalog, which looked interesting, so I applied to that, too. I got rejected by all the schools, and—

01-00:41:14

Cooks:

And so then what did you think? [laughs] What do you do next?



01-00:41:19

Gaines:

Rochester—because I think I called up there to find out why I was rejected, and they said I was not ready. I think that if I were a faculty in any of those departments and I judged my own portfolio, I would have rejected it, too. I don't think it was something that—I don't feel like this is a conspiracy. In fact, I just didn't gain the discipline early enough so that I could build this background. As it turns out, I was furiously making work the last year after being quite blasé about that in my first two years in college, and I just didn't have the time to grow and mature and develop a worthwhile portfolio. I thought, I would've done the same thing. [laughs]

But, I wrote them and asked them, and they said that "Well, if you want to, we have a summer program where you can study for five summers and get an MFA." They said that "This is a program that interests a lot of public school teachers who don't have time to go through a regular program, but wanted to get an MFA. And so, you can think about that." I said, "Are you kidding me?" The dean said that "The other thing that you can do is come up for a summer into the school and get a new—we can reevaluate your portfolio at the end of the summer, and maybe you could get entry then."

Oh, I remember. Actually, what I did was—it's completely mess. I went out there when I got rejected. I was going to go actually ask these people why, and so RIT was the first one. I drove up with my friend and had a meeting with the dean, then he told me all this stuff. But I think he ultimately was trying to say that, well, I'm just not ready, but then, it's hard to resist somebody who's like crying, writhing on the floor, saying, "Please, can I get in?" [laughs] And so after that he said, "Well, we have these things." I went up there for the summer, and it turned out to be very successful. I was admitted into the graduate program—

01-00:44:20

Cooks:

So—

01-00:44:20

Gaines:

—the following fall.

01-00:44:22

Cooks:

So did you work there that summer? Were you in a program that summer, leading up to the fall?

01-00:44:25

Gaines:

Yeah.

01-00:44:26

Cooks:

I see.

01-00:44:27

Gaines:

And I had to pay for it. There was no money for it, and—

01-00:44:31

Cooks: Were you working through college for money? Did you live at home when you were at Jersey?

01-00:44:35

Gaines: I lived at home, but I was a professional musician. I played in clubs, and so I had money and income.

01-00:44:46

Cooks: Well, what did you play? What do you play?

01-00:44:49

Gaines: Drums. I was trained as a percussionist.

01-00:44:51

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:44:53

Gaines: That was something that I started doing when I was at Arts High School. Of course, Newark is a big jazz town. From the age of twelve, I started collecting jazz albums, and out of that—the proximity to jazz musicians was really easy in Newark. And so, a kid who—I call him a kid, but he was—he rented the first floor of the two-story house that my parents bought. This guy worked in a jazz club, he was a young guy. He says, "You can come out to the club." I was underage, but he would get me in. And so there, I started meeting jazz musicians and getting acquainted with music.

So I started buying albums, and then I said, "I want to be a drummer." I started first teaching myself. And Nick, I don't remember his last name, he says, "You need to take lessons." He put me in touch with a drummer who played for Lambert, Hendricks & Ross: Jimmie Smith. Jimmie lived in Newark, and Jimmie started giving me drum lessons. I got more deeply involved in music. And then at a certain point Jimmie was not around enough, because he was on the road often. I couldn't take lessons consistently enough, so I started taking lessons from a famous drum teacher in Newark named Carl Schmitt, and so then I studied with him all through high school, and—

01-00:47:19

Cooks: What did your family think about this, since your mom—talented in music—your sister? Were they excited or were they nervous?

01-00:47:29

Gaines: Well, the thing is that like, as far as my mom was concerned, I could do no wrong. My father had this set of different rules, but for some reason—yeah, very definitely for my mom I could do wrong—but for some reason being involved in music was, it was a source of pride for him. My first drum set was a typewriter, an old pushbutton typewriter. I put it on a chair and had a couple pairs of drumsticks, and the top part of the typewriter, the metal part, I used as a cymbal, and I had this old snare and no bass drum. So I was up there in the attic, and I would put on my albums and play along. I would try to imitate the

drummer on the album. It'd make a racket. Drums are loud, so you don't want to live next to a drummer, but—

01-00:48:45

Cooks: Were you in the attic? Were you playing in the attic of the house?

01-00:48:49

Gaines: It was an attic that was converted into two bedrooms. We lived up there, because one room was my and my brother's bedroom, and the other room up there was my sister's, and so I had the set in my bedroom. But on the second floor [is] the rest of the family's living room and so forth, and my parents' bedroom. So, I was right above their bedroom, and I don't know why they put up with that. I have *no idea*. I mean, a drum sounds better than a typewriter, but it was just noise. They just put up with it. I remember Jimmie—not Jimmie, but Nicky coming by and seeing what I had. He said, "Well, I have an old bass drum," and so he gave me a bass drum with a foot pedal. This just increased the amount of noise that I was making. That's when he said, "You should take lessons."

I don't know where I got the first drum set from. I think Nicky had something to do with that. Nicky and Jimmie gave me a more complete set. I started taking lessons with it. But it was a beat-up set, but I used that. I got good enough to play in clubs. After a couple of years of playing clubs, I got the money to buy a new drum set, and my drum teacher, Carl, he had music a store, so I bought the first set of drums from him, which was a good set, and continued the lessons. At a certain point, I stopped taking drum lessons. Continued to play, but I had got to a certain point—and I should say that I played with some really good, pretty famous people, not necessarily as a member of their band, but at these night club where musicians could sit in. And so I would go and—

01-00:51:02

Cooks: Like, who were some of these people? Jimmie Smith is already pretty impressive.

01-00:51:09

Gaines: Yeah well, the drummer, Jimmie Smith, there is also the organist, right?

01-00:51:14

Cooks: Yes.

01-00:51:15

Gaines: Yeah so, he's the drummer. This is where I get problems with remembering names.

01-00:51:23

Cooks: We'll fill it out later, that's fine. Well, that was an exciting bit of your history, yeah. [laughs] We hadn't gotten to—

01-00:51:33

Gaines:

Well, what I want to say about that is that I continued to play up until the time I decided to go to graduate school. I was asked to go on tour with a jazz ensemble at the same time I was trying to decide to go to graduate school, so I had to make this decision: whether I was going or not going to graduate school. And so of course, I decided to go to graduate school. In order to afford that, I sold my drum set at least to get up there, but not during graduate school. I pretty much stayed away from playing until I graduated, and then continued to play but not on a serious level, I stopped practicing. When I moved to Fresno, I hooked up with some musicians and began to play in clubs again recreationally.

01-00:52:33

Cooks:

Wow.

01-00:52:33

Tewes:

Sounds like you actually had a pretty good gig going with the music. Did you ever consider just following that path and not continuing on [in art]? What was the decision process for you?

01-00:52:46

Gaines:

Well, I really did want to become a visual artist. And later, I was glad I decided to stick with it. At a certain point I might have thought [music] was the better decision, because some of the people that I went to school with—Woody Shaw, Wayne Shorter, for example, and Sarah Vaughan had graduated from Arts High School and—

01-00:53:09

Cooks:

Wow. She's a different generation now.

01-00:53:16

Gaines:

Yeah, she's a totally just a different generation than me.

But it wasn't long before I discovered what a brutal life being a musician was. A number of the people who became famous or developed [music] careers, a lot of them died from drugs. Sonny Rollins, one of my idols, resisted drugs.

It's so interesting. I just found out that I'm going to be awarded the MacDowell Medal, and—

01-00:55:13

Cooks:

Oh, congratulations!

01-00:55:15

Gaines:

Thanks, yeah. One of the people who got the medal was Sonny Rollins.

01-00:55:23

Cooks:

That's excellent.

01-00:55:26

Gaines: I'm glad because it's a brutal life. Being a visual artist is bad enough, but jazz musicians were forced to play in clubs, and that kind of social space just made it—drugs [were] so prevalent in this space; it was unbelievable. Like when I would go to see my drum teacher Jimmy Smith play with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. Ross, I'm trying to remember her first name. [Annie Ross.]

01-00:56:12

Cooks: We'll fill it in.

01-00:56:13

Gaines: Yeah. Anyway, I was there when they fired her and hired [Yolande] Bavan, so it became Lambert, Hendricks & Bavan. What happened—you know, I was right there; it was just amazing. She became addicted to cocaine, and she started missing gigs and so forth. She decided that she was going to get off of them. They told her that "You have to take a leave of absence and try to rehab." But during the time that she was rehabbing, they hired Bavan. This happened in the New York jazz club, Basin Street East; when they're all in the back room. Jon Hendricks came in and told the rest of them, he said—Annie Ross, yeah—told us that "Annie's outside, and she wants to join the group. She wants to come back. She says she's sober, she wants to come back." They were saying, "No, not on your life," and, "I'm not going on that pathway anymore," and so forth. Because none of them were involved in drugs. And even then I thought, Boy, this is really heartbreaking.

01-00:57:44

Cooks: That happened while you were in college, and so you're saying that helped to encourage you to try a different direction as a visual artist, even though it was more unknown, it was maybe—had more potential for a safer life than being a jazz musician.

01-00:58:02

Gaines: This happened while I was in high school. Well, I think that it became another reason that I think that I made the right decision, but there was no question that I was not going to go into professional music. I can't explain why I had a greater passion for visual art than music, except for the fact that I was doing visual art longer, and it's sort of become more normalized in terms of my identity, which gave it an edge maybe, making that kind of decision.

01-00:58:39

Cooks: So, you apply to graduate schools; you get in a car with some friends; you drive to Rochester; you meet with the dean and say, "Why didn't I get into graduate school?" and he offers you some alternatives. Do you then stay after you drive up, you just end up staying in Rochester, and then being part of a program and then enrolling in the fall?

01-00:59:05

Gaines: Yeah, it was a time between the end of the summer program and the end of the fall, and so I came back to Newark and then returned that fall.

01-00:59:16

Cooks:

What was graduate school like for you? Was it what you expected? Did you come in thinking, Now, this is where I get to figure out how to be a professional artist? Were the classes helping you? Because I think about RIT as a technical school, and now we associate it with photography, but I'm wondering what it was like for you then, if it was what you were looking for.

01-00:59:42

Gaines:

Well that's the thing, because RIT had one of the first fine art schools in the country. I think that Syracuse also had an early art school. So there were two schools at RIT: one was the School for American Craftsmen and the other is the School of Fine Arts. There's also a photography school that's completely separate, and there are two parts to that: there's the fine arts photography and there's the commercial photography, but they were entirely separate schools. The School for American Craftsmen had become very famous, and much better known than the art school. It's interesting because my work, as you know, deals with numbers, so when people ask me where did I go to school, [I say,] "It's RIT." And they say, "Oh, that's why. You went to a math school, that's why you do the work you do." I'd say, "I don't know anything about math, it was just an art school." I, at a certain point, started having this sense that I had to justify myself.

01-01:01:03

Cooks:

To you or to who?

01-01:01:05

Gaines:

To the world.

01-01:01:06

Cooks:

To everybody.

01-01:01:07

Gaines:

It was like I had the idea—and it's something that I'm still struggling with, again, upon reflection—but in that moment, I was totally unconscious of it—that I believed people are going to underestimate me, so I had to show them that I was more than what they expected of me. A little of that came from—I don't know where that thing came from, because I remember when I was a kid having the feeling that I don't want people to wrongly accuse me of bad stuff. There's an image that I wanted to project, and I don't want people to have other thoughts about me than this image. I have no idea where that came from, but when I was in high school, I got very defensive; I remember that a number of high school teachers underestimated me in different ways. They didn't expect anything from me. They didn't think I was very smart, didn't think that I was very talented, and didn't expect me to excel. And they treated me in such a way where I was very aware of that lack of expectation.

I had just two teachers in high school that were different. One was Mr. Rickenbaker. He was an English teacher. I did extremely well in his class, and I think it is because that he expected it from me. I had another English teacher

who was just the opposite: Mr. Janowitz. He would expect that if he gave this assignment that I wouldn't do it, and he would try to embarrass me in class. He would call on me to answer a question. On one occasion, he asked me a question from the assignment, and so I was thinking about the answer. I'd done the assignment. This is during the time that I was like a semiconscious human being anyway; I didn't have good discipline. But I did the assignment and—oh no, no, no. This is my senior year. This is after my awakening. [laughs] So—

01-01:03:41

Cooks: So, senior year—

01-01:03:41

Gaines: So I'd done this—

01-01:03:42

Cooks: —in high school?

01-01:03:43

Gaines: Yeah. I'd done the assignment, he asked me the question, and I was just about to give him the answer when he broke in and said that, "You never do your homework, Charles." He used me as an example in his class—he publicly ridiculed me. But I gave him the answer.

01-01:04:09

Cooks: Oh you did?

01-01:04:10

Gaines: Yeah. I said, "I did read the assignment. Why did you think that I didn't?" It was a kind of pattern that I'd gotten from several teachers. One biology teacher used me as an example of, because I—not biology, but geometry—because I was actually pretty good in geometry. I wasn't that good in math, but I was good in geometry, geometry came easy to me. I was giving him the series of answers to questions that—given an assignment, and he would score people by how many right answers [they had]. So there were like maybe a hundred problems, and he would go through people and say, "How many can you solve of these hundred?" and then people would give their answers until they got one wrong, at which time he would go to the next student. I had the longest sequence of correct answers as anybody, and then he took the pointer and said, "This is amazing. Here's somebody—" [yours truly]—"who's not particularly bright, and just sort of a middle-of-the-road person. I don't know *how* it is that he can give all these answers." He was ridiculing me in front of the entire class.

My family was very poor at this time. I mean, I had two pairs of pants and two pairs of socks to my name; one of the socks had holes in it. I know that my parents struggled and we didn't have very much. And so this kind of dark social space became normative in my life, and being reinforced by the way I was being treated at school. Probably it contributed to making it more difficult

for me, coming from the space where I didn't have those disciplines and didn't understand, it contributed to the difficulty of coming to the realization that I ultimately came to; the limits and constraints of the general social space that I grew up in—

01-01:06:37

Cooks: Well, when—

01-01:06:37

Gaines: —was sort of framed in me and operated against me in that pernicious way.

01-01:06:41

Cooks: Is there a moment or is it maybe an accumulation of moments when you figured out that you had the confidence to do well, to kind of become this person that you had imagined, you know, kind of in the unknown, but, I think that I'm going to be a professional artist; I think I can do well in school, even though I've had experiences where people expect less from me? Was there a moment when it sort of turned and you had the confidence to sort of be who you thought you should always be?

01-01:07:17

Gaines: As I mentioned, I operated in a bifurcated space of identity and couldn't bridge the differences, which is, I couldn't bridge or reconcile this sort of ambition with this low opinion I had of myself. I couldn't reconcile that, and I only think I came to some understanding of it when I was in my forties. But at the time, I just sort of lived with the difference, and it was a matter of not really believing in myself, but at the same time, like, I'll never be these things that I might want to be; but at the same time, I had this ambition to do—go through the process of trying to be that better person. Yeah, I have no idea why my identity had this line of demarcation. I didn't ever, ever get to the point in my early years of coming to terms with this. It never got to that holistic moment, never—not until my early forties, certainly not during those younger years.

01-01:09:03

Cooks: I think we're going to come back to that, because it's so important, just in terms of human development. But of course, thinking about how you've become such an incredible mentor to many people, that you've been able to instill a sense of confidence in challenges, I think, for our kind of system in which artists can challenge themselves, that it's interesting just to hear you talk about that process for yourself: how you became who we think of Charles Gaines, which, it's a name, but it's also a kind of—it is a story of success and almost a kind of anomaly in the art world for many people in terms of the success and trajectory of a black artist. I think we'll come back to that sort of organically as we're talking. Thinking about the chronology, though, I'm wondering how these new skills that you're gathering as you're going to graduate school, how did that become part of this idea of becoming a professional artist? Was it what you hoped it would be? Were you learning



what you thought you should be learning to start to become that person later on?

01-01:10:34

Gaines:

I didn't really think beyond the moment that I was existing [in]. At the time that I was in graduate school, what I remember thinking is that, whatever being an artist was, I have to go to graduate school in order to find out what that is. And so, what I know of the graduate school is it's pretty much—it was above functioning in that space, and I wasn't thinking about what's going to happen when I got out. The thought of it was there; I mean, I said that well. I know why I was there, but at the same time, it wasn't something that I felt compelled to pay attention to, because I was busy paying attention to the moment that I was in, which was trying to perform as a graduate student.

Well in the course of that, I did get an idea of what it meant to become a professional artist from the people that I met while at Rochester. One was a curator from the Guggenheim Museum—[his] name was David Hayes—who was taking some classes in the photography school.

01-01:12:01

Cooks:

He was already a curator and he was taking photo classes, or he became a curator later?

01-01:12:06

Gaines:

No, he wasn't in the program; he went to Rochester just to take the classes. You can, as a non-matriculating student, take courses at RIT. And it's because, [it] mostly happened in the summer; like I said, they had this summer school, but they had the potential for a number of the students at RIT. He was up there in photography, and so I was introduced to him. During the school year, he came back and took additional coursework, and he begins to see my work, what I was doing, after a period of time where I had to build it or I had actually made things while I was a graduate student, and so he—I don't know. He thought it was interesting, said he thought that I should know something about the art world, and he began to introduce me to the art world itself.

The first thing that he did was that he suggested, in order to understand art, that I needed to read a couple of books. He gave me this book or he told me to buy this book called *The Life of Forms in Art* by Henri Focillon. He says, "Read this. This is a book that a number of artists have read and have been informed or influenced by." And then after that, that book led me to read [George] Kubler's *The Shape of Time*, because Kubler was a student of Focillon's and Kubler was at the time teaching at Yale. I subsequently read that. He also introduced me to a book called *Tantric Art*, essentially an art book showing the colorful images of tantric paintings and sculpture. There was some theoretical writing, critical writing around, but very little; it was mostly a picture book. He gave me a book by [Philip] Kapleau on Zen Buddhism, [*Three Pillars of Zen*]. What was happening was that he was giving me discourses that were interesting to certain artists: John Cage and

David Tudor and "Merce" Cunningham, and not so much Jasper Johns, but [Robert] Rauschenberg. He was exposing me to certain kind of discourses that were important or influential to them, and so I started reading.

Then at the same time, he would introduce me to these events in New York. I met [Andy] Warhol and went to several Velvet Underground events. I went to the Velvet Underground and saw the band, and met the people in the band, then Warhol, I also went to sculptor Donald Judd's studio. So I began to meet these artists who were part of a really contemporary practice that I didn't know so much about because in terms of study they were too new for the history of art to record them—they were such cutting-edge people. So you would find them in books like Calvin Tomkins's book, [*Lives of the Artists: Portraits of Ten Artists Whose Work and Lifestyles Embody the Future of Contemporary Art*], if you read about it there, and Gregory Battcock had written *The New Art*. These are all the artists that I would become acquainted with, and so I began to get a better idea of contemporary practice.

01-01:16:40

Cooks:

With these books, who were you talking to about the ideas in this—I mean, these are pretty heavy ideas, and I'm wondering if—were there people at RIT who were teaching these books, or were your peers at RIT also reading these books, or did you talk to David? That's a lot to be exposed to and try to sort out all these different ideas. Or was it just you processing and trying to make it make sense in your own context?

01-01:17:13

Gaines:

Yeah, none of this stuff was being talked about at RIT. I had one teacher at undergraduate school who talked about Cage a lot. That was really informative, and it helped later on when I got into this other material. But essentially, everybody that we were studying, most of them were representational painters, some were expressionists, some of them were minimalists; but nobody was involved in these so-called new genres investigations, conceptualism, anything like that. And so those ideas were not being discussed, and critical discourse of art was not being talked about, discussed at all. For me it all came from this one source: David. And of course, when I began reading that stuff, I hadn't the slightest idea what I was reading. I had to read these books several times. I think I read Focillon fifteen times before things started to make sense on some level to me. A lot of it was to stick with it just strictly based upon trust, that David must know what he's talking about. It could have been that David's like crazy, but he isn't crazy, so let me keep reading it.

01-01:18:48

Cooks:

Did you kind of debrief with him? Because I was trying to imagine—I know the drive from Rochester to New York City, it's a very long drive, and I was wondering, did you—David was living in New York—did you take a bus or did you drive a car when you drove—

01-01:19:04

Gaines: I was living in Newark, so during the times that—school breaks and so forth—

01-01:19:16

Cooks: So during the school year, though, you were at RIT in Rochester, and then during the summers—I see, okay. Just—

01-01:19:23

Gaines: Yeah, or Christmas. All the breaks I was back home.

01-01:19:26

Cooks: You would go back and then you'd go to New York, and meet all these people. Yes, okay. So many questions. Let's see. We can talk more about being at Rochester. I did want to ask if there were other people—was there anyone at RIT that made a kind of supportive environment or a community of people, other professors or other students? Were there other black students that were there? Probably less than Newark, if there were any, but what was it like being a grad student there?

01-01:20:07

Gaines: Well, it's about school. I was the first black graduate student in the program's history. They had a black student before me in the Design Program, but he was actually the first black student that actually sort of stepped on campus. I was able to have some connection with other black people, because one of the design teachers—another person who's helpful and influential—was a guy named Osmond Guy. Oz, as he was called, was a little nuts. He's not a perfect role model, but he did help me out a lot. I would not have made it without his help. I went there with no money, and he put me up for a period of time and where I was able to get some money to pay for—to get an apartment. He would have me babysit his daughter Michia once in a while, so he would employ me here and there. And brought me into his social life, which was, like, really crazy. I just recently met Michia again after 40 years.

01-01:21:18

Cooks: In Rochester?

01-01:21:19

Gaines: Yeah, but he was my connection to a black experience in Rochester. Otherwise, I'm going to say, I could not identify with the environment. And as it happens, that's been the case through my whole professional life. I can't identify with the spaces that I've worked professionally or studied professionally. So I couldn't identify with the environment. I felt that there was a sort of façade, that the issues of race and difference were not issues in Rochester. What makes those environments alien is that you don't see yourself anywhere—not in the things that you study, not in the things that you talk about. And even though teachers, they're very nice and I wasn't faced with—you know, Rochester's a very problematic community in terms of race, and the school is, too. But it's not something where people carry signs saying that,

"You black, you go away." There's this façade of an ordinary environment, but you know deep down it's not. You know that underneath it's like a mess.

And so I couldn't identify with school, but I did identify with a couple of graduate students. This was one guy I worked with, Paul Garland, and we became friends and we continued to be friends years after, who I could get along with super. There was another graduate student there, an older guy that I did have a confrontation with him. There's certain moments where you are reminded you are a black person.

01-01:24:42

One day I was walking through the painting studios, joking, which I do a lot—joking, that is—and said something jokingly but stupid, like, "Is there any art being done here?" I said this loudly. I walked out of the area and decided to turn back, and as I did, I heard the older guy say to Paul, "Paul, that guy has a big mouth, I don't even know why he's here?" As he said this he turned around and there I was, and he knew I heard him say that. He began to be very—"Oh, I'm sorry I said that," and he was trying to make amends. "You can come over to our house and have dinner. Or, I'll let you wash your clothes at our house." I said, "No, no, no." But later, he admitted to me that he's not used to being around black people, and that I had this white female student who I went out with on a couple of dates, and he was telling me how troubled he was by that. He said he has a sixteen-year-old daughter and he's saying, "Oh, I feel bad for thinking this way, but I don't know what I'd do if she came home with a black guy." And he's telling me all this stuff, right?

So what happens is that in that circumstance, the skin was peeled back for a brief moment and you got to see the actual inner material of Rochester. Oz, the teacher who—he actually looked white and you would guess him to be white—but he makes a point that everybody knew that he's not white, would talk about that stuff. It's like the ugly underside of Rochester and RIT. There's some really nice individuals, but like me, he said the same: he could never identify with the environment.

01-01:27:28

And so I said, "I don't even know what to say about that." I mean, it's this issue that what's happening to me is not unusual, particularly at the time with black people moving into these—more prominently into these white spaces. This is part of what that is, and you have to find a way to negotiate it, so I don't know what to say. But that's a real part of that experience, and it was later I was able to say, Well, one of the things that I've gained from that—this has nothing to do with the school, how the school works institutionally, but has to do with your experiences there and the social space and what I should expect in the art world. It gave me some real lessons on that.

