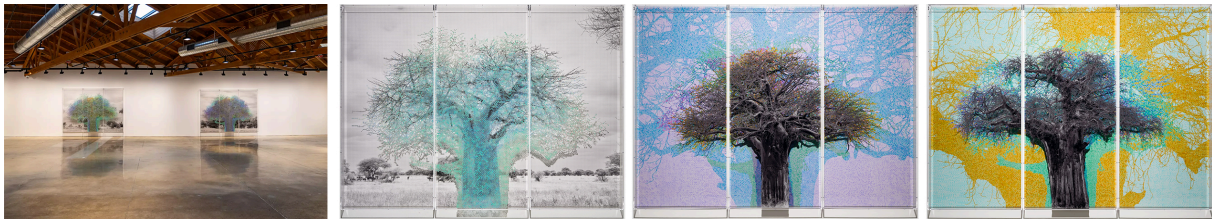


Art Now LA, March 26, 2025

Charles Gaines
Numbers and Trees, The Tanzania Baobabs
Hauser & Wirth West Hollywood
February 19 – May 25, 2025

by Jody Zellen



During a 2023 trip to Tanzania, Charles Gaines made photographs of baobab trees. According to Wikipedia, the trees are “*native to Madagascar, mainland Africa, and Australia and as they help keep soil conditions humid, aid nutrient recycling, and slow soil erosion, they have come to symbolize life in a landscape where little else can thrive.*”

Gaines has been making works that feature numbers and trees since the mid-1970s, and with each new series, his investigations become larger and more complex, as well as more beautiful. Though an ardent conceptualist whose works are based in theory, Gaines is, without a doubt, also a formalist who thrives on making visually dynamic, as well as conceptually savvy pieces. In a statement from the 1970s he states, “*I wish to use art as a tool for investigation. This investigation is focused in part on the relationship of single things with the parts of single things.*” If the single thing here is a tree — the branches and leaves are the parts.

While some of Gaines’ artworks map actual occurrences— the rate of falling leaves or growth patterns— in others he indulges in more subjective categorization. In past works like *Numbers and Trees: Palm Canyon, Palm Trees Series 2, Tree #7, Mission* (2019), he assigned each tree a different color and then superimposed multiple iterations of these trees together to map their physical differences. For *Numbers and Trees, The Tanzania Baobabs*, Gaines similarly assigns each tree a specific color as well as a number sequence, and when these mark-making systems merge — paint, pen and photographic image — viewers are dazzled and puzzled by the complexity of the relationships.

For each of the seven large-scale, three-part works, Gaines starts with a black and white photographic mural depicting a specific baobab tree inset into a five-inch thick, clear acrylic box whose front is completely inscribed by a small grid. Almost every square that corresponds to the image of the tree behind it is assigned a color, as well as given a number. This creates a tinted, numerical veil through which the photograph is seen. From a distance, the grid resembles a wall of colored pixels giving the entire

image a Pointillist aura, but Gaines is hardly an impressionist. Rather, these works are about difference — not just the differences in the selection of trees, but how difference resonates, both metaphorically and symbolically.

In *Numbers and Trees: Tanzania Series 1, Baobab, Tree #2, Zanaki* (2024), the photographic image fills the background. A large tree is centered in the composition and behind it is a tree-filled landscape that recedes into the distance. The squares of the grid inscribed on the acrylic overlay are colored in varying shades of translucent blue as the number sequences extend out from zero at the center and into the hundreds to both the left and right. For *Numbers and Trees: Tanzania Series 1, Baobab, Tree #5, Rangi* (2024), Gaines layers multiple trees in varying hues on the acrylic to create a cacophony of colored squares. In both *Numbers and Trees: Tanzania Series 1, Baobab, Tree #3, Tongwe* (2024) and *Numbers and Trees: Tanzania Series 1, Baobab, Tree #7, Makonde* (2024), the trees are screened onto the top layer of the acrylic while the numbered and colored grids fill the background. In these pieces, the image behind is an enlarged section of the tree, appearing like a partial shadow that glows behind the subject.

Creating another layer through which to view the pieces, each work is named after a tribe or an ethnic group from the area where images were shot. Gaines relates the trees to the people who populate and once populated Tanzania — a country damaged by the slave trade. As Gaines charts difference, he simultaneously inserts history and politics into the images thereby inviting viewers to imagine the relationship between people and data, past and present, computation and abstraction, as well as nature and culture.

<https://artnowla.com/2025/03/26/charles-gaines-numbers-and-trees-the-tanzania-baobabs/>