

Charles Gaines at Pitzer College, 9-19-12



Charles Gaines, "Explosion # 19", 2007

Graphite on Paper, Diptych

paper 58" x 98", frame 61" x 101", and paper 10" x 12", frame 12 1/2" x 14 1/2", detail

Image from Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

It is easy to attribute an explosion of fury to large events, to the disempowerment of one group of people by another, and to simple economics. But the apparent inevitability of wars and historical events is a construct, people make things happen, specific people.

A large drawing of an explosion accompanies a small text drawing taken from the page of a history book. There are three such groups in Charles Gaines' show at Pitzer College, the works are all similar in size, the rising clouds depicted in them are very much the same from drawing to drawing, with the leftward or rightward direction of the smoke serving to differentiate them. In each text piece is described a pivotal moment in one or another disaster of war – they seem all to be imperialistic in nature. Gaines calls out the individuals and their acts which might, if chosen differently, have led to something other than deadly conflict. Where the drawings don't name names, they describe in matter-of-fact detail such incidents as the brutal Sepoy Mutiny in India, and Britain's much more brutal response, leaving to my imagination the effect on people who were involved, or simply adjacent.

Nothing of my recent understanding is, well, *new*. That Gaines takes his texts from already established historical sources makes me think that I *should* have understood history this way a long time ago. And maybe, intellectually, I did; but seeing the facts as he has drawn them, by hand – the same human tool that used the weapons described in the documents – gives me no choice but to recognize how very human it is to choose to draw, to fight, to understand and to reject.

Charles Gaines' video, *Black Ghost Redux* feels very specific to Los Angeles. A young Asian woman, well-dressed and attractive, interacts with a blues song in two repeated and alternating ways. From the documentation I know this woman to be an artist and colleague or student of Gaines. These facts, along with her chic, minimal attire, place her as one or another kind of elite.

A lot of art has been made since Los Angeles' urban conflicts in 1992, and especially rich have been works that cause us to consider the challenging relations that are typified, or symbolized by LA's Korean immigrant culture and the city's African-American/Black cultures. Both are *other*, both have been differenced by the dominating generically white culture. One has historically been disenfranchised – with occasional slippages to success or power – while the other, more recent immigrants have felt encouraged to struggle and to flourish. That the second group provides the services for, and makes money from the first exacerbated the tension.

Sociologically and historically *Black Ghost Redux* offers much, and I refer you to the exhibition catalogue for a valuable exploration of the piece. In the gallery, in the presence of the video I found the young woman provocative, and her cool demeanor as she smoked a cigaret swayed to the music spoke of sophisticated appreciation, perhaps a bit distanced; she dropped her self-possessed manner in the second iteration of the piece, when she sang a capella – she karaoke'd – the song. Leaning forward into the camera, her voice was plaintive and beseeching. The camera works almost like a fish-eye to exaggerate her features, her voice is deadpan where blues are usually sung in a growl. Nevertheless, strong emotion comes through. I saw the video three weeks ago, and I'm still kind of haunted by it.

Charles Gaines, in the way of art – of ancient gods – speaks through the person of this young woman and he expresses well an undefinable absence that pervades our shared culture.

Note that Charles Gaines will be speaking on Tuesday, October 16 at 2:45 p.m. at George C.S. Benson Auditorium, Pitzer College

<http://www.pitzer.edu/galleries/>



(From Goya's Disasters of War series, image from Veterans News Now, which is linked.)

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