01-01:28:23

Tewes:

I'm wondering how that kind of discrimination that you were faced with in Rochester and beyond, how that impacted where you saw yourself where you could go in the art world.

01-01:28:36

Gaines:

Yeah well, I don't know. Part of that split that I was trying to describe in my identity was probably sort of fertilized by the way the covert racism that exists in the general culture and in any particular discipline that you find yourself in, that it has to play a part in minimizing or limiting your ability to imagine. That I think probably made that—what I'm calling that split or bifurcation in my identity—something that I didn't think I'd have to really deal with. What I didn't recognize is that—and later I did—this bifurcation in my personality was produced by this, living in a racist environment that is sort of—the context that I lived in, the *mise en scène* of my life, was racist, and then that racism was presented as normative. So, it splits people. You live in fear of being a victim, and you transcend it. You transcend it, if you understand how it works on a critical level. If you can articulate how, for example, there's a political or racial history that's framed by ideas and concepts that have studied social behavior in such a way that you see yourself as part of a pattern, then you become critical of it and this split can merge, but at the time I hadn't.

It wasn't anything that I could act upon. I had friends who earlier than I, much earlier, were able to sort of theorize their identity in their world. So I'm not saying that I didn't have the possibility of coming to an understanding a lot earlier, because others, black friends that I had especially in Jersey City, did. They were able to do that, but it took longer for me. For whatever reason, I don't know.

01-01:32:01

Tewes:

Well, that's definitely a journey we're going to continue going down. Is there anything you two want to add before we finish up this first session?

01-01:32:11

Cooks:

I think it's fine to break right here and then start with teaching for the next session.

01-01:32:16

Tewes:

All right, very good. Thanks, guys.

## Interview 2: April 1, 2019

02-00:00:03

Tewes: This is a second interview with Charles Gaines for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes at Mr. Gaines's studio in Los Angeles, California, on April 2, 2019. So everybody, thanks for a second session. I said April 2, and I meant April 1. [laughs] Thank you for saving the day. Go ahead, Bridget.

02-00:00:32

Cooks: So, I want to start where we left off, which was you leaving RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology]. Were you feeling at that moment that you had to make a decision in terms of your career? Did you think about going to New York and trying to give a go at it, becoming a professional artist? Was the other path teaching, or can you help us kind of think about where you were in that moment just fresh out of grad school?

02-00:01:06

Gaines: Sure. So at a certain point, people began to mobilize around doing things like teaching after grad school. As I said before, I didn't think that far ahead, and I suddenly became concerned with sending out applications for teaching positions and so forth. I guess at the time, the MFA was considered something that would get you a teaching job much faster than an MA, and so, it was something that a lot of people did. Like nationally, people who got MFA's got teaching jobs, it was a time that art schools were growing, the student population's increasing. There was financial aid. There were a lot of things that made it—the MFA possible. It was at growing moment in education and the MFA fed into that, in art, so lots of people were looking at teaching jobs.

Even though a lot of people went to school because they wanted to get a teaching job. I didn't, because as I said before, I didn't think that far ahead. I was only concentrating on school. Eventually, I began sending out applications. I already mentioned that I began developing an understanding of the art world and what it meant to be a professional artist, and I was spending all my time in New York. So the question, the obvious question is perhaps: did I seek that out at the time also as a possibility? I guess I didn't. I don't know, perhaps because it was for me a relatively new idea and I didn't process it; I didn't see finding a job as something that would inhibit my ability to start a professional practice.

So, sort of blindly I started sending out applications. I was late in sending them out, and because of that I wasn't getting much response. But there was a guy who was at RIT from Mississippi Valley State [University], he was chairing the Art Department, and he was not in the regular program, he was in the summer program. I met him during the summer. He said after I graduate, give him a call. RIT's MFA at the time, it was one year. The MFAs are

typically two years, but they had a one-year MFA, which meant that I essentially spent a year-and-a-half in the graduate program. At the end of it, the following summer, I did call him, he suggested that I came down there and teach, and so I did.

02-00:05:11

I'd never been to Mississippi before. I had grown up in Charleston until the age of five, but I also went back to Charleston every year until the age of sixteen. Every summer, my parents would send us back to Charleston to stay with my grandmother, until I turned sixteen and then I didn't have to go anymore. And so, I knew Charleston fairly well, and I thought I knew the South. It's not like Charleston is Shangri-La, but it is nothing like Mississippi. So, when I went down there at the school—it's a small liberal arts college in the middle of the Delta in a town called Itta Bena that got famous a little bit because Jerry Rice went to school there. But I was made a professor, and so I started teaching courses in art history to the art students.

Trying to get used to living in the environment, I found the school had apartments on campus, so I got a small, one-room campus apartment. You didn't have to drive anywhere, there was the school and about a half mile down the road is the Itta Bena business section—it's a town that had more horses than it had people. It was very tiny, and so you didn't have to go anywhere because there's no place to go, really. But I wanted a motorcycle, and I went into town to see if I could get a loan for a bike and I was refused the loan. That was curious because that—well at the time—the salary was not bad. And so I asked my chair to co-sign, and he said, "It's hard for black people to get loans in this town." I said, "Well, could you co-sign a loan for me?" He said, "No." [laughs] So, I never got the motorcycle. But that was the first time that I knew I was in an interesting, unique place at this stage in my life.

02-00:07:46

There were other faculty, young faculty, who were there, and we hung out together. We began to talk about the environment: what does it mean to live in Itta Bena? And among us were people who—there was one guy who actually grew up there. At the end of this conversation, I got to know—I was, like, naïve about this—I got to know that I'm in a place where I've got to be really careful, because they were still lynching people. Officially, if you see Bryan Stevenson's memorial, [The National Memorial for Peace and Justice], I think the last lynchings that they record and last killings are in the fifties, but they were lynching people way into the sixties. I don't think that they were just telling apocryphal stories. They're saying that, "This is still going on and the Klan is still here."

It all came to a head after Martin Luther King was shot and killed, and the students wanted to organize a protest mostly as sort of a memorial, an act of memorializing the death. They didn't want to tear down the town, but they had

to do something. The school gave them no outlet, and so they formed on campus—the student population was about 3,000—about a thousand students formed and started marching to Itta Bena. They were just going to do a march to the little town, probably say a couple of words, and then march back holding signs. And so the school panicked; it is a black school. There are no—

02-00:10:26

Cooks:

HBCU [historically black college and university]?

02-00:10:28

Gaines:

Mississippi Valley State, yeah. I don't know, it might be called university now, but it was Mississippi Valley State College then. But it was a black school where the administration was totally black, but they got nervous. They called the governor and said that the students were marching to Itta Bena. I guess before that, they called the city government, and they sent out the police. And the police, the local poli[ce]—which is like three sheriff officers or something like that; it was not much of a police department—but they sent them. But the governor sent down the state police.

So the students started marching toward the town, and the governor ordered the state police to form a barricade preventing the students from reaching the town, which they did. I was in that crowd, I was fortunately way in the back at the tail end of it. They were marching, and from here, as the crowd marched forward, the police yelled, "Stop!" They didn't have a bullhorn or anything. They just said, "Stop." It was a big crowd, so nobody heard them. We kept moving, and so the police started shooting people. I don't think they wanted to kill anybody, but they shot at them. What happened is that the bullets ricocheted and hit several students. I don't know how many students went down, I can't remember. Nobody was killed. Down in Jackson, Mississippi, where a similar thing happened, some students were actually killed in that march. But when the shots happened in Itta Bena, all hell broke loose. The students started running everywhere, which meant that the state police, thinking things [were] getting out of control, they just started shooting more.

02-00:13:08

I should say that before this happened, I was having some kind of fits of anxiety and my heart would start racing. I didn't know where this was coming from. I went to the doctor and he tested me, and he says, "Oh, your tests are coming up normal, so I don't know. What's going on must be psychosomatic. Is there any stress in your life?" [both laugh] I thought about it. I said, "That's an easy question to answer." This happened about the time that King was shot, and this issue became the straw that broke the camel's back as far as I was concerned. Because right after that, the school initiated a kind of martial law, a curfew that prevented students from leaving the campus, and also returning to dorms at a certain time. They began to hire certain faculty and students as spies to make sure that no faculty and no students were talking or trying to engender a kind of political reaction or any kind of political activity at all. They wanted to spy on them. Some people who were snitched on, and the



students were caught—they were suspended or expelled, if my memory serves me. The school installed video cameras in the classroom to watch faculty. Because I remember being in class and having somebody come in [to] install a camera in one of the classrooms, so I don't think I'm making this up. This is what I remember. So at that point I thought, I got to get out of here, and so I wrote my resignation to the dean. This is when Martin Luther King was shot in February or something like that.

02-00:15:30

Cooks: April 4, in 1968, I think.

02-00:15:33

Gaines: In April 4.

02-00:15:34

Cooks: Mm-hm.

02-00:15:35

Gaines: Okay. The school term ended in June, and so I went to the dean and handed a letter of resignation. He couldn't understand why I was giving up such a good job.

02-00:15:50

Cooks: And so the administrators were black; the professors were also black? Or was it mixed?

02-00:15:56

Gaines: No, they were black. There were a couple of people, white faculty who would come in from Mississippi State [University] to teach certain courses that needed to be covered, but they were just kind of brought in to fill out a schedule so that the students would have available to them all the courses that are appropriate in their area of study. But otherwise, the regular faculty were all black and my students were all black.

02-00:16:38

Cooks: Would you say that it was a conservative school?

02-00:16:41

Gaines: Yeah! [laughs] Look, I know conservatives, but I could not—I mean the issue, to me, I couldn't understand that even in terms of a conservative/liberal binary, what they were doing was just plain wrong. It's like what's going on today with Trump. That's not a liberal-conservative issue. Even though the positions that he takes, some are more conservative, it's not one that could be argued on the basis of political differences. It's one where there are certain fundamental values that are even understandable at that time. The fact that the South hadn't caught up with that, it was no excuse. And so, I didn't think of it as: this is a conservative school. I thought it was that the school was made of people who were self-interested, that they had other values that were more important than even values that they were purportedly teaching at a humanist institution.

For example, even before this moment, they would have these assemblies in the school auditorium, and the board of trustees for the school, which was made up of all white people, would come, not only to graduations, but also general announcement assemblies. The trustees would come and the family of the trustees would come, and they were seated first, and then everybody else, all the black folks, is seated last—that's if they could find a seat. The worst manifestation of that was a graduation where all of the trustees and the family of trustees and town owners—white people—came. They're seated, and took up the seats of the auditorium all the way to the back, until there were almost no more seats. On the edge were a few seats where everybody else could sit. Now, what happened is that most of the parents who came to see their kids graduate couldn't find seats.

02-00:19:20

Like I said, is this is a liberal-conservative issue? If you say that abject racism is conservative and liberal humanism is liberal, and, that kind of binary—I think at the time, the conservatives and liberals in the North knew that this definition was wrong. And so, it goes beyond that: the college's policy was a product of the legacy and history of Jim Crow, and felt compelled to reinforce that legacy in any way that they found necessary. Black people who were middle class, like the administrators, who were given certain ruling positions within the Jim Crow structure, were only interested in themselves. They reinforced the structure because they wanted to preserve their own place in it. If you say to them, "Deep down, do you think that it's right to give white people preference over black people?" The fact is if you took away all of the trappings and privileges they are given, if you took away the benefits and they just had to answer the question, how in the world could they then think that's right to do what they did? If, in fact, they're thinking about it in terms of their self-interest, then you can make up all kinds of excuses. The most common was that "Oh, these people have been good to us. Look what they gave us, and we're going to need to change slowly. We can't just be radical about these changes." Those are also justifications to maintain their own—the privileged position in this kind of structure.

02-00:21:17

Cooks:

So, you were only there for a year—or less than a calendar year—a full school year through graduation, and you were teaching art history. Did you have any space to make art, or were you leaving, or how were you kind of keeping up your own wellness and critical thought and practice as an artist?

02-00:21:40

Gaines:

I was also teaching painting. My own work? Well, you couldn't. I mean, when you move locations, it takes a while before you can adjust to a move, to start making work. I think it takes, like, a year to two years to adjust. Even if you have a place to work, it takes a while to adjust to this change. My time was too short. I was there from September to the beginning of May and I was out of there. Even though they gave me a studio, it was too short to do anything. So essentially, the art sort of didn't happen while I was there.

02-00:22:19

Cooks:

How did you find Fresno from Mississippi Valley? Did you know anyone at Fresno? Was that another kind of a personal connection where somebody had established a place there, or they were advertising and you applied in a more formal way?

02-00:22:39

Gaines:

Yeah, it was advertised. I consulted these journals where schools advertise positions, and I forget what the journal was, but anyway, I just saw it. I applied to three schools, actually: two in New York state and one in Fresno, California. I got all three jobs, but I chose the Fresno job. I applied to Cal State Fresno; I applied to University of New York, Oswego and the University of New York, New Paltz.

02-00:23:55

Cooks:

So, what did you know about Fresno?

02-00:23:57

Gaines:

I didn't know—

02-00:23:58

Cooks:

There are people in California that don't know anything about Fresno.

02-00:24:00

Gaines:

I didn't know anything about it. In fact, I didn't even know where it was, but the idea that it was in California intrigued me. At the time, I thought that I wasn't moving so far away from an art center, because Los Angeles had been growing as an art center in those days. I really thought it was closer to Los Angeles. I thought it wouldn't be so far away, which it was, like 225 miles from LA.

Going back to what I was talking about before—one of [my] colleagues at Rochester—I applied to Oswego because he was teaching there, and he said they had a position open up and that they were interested in me. He said, "You should apply." I found out later that—see, I hadn't heard from them for a long time, and I heard from the other school, and they invited me to join the faculty, but I hadn't heard from Oswego. He called me and said, "We've been waiting for you to respond to our offer, and so we're wondering." I told him that "Well, I got nothing from you." He said, "Let me get back to you." So he called me back and said that they had a faculty meeting. What happened was, the chair saw my application, he saw me being their top choice, and the chair was told to call me and offer me the position; the chair didn't. What happened was that he put the file away and then told the faculty that he'd never heard from me, and everybody was fine with that. But my friend, Paul [Garland], said the chair, knowing I was black, lied to them and hid my files. They said they reprimanded the chair, and they offered the position to me again. By that time, I decided to go to Fresno. I thought it'd be better than teaching next to the Yukon. [laughs] Oswego's, like, way up there—

02-00:26:43

Cooks: And—

02-00:26:43

Gaines: —like, sunny California was a little [better]. [laughs]

02-00:26:47

Cooks: Very sunny in Fresno, too. And so, Charles, what did your art look like? Did you have an artist portfolio that you put together?

02-00:26:56

Gaines: Yeah no, I had work that I had done in graduate school at the time that I used to apply for those positions.

02-00:27:00

Cooks: And it was painting?

02-00:27:01

Gaines: Yeah.

02-00:27:03

Cooks: What kind of painting? I've never seen the work from this period. Does it look like Charles Gaines as we know today?

02-00:27:10

Gaines: No. I don't think any of that work was very interesting. For whatever reason, a couple people thought it was, I haven't the slightest idea why. It was essentially a combination of expressionism and realism, and so I would make these sort of, these colorful expressionist gestural marks—sort of like the composition was like a layout of a magazine page that you would find that's broken up like in newspapers or that's broken up into sections where [you have] a layout of photographs and text. I used the same structure to realize this combination of gestural images, brush strokes, and photographic image where I would paint realistically a photographic image of a figure or object. There was really no rigor or conception around the practice, and I think it was the kind of work that I should've been doing in undergraduate school. I mean, it kind of looked competent, and that's the only reason why I think it survived graduate school, because I just think it looked competent. I was still coming into my own as far as what kind of work I wanted to do.

One of the things that we'll probably talk about is that I discovered when I was in graduate school that I wasn't very actually interested in the received ideas about art practice and what it means to make a work of art, what constitutes the process of making art. I was not very much interested in those accepted ideas. Essentially, they were about the work of art as being the product of an expressive act that is the consequence of something one imagined, creatively imagined, and put on a canvas. That relationship between what I intuited and the image that was produced as a painting seemed to be arbitrary; they seemed totally disconnected to me, and I found no investment in it. So, according to that strategy of making art, I couldn't identify with the object. I didn't realize

this at the time: I realized that I was alienated by the process. This is because I surmised later on that the idea that a work of art is in totality the product of the creative imagination is false. The idea that impulses and intuitions would find its way unmediated onto the canvas made no sense. I was not convinced that what I imagined was an unmediated expression of a subjectivity.

02-00:31:26

I found the subjective strategies of practice to be unconvincing, which is simply because, as I said, I could not identify with the object of my expression. The relationship between me and the expression seemed really arbitrary. I thought they were more given to certain presumptions, presuppositions, or let's say general or learned knowledge that I just transferred onto a canvas, not from my intuition. When I was making those paintings in graduate school, I was working through these problems. I was [in] an early stage of trying to resolve this, trying to think about this. So, for me, the work was physically competent looking but conceptually immature. I think we were talking about [how] graduate school affected me.

02-00:32:50

Cooks:

Yes. No, that was helpful, because I wanted to know more about what your takeaway was from graduate school. That seems like that's one of the things that you were trying to process and learn, and kind of mature in terms of you becoming a professional artist and becoming a professor, that looking back, you're figuring out what stage you were at then, and then where you wanted to go—or maybe where you went, because you keep saying that you were really living in the moment and not a planner. You've done, of course, very well [laughs] for someone who didn't have things planned out ahead of time at every step.

02-00:33:36

Gaines:

Well, it didn't feel that way.

02-00:33:38

Cooks:

It didn't feel that way at the time, yeah. The position that you applied for at Fresno, was it professor of painting or professor of art, or did they have another—what was the term?

02-00:33:50

Gaines:

Like most universities, they have a hierarchy: it begins as assistant professor, then associate and full. Usually, when you have a little more experience you're hired as an assistant professor, so that's what I came in as.

02-00:34:13

Cooks:

Did you come out for an interview, or they—

02-00:34:16

Gaines:

Yes.

02-00:34:17

Cooks: Yeah, okay, and then you came back in the—and then that was the fall right after you left Mississippi.

02-00:34:24

Gaines: Right.

02-00:34:25

Cooks: Okay. So can you tell us: what was Fresno like when you got there in 1968? It's very different from Mississippi, different from Newark. Yeah, more about that.

02-00:34:39

Gaines: Yeah well, first of all, it wasn't a really small town then. In 1968, I would say I think it had a population of almost 200,000 people, and now it's like a little over 300,000, if not even more. So it was not a small city, but it was in the middle of nowhere; that fact of it didn't really sink in until I lived there for a while. So, what is it? It's a medium-sized town, which is really agriculturally centered; agriculture is its main—it's the main industry there. And so, it was extraordinarily conservative. It was pretty much in competition with the South in terms of its conservatism and racism. I tried to rent houses and people would not rent them to me. I tried to cash checks and people wouldn't let me cash it. I was mentioning before about how in Rochester there's this façade of normalcy, and underneath that skin, the normal, it's just a mess. Well in Fresno, the mess was right on the surface. There was no pretense and no façade.

02-00:36:27

Cooks: Was the university different from the city? Was the university a more welcoming place for you and the city—was the university a kind of safe haven for you as a professor and the city was more hostile? What was the community like that you found when you went to work?

02-00:36:47

Gaines: Well, the school was just as conservative as the city.

02-00:36:49

Cooks: It was.

02-00:36:50

Gaines: When I went there, there was a population of 12,000 students; now it's like 25,000 to 30,000. There was an emphasis on an agricultural economy, so there's a conservative ideology there, a business-centered ideology that dominated the school and was in control of the way the school was administered. Even though agriculture is only one of the majors in the school, the entire framework was that the school was driven by a very conservative, agricultural, agriculture-attached business framework. It followed then that the school advanced a very conservative political ideology.

Now within that, though, were these two more politically progressive departments. I have no idea how they're able to survive, and one is the—no, three departments: one is chemistry, the other is English, and then the Art Department, which were liberal outposts in this conservative desert. Those three schools were *constantly* in trouble because of that, particularly chemistry, even more than art; chemistry and English.

02-00:38:35

Cooks:

What was going on in chemistry that made it such a difficult match, I guess?

02-00:38:40

Gaines:

Well, they'd propose liberal to progressive policies on campus; they also got involved with politics like anti-war demonstrations.

It was almost impossible in those days not to be connected in one way or [another] to politics, because—except perhaps, for the New Deal—this was probably the most political moment in the history of the United States: the Vietnam War was going on; activism around civil rights was raging; these new radical resistance [movements] were being formed; the Black Panthers, and even the black Muslims were getting more overtly radical; and the beginning of the women's movement was starting at the same time. That was the American environment in those days. It was on the news all the time, fueled by the Vietnam War, which was a perfect subject to talk about, because it encapsulated all the inequities that were going on in American culture at the time. It was a time politically dominated by an expression—unapologetic expression of American imperialism.

02-00:40:45

So these programs, these professors were heavily involved in progressive movements. The English Department connected their progressive politics to the curriculum and hiring the Black Panthers and which allowed a critical discussion of radical ideologies. As a consequence of that, the school became politicized. That is, that the students became political. They came out of a hyper political framework anyway, because a lot of them were Vietnam veterans, and they're returning to school or coming to school for the first time. And so, they were learning about political discourses in their English classes and in their history classes. The History Department was also pretty liberal.

The administration didn't like that these courses were being taught. They didn't do anything about it, but when protests hit the campus and students started voicing their concern about things that were happening on campus, then that's when the administration came down *hard*. They tried to fire faculty. When I got there, they tried to fire a poet in the English Department named because some of the radical things he was saying in his poetry, which was tinged by certain curse words. They tried to use the fact that he used profanity in his poetry as a justification to try to fire him. The department brought in the American Civil Liberties Union. It took a lot of resources to defend your rights in this kind of environment. The school started clamping

down hard. They fired department heads, replaced them. They invited the FBI in to monitor the campus, to monitor the—

02-00:43:20

Cooks: So, did it feel different from Mississippi? I mean, the population is different, but the politics are still as hot and—

02-00:43:30

Gaines: It felt just like—

02-00:43:31

Cooks: —dangerous.

02-00:43:31

Gaines: —Mississippi, except that there was a rather sophisticated resistance in Fresno, which didn't exist in Mississippi. The resistance forced this repression more out into the open. So that was the difference. But as I said, the normal community, the regular community outside the realm of the university, within the town itself was really identical to Mississippi. There was no difference, and so we're talking about a certain kind—

The English Department would hire political activists as English teachers. A couple of times they hired Nathan Heard who wrote *Howard Street*, but he wrote it in prison. When he got out of prison, the English Department hired him as an English professor. [laughs] The administration didn't like that. It got so bad that the president of the school, it was rumored, started packing a gun. This was commonly understood.

At one point, the students were upset about something, and so they organized a protest which involved one of my colleagues in the Chemistry Department—name was Joe Toney. They were going to take the president hostage until the administration gave in to some demand—I can't remember what it was—and they did. They locked and barricaded the door, and then put out their demands. Joe Toney was right in the middle of that. Aside from the fact that he agreed with the student position, he felt that there should be a monitor; he was trying to play this dual role as being part of the protest, but also trying to make sure things didn't get out of hand. And so his presence was trying to—he felt this was in order to help facilitate negotiation, not to kidnap the president. Of course, he got in trouble. People were trying to say he was part of the kidnapping of the president, but ultimately that was resolved. They said, "No, he wasn't; it's a good thing that he was there." The police came and it was a standoff, and eventually the students gave up.

02-00:46:23

Cooks: You got to Fresno in 1968, and this is all happening. It sounds like immediately after you get there, these things are already—

02-00:46:31

Gaines: It was already—



02-00:46:31

Cooks: —going on.

02-00:46:31

Gaines: —before I got there, then I stepped in right in the middle of it.

02-00:46:35

Cooks: So I have a lot of questions. [laughs] One is, of course, how did this affect your life? How did this impact what you were teaching? What did your art look like at that time? If you can just give us a sense of—because we've got a good idea of the context, but then also now you arrive, you're dealing with all of this, but you're also having to do your job. So how do you do your job? What does your job even look like?

