

# REVIEWS

## FEATURED REVIEW

### CHARLES GAINES

POMONA COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART AND PITZER COLLEGE GALLERIES

BY CHRISTOPHER MICHNO

**POSITIONED BETWEEN EVOCATIVE** and elusive, “In the Shadow of Numbers: Charles Gaines, Selected Works from 1975–2012” wends through Gaines’ explorations of language, codes and systems. Jointly exhibited at the Pomona College Museum of Art and the Pitzer College Galleries, this survey offers a view into the tightly-packed and remarkably expansive philosophical inquiry that comprises Gaines’ artistic output.

As much as Gaines has attempted to eliminate subjectivity, his conceptual practice elicits a responsive desire from his audience to create meaning. Pieces like *Randomized Text: History of Stars 6 and 7* (2007) or *Sky Box I* (2011), which juxtapose seemingly unrelated images of text and constellations, invite rumination. In *Randomized Text: History of Stars 6 and 7*, Gaines encrypts two texts through a complex set of functional operations. Resembling a quilt of newly constructed meaning interposed between two distinctly recognizable texts—the Gabriel García Marquez novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, translated from Spanish in the late 1980s, and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* from 1975—the newly continuous text is hand-printed on two tablets, juxtaposed between photographic documents of identifiable constellations in the night sky, and reads in a quirky alternating pattern of narrative/dialogue and political theory. More intriguing than disorienting, Gaines’ shuffling of texts results in a stippling of Marquez’ fictional address of questions of science, progress and love, set within a subtext of socio-economic status amidst Said’s analysis of colonialism.

It is impossible to eliminate these kinds of extra-textual encounters when viewing Gaines’ work, which inevitably brings to mind historical or contemporary developments. In *Sky Box I*—a 7 x 12-foot light box with photos



Charles Gaines, *Sky Box I*, 2011

of text printed on the opaque surface—Gaines quotes Ho Chi Minh quoting the Declaration of Independence of the United States in his Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The work thus expands into broad questions of self-determination, liberty and how human rights are perceived in different places at different times. These questions grow ever more nuanced given the historical scope of *Sky Box I*, which presents texts from four different declarations of human rights spanning three hundred years, opening with a quote from Gerard Winstanley’s 1649 “A Declaration from the Poor Oppressed of England.” As the gallery lights dim according to a preset timer, the texts seem to fade into what appears to be the night sky, as the box emits light through holes cut into the surface in the patterns of constellations. Conversely, as the gallery lights come up, the texts appear as if written in the sky. *Sky Box I* suggests a continuity of ideas concerning social justice

over a short course of history and a common thread in the variety of social conditions that gave rise to these texts.

Gaines’ elucidation of his own work directs attention almost entirely to the logic of systems and the structural considerations of creation, eschewing the notion of expressivity. In his exploration of image and text, Gaines’ ability to withhold judgment in favor of investigation is compelling, yet the subjective responses of the engaged viewer are what animate the images/texts/inquiries.

Within this context, the video *Black Ghost Blues Redux* (2008)—a collaborative project with Korean-born artist Hoyun Son, and the most openly affecting work in the exhibit—explores the same kind of textual displacement and fluidity as *Randomized Text* and *Sky Box I*, while adding a simulacrum of human presence. The video features Son swaying to a recording of the Lightin’ Hopkins song “Black Ghost Blues,” followed by her own acappella rendition. The lyrics reflect on the man-

ner in which African-American men have been depicted in art or popular culture as a threat, and simultaneously refer to cultural “invisibility.” The “ghost” also alludes to tensions between African Americans and Koreans as Son sings “Black Ghost, please stay away from my door.” Though Gaines asserts that his intent is not to create symbolic associations, one might easily do so with *Black Ghost Blues Redux*. The piece seems to correlate with the civil unrest in Los Angeles following the beating of Rodney King and the acquittal of the LAPD officers charged in the incident.

Clearly, throughout the exhibition, Gaines advances his interest in the structure and dynamics of language, or more broadly, ideation and meaning, rather than the specificity of metaphors that individuals may take from his work. Perhaps our desire to create meaning in the absence of conclusive evidence fuels our reiterative reading of Gaines’ compelling body of work. ☐