02-00:47:10

Gaines: I said this before, but it was a kind of space that was an aggregation of all of these different activities: there was teaching, there's political activism, there's your private life and so forth. At the time, you lived among this multiplicity. Like I said, if you were an English teacher teaching Shakespeare, it would inform how you teach Shakespeare, because you would raise certain things that otherwise a less progressive mind wouldn't find important to raise. But you're not teaching politics, so you still taught Shakespeare. Then in terms of the way the institution that hired you is operating, you became politically involved in that institution, and that's pretty much how it is. So that in an indirect way, shaping and influencing the structure of the institution can have a positive—potentially positive effect upon your teaching, if, for example, if you wanted to approach certain subjects and topics in particular ways, you felt that you created an environment that allows you to do that. There was a benefit to doing that because you're trying to influence the environment, but other than that as an example of how they might be linked, you just did these separate activities.

I taught a course in those days called "Art as Ritual," and it was influenced by some of our readings in Tantric Buddhist art. What I did was, we studied ritualistic art and we studied the *Bhagavad Gita* and other things. The whole idea behind the course was for class to create a performance that was ritualistically based. It was the idea of, if you're bringing in to an art format, particularly a performance format, there's certain strategies that reflect upon certain ideas that I talked about earlier with respect to Tantric Buddhist art, Zen Buddhism, John Cage—

02-00:50:21

Cooks: So—

02-00:50:21

Gaines: —and all those things.

02-00:50:22

Cooks: The things that you're teaching at this point, are they coming from your own self-taught practice? We were talking about the books that David Hayes gave you. Is it coming from there, or is it coming from—

02-00:50:32

Gaines: Yeah, this course came directly out of that. Nobody thought about those concepts as being politically radical, but they nevertheless create a context that conservatives would find challenging and it was the case with the course. The students developed this performance that in one part called for nudity, it's really not a big deal. We've dealt with nudity within the institution. I mean, we had figure drawing, for Christ's sakes, so it wasn't even something that I even thought about. And so, we were working with this idea. But then at a certain point we had decided that wasn't going to work, so we took out the nudity in the performance for formal and critical reasons, not for political reasons, right? But the lighting guy that we hired from the theater school got worried. He didn't realize that he—that we took the nudity out, and went and told the dean that "You're going to have this performance and there's going to be nude students running around doing ritualistic things." The dean called me in and said, "Yeah, I heard that you were going to have nudity in your performance." I said, "Well, we were, but we took it out." He said, "Oh okay, I just wanted to know because I wanted to prepare a support for you."

02-00:52:43

Cooks: Really?

02-00:52:44

Gaines: Yeah, because he knew what the reaction in the conservative environment would be. The issue was that that's how you could see how liberal and conservative positions can bleed into a discipline, into a practice that is not intended to be political, and how these radical politics can actually help you. Like, the fact that there was a radical politics on this campus helped me do this course. Even though the course had no intention of being political, the radical politics helped create structures within the institution that can protect a certain sort of ambitions—and the artistic ambitions in this case—that otherwise would cause you trouble.

02-00:53:35

Cooks: And how did the students respond to the classes that you were offering that may have been new classes to the curriculum altogether?

02-00:53:44

Gaines: This particular class, people loved it. We only did it once, unfortunately, but everybody thought it was an amazing experience. We had the performance and it was a big hit. But I'm going to tell you, again, there were other courses that I taught, that I invented at the time I started in Fresno that I continued to teach for many years. "Content and Form" is a course that I continue to teach today, again, dealing more with a certain critique of art, not the critique of

culture or critique of politics. It came out of an attempt at challenging received ideas of art.

Being able to do that was productive—well, let me put it this way: I had mentioned earlier that I thought my work in graduate school was part of a process of finding or discovering a type of practice that was meaningful to me. The experiment with "Content and Form" was part of that research, part of the attempt. This is a good example of showing how teaching was definitely connected to my studio practice. "Content and Form" did not have a political intent. It took a number of years for me to understand to what degree and in what way politics are actually even a part of those things, which I ultimately concluded. It's a conclusion that helped me move my art forward.

02-00:56:02

Cooks:

Mm-hm. So—

02-00:56:03

Gaines:

I have to go to the bathroom.

02-00:56:04

Tewes:

Oh sure, let's take a break.

02-00:56:05

Cooks:

Yes, of course. [laughs] [break in audio]

02-00:56:07

Tewes:

Okay, we are back from a short break. Bridget, go ahead and pick us up here.

02-00:56:11

Cooks:

Charles, I wanted to ask you about your early work at this time. You said earlier it takes you at least a year to kind of settle into a new place and figure out the rhythm of creating art and what you want to do and sort of focus in. How did that happen, or what did the early work—when did it begin when you got to Fresno?

02-00:56:36

Gaines:

Well, I got a studio during my first year teaching at Fresno State on this farm that was actually owned by one of the people on the faculty. It was a barn that I built out as a studio. I started doing some paintings, and so they were not really work that led to anything or I thought was particularly interesting. Basically they were large abstractions; these were paintings that reflected my continued education of what was going on in the art world. In this case, I think some were some kind of combination of minimalism with the idea of rethinking the expressionist gesture in terms of chance operations; not like in the impulsive gesture like in Jackson Pollock's case, but chance permutations that we see in patterns, but that didn't have the legitimacy of an idea like pathos or anything like that which we find in expressionism.

And so, I did those paintings. I had a show—we had a show with them, two of the Fresno State faculty [and] myself had a show at USC [University of Southern California]. I think this was in something like 1970.

02-00:58:32

Cooks: I have '72.

02-00:58:33

Gaines: Yeah. I spoke before about my self-image, and my self-image was not much better than it had been like five years prior. But in Fresno, I moved into a space that was not a space with many white people. And also, there were black people living in Fresno, and some of them were in the university, but for some reason they weren't very accepting of me. In fact, I'm not going to get into this because I was talking about the show, but I wanted to introduce something to explain what happened in the USC show: and that is that when I was hired, the Black Student Union got together and accused me of being an affirmative action employee, so they weren't happy about me being hired. Still don't know exactly why.

02-00:59:47

Cooks: The Black Student Union was not happy about you being hired.

02-00:59:50

Gaines: Yeah. They thought I wasn't a legitimate hire. The only reason I could think of was that my work did not look black, what was called black then at the time. And I was like a year out of graduate school; see, I was as young as they were. I started teaching when I was twenty-three. This did very little for my self-image, of course. And then, the environment that I was in was so white, and they had white faculty, and they were very judgmental. They marginalized me as an individual. That's part of the discussion I was saying about not being able to identify with this place. I was like, as far as I'm concerned, living on an island.

Then the show, it came up, and—

02-01:01:04

Cooks: How did the show come out for you, from USC?

02-01:01:06

Gaines: There was a curator, Don Brewer, who was at Fresno for a couple of years and who went to USC to become director of the gallery there. Don invited us down to have the show. The show got trashed by the *LA Times* reviewer: "the country hicks coming to Los Angeles" kind of trashed. But the art critic excluded me in that trashing, and actually referred to my work as "the bright spot in the show." But he problematically contextualized the work by saying that he understood it in terms of a certain kind of abstraction, that it reminded him of African fabrics. If you saw the paintings, they don't look anything like African fabrics. I could see, because of the geometry that he would think that way. But to me, it's an attempt, I'm trying to understand—constant attempt to

use whiteness to measure the value of different [non-white] subjects. White people have historically read the black body as normal but only in the landscape of whiteness, but they can't. When they are called upon to identify that black body, every identification is a stereotype. Even as they don't intend to do that, that's the language available to them.

02-01:03:08

Cooks: Did you meet this reviewer? Did the person know you were—

02-01:03:11

Gaines: Oh, he's a famous—

02-01:03:11

Cooks: —black?

02-01:03:12

Gaines: —he probably has his name—but he was a very famous *LA Times* reviewer at the time.

02-01:03:16

Cooks: Did he know that you were black? Did he meet you at the opening or something like that?

02-01:03:21

Gaines: Yeah, the—

02-01:03:21

Cooks: I see.

02-01:03:22

Gaines: He didn't meet me at the opening, but the curator told me, yeah. I have other stories about that. I don't know if we'll get into [them]. This issue created—it's an unarticulated tension between me and my colleagues at Fresno State. The issue is that my colleagues couldn't help but marginalize me in one way or another, to the point where they would love telling me—saying race jokes around me—so I had to make a public announcement that said that "No more race jokes; otherwise, I'm going to file a complaint," and so that stopped. But this is just that, it didn't help my self-image to have to struggle with this constant knowledge of being marginalized by white people, and any success I had in those days was difficult for them to deal with, difficult.

I remember when I got this show at Castelli's [Leo Castelli Gallery], and just before that show opened up, a person who was chair at the time, the sculptor Roger Bolemy, told the faculty in the faculty meeting that "Charles is going to be a very important artist," and the faculty literally laughed, they literally laughed. I had no idea, when I think back on my history, why I have all these stories about being treated that way. I don't know what I did or how I looked to others, except that it's partially the marginalization of race, but it's partially something else, too, so I don't know what all that's about. I think all those experiences contributed to years of underestimating my own self-image.

02-01:05:58

Cooks:

Okay. Well, I think much of what you're saying sounds just to me very familiar and validating, to be totally honest. At the same time, right, it becomes a personal issue; even though it's a social issue, it becomes personal, and so there's that need to try to figure out how to survive. How do you navigate the bifurcation or the dualities of even knowing who you are, but navigating in a space where people perceive you as something that is totally alien to you?

So around 1972, 1973 you're having this show at USC, which is one of your earliest shows; you also have another exhibition in New York at Cinque Gallery in 1972; and I think it's also around this time that you are starting a family, because Malik [Gaines] was born in 1973. So, could you, in whatever order you want, maybe address starting a family; but then also the *Regression* series starts in 1973; the Cinque show is in '72. There's a lot of things going on. Can you speak to us and make sense of that moment?

02-01:07:27

Gaines:

Yeah, but the politics that was going on in Fresno at the time was helpful to me, that sort of activism really, I think it was helpful for me, helpful to me. I could not perceive my work and the things that interested me critically as political expressions, and I was concerned about this and I wanted to somehow deal with my lived experience as a black person in my work. One of the things that happened was that I learned from the political activism happening around me. I wasn't on the frontlines; I was just in the audience, carried signs and so forth, ran away from the cops like everybody else. I learned a lot from it, and so it gave me ideas about how I could introduce the issue of politics in my teaching. I started teaching a course on African civilization, knowing nothing about it, which is usually the case when I teach.

02-01:08:54

Cooks:

How do you do that? How do you—

02-01:08:57

Gaines:

Well I just got the books—

02-01:08:58

Cooks:

—just say, "I'm going to teach this," and—

02-01:08:58

Gaines:

Yeah, I just got some books and researched and learned. At that time—it's interestingly enough—you would think that by the time of the early seventies African civilization would be a subject wholly researched, but it wasn't. At the time there were possibly two books on the subject of African civilizations. And so I went into it and I found out all kinds of wonderful things about the Kush civilization, Mapungubwe, later the trading that went on between China and Africa and the cultures of Benin, Ife, Mozambique. I found out about this complicated history of Africa, and I was really excited about it, and then I—because I knew that stuff I framed a course and started teaching it. And that is

regarded as the first effort of bringing some aspect of my identity to my teaching. It wasn't in my art yet, but it was certainly in my teaching, I could actually talk about that within the context of art and I was able to deal with a way to theorize European modernism from a global perspective. When I say global, I mean its non-Eurocentric models of art and history.

I began to teach those courses, but it still—couldn't find a way to think about my work politically. I intuitively thought that it was there; I just didn't know how it was. By the time I started working in systems around 1972, '73, which started as abstractions, but it was a certain strategy of making more oriented to what's called process art at the time, then evolved into working specifically with numbers and systems, I found that—well, let me pre-stage this: that at the height of my investigation into expanding my teaching, I was doing these abstract paintings. Then when I started doing research into black history, black civilization, I got a heightened interest in production of contemporary black artists, like Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis and Ernest Crichlow. I wanted to find out more about that, and so—

02-01:12:01

Cooks: How did you—

02-01:12:02

Gaines: —I—

02-01:12:02

Cooks: —find out about them?

02-01:12:02

Gaines: I thought—yeah well, what I did was I organized an exhibition that would bring their work to Fresno, as a way of introducing them to the community and to me. I sought out Romy, Norman and Ernest, along with some young artists like Martin Puryear and asked them to be in this exhibition. I went to New York and somehow I found out where their studios were and I asked them, and each one agreed to be in the exhibition. Romare said at the time, "Would you be interested in having a show at the Cinque Gallery?" I said, "Yeah." I later packed up a bunch of the big abstractions and I shipped them to New York and had the show. It was reviewed in the *New York Amsterdam News*, and in that regard, it was a great experience. I think the history of the Cinque is interesting because there's a problem that, it was not just unique to me, but it was something that was a part of the experience of a lot of black artists, and that is: how can the artist participate in addressing the history of oppression? And so the gallery was started by them as an attempt to do that, to do something for the community, and then to advance the work of black artists who otherwise weren't getting exhibitions, right?

When I reflect back I remember that I was on the ground floor, at the beginning of that sensibility, that mentality, and in a different kind of way, my interest was to advance within the larger educational world the work of these

artists. I could do my own work while trying to address the political in my teaching, but at the time there was little interest in their work in the New York art scene—their work was so different from [what] else was going on in the art world, that it was hard to get mostly white students interested in these practices. Even the case of Romare who was making these collages that was having some commercial success, they were still very different from anyone else's practice—[what] was being done. I remember I was talking to Stephen Antonakos, and he said, "You like Romare Bearden's work, huh?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "The work, it seems so, so derivative and political. I don't know why they're so far out of the mainstream of New York thinking. How can you like it?" I remember him saying that—

02-01:15:14

Cooks: And he was—

02-01:15:14

Gaines: —which was sort of difficult.

02-01:15:15

Cooks: —one of your colleagues? He was a professor?

02-01:15:17

Gaines: No, he was a New York artist, a famous neon artist. He came to Fresno to do a visiting artist stint for a brief time. That's how I got to know him, and this was a conversation we were having in New York.

02-01:15:30

Cooks: Did you find out about Bearden's work and Lewis's work when you are at Fresno—

02-01:15:36

Gaines: Yeah.

02-01:15:36

Cooks: —through like magazines and—

02-01:15:39

Gaines: Yes, just studying—

02-01:15:39

Cooks: —and then you went—

02-01:15:40

Gaines: —just research. Yeah, because unless you're in New York and in the community of black artists, you otherwise wouldn't know about them. They're towering figures. To me, they were towering figures back in their day, and among the New York artists they were towering, but otherwise you didn't know about them. So it's only through the research that this happened.



- 02-01:16:13  
Cooks: And then you had their work shipped to Fresno and there was an exhibition in the art gallery at the university?
- 02-01:16:18  
Gaines: Mm-hm.
- 02-01:16:19  
Cooks: Amazing. What was the name of the show?
- 02-01:16:23  
Gaines: I don't remember, but it's written down. I've got it written down some place.
- 02-01:16:26  
Cooks: We can find it. [*Black Artists' Recent Attitudes* in 1974.] And, it was Bearden's collages or Photostats?
- 02-01:16:32  
Gaines: It was Bearden's silk screen, and a drawing by Crichlow, a small painting by Lewis, a drawing by Martin Puryear, as I remember—
- 02-01:16:53  
Cooks: And did they—
- 02-01:16:53  
Gaines: —the artists.
- 02-01:16:54  
Cooks: Did they come and talk to the students? Did they come or it was just the artwork that came?
- 02-01:16:59  
Gaines: Just the artwork.
- 02-01:17:00  
Cooks: Just the artwork, okay.
- 02-01:17:00  
Gaines: They had no interest in coming to Fresno. [laughs]
- 02-01:17:01  
Cooks: Right, okay. And then you had a show at Cinque in 1972, and it's a solo show.
- 02-01:17:10  
Gaines: Yeah well, talking to them got me the contacts to—that allowed Romy to ask me if I wanted to have this show at Cinque, and I would display my abstract paintings. I remember saying to him like, "There's a problem. I do this work, and I get complaints from black artists that I'm making white paintings." He said, "Just don't pay any attention to any of them."
- 02-01:17:42  
Cooks: Did they give you feedback on your work?

02-01:17:45

Gaines: No, not much. They thought it was interesting, but that's about it.

02-01:17:52

Cooks: They encouraged you and, Just keep doing what you're doing and don't let other people tell you not to do it, which is helpful, I imagine.

02-01:18:00

Gaines: That was one of the issues that was going on at the time. There were black artists painting abstract—and black artists who dealt with representational imagery; those artists who dealt with what is conceivably black subjectivity through representation were complaining about black artists who were abstractionists; it was said that the abstract artists were making white art. And then, from the standpoint of the art world, the white art world joined black artists who were opposed to abstraction and would complain that the abstract art of black artists was alien to their experiences; they should be making art about black subjectivity. But when they did, then they would be marginalized by others of making political art. There was no place in the mainstream art world for these paintings, whether they were making abstract art or blacks dealing with notions of black subjectivity. There was no place in the mainstream art world for them. If they took the advice to paint black subjectivity, then they would be marginalized around that subject. You still couldn't get an exhibition. For some reason, artists who dealt with abstraction in some way or another—or conceptualism in some way or another, in my case—still couldn't be seen within the context of the mainstream art world. For some reason, they still couldn't resolve the issue of blackness.

Five years later, it's like around '77 I was in the show at the Leo Castelli Gallery. From that show, I got a one-person show with that gallery and John Weber, and nobody knew I was black [except the gallerists]. The earlier show at the Leo Castelli Gallery was curated by Rainer Crone, and it was a show with an amazing roster of artists. So, it was unbelievable that out of nowhere this show—I mean, I was in the Whitney Biennial in '75, but this is like, how did this happen? Even the Biennial, there's a logic for me being in that show, because Marcia Tucker actually came to Fresno and selected a couple of us to be in that show. But this show at Castelli, it was just like very—out of nowhere.

02-01:20:47

Cooks: How did you get in that show? I want to come back, but since we're at this show in '77, how did you get—was it because of the Whitney Biennial that then you were on their radar?

02-01:20:55

Gaines: No, it was because of Sol LeWitt.

02-01:20:59

Cooks: Okay.

02-01:20:59

Gaines: So—

02-01:21:02

Cooks: Maybe we should go back and then come forward again, because I know that you took a leave for—I have it for one year, from '74 to '75—from Fresno and you went to New York. Is that right?

02-01:21:19

Gaines: Yeah. It was like eighteen months, actually. I was inspired to do that because of this visiting artist program that was developed in Fresno where New York artists came to talk for a couple of weeks in Fresno. At that point, I had a better understanding of what professional practice was like, what I needed to do to have one, and so I thought I'd take a year and two summers off, and go to New York without pay. This was about nine months after my son was born that we took this trip.

02-01:22:14

Cooks: Malik is born in '73, and then you take a year without pay in '74; that just shows how driven and ambitious [laughs] you were to do that. The *Regression* series starts in '73, '73 to '74. That's a lot of things sort of being born at the same time, because I wonder if then you start to think of yourself differently from being an abstract painter to being a conceptual artist. All of these things are kind of happening at the same time—and I don't know if that's the way that you've characterized that transition—but what happened in 1973 that, you know, there's a lot of change going on?

02-01:22:59

Gaines: Well as I said, those big abstraction paintings turned into these process-oriented works, and so that work demonstrated an interest in a systematic approach. It was a part of my research. I was looking for an alternate way of making work that was not based upon the creative imagination, was not based upon subjective expression.

In reading the tantric art book, I discovered that there were practices of art that did not engage the idea of the expressive unconscious. To make a long story short, I was trying to figure out how that can work from the standpoint of a person from the West, and what could I do to produce a kind of work that was based on that, that was meaningful to me, or comes out of my own social/cultural experience. This is where I guess conceptual art steps in, because saw a Hanne Darboven show at—this is after the Biennial—I saw a Hanne Darboven show where she had these repetitive—these drawings that were based on repetitive practices, repetitive gestures, that are—it's essentially based upon certain strategies of categorizing. It was like a—I'm trying to think of the proper word—but a kind of filing system that marked times during the day and weeks and months and years, that in one way tried to be this abstract marker of her mental state in those moments. So it was just like on Monday, she'd make a mark, and then the next day, she'd make another mark. The

marks were pretty much similar, and the difference between them was the fact they were done on different days. These drawings tried to make a cataloging system or a catalog of this redundancy, in which we find a certain kind of paradox because it's trying to make—figure ways of categorizing what is changeless, right, and that really interested me.

02-01:26:28

First of all, I was really upset because I didn't understand what I was looking at and I was getting mad at her. But I kept going back to those shows, and there was three of them going on at the same time in New York. I kept going back, going back, and I thought that—one thing that was similar to what I was doing is the repetitive image, I was doing that in my painting; there is the implication of a grid from that, but it wasn't systematic work and it wasn't using numbers. But it did tell me that I should stop painting and do drawings in order to try to rethink what I can do. The other thing that it showed me is that my idea of getting away from the notion of the expressive unconscious, could be best played out with math. It was some kind of system that was mathematical or geometrical. And so I said, I read some experiments around math, and then they resulted in the drawings, the *Regression* drawings.

02-01:27:40

Cooks:

Okay. I don't know if you had seen Adrian Piper's work. I guess I'm just thinking about work from around this period from her. We just had the retrospective at the Hammer [Museum], but I didn't know if that work was available to be seen at that point.

02-01:27:58

Gaines:

No, that's interesting, because I hadn't seen that work. I only saw it after I started doing my work with numbers. Some of our theoretical molds were the same, because she had this critique of subjectivity like I did. But she was eighteen when she started those drawings, and so she was way ahead of me in that regard.

02-01:28:21

Cooks:

It's interesting at the same moment you're interested in the same kind of experiments, I guess, or explorations.

02-01:28:29

Gaines:

Yeah, for different reasons, we were—the critique of representation, critique of subjectivity took us on two different paths, even though we had the same critique.

02-01:28:43

Cooks:

Okay, Malik is born in 1973. Did you meet his mother—is she an artist? Was she also teaching in Fresno?

02-01:28:57

Gaines:

At the time we met, she had already gotten out of art school. She went to Fresno State, but she'd already got out of art school. In fact, when I met her

she was actually already married. Then, in the course of events, she got a divorce, and then we got together around that time when she was getting this divorce, and then ultimately got married. The ceremony was held by a judge in Clovis, California, who married us and married her sister at the same time—married this guy named George—and about, I don't know, six months later, Malik was born.

02-01:30:08

Cooks:

And then, did everyone go to New York in 1974?

02-01:30:14

Gaines:

Yeah, Malik was only eight [months] old, and we all packed up in the Dodge van and drove to New York. We drove via Seattle. We drove to Seattle first and then drove across country. It's a kind of crazy thing to do when you're young. We had Malik, we had a dog, Cedar, who was farting all the way across country. We got to New York, and then I had some friends who were there who let us stay with them for a while, soon we found a loft. My friend helped me build it out. I think it was only a couple of months that we then moved into the loft, and we stayed there.

02-01:31:04

Cooks:

What was your plan? You said, "We're moving to New York, I'm taking a leave of absence without pay, and there's exciting things going on there," and what were you hoping was going to happen?

02-01:31:22

Gaines:

I'm not sure. I thought that it would be a thing that would tie me more directly into the mainstream art world because I would be in New York, and that I sort of understood that, in terms of developing not just a practice but a career, it's a step-by-step process and you need to go through these steps. I felt that living in New York was crucial, as it was a crucial step. I suppose I could have moved to LA, but LA is a much smaller art scene and I was much more familiar with New York, so it turns out to be a more comfortable move than moving to LA. I never got to the point where I thought that I would quit my job to stay there, because I had this family; I didn't know how—that year-and-a-half was pretty rough, and I didn't know how I could—if I had no options, I would've lived through it, but I had an option so I decided I wanted to keep my teaching option.

02-01:32:37

Cooks:

Did you play music again while you were there? Trying to think of supporting everybody while you're there.

02-01:32:45

Gaines:

No, what I did is that I got jobs as an unlicensed electrician, carpenter, and plumber.

02-01:32:54

Cooks:

Wow.

02-01:32:56

Gaines: I did those things to make money during the time that I was there.

02-01:33:00

Cooks: Okay. It's during this year that you meet a number of important people, artists who are still important artists for your thinking today. I'm thinking in particular of Sol LeWitt. He's someone, though, that you were able to talk to him in New York, but I have a note that you met him actually in Los Angeles and—

02-01:33:28

Gaines: Yeah no, meeting Sol happened later. When I moved to New York, I did meet a number of artists like—well, I had these connections from the Fresno program with Sam Gilliam and Mel Edwards, and I got to meet Jack Whitten during that time, and Ed Clark and all those people. It was pretty amazing because it was the first time that I found the community of black artists.

02-01:34:08

Cooks: And so, what was that like for you, to—

02-01:34:11

Gaines: Well that part was pretty amazing, and most of all getting involved, because you got involved in the complex politics of black artists at the time because there were divisions and groups, and although they tried to work together, there were different aesthetics that divided them. I got an understanding of how these divisions were formed and on what basis, and I found where I was located.

02-01:34:53

Cooks: Where were you looking then? Thinking about these different figures, and were there black artists that you felt more of an affinity towards in terms of the art that they were making, or the politics of another person?

02-01:35:07

Gaines: Well, I felt completely displaced; I should've been closer to the abstract painters, because they were receiving the same complaint about making white art that I was receiving. But later, except for people like Bearden who were nonjudgmental about it, my interest in conceptual practice scandalized even the abstract painters. I had no model; I had nobody that I can compare myself with. I was a unique—I say this not as a way of trying to position myself as some kind of prescient thinker, because it's not; I would've much preferred not to be in that situation—but it was like there was nobody out there doing anything close to what I was doing, except for some white artists, and what they were doing was different. It was based differently on certain ideological and critical assumptions from my own. I didn't know Adrian [Piper] at the time. That would've been the closest, but I realized that when I ultimately met her—I met her in the late seventies, like '75, '76, and we became friends. That's when Adrian let people be her friend. I guess you can leave that on there. [laughs] I realized that although we shared so much, we were really

very different people. She was very helpful to me in terms of negotiating the New York art scene. She tried very hard to get me to move from Fresno to New York, for one thing.

02-01:37:10

Cooks:

So you meet a community of black artists, they're *scandalized* by your work, they were not identifying with where you're coming from in terms of conceptual art. When did you discover the work of—well, you discovered the work of John Cage in school, but did you meet him? Did you see other exhibitions of his work in New York, or Sol LeWitt's work? You said that there were white artists whose work you felt closer to. How did that relationship develop at all?

02-01:37:41

Gaines:

Oh, I never really developed a relationship with any of those artists, except ultimately with Sol in, well, 1976 when I met him in Los Angeles. But I did at that time, during that time in New York, become much more familiar with conceptualists, with what the conceptualists were doing. At that time, it provided a context for me, it was just before I started working with numbers but I was working with systems already, and so I felt that it's true that, of anybody, my work, the language of my work fits best with those conceptualists. I really didn't meet any of them, because I met these other black artists. It wasn't until after I met Sol that I began to meet a lot of other people, including like John Cage, Lawrence Weiner, John Baldessari, Mel Bochner, Alighiero Boetti, and all of those people.

02-01:38:53

Cooks:

What did it mean for you to connect with, not necessarily personally, but just find a kind of, in a sense, overlapping—I don't want to say like-minded, because your work is very different—but in terms of your development as an artist and going from being an abstract painter to a conceptual artist, how did those relationships, even just with the work, have an impact on how you developed as an artist?

02-01:39:27

Gaines:

Impacted the work of others?

02-01:39:30

Cooks:

Well, I was thinking about how you became more familiar with conceptualism, and perhaps you felt like, Okay, here is a group of people that I think are interested in some of the same things that I am, even though my work's very different. How did that kind of encourage you to go in a particular direction or to keep thinking about systems in your work?

02-01:39:51

Gaines:

I guess it's a clear encouragement when you see people whose work habits are similar to your own, even if they're not identical. You understand that you're not alone. Except for creating that kind of space, it had really no influence on what I was doing. Even as I engaged the work of conceptual artists, I

understood more clearly what was different in my work, what I was interested in that they weren't. I recognized that quite early. I was much more interested in answering, at the time, this other question having to do with art and culture; what connection is my art to my lived experiences? I was much more interested in that question than ones that interrogate the art object—because I think that's a natural question that any minority person would have, that white artists at that time never sort of indulged. What happens is, of course, if you're mainstream, then your subjective space is totally fulfilled except for certain, probably highly personal, individualistic subjectivities that you might—but the language of expression is already connected to your lived experience, whether you're an abstract artist or a representational artist, it doesn't matter. From the standpoint of an artist dealing with conceptual practices, I think I deserved an answer to that question that would be as satisfying to me as it was to those black artists who dealt with black subjectivity. Even though I thought they were absolutely wrong in their conclusion, they were nevertheless totally satisfied with that answer.

When I was challenged that way, with that question about my art and lived experience, I thought it was a legitimate question, and it wasn't until many years later that I figured out an answer to it. I was able to answer the question not in the seventies, but in the late eighties after I had done a lot of critical reading in semiotics and structuralism, deconstruction, [Sigmund] Freud and [Jacques] Lacan, all this theoretical stuff that's always been an important part of me for many ways. I guess I told you before that I'm really invested in critical thinking and philosophy. In the course of doing that, I was able to create a theory which allowed me to answer that question. Do you want to know what that answer was?

02-01:43:15

Cooks: For you, what the answer was?

02-01:43:16

Gaines: Yeah, do—

02-01:43:17

Cooks: Well—

02-01:43:17

Gaines: Do you want to know?

02-01:43:18

Cooks: Yes. I won't guess. I don't want to say what I think. I want to hear what you have to say, yes. [laughs]

02-01:43:24

Gaines: If you've read the text from any of my presentations, I always talk about this thing about birds. Essentially, I go back to Charleston, where I was born; my mother told me that when I was young, like three or four years old, I would ask these crazy questions, and she would get a kick out of it. One time, we



were walking along this dirt road where I grew up. I grew up in literally a shack. I put an image of the house that I was born in on the Web once; it's connected to an essay. It wasn't the house I was born in, but looked identical to it, and it was literally a shack. My grandmother and grandfather raised thirteen kids in this small house. It was along the dirt road where there were two other small houses leading up to Congress Street. Along this dirt road, the neighbors raised chickens and pigs and other farm animals. And so we would walk and I would say like, "Why is that a chicken?" and, "Why is that a pig?" There was a bird that lived in a tree, and I said, "Why is that a bird?" Mother would answer, "Well, I don't know." And then I said, "You think, when I die, will I come back as a bird?" She thought that was the craziest thing.

But I was thinking about that, and there are two things that's revealed in that story for me. One is metaphysical, my curiosity about the origins of things. At three or four years old, I had an interest in philosophy and critical thought, it's something that's a part of my temperament. But the other thing that it showed my interest in me was change and difference; it explained my interest in systems.

02-01:46:45

So even as a three- and four-year-old, I was totally aware of the Jim Crow laws in the South, and I would also ask questions about: why do I have to drink in this fountain, why do I have to sit in the back of the bus, all these questions. I just thought that the question about the bird was really wondering about how and why things were named, who or what was responsible. Because what Jim Crow laws did was, it laid out a set of terms and rules that explained why different people were treated differently, and why some people were more privileged than others. I couldn't figure out why a skin color could be the way of determining how people are treated. My questions about birds, I surmise, was my attempt to theorize about racism, because I thought that: I am a black person now just like a bird's a bird, but if I'm reborn I might come back as a white person, and then I would be emancipated on the basis of this sort of arbitrary system.

The issue is semiotics: the idea of naming, the idea of origins, the power of social discourse. It is heavy-duty when layered on top of a simple question by a black kid. I think that I recognized a certain injustice and I recognized that some injustice was produced by a racist power structure, and that there must be a way of thinking outside that structure. I can conceive that if things were named differently, I would escape victimization.

My interest in philosophy, my interest in critical thinking, my interest in all of the strategies of the understanding came from my experience living in the Jim Crow South; it originated there. It was the first sign of me trying to make sense of something that doesn't make any sense. For me this explains how a kid with a particular temperament tried to deal and resolve the issues of racism.

02-01:49:45

Cooks: So did you think—and we're going to wrap up soon—did you start to think about those ideas, kind of put those things together in the early seventies, when you start to make—

02-01:49:58

Gaines: Well, I didn't figure this out—

02-01:49:58

Cooks: —this work around systems—

02-01:49:59

Gaines: —until like in the late eighties after I did all this research into post-structural thinking. I didn't have the language for it earlier. There was no language to deal with—the only political language at the time that had any saliency in terms of this kind of discussion were certain essentialist ideas about race and identity. There was so much intellectual poverty around the issue in those days, anybody who came up with a nonessentialist argument was considered to be influenced by white people. There was no text; there was no discourse that allowed you to form a critique. And as you probably know, [Frantz] Fanon would be a person who provided an early critique at this, but nobody read Fanon in those days.

02-01:50:55

Cooks: We are going to talk about this later, but since you're talking about the 1980s, I feel like this is a moment where you start to really articulate the kind of conceptions that you're having a lot of clarity about now looking backwards, that in real time this is when, with *The Theater of Refusal*, you start to be able to put these things down in writing and in your curatorial work. I'm fascinated to know that you curated this exhibition at Fresno in the seventies. [The *Theater of Refusal* was designed in 1989 and turned into an exhibition in 1993]. I had no idea about that, so now everyone will know. That gives me, and I'm sure other people, great insight into how you're working in different kinds of skillsets as a practitioner; as, I think, an intellectual; as an activist, also, or with activist impulses, I would say; and a curator, yeah, all at the same time. I'm looking forward to talking more about this. [laughs]

02-01:52:03

Tewes: Is there anything more either of you would like to add before we close out today? I know we've got a lot more to discuss tomorrow. We're—

02-01:52:12

Gaines: Yeah—

02-01:52:12

Tewes: —feeling good? Okay.

02-01:52:13

Gaines: —yeah, we're good.

02-01:52:14

Tewes:

Let's [wrap] it up for today.

## Interview 3: April 2, 2019

03-00:00:02

Tewes: This is a third interview with Charles Gaines for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes at Mr. Gaines's studio in Los Angeles, California, on April 2, 2019. So thanks, everyone. Why don't you start us off here, Bridget?

03-00:00:24

Cooks: Okay. Charles, in 1975, you were in the Whitney Biennial, and I would love to hear you talk about how that came about and your experience of participating in the show.

03-00:00:40

Gaines: Sure. My participation happened because Marcia Tucker was at the Whitney Museum that year [and] decided to put together the Biennial. It was new. It was a new effort, in fact, to go throughout the country and visit studios, and invite artists that reflected more of a national scope for the exhibition. This was a change because the exhibition typically centered on New York artists, and was a kind of badge of honor, with respect to that population of artists in New York. They were almost all famous artists—they were either famous or almost famous artists in the exhibition—and this time she changed the approach. So she visited Fresno, and part of the reason she came to Fresno was because there's—[the] school had a visiting artist program that, at the time, turned out to be probably the best in the country, and so in New York it had a reputation. New York artists would come out and teach two or three weeks, and they would go into New York and suggest to us other artists who might do it. And so, all kinds of interesting people came out. During this period, Marcia had made a trip up to Fresno that was included in her itinerary.

I told you I was living on a farm, I had a house. There were several small houses on this farm property, and I was living in one of those houses, and all of us were artists or people who taught at Fresno State. She came out and looked at our work and selected four of us—no, three of us—to be in the Biennial.

The paintings I was working on at the time, as I mentioned, were these process-oriented, repetitive image or repetitive gesture paintings, where I would make a single mark and repeat it sometimes in the shape of a grid or sometimes organically across the face of the canvas until the canvas was filled. I was doing also these abstract paintings that were reminiscent of Ed Clark, but it was stuff that I was doing before I met Ed. I would spread acrylic pigment on a canvas. I would seal the canvas, put acrylic pigment on it, and then comb the canvas with an antiquing tool that created these vertical—or created these lines that were repeated across the surface. That painting was shown in the Biennial.

03-00:04:18

Cooks: Were you excited about it? Being in the Biennial, did it have any impact on your career? I was thinking ahead to how you became part of Castelli and Weber a few years later.

03-00:04:35

Gaines: Yeah, it had no impact on my career.

03-00:04:37

Cooks: It didn't, okay. [laughs]

03-00:04:38

Gaines: It was extraordinarily exciting. It was like, is this really happening to me—or I guess we all said that to each other. Because as I said, it was probably the most important exhibition in the world, along with the Venice Biennale. We were grateful that Marcia changed the structure of it and made it available to a larger body of artists from different parts of the country, so people like us would have access to this important show. We were totally, totally, unbelievably excited. At the opening, it was like a dream. The Whitney might be seen today in some particular kind of way, I'm not sure, but then it was—you thought that it was the beginning of a career if you were a young artist, or a significant affirmation if you're a veteran artist. We were all convinced that we're on track at the time. [laughs]

I remember sort of hanging out by my painting, trying to look inconspicuous and not impressed, but just sort of standing there and trying to hear what people were saying about it. My family came to the opening, and my brother walked up to the painting and looked at it, my brother, Fred. There was a woman standing next to him, and she turned and said, "Isn't this a wonderful painting?" My brother looked at her and said, "You mean you like this?" [both laugh] He said he was just scratching his head. So anyway, the fact that the entire family from Newark came out to the opening, it was a testimony of what a huge deal this was for me. I was about thirty years old at the time, twenty-nine or thirty years old, and it's huge.

03-00:07:06

Cooks: And Malik [Gaines] was in the Biennial, too, right?

03-00:07:09

Gaines: Years later.

03-00:07:11

Cooks: Yes, many, many years later, but I was just thinking about that father and son, a kind of shared experience, a kind of parallel moment.

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Gaines: Yeah, it was pretty amazing that he followed a career in art. He's an artist and an academic, so his performance collective is still going on and it's still doing things worldwide. It's just a surprise to me that that happened.

03-00:07:40

Cooks: Is it?

03-00:07:40

Gaines: Totally. When he was a kid, I used to bring him to the studio, and he didn't like it, which, what's unusual about that, right? But at one point, I said, "We're going to the studio. I got to go to work, and I just can't leave you here at home alone." Once we got to the studio, he walked in and he told me, he said, "This happens one more time, I'm going to report you for child abuse."

03-00:08:12

Cooks: [laughs] How old was he?

03-00:08:14

Gaines: He was no more than, at the time, seven or eight. [laughs]

03-00:08:21

Cooks: Yeah, once you find out that child abuse is a thing, you try to use it when you're a kid.

03-00:08:27

Gaines: [laughs] That's it.

03-00:08:29

Cooks: His practice is very different from yours, but there had to have been a huge allure and a kind of model that you were for him as an artist.

03-00:08:40

Gaines: I don't know how that—I think, of course, his mother also went to art school, but she wasn't a practicing artist, but art was a big thing. So I think that he had obviously an increased awareness of art as a human endeavor, but what he was interested in school was in theater, and so he participated in school plays, he was part of the drama club, and so forth. When he decided to go to school at UCLA [University of California Los Angeles], he went in as a history major, not an art major. What had happened was that he found a crew of friends who were from the Art Department. This is interesting, because I think that the Art Department probably had the most diverse collection of students of the different majors in the university, and that diversity attracted him. But I think also the idea that the art, this temperament or personality, at least they have a certain kind of interest that he was familiar with. I think that he gravitated to that population, and they became his friends. Through his whole life, his friends were—I called him a walking UN ambassador. He just had a diverse group of friends even in high school, and he just repeated that in the university where his close friends were all from different ethnic backgrounds and races, and so forth, and gender. He himself is gay, so among this group, population of marginalized personalities—

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Cooks: And he grew up in Fresno.

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Gaines:

As I said, he just found that kind of group in Fresno; how did I not? But I think that move more toward the arts started there, because when he went to graduate school at—he went to graduate school at CalArts [California Institute of the Arts]. He went through the writing program, and everybody was trying to groom him into being an arts writer. They wanted him to be a curator and arts writer, but he wasn't interested in doing that. He was very interested in writing since he's an extraordinary writer, and so he did that. Well at that point, he was already part of the collective My Barbarian, so they were already—the early part of their career was already in operation by the time he was in graduate school.

At a certain point after graduate school and as he was writing for art magazines and so forth and performing, he got concerned about his future, so he decided to go into a PhD program. Then he went to UCLA and got a PhD in performance, and that reinforced his academic interests. So right now, his life has played out that way, as this is the side of the practicing artist and this side is a practicing academic. He's writing his second book right now.

03-00:12:45

Cooks:

And he's in New York; he's at The New School, is that right?

03-00:12:48

Gaines:

He's at NYU [New York University].

03-00:12:49

Cooks:

He's at NYU, okay. That's very impressive, yeah. [laughs] So, I'm thinking also about, getting back to your career in New York, that you're this artist in Fresno that has this career in New York. Did you have ambitions to be in a gallery in Los Angeles, or what was your relationship to the LA art scene?

03-00:13:15

Gaines:

I'd mentioned before that I didn't know much about Los Angeles, but I was way more familiar with New York, so I would travel back and forth to New York. I had an irrepressible ambition. I don't know where that comes from, because I would spend all this time talking about my psychological state, right, and certain uncertainties that lurked inside of me. At the same time, I was very ambitious, and so I wanted to be an exhibiting artist; the same duality or bifurcation, whatever you want. I wanted to be an artist, but I never thought that I would be one at the same time. Fortunately, I resolved all of that without having to go to therapy, so it's okay now, but this was what's going on in my mind at the time. I was determinedly ambitious, and I was determined to keep a studio running, I was determined to keep making work. It caused great havoc on my life, my personal life. All of my investment went into trying to keep making art. It was really, really hard. I look back on it and I think, I don't even know how I survived it. It was *really* hard.

I do think that it affected my marriage to Malik's mom. One of the things that both of us were proud of was the way we handled the struggle of being an artist and how it might affect the relationship, we worked through that without making Malik subject to it. That was a sort of unwritten agreement: that he did not experience the difficulty of trying to sustain a career and he did not see the difficulty in trying to sustain a marriage. We did. [laughs] We made sure that he wasn't victimized by whatever things that we went through. Now, we did that the best we could; the thing is that there's no way for a child not to be scarred by divorce, it just can't happen. Even if you create the most smooth transition, it's still difficult on children. We made it as smooth as possible, but we recognized that it wasn't going to be perfect.

03-00:16:42

Cooks:

So, despite having this ambition to be an artist, and self-doubt, and having life happening with all of its traumas and challenges, you become a successful artist. [laughs] In 1980 in particular, you're showing at two galleries that any artist in the world would want to show their work. How did this happen? Kind of despite your self-doubts, how did you get to be an artist at Castelli and at Weber Galleries?

03-00:17:18

Gaines:

From the standpoint of the work, I think that I was continuously working and I was continuously working through those problems of art making that I talked about earlier, those conceptual issues. All that was going on. If there's any impact on Whitney or the year that I lived in New York at all on me, it's on my work, the continued development of the work. It wasn't much about career, but it had this impact on the work as I became more knowledgeable about art and history of art, and I began to feed my own interest in critical theory and philosophy. And so, I think this is how I developed the early gridworks, a kind of work that nobody had seen before.

I made these various trips to New York and would take in the scenes. In those days, walking into a gallery and asking them to look at your work was something that was possible. You can't do that anymore, but—

03-00:19:07

Cooks:

Did you have slides that you—

03-00:19:09

Gaines:

I had slides. I'd walk up and down Greene Street and Prince Street trying to get galleries to look at it, and never had much success. It was a heartbreaking experience, but I thought, Well, I should try—at the same time, I should try in LA. So I would walk around and see if anybody would be interested in my work in LA. And a person I was teaching with, Terry Allen at Fresno State, said, "Well, you should talk to my dealer, and show her your work." He made it possible for me to connect with her, and brought these drawings down, these grid drawings.



03-00:20:01

Cooks: Which gallery was it? So your colleague was Terry Allen, and then the gallery—see if I have this. Was it Margo Leavin?

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Gaines: No, no. That's Leavin, but no.

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Cooks: All right, okay. [laughs]

03-00:20:21

Gaines: We'll have to pull it out and research a little bit. I know the gallery, but I'll come back to it. [It was the Melinda Wyatt Gallery.]

I went into the gallery and talked to the dealer and spread my drawings on the floor, and Sol LeWitt walked in while the drawings were all laid out. He had just had a show at the gallery, and he was working with them doing an installation at LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art]. He saw the drawings and he was visibly excited, and he said that "When you're in New York again, bring more, and let me see what else you're doing." I told him, "Sure."

And so, of course I made a plan to go to New York again, and I brought a portfolio. It was this ridiculous—it was one of these giant portfolios that nobody uses anymore that's bigger than me, and trying to get it to New York and trying to get the airline not to put it in the luggage compartment but to keep it in the plane, that was tricky. But anyway, I had to go. I went to his loft and spread out the tree—it was the walnut trees that I showed him. He bought one right on the spot for \$500, and then he said, "Just a minute." He called John Weber where he was showing, and said, "You got to come look at this work." And then he called a curator, Rainer Crone, who was organizing a show for Castelli called *Numerals*, and he told Rainer, "You got to get a look at this work." They both did ultimately look at the work.

Then Rainer called me in LA and said he wanted to include me in the *Numerals* show, and I flew to New York for the opening of the show. The show was at Castelli's, so I met Leo at the same time, and he was very excited about the drawings. It seemed that these were the galleries and artists that were part of sixties and seventies conceptualism, particularly with John; with Leo, it extends back into pop art and so forth. But they were the cutting-edge, high-profile galleries at the time, whose reputations were built partly on conceptual art. This was in '76 or '77, and at the same time, there was a general feeling that was going about that conceptual art was over. There was a general notion that it was a movement that was seen in this light; I was told by Sol that this work showed that there was still uncharted territory to explore in conceptual practice. They saw the future, the continuation of conceptualism—

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Cooks: And so—

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Gaines: —in the work.

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Cooks: How were the shows reviewed?

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Gaines: Well, they weren't, essentially. The first show, I think—I don't remember, but I remember there was a review, and the review was not very good. It was reviewed as more conceptual art, you know? For my second show, I got an *Artforum* review that was actually very positive. But other than those two reviews, the art world, the writing world, and curatorial world had no interest in the work.

The galleries continued to show me, I should say. Because I was going to say that how I got involved with John and Leo was that when I was in New York, both of them said they wanted to represent me. I went to see Leo and he says, "I'll give you a show and represent you." I said, "Great, but I have this meeting with John Weber." He says, "Yeah, go talk to him." John said the same thing. I told him that Leo just offered me representation, too, and so one of his directors, whose name was Anthony, said, "Well, we could ask Leo if we can both represent you." And so I walked back over to Castelli and said, "Well, John Weber said that they had this idea of co-representation." That wasn't an unusual idea at the time in New York.

03-00:25:44

Cooks: How does that work, though? They just show separate work by the same artist, and decide how to separate what you do?

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Gaines: Well, you produce work on consignment to each gallery, and they take care of the work you consign to them, and—

03-00:26:02

Cooks: This is—

03-00:26:02

Gaines: —the shows that I had were simultaneous.

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Cooks: Oh okay, I see.

03-00:26:07

Gaines: So, each time I would have the show at John and Leo's at the same time.

03-00:26:15

Cooks: It seems to me, it sounds like a sudden embarrassment of riches that started because you were pounding the pavement in LA, or going on a recommendation to LA. By chance, Sol LeWitt walks in, right, just by chance that he's there.

03-00:26:35

Gaines:

Well, that's how it works in art, or any practice or discipline where—like in acting. The thing I would always give my students advice about is that you can't control career. That's something that you shouldn't even be thinking about. You should only think about the work, and you should also think about exhibiting the work, which I think is different from a career. You need to show people the work, so you make the work and try to get people to see it. In that process, something might happen, you can't make it happen. In almost every story about how careers get kicked off, it's because you happen to be at a right place at the right time, and somebody who matters notices something, and then things sort of roll into place. Or it's out of the process. Even if it's a matter of walking into a gallery and having the slide, the fact is that you're active by walking to the gallery; you just didn't sort of sit back waiting for something to happen. Or you didn't think that there was some kind of secret strategy to getting shows, which is a notion that I try to disavow in my students' minds all the time, because they think that you can construct a career. You can't. You can't control the thoughts of others, so you can't find the strategy. One person might work one way and another person might work another way, but you can't say, "Oh, if I just keep going to openings and talking to certain people, eventually I'll get a show this way." That might work for one person, but it won't work for the other. You just have to just exist in the community and keep producing the work. Ultimately, it's the work that's going to get you the exposure.

03-00:28:47

Cooks:

So, even though the exhibitions weren't getting consistent coverage by critics, and there was a sense that conceptual art was on its way out, how was your work selling in these two blue-chip galleries?

03-00:29:08

Gaines:

Well, the work sold for very little money, but they sold for a time. It was a process that you would expect in building a career, that it's a step-by-step process. The early stage, it looked like that's what was happening. But in order for that to sustain itself, you got to have the support of writers and you got to have the support of curators, and I never got that support, and so I could never get past that early stage. I think it affected how much the galleries worked for me, too, how hard they worked. The situation of having a show: in one gallery there's Roy Lichtenstein, and in another gallery there's me; or, one gallery is Robert Ryman, and the other gallery is me; and so I'm always hanging next to these huge giants. At a certain point, the attention was being paid more on the giants than me, but those galleries were very good because they continued to show me; they never dropped me or never abandoned me. There were other galleries that did, but the New York galleries stuck with me all the way. Every three years I'd go, they'd give me a show, even if nothing was selling. As we moved into the eighties, nothing was selling, and then into the nineties, but they still gave me shows.

03-00:31:02

Cooks:

I wanted to talk about multiple art worlds, so that you're making inroads in mainstream galleries; at the same time—and we talked a little bit about this before—the idea that some people perceived your work as being white art, because it's conceptual art, because it's not figurative work that shows black people in it. I would love for you to just say something about this position that you have where you have success in one way, but then thinking specifically about black art spaces in New York, the Studio Museum in Harlem being the new one, the curators there weren't interested in your work even though you were interested in the mission of the museum. Could you say something about this kind of disconnect? You've already mentioned how you've consistently felt like you never belonged in the place where you were, in terms of where your work showed, so maybe thinking along those lines, how you might address Castelli versus the Studio Museum in Harlem.

03-00:32:21

Gaines:

I was described at the moment as being sort of unanchored, like I was getting marginalized by both sides in one way or another. As far as showing at Castelli and so forth, it has to be said that the black artists in the fifties, like Norman [Lewis] and Romare [Bearden], had been showing in important galleries, but for most of their career they weren't receiving the same attention that the white artists in the galleries received. [phone rings] I'm sorry—

03-00:33:28

Tewes:

Let's pause. [break in audio] Okay, we are back from a break. Charles, you were just talking a little to us about dichotomies in the art world, and display.

03-00:33:40

Gaines:

It was a long-standing problem with the issue of representation and abstraction among black artists and the black art world. During the time that I was a young artist, the Black Power movement had a significant—had an influence in presenting what I call an essentialist model of identity where they felt—there's so much I can say about this, as this is a huge subject for me, but so, I'll try not to go on and on.

03-00:34:23

Cooks:

Well, I don't mind if you go on and on. You might want to go on and on now and later when we talk about the *Theater of Refusal*. This is the time for all of us to benefit from your thoughts about these things for the record, so it's up to you.

03-00:34:40

Gaines:

Yeah well, I'll try to be efficient at least in the explanation. The Black Power movement had a great influence in this essentialist model, and so within the realm of art that played out in terms of—what I keep telling people, it's an idea about practice is based upon expressionism, and so that there is a notion that there's a cultural—that there is, as you know, sort of a biological—that biology plays a role in forming identity and the way people of different races construct their world. The worldview that they have is biologically

determined. What's important about that is that you can say that identity, "Well, it may be culturally determined, not biologically." Back then, biological determinism thought that the reason there was jazz, for example, is because of the black gene in black people.

03-00:36:06

If you extend that, there is this idea that black art is intrinsically black because it's the expression of black people, and they took on a model for this that it was through one's expression you made connection to your essential biological roots. So, it was a model I thought was bull, it was terrible. But this was being fed as one argument during the Black Power movement then, and a lot of artists bought into that. This left artists who could not articulate through their art certain gestures of expression marginalized. That is to say that the poetic model is that, if there's a figure or an object and this was produced in a painterly way—so the painterly is a poetic articulation of the object, and therefore the painterly is the marker of a moment of expression—that's how it got to—it reaches back to a genetic source or a biological source. If you did not paint objects and so forth, then it's hard to trace the work or connect the work to a history of practices that's identified with black.

And so, those artists—and I wrote about it in my Norman Lewis essay—found the situation where they knew, in fact, that there was this social problem of racism in the United States that affected them; like Norman Lewis knew that his white friends in the gallery were getting more attention than he was, because they were white and he was black. He knew it was a social problem, but he also believed in the practice of art that we call modernist, in a way that they all believed in it, that the idea of art making art was based on transcending the local social and cultural context. They believed in art as an autonomous practice. The way I looked at it, though, was that I didn't quite believe that, that art was this autonomous practice, but I thought that there was a relationship between what I was doing as an artist and my lived experience that didn't necessarily have to play out in terms of recognizable tropes.

03-00:39:08

So, the Studio Museum represented this essentialist model at the time, and for that reason, they had no interest in my work. They knew about the work completely, because I was showing in these major galleries; I was showing at Castelli and John Weber. At the same time, in showing in these galleries, people didn't know what to do with, I think—they particularly didn't know what to do with my work because I think that they found that they couldn't just address me as an artist. There's some way that they had to connect my art to race, and there's no way that they could figure out how to do that. As I said before, that if I'd been a representational artist painting the black body, then the mainstream wouldn't pay any attention to the work anyway, because they thought that that kind of art discourse was not part of mainstream practice; it's kind of just marginal, local-type practice.

03-00:40:16

So for me, I was doomed coming and going, as far as that's concerned. That's why the discussion I had yesterday about making this discovery about that was important to me, about how I fit into that. Just like Bearden and Lewis knew that the issue of culture and race was important, I also feel that the issue of culture and race is important, and so when people ask me, "What does your work have to do with this cultural experience," I thought it was a legitimate question. I couldn't dismiss the question as, "Oh, you're just an essentialist"; that doesn't play. I thought it was a very legitimate question that I had to answer, and ultimately, as I said, I came up with my own theories about it. That as a kid, I was always interested in the way things are named and how they're given value according to how they're named; I always felt that the name was arbitrary in relation to this value. Ultimately I took that issue to the practice of making grids and number systems in order to unpack the idea of representation. I think that is the issue that's most important in the gridwork, that you choose the relationship between objects and systems, and that you see an arbitrary relationship between those two things, which for me, reinforced the idea that meaning is constructed.

This goes back to what I was saying before about birds and stuff, where I was saying that Jim Crow laws were not based upon any legitimate theory of origin or essentialist model about race. Jim Crow laws were constructed in order to benefit a certain group of people, things are constructed that way culturally. In this case, it's easy to use the trope of whiteness to set a system of benefits for white people. There's nothing deeper than that; it's just that. My argument was that ultimately it's all arbitrary. And so, my interest in representation came from my experience in growing up. That became the model for what I did later, in terms not only in the work that I did in the nineties, but also in these exhibitions that I curated—because I wanted to not only deal with that idea in my work, but I also wanted to deal with it within a discursive space, like exhibitions, in order to—so it was very productive in moving my practice forward.

03-00:43:46

Cooks:

Let's go in this direction, because I'd like us to talk about the mid-eighties to the late eighties and into the nineties. Thinking about exhibition, like you've brought up, I wanted to hear you say something about the *Process und Konstruktion* exhibition that happened in Munich, and if you could talk to us about how some of these ideas start to play out perhaps in the artwork that you're exhibiting at that time. Then I want to get to the other forms in which you're expressing these ideas, which has to do with more about writing and curating. Was the 1985 exhibition an important exhibition for you as an international exhibition? Did that become a marker for you, or was it just another show?

03-00:44:41

Gaines:

It was amazing for me, because it was the first time that I went to Europe, and also I took my son with me, so we were both there. *Process und Konstruktion*

was based upon simply the idea of inviting the artists who participated to make the work that they're going to exhibit in the exhibition at the site. Artists were there for anywhere from a week to a month, it was a roster of international artists. It was one of the benefits of showing at the New York galleries, because in Europe, I think they saw my name in the gallery roster. Otherwise, they didn't know who I was. Nevertheless, I was invited to be in the show with a bunch of luminary artists from the United States and Europe.

And again, like the Whitney Biennial, nothing rippled as a benefit from that show. It was just a great experience, but it didn't kick anything off. The show that actually kicked off an interest—because I was talking earlier about the fact that my career being stalled; because I couldn't get the interest of writers and curators. During these periods, I had these opportunities, but the work didn't gather interest until the 2007 [Venice] Biennale when an actual exhibition had a ricocheting effect on my career.

03-00:46:39

Cooks:

I thought you were going to say the *Theater of Refusal* was the next exhibition that would have been an important marker. I remember that exhibition, so maybe that's why [laughs] I think that, because I was at UCI [University of California Irvine] at the time, and there was a lot going on with Catherine Lord being there; and then, as far as I knew as an undergraduate, you being invited to create this show, coming to do this program where we're able to hear people from different parts of the country—New York and LA in particular—coming to talk about blackness in the mainstream, and issues of criticism and perception. I absolutely want to talk about the 2007 Biennale, but I would love to hear you talk about the *Theater of Refusal* because it's another step for you as a curator, and then it also results in this important publication that has had this incredible afterlife.

03-00:47:46

Gaines:

I can pretty much say that I've curated over all these years only a couple of shows, and so I don't see myself as a curator. The times that I've curated were because something was very important, some issue came into my mind that could successfully be negotiated in a curatorial format, and that's why I did it. The *Theater of Refusal* was separate from my studio practice, they contributed nothing to each other, principally because they were two different kinds of activities. The reason: because, in the seventies and eighties, I showed in these important galleries, a limited population of people knew who I was. I wasn't generally known, but among artists and so forth within this certain circle, they knew who I was, and so I could get people to listen to me if I wanted to do something. That show was an idea that I tried to get kicked off in 1987 when I first had the idea. I spent about four years trying to interest people in it; nobody was interested in it. Then around '92, Catherine Lord, who was the head of the Art—

03-00:49:38

Cooks:

Yeah—

03-00:49:38

Gaines: —School—

03-00:49:38

Cooks: —chair of the Studio Art Department at UCI.

03-00:49:41

Gaines: Yeah. She was a partner of a woman that was my colleague at CalArts, Millie Wilson. I don't know how it happened—Millie might have had some connection—but I knew Catherine because she was the dean in the Art School at CalArts when I first started teaching. And so, she wanted to know about this idea. I explained it to her, and she said, "Well, let's do it." So she would be the only person who picked up on it and had the willingness to go forward with it.

The only other thing I could say about that is that it, again, plays into what I was saying before, that it gave me an opportunity to play out what I could now more clearly understand: my interest to inform and influence culture with respect to issues of identity and race, and do so from this unique—I thought at the time—a unique perspective that is the taking on a structure that's an investigation of the issues of identity and race, but through the show. I think it was unique because after a fashion, I would get emails and calls from people saying that they had never read or encountered the way racism [was] addressed in this show before. To them, it was a brand new way of looking at the subject. In fact, a couple of people like Eungie Joo fashioned her—their doctoral thesis on the show.

This realization happened quickly after the show happened, that a direct discursive influence of my ideas and culture was achieved in this kind of venue, whereas in my studio practice it was much more abstractly related. So, that's why I kept writing, because that gave me an opportunity to contextualize the work around these ideas in my studio practice. I could link the ideas that I was talking about here with the studio practice through writing, not only exhibition.

03-00:52:51

Cooks: I wanted to hear you say some things about the artists that you chose. I'm imagining that, of course, as part of the art world, you're seeing other artists' work, you're meeting other artists. Did part of the moment of you sort of coming up to 1993 and the exhibition—you said you had the idea for a long time—were you finding that there were other black artists that were struggling with some of the same issues that you were struggling with in terms of not fitting in in one place or another; or, thinking about what the *Theater of Refusal* means, being rejected by critics or having a work perceived in a particular way because they're black, not necessarily anything to do with the work itself; or, just thinking of yourself as a curator, but in the act of curating this particular show, how did you choose the artists?



03-00:53:56

Gaines:

Well, I chose artists who were actively producing in the art worlds, and known to people. In a couple of cases, I showed a couple of people who were at an early part of their career, like Renée Green, for example, just started her career. But there were other people like Lorna Simpson and Fred Wilson, Adrian Piper, were completely well-known. The fact that they're well-known artists was important to me because it allowed me to underscore this point that I was making: that is that there's not much writing on the work of artists, even if they're well known. The writing that there is [is] marginalized around the idea of race. The writers who wrote about [them] often thought they were writing positively about the work. They didn't think that the way they approached the work was, in fact, marginalizing.

You have a well-known artist whose résumé should be a lot longer than it is. It is not longer because that person is missing out on shows or coverage because of his minority status. It's just the same as in the Norman Lewis comment I made before that Norman wasn't getting the same attention that the other abstract painters in the gallery were receiving; and with respect to those minority artists who were being covered, in the writing that was happening around these works, you would find certain habits and patterns that marginalized them either positively or negatively. Like for example, the [Jean-Michel] Basquiat writing was all about his raw talent, signifying the animalistic, as pure nature. But Basquiat had a middle-class background and went to art school, and he was pretty much an expressionist. I mean, he was an expressionist painter. Notwithstanding his background in graffiti, the only thing that made him different from general expressionism was the subject matter, but in terms of the paintings and how paintings were constructed, he was an expressionist. And so, they would look at his gestures and connect them to the tropes of primitivism and say that "This comes from an unschooled painter, this gesture is unschooled," which is supposed to amplify some aspect of uniqueness about him, but which was really about his race. They're trying to find a way to articulate some positive notion about his race. Whereas, they could look at [Willem] de Kooning and consider his formal strategies as tied to this sophisticated notion of self-expression that comes out of European modernism, and so they're writing about Basquiat differently.

03-00:57:38

So, there's an aspect of the exhibition where we posted the writings on the work of the artist; we did the same thing in the catalog. I did that to have the opportunity to point out those tropes of marginalization, as in the case that we're talking about, Basquiat. Another really good example is Adrian Piper, the way her work was being written about and commented on, which I think is part of the reason she's so weary of people writing about her work. The writing on Lorna Simpson really cracked me up; there was one article written about a series where she photographed black women from behind that said that the problem with her is that she was using a secret black code. The review was cited in the catalog, so you can actually go read it yourself; it meant for

the writer that he was left out of the discourse that the work was trying to generate because he was white. For Lorna, that work was so heavily conceptualist, it was part of what Nizan Shaked in her book, *The Synthetic Proposition*, called "conceptualism." She says in the book that Lorna was part of these artists in the early eighties who brought in a new generation of conceptual practice where they included the political subject. The only thing that she did was take conceptualism and applied the political subject; she talked about these issues of representation, but structured around the female figure. And nevertheless, white critics saw her as creating a secret code.

There are all kinds of these types of things that went on that I wanted to point out. Part of going back to what I was saying about this understanding that I had of how these concepts and ideas are constructed, they're constructed around the interests of certain people and certain groups, and preserved that way to a degree that made them seem normative to the dominant group. I wanted to unpack it and say, "No, all the stuff that's presented as normative is made up. It's just made up shit, that's what it is." For me, it wasn't bad. That didn't say that "Oh, culture has failed." It's simply being recognized, saying how politics work in the formation of cultural and values and cultural ideas. It's just trying to shine a light on this fact, so that you more clearly recognize the context of your own action, and therefore the effects of your action, without protecting your behavior and your action by framing it as normal, not politically driven.

03-01:01:20

Take expressionism, for example; the problem I have with expressionist practice is that it's seeing the gesture as a natural act. Well, that's not natural. It's a technique, right, but then it is advanced as a natural act to keep anybody from critiquing it. That is to say that I'm expressing myself, and my own personal feelings can't be critiqued, which is true. How can you critique the feeling that anybody has? You can critique its effect, but you can't critique the feeling and the existence of it. They use that to remove the gesture from critique and make it seem normative. This is the way I think mainstream culture produces whiteness, that they tie it to biology and genetics, and say that "It's a normal process of—this is the Heideggerian model of historical time," and say, "Then, it's not beyond critique. The only thing that's critiquable are things that are not white." And so, this whole idea was to try to reveal that, then to play—be part of a discourse that is acted that way.

I can say that one of the most influential texts that I have read with respect to this and the notion of the time when I was studying deconstruction, structuralism, semiotics, was Edward Said, his *Orientalism*. That was probably the most influential book that I've ever read.

03-01:03:00  
Cooks:

Wow. Okay. And that was, I think, 1979, when that came out—

03-01:03:06

Gaines: When that came out.

03-01:03:06

Cooks: —and it's still relevant. Your work wasn't in the *Theater of Refusal* show, right?

03-01:03:14

Gaines: No, I never put my work in a show that I curated.

03-01:03:19

Cooks: Okay. I wanted to just kind of spatially think about where we are. You are making work, and you are working in different forms, a curator and, I think, critical theorist in the writing that you're doing, but you're also teaching. You leave Fresno and you go to CalArts. What year did you leave Fresno and start at CalArts?

03-01:03:55

Gaines: In 1989.

03-01:03:57

Cooks: Would you say something about how that happened? Why did you leave Fresno; what was the appeal of CalArts; and how did maybe that have any effect on your, yeah, your thinking about the art world, but also about your work in a new context?

03-01:04:21

Gaines: Well, one of the things about teaching at Fresno State back when I started in the late sixties and then into the seventies, was that there was an openness in certain programs—the Art Program being one of them—that had a separate rather avant-garde notion of education. I was privileged then to walk into this situation and be able to teach courses of my own invention. There wasn't a curriculum that was based upon matriculating through a series of courses based upon some notion of technical and conceptual development. The classes were mostly issues oriented, and then also because there was a diverse population of teachers there. There were also studio courses; of course, we had painting and sculpture and so forth, but it wasn't exclusively that, and so I could come into the situation with courses that have been invented by me—like one of them was "Content and Form."

03-01:05:47

We had good students there at the time. They were very interesting students, partly because it was the time of the Vietnam War; that brought in some older students and students who experienced the war, and also students who tended to be socially and culturally activist. The nature of the courses was such that I was able to use them to explore, and they became experimental spaces for me, like experimental seminars where I would bring into those spaces the discussion of certain ideas that have not totally been stabilized in the world of ideas yet. They were edgy. And so, we used the classes to try to understand

them and to form ideas around them that would help in the production of work.

I definitely saw the classes as connected to my studio, and I was getting more from my students than I was giving them. A change happened over time where the university merged the Art Department with what's called in those days the Home Economics Department. It's because they wanted to sustain a certain enrollment level of students. While this change was in its early stage, one of my students from Fresno State, Karen Atkinson, had gotten a job teaching at CalArts and called me and said that "They want to bring you in as a visiting artist if you would accept." So I did, and I spent a semester teaching as a visiting artist. When it was over, they asked me if I would stay as regular faculty. Then I made an agreement with Fresno State where I could leave the college to teach full time at CalArts, but they created—it was very nice—they created a situation where I could fulfill certain residency requirements so I wouldn't lose all my retirement.

03-01:08:25

Cooks: Wow!

03-01:08:25

Gaines: Yeah. So this meant I had to drive up to Fresno once a week for a few years to teach a course in order to fulfill that.

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Cooks: I see, so you had appointments at two different universities, two different colleges.

03-01:08:37

Gaines: Right.

03-01:08:38

Cooks: Wow.

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Gaines: And also, CalArts, it was a joke what they offered to pay me. I would've had to turn it down anyway without this dual arrangement.

03-01:08:54

Cooks: Oh, because it was so little?

03-01:08:56

Gaines: Yeah, but they promised me that after a certain amount of time, they would bring me up to a certain level, and to their credit, they did.

03-01:09:04

Cooks: Wow, that's a lot of risk! Those are lot of choices to make. Do you remember what class you taught when you were a visiting professor at CalArts?

03-01:09:13

Gaines: I brought the same classes, I brought "Content and Form."

03-01:09:16

Cooks: And how were the students? Were they—

03-01:09:20

Gaines: CalArts has remarkable students, so even more enriching than my Fresno students, because with my Fresno students, I didn't have as many interesting students; there was a small cadre that were very interesting, but most of the students were not as interesting, I'll put it that way, mostly because they were not committed to be professional artists. But at CalArts, everybody was.

I was going to say that I was thinking that the old Fresno State was ideal for what I wanted to teach, but it was changing. And if I had to choose a place where I fit in seamlessly, it would be CalArts. I thought about teaching at CalArts even before I was a visiting artist. As luck would have it, they invited me, and so I continued to teach the same courses at CalArts.

03-01:10:14

Cooks: And you're teaching now, right? You're still teaching at CalArts?

03-01:10:19

Gaines: Yeah, I teach one class each semester right now. As I said, teaching for me is a certain extension of my studio, and if I can teach what I want, then I'm able to create a situation where I'm being helped by as much as I am helping the students—if, in fact, they're being helped. [laughs] So, as tough as teaching is, I love doing it. I don't have to teach; I'm only doing it because it's a personal as well as professional commitment.

03-01:11:06

Cooks: How did you find the faculty at CalArts? Did you find them as interesting as the students?

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Gaines: I have nothing but good things to say about CalArts.

03-01:11:18

Cooks: Wow.

03-01:11:18

Gaines: It was a strong faculty. It's one of the top five art schools in the country, and it deserves that reputation. It has a very strong faculty; it had one then when I started; it has historically had one. Half the New York art world were either teachers at CalArts or students from CalArts. So it has this extraordinary history in the art world. Over time the population of teachers changed, but they keep bringing in very, very interesting teachers.

03-01:12:00

Cooks:

It may be that you're being serious that you don't know if the students are being helped, but you have a very long roster of former students who speak your name in a way that introduces you as a very pivotal person in their—not their careers; in their art practice, yes, but just their way of thinking, their way that they might try to distill different aspects of their life and approach a kind of purposefulness, in terms of their practice, that you are a very important person in CalArts's reputation. I wanted to talk a bit about this. One is, I'd love to hear you talk about your teaching philosophy and maybe how your teaching style compares to others. But also, I'm wondering if—it seems that you haven't had mentors, and I don't know if that's true or not. How did you learn to become a mentor yourself, and maybe how does that connect with a philosophy of teaching for you?

03-01:13:32

Gaines:

Going to the last issue first, at CalArts you're going to get—and it's like some of the other major art centers like UCLA and so forth—you're going to get a large number of students who intend to become professional artists. You're teaching in a school where you're encountering these people, and they go out into the professional world, and then somehow you're still, for whatever reason, attached or tied to them in the community, and often you're given credit for things you don't deserve. So, I feel that the artists that I know who are important today that came from my classroom would [have] become important anyway.

One thing about my teaching, because I think it's a matter of my temperament, one studies the attachment of language to art as part of making an art practice. So it's a big deal that in my class you have to be critical and articulate your criticism about your own work and the work of others. You have to read a lot, and you have to have a vocabulary, and all that stuff. Most of my students don't value those things; consequently, when they come into my classroom, they come into something that they've never experienced before. It's an experience that they don't know what to make of, which is more important than taking very specific things from a class, learning facts or techniques, and carrying them on into the future. It is a kind of shock or a destabilized moment that might affect them into the future. And essentially, you introduced readings on semiotics to people who never even studied anything having to do with linguistics, let alone the relationship between linguistics and critical thinking. You read this stuff to them and they don't understand what it means, and you talk through it. I tell them that "You make of the experience what you can at this moment, because it's not a situation that I anticipate or expect to be easy—there's incremental measurements of improvement." It's you being thrown into an unstable space. It's been my experience that the effects of being in that space don't show up for five or six years after the experience.

03-01:17:18

In the most general sense, I think that there is a certain experience produced by introducing these people to these ideas, rather than the specific ideas

themselves. It makes them deal with things as an experience, on how to deal with a whole set of destabilizing thoughts and ideas that you don't understand. I think that out of that, maybe later on, something happens. Because when you talk to the different students that I am supposed to have had an effect on, you'll get different narratives.

Like Mark Bradford—I am somewhat an intellectual, and so rather than Mark being influenced by that, what influenced him was bringing value to intellectual practices. That's what he has told me. So he brings value to thought? But he doesn't—so what does that have to do with his work? In fact, unlike me, where I consider my work a part of philosophy, which is an articulation of the work's part in philosophical adventure; he doesn't think about work that way. And then there's Henry Taylor, who just kept wandering in and out of my classes trying to figure out what the hell was going on, [laughs] and I was humored by it because he'd just come in and then he'd leave, and I said, "Oh, that guy's gone; he's not going to [come back]," but then he'd come back again. And so, there was something going on that was different. It was a different experience from that of some of the other teachers that he had.

03-01:19:30

Cooks:

Did you talk to Henry and to Mark individually, or was it kind of like a lecture?

03-01:19:37

Gaines:

Yeah, it was a lecture. I had to go and tell them to read this and read that, and sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't. But it was a combination of introducing them to concepts and theories that were supposed to help them develop a critical language; and between that and giving them projects that tried to serve the function of a problem that they had to solve, that was framed by the critical ideas. They did that, and not all of them understood even at the time what kind of impact that would have on them. I ultimately feel that those impacts turned out to be expressed differently, because the same ideas provoked experiences that were different for different people; that is, how to deal with things that you haven't had the language or the imagination to address or to deal with, let alone what relationship that has to how you perceive making work. It's that shock. Between them, they would say that—you get them together and ask, "Well, what do you most remember about Charles's classes?" [They] would say, "The thing that I remember most is that I didn't know what the hell he was talking about," [laughs] and they all said this. So it created this experience of uncertainty, and I think it did have an impact because the students always said that it had an impact, but it's because they had to resolve a shock, and that is the lasting part of it. As far as their success in the art world, it has little to do with me, I think that they're going to be successful artists anyway.

03-01:22:09

Cooks:

I'm wondering about a few things. One is the mentorship question. Now in my mind—which can be totally off, and I want to hear you talk about your thoughts—but I'm thinking, Why, then, is Charles taking this approach of creating an experience of destabilization, and then from our conversations, thinking about the different moves that you've had—and I was thinking specifically about going to RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology] and meeting David Hayes, and him suggesting a number of things for you to read, and wondering if, in a way, you're partially replicating an experience of being faced with a number of new texts, but then doing something really productive with that, which is having assignments that come out of it and having credits come out of it, so that the next step is built in. Because David Hayes was a student; he wasn't a professor. So much of what you talked about with RIT concerning what you learned wasn't from the curriculum. I'm just wondering: is there a relationship to you between your experience in that moment in your life and what you give to your students as a professor today?

03-01:23:35

Gaines:

I can describe it in general at this point, it seems my work comes out of a certain ideology about language and knowledge, and I try to address these issues in my work. Rather than through intuition, I approach my work intellectually through deconstruction; that was part of what I discovered about what was meaningful to me in making art back in the early seventies, and I bring that same approach to teaching. So, it's exactly the same thing, and it's the situation—now, of course, I was trying to say that ultimately it's not about teaching subjects in order for people to become competent and that they're understanding of those subjects; it's about creating a space of the destabilized moment, and finding a place to produce art out of that. That is what I found comfortable to deal with, in a manner of speaking because it's very uncomfortable, [laughs] and this is what I try to bring into the classroom.

03-01:25:37

Cooks:

As a professor, when you're creating these uncomfortable—or what may be for some or a lot of the students maybe—this uncomfortable situation—and I'm thinking that many of them are trying to become the artists they imagine in their minds—do you create a safe space to do that? Or a destabilized space where the students are likely to say, "Oh, Charles is so mean. I don't ever want to take that class. I feel so stupid in the class." How do you balance—or do you balance—a safe space to have an unstable experiment?

03-01:26:19

Gaines:

Yeah, I try. It's a challenge, because I approach the class by saying that "There aren't any right or wrong answers to any of the things that are presented." One of the things that just drives me nuts is how students sometimes think that they can reinvent the definition of concepts based only on their intuition. For example, I talk about the issue of the sublime. One of the students said once, "Well, I don't think that's the sublime. For me, the sublime is blah, blah, blah..." My response to him was that "This is a concept that you didn't invent,



that it's actually a hard-fought solution to a set of challenging issues, and the word is part of our system of knowledge—because it wouldn't even exist in the world had it not entered the world in this particular way. So, if you want to challenge that, you have to go through the same process that happened initially—" In other words, you have to convince others, not just based upon your feelings, which is to subjectively interpret this word sublime to mean this or that. Nobody cares about that, taking your personal belief as truth, and it doesn't produce discourse because discourse operates in the realm of subjectivity. The term is intended to be discursive, and so you can't change the definition just willy-nilly based upon your personal feelings. This is the thing that I sometimes encounter because a lot of the ideas and concepts that we interrogate are used improperly or poorly by people who have not been required to think in terms of ideas with any kind of rigor, any kind discipline.

Under those circumstances, I find the idea of keeping a safe space when I teach difficult; but otherwise, I try to assure them, aside from trying to reinvent, on that basis, general ideas, aside from that, I try to tell them that there are no right or wrong answers. Even in the case of subjective interpretation, I try to explain the difference between something being knowledge and something that is part of one's subjective personal experience. I just try to explain what's required for something to be considered an idea in the world, and the difference between that and subjectivity. So, I give them the license to do that, as long as they understand the difference and understand that that's a subjective interpretation, not a concept that actually exists in the world as knowledge.

03-01:30:21

Cooks:

I'm looking at the time, so I think maybe this is a good time to break for the session.

03-01:30:29

Tewes:

Okay. Sounds good. Is there anything you wanted to add before we take a break, Charles?

03-01:30:33

Gaines:

No.

03-01:30:34

Tewes:

No? Okay, thank you everybody.

## Interview 4: April 2, 2019

04-00:00:02

Tewes:

This is a fourth interview with Charles Gaines for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes at Mr. Gaines's studio in Los Angeles, California, on April 2, 2019. Hi, everybody. Why don't you bring us into the fourth session here, Bridget?

04-00:00:25

Cooks:

Okay. Charles, I wanted to talk a bit more about your writing project. Thinking of something more recent from 2009, you published an article titled "Reconsidering Metaphor/Metonymy: Art and the Suppression of Thought." I would just love to hear you talk about why you wrote the essay and the kinds of ideas that you're expressing in that work.

04-00:00:57

Gaines:

Sure. I think the essay was a culmination of thinking about the problem of—or addressing, I should say more appropriately—this idea that I had, how knowledge is constructed. I'd mentioned before that the idea—my interest in knowledge came out of some experiences that I've had, not understanding, even at a very young age, how meaning is constructed and what gives meaning value, or what gives objects and things value, which is the offering of values. It's not necessarily connected to the idea of attributing meaning to things. I had been influenced by, first of all, the critique of the Enlightenment project and a critique of certain sort of Eurocentric constructions of universality, the ideas around the transcendental and universal kept in place certain uncritiquable notions, particularly those having to do with culture and subjectivity. Value and meaningfulness made certain things important in terms of knowledge and certain things unimportant, so when I think of advanced universal frameworks or forces, or however you would call it, that predetermined certain human practices—art, particularly. On the basis of that posturing, it made the critique of what I'm looking at as the assumption of the universal uncritiquable. In other words, anything that is described as the universal not available to debate, critique. The Enlightenment put this into place—I should say the European Enlightenment did a lot of great things, like the invention of science based on empirical facts and so forth. But it also put into place a lot of bad things, like it became the justification for theories of race and certain oppressive social and political practices like slavery.

04-00:04:05

I was critiquing hierarchies, particularly their relationship to race theory. I was particularly interested in how art participated in those same kinds of assumptions and justifications through its embrace of universal constructs. I was interested in establishing that, rather than the idea that these disciplines like art being operations that are driven by universal structures, I was interested in establishing that these types of operations are cultural and

political and social, not universal. My reading of Foucault and Derrida and Lyotard, and then the later post-colonialism and post-struct[uralism] readings like Edward Said, was informing me about how to—particularly later with post-colonial—how to rethink, how to critique this idea of the Enlightenment project, and how to critique this idea of universal practices.

04-00:05:35

My investigation into semiotics particularly was interesting in that it showed how a certain notion of language as a system set up the possibility of an anti-universalist critique with the assumption that we're born into language; language is a system that preexists us, and that we are therefore shaped and formed by systems of knowing in particular ways in accordance with the linguistic system that we use for understanding. Part of the investigation is to separate the objects and experiences that we understand from those things that we perceive and understand. And so, semiotics helped me to understand that there's a system that presupposes an operation of signs that's separate from the objects and things in the world that these signs are supposed to point to, and show how that system informs the way we understand those things in the world; rather than those things existing in reality and eminent to the world, that there are actually constructions of simple things like trees and plants that produce ideas that are determined by our linguistic system.

While I was dealing with this issue of semiotics, at a certain moment, I discovered some ideas that came out of Roman Jakobson that articulated a significant division within linguistics: and that is the difference between writing and speech, but even more than that, the difference between the language as a system and the moment and utterance of speech. So, they're two different operations whose relationship is kind of arbitrary. On one hand, the language system is made of signs. It's not that in the moment of speech we don't also use signs, so what happens is, in speech, we incorporate ideas of intent and motivation that we then apply. These are moments where we apply the system to an actual exercise of commenting on the world. There's a structure to that, too, in that moment of speech. That structure, it turns out to be made up of two linguistic constructs, and one is the metaphor and the other is the metonym.

04-00:09:24

It turns out that everything that we can identify in the world, everything that is named in the world, which includes the entire range of concepts and entire taxonomy and lexicon of objects, is either understood metaphorically or metonymically. This is a little derivation from earlier notions in linguistics where the metaphor and metonym were thought of as dependent linguistic functions that allow us to form ideas and speak. They were thought to be dependent upon or involved in articulating observations about the world. Pretty much the idea of placing feeling and meaning upon objects in the world; metaphors were thought to provide that kind of function alone. Metaphors were really talked about at that time in terms of poetic critique—

the critique of poetry. But with Jakobson, we found that the metaphoric function and metonymic function are actually separate functions of the brain. They can be empirically unpacked and realized. The way we make metonymic and metaphoric associations is linked to brain wiring and can be observed. If you incapacitate certain parts of the brain, you can incapacitate our ability to think metaphorically or metonymically. The other part of this that is interesting is that they're independent operations.

04-00:11:31

This was interesting to me because I wanted to—given the fact that the metaphor as a kind of trope came mostly out of literature and poetry, given that, I thought that it was useful to think about them in terms of dealing with this critique of the Enlightenment. I thought it could help me demonstrate how knowledge is constructed.

So my interest in the "Reconsidering Metaphor/Metonymy" article was really about trying to find—trying to narrate a history of the evolution of the terms metaphor and metonymy, to try to narrate that history to show how we have come into a moment, into a time, which is defined by semiotics as well as cognitive linguistics in general, where we can show that they are independent functions. And in doing that, show that even as they've been used to define how we experience the world, they also show how we experience art.

04-00:13:21

To this extent, I wrote this article "Reconsidering Metaphor/Metonymy" to demonstrate that the metaphor, which is a really privileged sign in the history of literature and poetry, has been ill-defined or mis-defined in that history, and the most controversial thing that I said about the metaphor in this article is that the metaphor—the purpose and the function of the metaphor is not to provoke critical thinking, that the function and purpose of metaphor is to allow feeling to be a part of that experience. Of course, we understand feeling as a subjective property, but by saying that it does not contribute to critical thought, many thought I was describing it as a negative function, but I was only criticizing the way that we use feeling through the metaphor, especially in art.

04-00:14:53

So, the basis of art [is] that we attribute to the metaphor a poetics or feeling that connects to what we call our subjectivity. What I was saying is that there's no such thing as a metaphor that's an internally produced operation; the metaphor is a cognitive and perceptual apparatus that allows any particular understanding to be felt, or creates a situation where one connects a feeling to an object. Now I thought that this establishes a critique of what I was calling the modernist project, specifically the proposition of expressivity. It allowed a critique of expressivity to derail the idea that the expression is a direct link to our unconscious. We're changing it from being a phenomenon operating within an indeterminable interiority or psychological space to a cognitive

operation, and to say that the metaphor is a cognitive understanding of the world of feelings.

Therefore, metaphors were not used for the purpose of discourse or the purpose of actually articulating ideas, and this is where the metonym is emancipated from the metaphor and addresses that history where the metonym was thought to be a type of metaphor. So Jakobson established the fact that a metonym as a cognitive operation is totally independent of the metaphor. You can't speak without using both of those tropes, but as signs they're independent. So, I attributed to metonymy the whole range of critical discourse, and this is precisely because metonymy is the cognitive operation that allows us to think literally. It allows us to name, for example. I always say to my class that a metonym is the name, it's simply the name given to something; and it's a relationship between something as a sign and its meaning that's socially determined, not eminent, but that it's a product of our social, cultural, and political activities. And so we could say that a metonym, that it's pretty easy to understand what metonymy is because dictionaries, encyclopedias are specifically metonymic, that they are simply giving a meaning to a sign that is decidedly literal. So, if I call a tree a tree, then the reference to the object is a metonym, so we identify the object or the word as metonymic. So there's that.

04-00:18:36

To that extent, I make the claim that the metonym allows us to actually engage discourse, because in order to engage discourse, we can't be operating in our feelings and our subjectivity; in order to conduct discourse, we have to find a way of entering a literal space of communication whereby we can communicate with others our ideas, not our feelings. I said that the history of art in the West was driven by the metaphor—the metaphor was very important, but I was focusing on this one aspect, where it's being used to define a whole realm of artistic practices and experience, which has to do essentially with the belief in subjectivity, expression—the link of expression to certain universal principles and ideas that are not based on individualism, but are based upon some transcendental theories. The metaphor has been used [for] that, and it works that way because it gets you out of the area of critical thinking into the area of affect. That's what it's supposed to do, but as I said, it's been misused, it's been abused for reasons that have to do with sustaining certain vested interests in the way we understand what art is. It's been misused in order to prevent certain things from being discussed.

04-00:20:18

I found this out big time, because when I wrote the article, I was attacked as being an enemy of the metaphor. People were saying that. It's like criticizing somebody's parents or it was like I was attacking something that was cherished, and almost to the degree that without the metaphor, we would have no concept of art, no concept of poetry. Metaphor is crucial and fundamental and foundational for those very important disciplines. I'm not saying, no, I'm

not the enemy of the metaphor. I'm the enemy of a certain strategy of its use, but not of the metaphor itself, obviously, because we can't help but to think metaphorically. I mean, to the degree we can have a feeling about anything, it's because that feeling can enter the domain of speech because of the capacity to think metaphorically. And of course we're talking about linguistics, not just a sense experience, because people say it's just about speech, "Well, animals have feelings." Of course animals have feelings, but what I'm talking about are things that are generated through a system of knowledge, a system of cognitive understanding, how feelings in people are produced within that framework, not that we just have feelings.

04-00:21:49

Cooks:

Well, I think that in your essay, you give pretty concrete examples. It's not just an abstract theorization that doesn't have any foundation, but that you are very clear about some of the examples you give, so that tying back to ideas that you started talking about, in terms of the Enlightenment and the idea of transcendental universals, that the metaphor, as I understand it from your writing, insists on, as you're saying, this kind of agreed-upon feeling and doesn't allow for criticism, that instead it's a structure that enables an expression of feeling. What I think you're doing in that essay and how I connect it with your work, is that you're then looking at what's lost in depending on the metaphor to create a feeling that may or may not be universal, that there's a kind of subjectivity that—for example, when you were talking about [how] Andrea Bowers was asked to be in this exhibition, and the title of it was *Bitch is the New Black*, right, so that you might get a feeling, and it's kind of like a [snaps] snappy, hip title, but it's like, Well so, what does that mean exactly? What is the bitch and what is the black, and are we supposed to not focus on that because it's just a feeling of something that sounds good, or something that sounds cool, or maybe sounds feminist, and don't think about it too much? That was just one example that I thought was really clear and that has a kind of credibility. That title has a credibility because it appears to be engaging with different weighted ideas without actually engaging them. So—

04-00:23:58

Gaines:

I think you hit the nail on the head. That description's really good.

04-00:24:01

Cooks:

Thanks.

04-00:24:04

Gaines:

In the article, I talk about how mechanically it operates, because I defined the metaphor as essentially an analogy between two things on the basis of certain formal resemblances and redundancies. So, that doesn't matter what they are. There must be this formal redundancy that's involved so that, for example, if you say that, "You're cold as ice," then obviously the metaphor is the personality of a person and ice, and it's intended to describe that. But what it's intended to do is place the feelings that you get materially from a block of ice

onto a person, and so there has to be ability to make that transfer, but it's not in the realm of feeling, because the block of ice means one thing, a person means something else, and there's absolutely no relationship between the two; but if you can draw a correlation, it will be because there's some material or formal similarities.

When we're talking about similarities, we're not talking about meaning, we're talking about a certain formal language, things that are dealing with structure not with meaning, that we could transfer, that allows the transfer from one to the other. What it offers is not really a concept, but what it offers is a feeling about somebody. In this case, the metaphor achieves this. Within that, you can say—here's the confusion, but in terms of playing that metaphor out, one can say, "Well then, it also produces an idea of a person," which is true, but that is not the metaphor; that is, that we take the metonyms of the individual and find redundancy in it. The impetus is not that an idea is being formed about the new sign, it's simply that we're attributing a certain feeling to a sign; something that metonyms can't do. So metonyms are political. They are about finding ways of forming social agreements about some phenomenon, experience, or idea in the world.

04-00:27:35

So, the meanings of words are not transcendently determined, nor are the affects that words produce transcendently determined. The meaning of words is dependent upon history and social agreements, and the affect of words is dependent upon your cognitive ability to make an analogy between things that exist as social agreements. This is not something that is operating outside the political, social, and cultural sphere. The metaphor has been inappropriately used to argue the existence of transcendentalism, simply because metaphors don't deal with meaning, they deal with affect. To that degree, it has been a useful tool to affirm and reinforce the existence of some kind of transcendentalism.

04-00:28:33

Cooks:

There's more to say, and I feel like we have to move on because of time. Thank you for talking about that essay, because I think it's a really important essay, and the things that you're saying about it connect, in my mind, to so many of the things we've already talked about with your art and your life and critical theory.

So, writing, making art, and curating, and in addition to being a musician, right, so we have many different areas that make up who you are in this professional way. I wanted to talk a bit about curating with an exhibition that you curated called *Terry Adkins: The Smooth, the Cut, and the Assembled* at the Lévy Gorvy Gallery in New York in 2018. This could be a much bigger conversation because we haven't talked about Terry Adkins as an artist and maybe a friend to you, and I'm interested in hearing you talk about—since you said you've only curated shows really when it made absolute sense, that there

was something building that you had been thinking about that turned you to this form in a particular moment—if you could talk about what led up to this exhibition and say something about it.

04-00:30:09

Gaines:

In this particular case, this exhibition, I was asked to do—of course, Terry was being represented by, I think, PPOW [Gallery] during his lifetime. After he died, Merele Williams, his widow, thought to find another gallery to handle the estate, and it turned out that Lévy Gorvy was very much interested in taking it on. Of course, they wanted to do an introductory exhibition of this, and I was recommended by Alexis Johnson, who used to be one of the directors at Paula Cooper who moved over to Lévy Gorvy.

The issue, the problem I had to figure out was how to approach the work. There's a way of reading Terry's work that makes it seem like it's driven by certain spiritual and mystical forces that he tapped into in making objects. There's a lot of writing around his work that does that, and it's an issue that he didn't like at all. He took on the shaman as a subject in the work, but he didn't see himself as one, or he didn't even attribute any strategy of shamanistic practices to the creation of works of art. Literally, he was very formal and very conservative in his ideas about art and sculpture. Although he recognized the existence of the political subject, he was wholly committed to modernist practice and tradition, and those shamanistic references bothered him.

04-00:32:54

In trying to approach the show, I thought about what might be unique is to approach it from the standpoint of certain modernist concepts that I knew were important to him, but the work was never considered in the light of them. I said, "Well, why don't we treat these objects in terms of certain formal languages that can be found when considering them? That is, considering within a body of objects certain formal redundancies that could constitute a formal language, a certain kind of "Terry Adkins" formal language of sculpture production, and so why don't I do that?" Just looking at the work, I came up with these three categories. What were they? [laughs]

04-00:33:58

Cooks:

The smooth, the cut, the assembled.

04-00:34:01

Gaines:

And the assembled. Those three words describe the practices that went into building of sculptures, and that it was not difficult to assemble or organize, sort of taxonomically, his works according to those three categories. They're not at all alike. "Smooth" is like a verb or an adjective. It can function like that. But "assembled" speaks to an actual practice, a physical construction of a work; but so do the others. There's some play in how those three terms extend themselves. I found that it was not difficult to organize the works according to those three categories, notwithstanding the play that exists in their meaning, and so this is what we did. I had selected works from the inventory and



made—had some models made of certain works I thought I wanted to work with, and played with them here in the studio to see how we could install them according to these three categories.

The show turned out to be really successful. I guess I'd say it elevated a way of talking about Terry's work that had been overshadowed by certain usage of the language of shamanism that sort of mystified his work. To the degree that Terry's work was affect driven, it was not because of the deployment of certain strategies of the shaman; it was because of certain rather formal aesthetics, a formal aesthetics that he totally and completely identified with. He didn't like the mystification of his work, because he thought that people who did that were a part of a kind of practice that wants to mystify, use the idea of the mystification in terms of talking about the work of black artists. That was a problem for him because, for him, it meant that black artists don't have value as critical thinkers, they only have value as agents of feeling, and that drove him nuts.

04-00:37:32

The writing around the show was good. There was one person who wrote a review and said that the show was too formal, he missed the craziness of a Terry Adkins installation. If you see a big show, for example, the work is eclectic and varied. There's a certain feeling of chaos that might be implied by it, that is attributed then easily to this notion of abject shamanism. So I think this writer is missing that. It's not like all the work was alike, but it had a discipline. It was really disciplined around producing these relationships between works based upon this formal language; I think the writer was missing that. But that's precisely the problem—in a smaller scale, you understood more clearly, as far as I'm concerned, how Terry's work operated critically, in terms of being works of art, than you could in these other large installations that tied the work to the history of shamanism.

04-00:39:12

Cooks:

Was there performance as part of the exhibition?

04-00:39:15

Gaines:

Yeah, but the gallery did not program any of Terry's performances, but it brought in people whose performance work could be related. I didn't see any of them, but I guess they were interested in creating this venue to point out or pinpoint some of the ideas that they thought existed in Terry's work and they could find in the people who did perform. A poet had written a piece for the catalog, which is something I think that Terry would have supported and liked, too. That wasn't my idea, but that was the gallery's idea.

04-00:40:09

Cooks:

Okay, thank you. So, moving to another part of your life, I would like to talk about some of the artwork. There are many to talk about, but I wanted to talk about the *Manifesto* works, and also to start a collaboration that you did with one of your students, with Edgar Arceneaux: *Snake River*. I guess *Snake River*

came first in 2006, so this gets back to your teaching and mentorship. This is the only former student that I've noticed that you've collaborated with, or another person that you've done a collaboration with; I don't know if that's accurate or not. But I am interested in the way that these two parts of you are still very combined, with the teaching and the art making, into making new work in a collaborative way.

04-00:41:16

Gaines:

It is the only collaborative—I'm not a collaboration artist, and I'm still not quite sure why we did that with Edgar.

04-00:41:28

Cooks:

Uh-oh.

04-00:41:29

Gaines:

It wasn't a smooth collaboration, but that's because I'm not temperamentally a collaborator. We did work on this piece together, and it was interesting because it was in a moment where I was getting very little attention and Edgar was getting a lot of attention, and he had this opportunity for—because he was having a show in Linz, Austria, a museum show which eventually came to REDCAT [Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater]. Edgar fashions himself a collaborator, and so he asked me if I would work with him. It was generous on his part. I took him up on it because I actually thought the project that we were planning—well, ultimately the project we planned sounded very interesting to me, but I took him up on it because it was before I fully realized that I was not a collaborative artist. But the other part of that is that Edgar was a student of mine, but also another—Rodney—

04-00:42:45

Cooks:

McMillian.

04-00:42:46

Gaines:

—McMillian, and again Andrea Bowers, who was at CalArts the year that I started—she says that she became my student two or three years later; she became my student a year later because she was graduating as I was arriving at CalArts, but it was later as we became colleagues that she started asking me all these questions about art. Beside all that, we—the three of us became—actually there were four of us, became the Four Musketeers.

04-00:43:23

Cooks:

Really!

04-00:43:23

Gaines:

We just became friends, and we would get together and do dinner and then often get together to critique each other's work. We would get into fights and arguments that almost got us kicked out of restaurants once, we had various agreements and disagreements on this or that. It was mostly Rodney and Edgar against me and Andrea, or then it switched around; Andrea and Rodney against me and Edgar, [laughs] but very rarely did Rodney come on my side

and vice versa. Edgar sometimes pretended to be on my side, but he really wasn't. So anyway, we had this long lived tradition which continues into this day. Edgar has collaborated with Rodney, too; I don't think with Andrea. We all did participate in an exhibition at Project Row Houses in Houston that Edgar curated.

04-00:44:52

Edgar's really, I think he's an amazing filmmaker. He had this exhibition project and he wanted to do a film. He said to me, "Well, we can collaborate on it." We had this idea of finding a systematic way to film an experience or event, whatever it is. We systematized the movement of a camera that we use to film an event. Again, the movement would be determined by a system rather than by the exigency of the event itself. It evolved that we were going to film a concert. Later that turned out to be a two-part film where we were originally going to film a performance or a rehearsal at Disney Hall, and then bring in Sean Griffin, a composer, and have him—commission him to write a piece that he would have to rehearse, and we could film him rehearsing the piece.

We couldn't do the Disney Hall thing, the situation was promising for a while, but the key person that was going to make it happen changed jobs, and the new guy in there wouldn't give us access to the music people. And so we changed that and started to work from Linz, where the exhibition was going to start. Ultimately, we contacted a quintet, a string quintet—it was part of the Linz Symphony—and they agreed to have the rehearsal. They rehearsed a Samuel Barber piece that's very popular, very famous, Barber, from, I believe—oh no, no, no, it was [Antonín] Dvořák. It was not a Barber. It was a Dvořák piece, incredibly beautiful piece. We started to film that rehearsal in Linz, and then we filmed Sean's rehearsal. Sean's work required a sixteen-piece ensemble at one of the theaters downtown on Broadway; I can't remember which one it was, but it was one of those old, beautiful theaters that had this very baroque marquee. The theory, the strategy was to—well first of all, we were going to use a spider cam that you see in sporting events—this cam that moves around in 360 degrees that's attached to wires.

04-00:48:18

Cooks:

Cable or—

04-00:48:19

Gaines:

We found the company and they were going to film it, but we couldn't raise the money. It was just too expensive. So we decided to use a camera on a boom. In order to determine the pathways that the camera had to take in order to film the performance, we had decided that we'll use an unrelated location to determine the mapping of pathways.

So we decided to take a boat trip on the Snake River. We went up to Utah. Well, we wound up in Utah. We started in Wyoming; the Snake River runs through there and cuts through Utah and then the eastern side of Idaho. We

loaded our camera gear on a boat in Wyoming and just filmed going along the river. We mapped the river's shape as we're moving, making coordinates so that systematized this travel. We did that on the eastern side and on the western side of the Snake, even where the river is pretty large and had these giant rapids.

04-00:50:14

Cooks: Whitewater rafting.

04-00:50:15

Gaines: Whitewater rafting on the western side. We filmed while traveling down the whitewater, and later mapped out our movement. The result was a large map of the areas that we traveled and broke that up into sections. A boom operator and the camera operator took footage that we used to map the sections. We used the maps to determine the directional movement of the camera during the filming of the rehearsals. We then told the camera operator to, "Just follow the shape that's on the page with your camera in the concert hall." The meandering shape was the Snake River. So the only thing that he had to do was to make sure that he was pointing toward the people who were rehearsing and follow wherever the path took him. He couldn't do close ups or distance; he had to have one lens set up [and] then just move the camera according to that. I think we had something like all together thirty-two of these sections, and we performed both rehearsals, Linz and Los Angeles, that way.

04-00:51:33

Then in the film, we simply—*simply*; it wasn't simple—we used the rehearsals as a soundtrack for the film, it was a two-channel installation. On the left channel, we had the Snake River, Wyoming side, and played the rehearsal from Linz. And so, we watched the rehearsal on the right screen while the camera moved along the Snake on the left screen. The camera movement on the right screen was governed by the direction and shape of the Snake River on the eastern end. On the western end, we had scenes filming Sean's rehearsal, and we used the whitewater-filmed parts for that; again, the camera movement was determined by the movement of the boat along the river. The whole idea was this: rather than setting up shots, the camera position was determined by the river movement, which made the relationship of the camera to the rehearsal scene arbitrary, that we didn't know what was going to happen.

04-00:52:44

There's one other thing that Edgar insisted upon and I wasn't so keen on: he wanted to film a section from a helicopter, and so we did it. He filmed a certain section of the western end from a helicopter. I mean, that sort of took too much away from this rigorous system for me, but it had a tremendous visual effect, right? So, that was edited into the piece.

When we showed it in Linz, Edgar—we only finished the eastern section at that time; we hadn't had the western section finished yet. They were still

finishing the western section. That wasn't finished when I left for Linz. Edgar couldn't go because his wife was giving birth to their baby, so he had to stay. So I was there by myself. I got to Linz, and then ultimately the film packages arrived. We put it on the monitor to look at it, and the visuals and the sound were totally out of sync, and so it was not showable. It was so bad. So, we had to call back to LA and said, "You've got to fix this. The sound is cutting out." It's like, for example in the rehearsal, the guy who was conducting would stop and tell the cello to play: "You bring out that part more," and, "Violin, can you lay back a little?" So he'd be doing this. But in the sound, there's music playing. [laughs] It was like crazy. They must have been drunk when they were editing this thing. Back in Linz we panicked and [said], "Fix it." They sent it back and it wasn't fixed, and we were coming to the countdown for the opening. The film is not ready, and Clara Kim, chief curator at REDCAT, was in Linz with us, and so the director of the museum just like ran away, [laughs] and I was just about to melt down. I was becoming completely useless because we were literally hours from the big opening, and so Clara just took over. She took the video to a local editor and said, "You guys got to fix this." They worked on it, worked on it, and worked on it, and they got it close to syncing, close enough so that we could get away with it.

04-00:55:43

And this was literally minutes before the—the auditorium was starting to fill up with people, and I was like in the corner just like going this. [trills lips] [both laugh] I was completely useless. [laughs] The auditorium's full and they said, "Okay, we got it, we got it." We install it. I didn't even know what was going to happen once we projected it, and sure enough, it was close. It was slightly out of sync, but it was close enough for everybody to be satisfied with it, and we got through that. It was like one of your nightmares. You have these nightmares that you—oh, I didn't do my homework and the big test was coming up—it was worse than any of those nightmares. It was an experience I never want to have again. One of the reasons—it was this that took me out of collaborations, because I cannot stand being out of control. I just can't deal with it.

04-00:56:57

Cooks:

Wow. I'm glad I asked. I mean, that was a stressful story. I now understand why you wouldn't be easily convinced of another collaboration. That's so stressful.

04-00:57:10

Gaines:

[laughs]

04-00:57:12

Cooks:

One of the things I want to take from that story—to take us to another set of works—is the relationship between systems and chance and sound. I was thinking about this when you were talking about Terry Adkins' work, but then the *Manifestos* you've done, hearing what you've said about *Snake River* gives me some more insight or another layer to understand *Manifestos*. I would love

for you to just talk about how you got the, I think, brilliant idea to do *Manifestos*, and how, for me, it brings together so much of the complexity of your work and your interest in many fields at the same time. It's like the perfect artwork, conceptual artwork. How did you come up with the idea for that?

04-00:58:22

Gaines:

Actually, there isn't an answer. I can only surmise. I don't know how, because often I'll wake up in the morning with a fully formed idea; it doesn't happen often, but it happened with most of the work that I made. I have no way of controlling that, except putting myself in a state of mind where I'm contemplating. This idea happened that way. I can only say that I must have, on some level, made a link between music and the grid—I got a better connection with the idea of music as a system, which of course, it is. Once you emphasize that aspect of it, then the connection with my other work makes sense. So, musical notation is essentially mathematics, and musical composition operates within a grid.

04-01:00:09

Cooks:

But music is a language you know because of your background as a drummer.

04-01:00:14

Gaines:

Yeah, I know music theory, but I never—because when we think of music, we think about performance, but I really didn't think of music theory that way, as mathematics—so somehow, I started thinking more about the music as a mathematical enterprise and a connection to, in this case, language—because I was working on language pieces at the time, the connection to language was quickly made. Probably, that's what happened where I was locked into this thought. Unconsciously, I began thinking about music as a kind of mathematics and this connection with text and language; I began to see the connection to language and systems. I'd already been invested in the idea of syntax from linguistic study. I was already invested in the idea that syntax is essentially mathematically based. So, the idea was to translate text into music notation, allowing letters to perform musically. Of course, the idea of writing music from text is old as early baroque, but so—

04-01:01:49

Cooks:

But it—

04-01:01:49

Gaines:

—I didn't think about it. What was different was presentation. It's not the idea of the music and text relationship, but what happens to that relationship in presentation. That's what I did that was unique.

04-01:02:08

Cooks:

But it's not like writing sound for lyrics, right, because it's a different—so I'm thinking about a band where someone writes the lyrics and then gives the lyrics to the next person; next person writes the sound that goes with it. This is a different kind of system, where the letters are assigned to different—

04-01:02:32

Gaines:

Yeah well, it's just like my general critique of art. In the example that you gave, that's simply thinking of the relationship between words and music metaphorically. That conforms with the conventional notion of making art that's based upon the creative unconscious and the subject of expression. But I, in the way I was dealing with it, I was dealing with all of those properties systematically, so I didn't have to intuit or imagine, create, from my imagination, some relationship to words. That was simple because the notes are individual and the letters are individual, and so for me, those began—they were units around which I could form a system. Then I went to the old baroque strategy, except mine is much—it's different from what's used in the baroque traditions, where a note is assigned to every letter. I only assigned, only used the notes that—the letters that are used in musical notation. So I assigned the notes A through G, and the rest of the alphabet was either a silent beat or a rest.

04-01:04:09

Cooks:

That's great, okay.

04-01:04:11

Gaines:

There's certain other sort of structures of metrics that I had to—it's a kind of metric system where you have to give different things equal value so the notes and the letters have to have equal time values, and so I simply decided to write in eighth notes. So the notes had the value of an eighth note, and the word and the letter, each letter has a divided eighth note, so they corresponded to the notes that way. I could do quarter notes and half notes and whole notes, but based upon the same metric, because it was all systematized.

04-01:04:54

The other part of that is that I saw it as an opportunity to deal another way with the issue of the archive or archival documents, which I'd already been invested in. In this case, I wanted to reinforce the idea of the political document coming from a political archive, and research these various political documents from, I would say, from 400 years ago to the present. In order to do the work, I had to decide among the articles that I collected, which I did. One was Malcolm X's speech at Ford Auditorium.

What I did was to create a melody line, and then a harmony line. The melody line was created by simply translating the notes of Malcolm's speech into musical notes. Underneath that, I had to create a harmony line. What I did there is take the word where the notes were found and created a chord within the metrics of that word. It's like this: it's like the word "tree" has four letters in it, and so I would translate the "t" and the "r" as eighth-note rests, and each "e" is an eighth note, but there where the notes "e, e." All right, so at the bottom I would write the chord that accompanied that word, because we deal with whole words. The word "tree" has four beats and four eighth notes in it, so the chord underneath had to be the length of four eighth notes, so it'd go: silence, silence, [claps] "e," [claps] "e." The chord would start right at the

beginning, and then two, [claps] three, [claps] four, like that, and then the chord would stop and then move on to the next word.

04-01:07:19

I guess what I wanted to say was that I created some dynamics to the chord section by using four types of chords: major, minor, diminished, and augmented. I systemized those in terms of how they're used, and so my composition was written in a way that voice and piano could perform it.

I gave that music to Sean Griffin, the composer, same composer that helped us with *Snake River*, and asked him to write this voice music arrangement for a small ensemble, so he did that. The first, *Manifesto One*, was written for a string quartet, piano; and *Manifesto Two*, we had the nine-piece ensemble. He arranged a piano score for the nine-piece ensemble, which means that—we always had the string quartet, but it means that the music was distributed among the various instruments, and that he could make decisions as typically arrangers do in terms of arranging; he just couldn't change anything that was produced by the system. He could make notes louder or softer, he could change the instrument that plays the note, but anything that's memorialized in the system, he couldn't use it as an opportunity to do that.

04-01:09:01

Cooks:

What was your experience of hearing the music that you wrote?

04-01:09:09

Gaines:

One of the interesting things about working this way is that it's few and far between, because it takes a long time to finish a work or finish a series. When I start a work, I have no idea what it's going to be, and so when I see it or hear it, I'm hearing it just like everybody else or seeing it just like everybody else for the first time. It's hard, and I'm actually pretty good at imagining things in the world, from being a description or a concept or something like that, but my imagination could never catch up with the difference between what I thought I was putting together as a system and what actually happens in performance. The same thing with object construction. This recent piece, this palm tree piece, "Numbers and Trees: Palm Canyon" (2019), when I saw it, it was like somebody else made the work. That's a very exciting relationship to have with your own work. The problem is that it only happens at the beginning of each series. [laughs]

04-01:10:24

The other things happen because, for example, in the gridwork, as you're layering trees on top of each other, the image changes, and so you can enjoy certain things that pop up in those changes, because you don't design what happens visually as you lay out the system. That part, you go somewhat into sort of new experience of seeing, but at the beginning is when you have this, like, shock. It's quite scary, because you don't know whether what you're going to do is going to work or not. You can sometimes run some models, but if I have a show, it's going to take nine months to prepare the work for the



show. So I have to start, and if it doesn't work, then I'm in deep trouble. It's kind of scary, because I can't say, "Oh, I'm going to—let's not do that, let's try something else," because then, I wouldn't have the work for the show. It's kind of scary, but at the same time it's a lovely relationship to have with your own work.

04-01:11:42

Cooks:

Two things I want to talk about. One is: we were talking about hearing your work for the first time when we were discussing the *Manifestos*, and that was performed at the Venice Biennale in 2007?

04-01:11:57

Gaines:

Yeah, that was *Sound Text*.

04-01:11:59

Cooks:

Okay, and so—

04-01:11:59

Gaines:

It wasn't the *Manifestos* series; it was *Sound Text*.

04-01:12:02

Cooks:

So, what was the *Sound Text* then? Was it the same kind of process with different kinds of materials?

04-01:12:11

Gaines:

Yeah, I was deploying a slightly different system and using archival materials slightly differently—slightly; very differently, actually.

04-01:12:24

Cooks:

And you heard it for the first time when it was performed at the Biennial—the Biennale in 2007?

04-01:12:32

Gaines:

Oh yeah, and that was a nightmare story, too.

04-01:12:35

Cooks:

I'm so sorry, [laughs] I keep asking the nightmare, like—

04-01:12:37

Gaines:

We did the installation version, and so I heard the installation version here after we put it together to send it to the exhibition, but the live performance I didn't hear. There's no voice in the installation version; it's just instruments. I didn't hear it with vocals until it was performed at the—essentially when we had a rehearsal for the Biennale was the first time I heard it—

04-01:13:08

Cooks:

And was—

04-01:13:08

Gaines:

—performed.

04-01:13:08

Cooks: Was that a magical moment or a disastrous moment?

04-01:13:12

Gaines: Well, it was even scarier than what happened in Linz, because we—Sean was conducting it, and I should have known that—because I showed in Venice before, and what I learned in my first experience is to leave nothing to the Biennale, do everything yourself, because there's some sort of standard model there. What can go wrong will go wrong at the Biennale. I had a kind of nightmare experience with my 2007 show, and so I should have known better. The one thing we did was we had the ensemble recommended to us by actually a very famous musician. I'm trying to remember—

04-01:14:22

Cooks: We can fill it in, yeah, that's fine.

04-01:14:25

Gaines: [Pauline Oliveros.] But in any case, so we got the ensemble, the musicians, who actually turned out to be incredible—they were really good—and then we had two vocalists recommended to us. Two tragedies happened at the rehearsal. One is that they promised us a quiet space to rehearse, and a certain amount of rehearsal time; none of that happened. We were trying to rehearse while construction was going on, so it was impossible; and they cut our rehearsal time down by three-quarters, so we had a quarter of the time to rehearse than we thought. These people had never seen the music before, and it's difficult music. At the end of rehearsal, we discovered that the soprano couldn't sing, literally. We didn't even know what she was doing there. Sean had to let her go, so literally two days before the performance we didn't have a soprano.

04-01:15:34

We tried to search around for a fourth, and we couldn't find anybody. Sean came up with the idea, saying, "Alicia Hall Moran is going to be here because she's also doing a work with Jason [Moran] for the venue we're playing in, and maybe she'll do it." Sean left her a message—and he hadn't talked to her for a while—he just left her a message and said, "I heard you're coming. We're in this pickle. Could you help us?" and she agreed. We only had one rehearsal with her, just one.

04-01:16:13

Cooks: And she's incredible.

04-01:16:15

Gaines: Yeah well, at the performance everything that could go wrong went wrong. The only thing is that the audience didn't know that.

04-01:16:28

Cooks: Great!

04-01:16:29

Gaines:

For them, there wasn't missed cues, coming in wrong. We got a standing ovation. Now, while I was sitting there, I thought that it's like one of those Dada stories, at the Cabaret Voltaire, and the Dadaistic performance where they ridiculed the audience and the audience would then chase them down with sticks and balustrades, trying to beat the crap out of the Dadaists. I didn't know if I was going to have to make—I thought the audience was going to suddenly come up, jump up and say, "I've had enough of this. Who's responsible?" They're going to come after me. I was, like, shaking and shaking. I could see Sean trying to keep control because he heard all of this stuff, too. The musicians were doing the best they can; we didn't have enough time to rehearse. But the music was so *passionate* and everybody played their mistakes with such conviction, because they're professional musicians, that the audience just jumped up and started—[claps] standing ovation. I could not believe it. [laughs]

04-01:17:35

Cooks:

That's another amazing story. I want to get some of the dates correct for the record, because I think I've gotten some things out of order, because the Venice Biennale, 2007, preceded the *Manifestos*.

04-01:17:53

Gaines:

Yes.

04-01:17:54

Cooks:

Okay. I just want to get that right for the record. A very important show for your career, and could you say something—since we've been talking about the rehearsal and performance, can you say, just identify the texts that were part of that performance, since we talked a bit already about the *Manifestos* and the significance of that? What were the archival texts that you picked for the Biennale?

04-01:18:22

Gaines:

It's like songs, vintage or old political songs in the eighteenth century, the nineteenth and eighteenth century. The subjects had to be political, so they're union songs and things of that nature, political songs that dealt with mostly American politics. What I did was, I took the original music manuscript and I kept the melody of the song, and that melody remained untouched, and then I went to a political manuscript—not manuscript, but a political document, like a manifesto—and I translated that manifesto back into musical notation. Rather than doing just the melody line and the harmony line, I just did the harmony line, and I pasted that harmony line under the melody line that preserved the original melody of the song, and so obviously the two are totally unconnected. And then I rewrote the lyrics with the words of the political text. And so all the relationships are random, arbitrary, and they seem to fall where they fit together.

04-01:20:12

Cooks:

Were you surprised? I mean, you talk about how nerve-wracking it is to see it all performed, but then were you surprised in that specific instance of how well it worked, that the systems worked, that you're saying it all came together?

04-01:20:30

Gaines:

Yeah, there are some reasons why it had a good chance of working. What I was afraid of is that you would lose sight of this, where sort of arbitrarily merged documents formed the basis of this experience, and I thought that people would lose access to that. Within the *Manifestos* piece, we had the big drawings and the music itself, so that if you were responsible, you could actually see how the music was formed, in the real time with the music. You didn't even have to read music. You could see by following the relationship of letters to notes that this was—what you were hearing is produced by a system then that conflated with the music, that produced music out of it.

*Sound Texts* was more complicated and I thought that people—because the worst-case scenario for me is that people would think that these compositions were realized not by a system. You would anticipate a system would produce chaos of some sort, and they didn't sound chaotic, they sound totally intentional.

04-01:22:17

So, I don't have any idea. I guess I don't know, because whenever we perform the piece, we make an announcement about how it's constructed, and so then hoping that people maintain that knowledge when they're listening. When I give presentations, though, about this, one thing I notice is that people are often—either believe that it was produced this way because it sounds so intentional, or that somehow I cheated in some way in order for it to sound like it was a paradox and intentional sounding but randomly produced. They thought I cheated. They have great resistance to the idea that a system can produce that kind of determinacy. There's good reason why it sounds like it's determined: it is because the system, the musical system, the diatonic scale, makes the music sound tonal. People, once they hear the melody, they think it's intentional, and when, in fact, no. Just because you hear a melody doesn't mean that there's a consciousness that produced it, but that's what people think, and the diatonic scale is intended to produce melody. It was built to produce melody, and that's why it sounds that way. It's not mysterious at all. Your access to the system is really—in the installation—is to actually study the music while the texts are being played, and go between that and then experiencing the music and the scrolling text together. That's the most ideal situation of looking at it. You can only suggest people do that; you can't control it.

04-01:24:22

Cooks:

I know we're running out of time. I really want to ask you about more recent revisitings of works from the 1970s, so thinking about *Numbers and Trees*

from 2015, and also returning to the *Faces* in 2018. Could you tell us why you decided to go back to those works and how they're different now than they were then?

04-01:25:01

Gaines: When I had the Studio Museum show that Keith curated, that was the next—

04-01:25:07

Cooks: *Gridworks*.

04-01:25:08

Gaines: —significant show in terms of reviving my career.

04-01:25:16

Cooks: Were you surprised to be asked to do that show?

04-01:25:20

Gaines: Well, Naima, three years before, she said it's an idea she had. She was still studying then, and I would just humor her, say, "Yeah, yeah, okay, we can do it." [I] didn't really think—well, not that she was being flippant; I'm serious, I just never thought of it going anywhere, and then—

04-01:25:49

Cooks: And she wasn't at the Studio Museum at that point—

04-01:25:50

Gaines: No, no, she was still—

04-01:25:51

Cooks: —she was at UCLA.

04-01:25:53

Gaines: Well, when she first had the idea of the show she was still a student, then she went to the Studio Museum, and then she went to the Hammer [Museum], and then back to the Studio Museum. During all that time she kept saying, "If I get the chance, we could do the show?" I said, "Sure." When she went back to the museum, she talked to Thelma [Golden] about this show, and Thelma was interested, and she asked me again and I couldn't believe it, that this woman, she's serious!

So, we did it. It was interesting to me because these are works that I've been living with or been with ever since for forty years, and I had all this history with the work and a history of modest to no attention. It was quite interesting to find that in this moment and this time, that work was found to be truly interesting. The people who ran it came to LA. It again got a lot of positive feedback, so it's just curious. I never really imagined or thought about the art world as making any sense at all, but even knowing that, it's still kind of crazy and curious that—

04-01:27:29

Cooks: Well, do you think the—

04-01:27:30

Gaines: —that same work could have entirely different lives.

04-01:27:34

Cooks: Do you think the success and standing ovation at the Biennale in '07 helped to bring some attention to you, and people started looking backwards into your body of work?

04-01:27:49

Gaines: That show helped the transition from Castelli and Weber to new exhibition venues, and so that helped with that. I saw that ultimately it was increasing interest in the work, but it was methodical and slow. I very definitely think that 2007, the Robert Storr Biennale did that. I produced a piece called *Airplanecrash Clock* (1997) that Robert showed, that, and that one piece was in seventy different articles, yeah, and so very definitely that helped. I just started showing with Susanne Vielmetter just before that; and then I started showing with this gallery in New York, Kent Gallery, as a consequence of that; then had the exhibition. The first *Manifestos* piece was shown in Kent Gallery in New York, and then it was here in LA at the show that Anne Ellegood curated, *All of This and Nothing* (2011) and that got huge attention. That piece got huge attention. Christopher Knight wrote a separate article about that work from the exhibition itself. I saw that things have started shifting. The shift started happening with the 2007 Biennale, is what I think.

04-01:29:27

Cooks: What compelled you then maybe from that energy to go back to *Numbers and Trees* and *Faces*?

04-01:29:35

Gaines: Ultimately, I got the resources to start doing things that I couldn't do before. When I shifted over to work on what I call the language pieces, I really wasn't finished with the *Gridwork*; it's just I didn't have the resources to do both. I went to, started to working on these other more language-based works. As time went by, my resources began to grow, and then I could go back into things that I wanted to do a long time ago. Like one thing I wanted to do—because the first *Gridwork* I did at the show was the ones that I showed at Paula Cooper, which is those eight-by-twelve-foot Plexi boxes, which—and I have to say that each piece is very expensive to produce, both in materials and in labor, and so it really requires resources, and so I just couldn't do it before, but then I could. I mean actually, at the time when I started working on it, it was more because I couldn't do it then. I was trying to get my galleries to help me, and they weren't so much interested. [laughs]

I finally got the pieces made, and when people saw them, they just flipped. That then set up a bunch of situations where I could follow through and continued to go after gridworks that I wanted to make that I never had the

resources and the time to make before, while I was still working on the language pieces. Because my *Manifestos* series was all being done at the same time.

04-01:31:38

Cooks:

What do you think happened in forty years that suddenly people were seeing something in the *Gridwork* that they didn't see in the seventies? Was it just people catching up to you, or was it some other kind of shift?

04-01:31:55

Gaines:

Yeah, they could have, but one of the things that I surmised is that—because at the time, I think that people didn't really deal with or didn't want to deal with it because I think it was too—that they didn't want to see any more conceptual art or work that was conceptual. I think that precipitated a period where people just weren't paying attention to the work, and painting had returned and Mary Boone happened. This whole direction of the art world was overtaken by painting again, and so the conceptual practices or the conceptually derivative practices were still going on, but I guess I would say that the market was being controlled by painting and the conceptually derivative works were being written about a lot, but they weren't adored by the market. It was just an unfavorable field even during those years for my work, because my work was dealing with trees, you know? The conceptual work at the time, what I call conceptual, was interrogating issues like identity and race and various political discourses that interrogate culture in so many different ways, and my work didn't ostensibly—it didn't appear to do that. I think it was, but it didn't appear to do that. So it was—

04-01:33:50

Cooks:

But now it does. Now it appears to other people that it does that?

04-01:33:55

Gaines:

I think so, because they've become much more tolerant of conceptual issues and much more willing to see how ideas are advanced through conceptual strategies. That focus, that framework, that ability to see it means that somewhere in their perceptual apparatus they are already embracing the idea of the politics of perception, that perception itself is a political construction. I think that that's become much more a present idea today, and that makes the space more favorable for the kind of work that I did.

04-01:34:45

Cooks:

I'd like to talk about the kind of work that you're doing now, and have this intersect with some of the other accolades that you've gotten. So in 2007, when you were in the first Venice Biennale, for your first Venice Biennale, you received the United States Artists Fellowship. Is there anything you can tell us about what that means for you in your career to get—because some artists feel like, well, fellowships and awards are suspect, or you're not really sure what they mean. What did that mean to you at that point, because in '07, with that first Biennale, your career starts to change?

04-01:35:35

Gaines:

Well, I think the value of an award depends upon the award, because I can't help but to think that—it's difficult to deal with this issue of validation, because it seems to play into certain human experiences. Sometimes people take on a very noble—what I think is that the award, what measures the value of an award are the other people who have been and who are awarded, and if I'm in the company of people that I respect and admire in an award situation, then I'm stoked, that's great. That just happened with the US Artists is, I think it was the second award, the second year of the award that I was nominated for, and it was, in terms of awards, it was really the first serious award that I actually got. I got an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] Grant years ago, and that was fantastic. But after all these years—and this comes around, and I was looking at the artists and I was stoked. Same thing with the Guggenheim [Fellowship]—

04-01:37:19

Cooks:

Right, in 2013 you got a Guggenheim.

04-01:37:21

Gaines:

—and which I'm also very—there's a politics to all of these things, but nevertheless, I see it as a certain kind of recognition that, on the social level, that meant work is regarded in a certain kind of way, and a certain level with certain artists. When you look at the other artists, then you can't help but—shouldn't help but to feel happy, unless you're like a really cynical person, then, I don't know. It's certainly the case with this new award, the MacDowell Medal, which I've heard about over the years, but not in a zillion years did I thought that I—the Pulitzer is more likely, and they don't even give Pulitzers to visual artists. [laughs] So, there was no way in the world that I thought that I could ever—because when you look at the list of people who received that since the sixties—

04-01:38:54

Cooks:

So who were—

04-01:38:54

Gaines:

—it's an unbelievable list.

04-01:38:55

Cooks:

Who were some of those people that you admire?

04-01:38:58

Gaines:

Oh geez, where do I start? Sonny Rollins, Leonard Bernstein. You know—

04-01:39:06

Cooks:

Big list, yeah.

04-01:39:07

Gaines:

—but—



04-01:39:08

Cooks: But those are impressive names.

04-01:39:08

Gaines: —Toni Morrison. Oh geez—

04-01:39:17

Cooks: That's a good list.

04-01:39:17

Gaines: —several of high-powered writers I can't remember, totally forgetting the names, but it's an extraordinary list. So again, I can't help but to feel really privileged.

One award was the REDCAT Award, and that was particularly meaningful to me because, particularly because I taught at CalArts, and of course, REDCAT is connected with CalArts. I was around during the planning and organizing stages of REDCAT, and watched it develop as a serious venue. That, just in terms of my personal history at CalArts, that's something that I was very pleased to get.

04-01:40:25

Cooks: Thinking about your success now, like right now, and the places that are showing your work, Hauser & Wirth is now showing your work, and so you have a show that you're preparing for right now that will happen this year in 2019?

04-01:40:53

Gaines: Yeah, so my show at Hauser & Wirth opens September ninth this year in LA.

04-01:40:59

Cooks: Okay. Can you tell us anything about your thoughts on what you'd like to show, or is Hauser & Wirth an important gallery for you at this moment?

04-01:41:14

Gaines: Yeah! [laughs] Conceptually, it's somewhat like when I discovered that I was being shown at Weber and Castelli, Leo Castelli Gallery. Leo Castelli was the top gallery in the world at the time that I was showing, so it's somewhat like that, that I—on a certain level, I feel extraordinarily grateful for the opportunity to work with that gallery [Hauser], because they provide levels of support that I've never seen before—I've shown with a lot of galleries—and so I have that feeling. I continue having a relationship with Max Hetzler in Berlin and Paris, something that seemed to make sense to everybody. It's just a consequence of that, and it was developing before Hauser, but at this point it's gotten to the point where my—the next five, six years are fully booked, both in terms of these exhibitions, but also in terms of work, that I have more demand for work right now than ever. I think that it was something I was beginning before I started Hauser, but after starting Hauser, it really accelerated.

04-01:43:36

Cooks:

Clearly you have an international reputation based on just the galleries that you've shown at. Do you have a sense of the perception of your work in different places? Do you think there's something about the structures and systems and numbers and letters that makes it translatable or equally perceived in different contexts, nationally?

04-01:44:11

Gaines:

Well, I really think that there's a global art that no matter where you are, that sort of, like these days—I think we've seen it different in the past than these days, they're all in with this new aesthetic language. The difference is the work is more diverse and eclectic than it's ever been, so there's so many different kinds of work that's getting attention these days, which would never have happened like fifteen, twenty years ago. Practices that are close to my own sort of critical insight to practices, in terms of practices, that I don't understand at all, they're all having this opportunity, because of the globalization of the art world, to find audiences. I think that, particularly, is a very good thing. The massive growth and size of the art market, I haven't decided yet whether I got scared—I mean, in one sense, the opportunities, the increase in opportunities are such because of the growth of the art market to create those opportunities; but at the same time, I couldn't say that as a consequence of that, as a culture we're going to get better art. I doubt it, but I'm not sure; I mean my intuition is that they have nothing to do with each other, but it's much better culturally to have a much more diverse art world than the sort of narrowly defined art world, the world that existed during the time I was a young artist.

04-01:46:18

Cooks:

We talked to you about so many different types of projects that you've done. Do you feel a certain freedom in terms of—I mean, there will be many more shows in your book, but do you feel like you have the freedom to show different forms in different media, like *Librettos* and performance, and *Numbers and Trees* and *Faces*? Do you feel like you can bring all of that with you into the stage of your career that you are now, or do you feel like you really want to focus on one particular kind of visual manifestation of a system to develop in a way that you haven't because you didn't have resources in the same way before?

04-01:47:09

Gaines:

I think that body of work is made up of all of these texts systems pieces, and I don't really see one in any kind of competition with the other. It's like the diversity you were talking about in terms of the art world. What I'm interested in critically, it remains the same whether I'm working with the language pieces or the systems pieces, and the terms of working out the ideas are different because they're defined by the language of those pieces. In the larger respect, I think of myself working on a set of ideas, and those ideas persist through the different objects that I make. Rather than seeing them as different

practices, the practice is really being driven by a set of critical concerns that each thing that I do attempts to sort of play out or attempts to investigate.

04-01:48:36

Cooks:

So okay, I think we're wrapping up. We usually have this question near the end of the interview, which is an opportunity for you to reflect on your impact, the impact of your work—which I think in your case, is at least teaching and being an artist—the impact of your work on the field, and even thinking about a legacy of your life and your work on the field. I would like to have you answer those questions, and I guess I'm talking about it in this way because it seems like the older you get, the more busy you are, which is not necessarily expected for an artist; that sometimes people slow down as they get older, but it seems like the demand for your work—I mean, you have the right to slow down, but the demand for your work seems to have really sped up. If you have any reflections on this very busy moment in your career, I'd love for you to speak to that, and to also think a lot about the impact of your work on the field.

04-01:49:58

Gaines:

I'm not the best judge in terms of talking about the impact of my work on the field. Like I said, because these awards, like the MacDowell, it doesn't make any sense to me. I don't think I will ever be in unison with the idea of receiving that award, or I don't think it'll ever happen, but these things happen, so it makes me the worst judge of determining that.

As far as this point in time is concerned, there's a thing going on right now where people, artists who have been ignored—and particularly black artists and in some case[s] women artists who've been ignored for years and years and years and years—are finding attention and being advanced. Part of that is in some way the market's recognition of the role of racism in the art world. There's a sentiment that the market should just contribute in the correction of that. At the same time, the market sees an opportunity to market a whole set of works based upon this idea of neglect, and so notwithstanding the value of the work—because I already said that whole thing is a matter of taste and it makes no sense, except on the level of changing tastes, that something that nobody looked at at one time becomes the center of attention at another time. There's no rational sense, except that that happens emotionally in our changing taste patterns, right, but then there's the politics which override our taste patterns, and I think that the market is recognizing that.

04-01:52:17

I feel good about that because, at least in terms of people that I know, I'm glad that they're able to get some attention before they're dead. I know people who died who, just at the time, they weren't getting the attention, and I see that as a negative mark of the racism that existed in the lifespan of these artists. But also, I'm troubled with the type of uncritical speculative nature that even the artists who are the recipients of this attention, that they're—the uncritical acceptance of it. That is to say this, well, it's about time idea, that is not really

paying attention to the fact that the work is still not properly being paid attention to.

Then I particularly had a problem with this recent *New York Times* article where I was reading responses to. A bunch of people I know thought the article was great. I thought that article was horrible.

04-01:53:53

Cooks:

It was "Discovered After 70, [Black Artists Find Success, Too, Has Its Price]"?

04-01:53:55

Gaines:

Yeah. They were just making a spectacle around the idea of elderly artists getting attention, black artists getting attention finally, finding it interesting to talk about the fact of their work in relation to their age. I find that completely uninteresting to talk about, but it becomes provocative for the reason of writing an article about it. It makes a spectacle out of the conditions that made them ignored in the past; there's no sort of deep interrogation of that. The article, I was pretty upset about how that was treated so uncritically, and I suggested to a friend that I didn't like the way I was written in it. I then find myself having to make the argument that my problems with the article was not because of the way I was written about in it, but the way I was written in it was typical of the speculative nature of the article, which essentially is that I'm a discovery of Mark Bradford and not recognizing that Hauser isn't the beginning of the part of my art career that began to get attention. It's simply because, well, what I would say is there's a lack of research on the part of the writer, but also this interest in finding a human-interest angle in writing this article. I thought it was terrible.

04-01:56:04

Cooks:

Yeah, I think it goes back to many of the ideas that you've already been talking about, that these artists are being incorporated, at least into the market—I don't know if they're really being incorporated into the art world at all—but that they're being made attractive to the market because of their age and their race, but still not being made a part of our history based on the work itself. It's that we're still dealing with an art market that is looking at exceptions, and thinking about a structure that is based on race and a certain kind of aesthetics that goes with race and ability, instead of still looking—or they're still not looking at the work itself, but instead looking at the artist.

04-01:56:52

Gaines:

Yeah, in fact, museums still don't know what to do with the work of black artists. They don't know how to locate it within the encyclopedic structure of the museum, where to appropriately place that work. That is to say that the idea, it hasn't happened yet that history and criticism have found a way of overcoming the idea of race in the way that they deal with black artists and Latinos, the artists of color and difference, they haven't found a way of dealing with that in relationship to the model of the museum, that there's space

about it, which is based upon a historical model of schools of styles. By virtue of that, the minority artists are starting to have that not fit them quite well, because that museum narrative is completely a Eurocentric way that's based upon schools and styles, and the development of new concepts and ideas, and the place of the artist pivotally as the instigators or playing out a particular movement or particular style. Within this history, you've left out like a quarter of the artists that were producing. So at this point, even though you want to do something about it, as long as you stick with that old model, you're not going to be able to figure it out, and so this gap exists. The only way that—a person who should be writing a critical article about it and not a market-driven article about it, doesn't have a way to address the issue of race and prejudice and racism, with respect to a concept of a work of art. They haven't figured out how to do that, because that's not one of the categories that makes up the encyclopedic narrative of the museum.

04-01:59:30

Tewes:

Do you have an idea of how you break that cycle?

04-01:59:34

Gaines:

How to what?

04-01:59:34

Tewes:

How to break that cycle.

04-01:59:37

Gaines:

Well, I think the model is wrong. I think, like LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] is doing some experimentation by grouping works of art not according to schools of styles and not according to the historical model, and already I've seen people criticizing LACMA and its intention. Now I don't know whether their particular strategy of doing that is right, but that's what you have to do.

One of the reasons why I thought Okwui Enwezor's Biennale was, I feel like, an extraordinarily successful one, is because he came up with a brand new model for acquiring works for the exhibition. It was brand new, but not by accident that the political, the idea of the political is so present in that, because it was an attempt at finding more cultural categories rather than art categories for the selection of work; therefore, it's already operating in a political space. A lot of people had trouble with it, but he did exactly what I think needs to be done. We have to change—we have to unpack the European model of history and think of ways of talking about the relationship of works to each other differently, and for people who are historians, that's a hard thing to do. So they just sit around scratching their head, what to do, what to do?

04-02:01:22

Cooks:

Well, I feel like this is a good place to stop. Are there other things that you want to talk—

04-02:01:28

Gaines:           Nope.

04-02:01:28

Cooks:           —about? [laughs]

04-02:01:30

Tewes:           You've covered everything?

04-02:01:32

Gaines:           {inaudible}. [laughs]

04-02:01:34

Cooks:           Thank you.

04-02:01:34

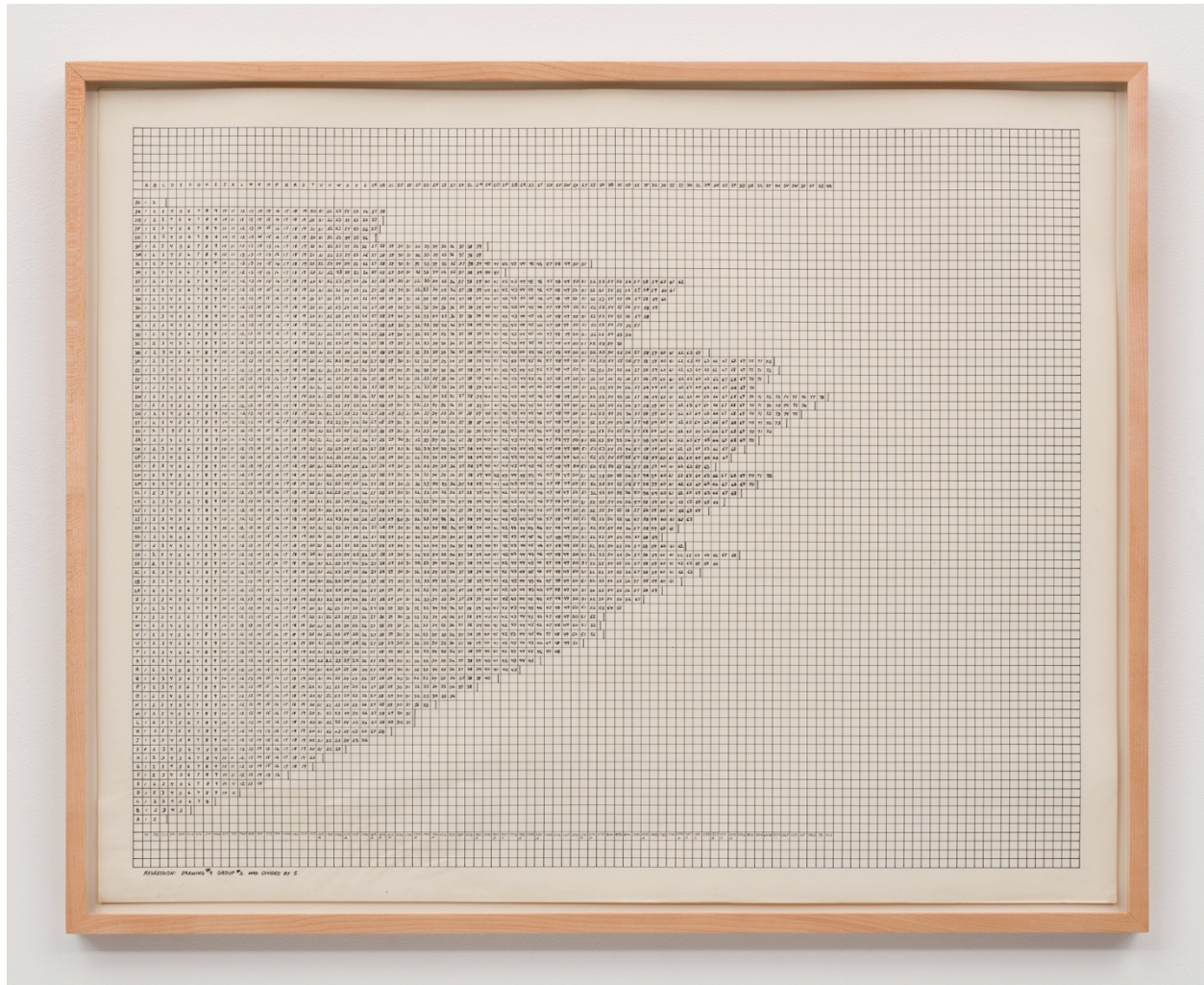
Tewes:           Well, thank you so much.

04-02:01:36

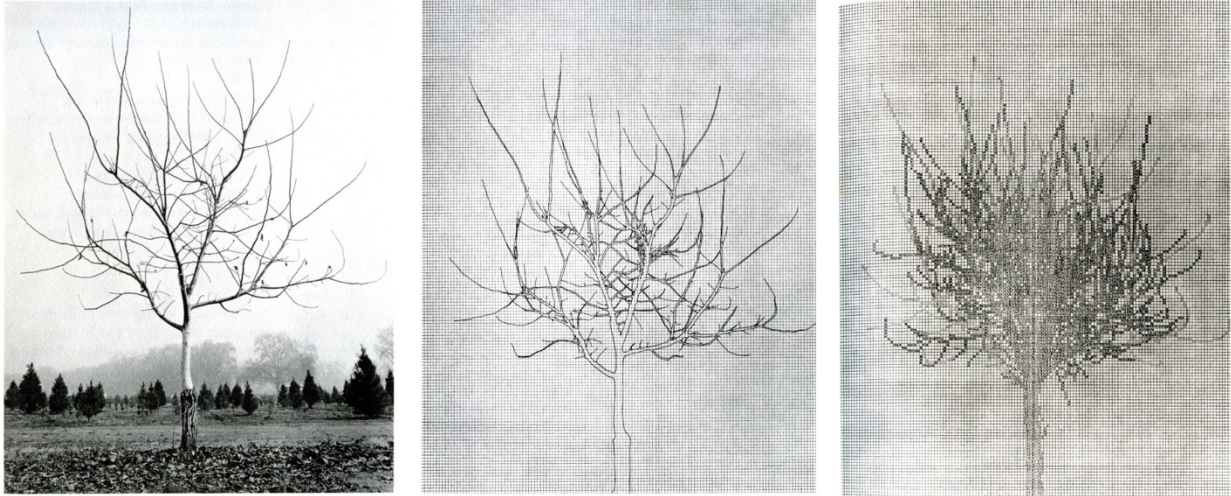
Gaines:           Oh, thank you.

[End of Interview]

Appendix: Images



Charles Gaines, *Regression Drawing #5, Group #2, 1973-74*  
Mechanical ink and pen on paper  
Framed: 24.75 x 30.75 inches (62.87 x 78.11 cm) Paper size: 23 x 29 inches (58.42 x 73.66 cm)  
From *Regressions* series



Charles Gaines, *Walnut Tree Orchard: Set D*, 1975-2014  
Photograph, colored pencil on graph paper 21 5/8 x 17 3/4 inches (54.94 x 45.09 cm)  
Included in *Numerals* at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, 1978





Charles Gaines, *Manifestos 3*, 2018

Single channel video (color, sound), two graphite drawings on paper, monitor, pedestal, two speakers, hanging speaker shelves

MLK: 68.63 x 54.5 x 2 inches / 174.3 x 138.4 x 5.1 cm (framed)

Princes and Powers (After Baldwin): 89.5 x 55.88 x 2 inches / 227.3 x 141.9 x 5.1 cm (framed)

Video total run time: 15 minutes, 53 seconds

Movement 1, MLK: 7 min 24 sec

Movement 2, Princes and Powers (After Baldwin): 8 minutes, 29 seconds



Charles Gaines, *Numbers and Trees: Palm Canyon, Palm Trees Series 2, Tree #4, Kumeyaay*, 2019, Acrylic sheet, acrylic paint, photograph, 2 parts 109 x 56.88 x 5.75 inches (276.86 x 144.48 x 14.61 cm) From *Numbers and Trees: Palm Canyon, Palm Trees Series 2*



Charles Gaines, *Sound Texts 1-4*, 2015

Graphite on printed paper (8), single channel video (4), monitor (4)  
Drawings: 44 x 28 x 1 ½ inches (111.76 x 71.12 x 3.81cm) each (framed)  
Monitors: 44 x 27 ½ x 3 inches (111.76 x 69.85 x 7.62 cm) each  
Each *Sound Text* overall: 44 x 92 inches (111.76 x 233.68 cm)  
Installation view at the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale: *All the World's Futures*



Charles Gaines, *Faces 1: Identity Politics, #12, bell hooks*, 2018  
Acrylic sheet, acrylic paint, lacquer, wood 74 x 60 x 5 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches (188.11 x 150.34 x 14.61 cm)  
From *Faces: Identity Politics*



Charles Gaines, *Faces: Men and Women, Set 4 (Stephen W. Walls)*, 1978  
Photograph, ink on paper  
23 x 57 inches (58.42 x 144.78 cm) framed From *Faces: Men and Women*



Charles Gaines, *Airplanecrashclock*, 1997-2007  
Mixed media 108 x 156 x 60" (274.32 x 396.24 x 152.4 cm) 10 minute loop