

Art Now LA, May 21, 2026

Todd Gray: 'Portals'

*Creating Narratives That Weave Through Places and Time*

Perrotin Los Angeles

March 21 – May 30, 2026

by Jody Zellen



In what he refers to as “photo sculptures,” Todd Gray layers numerous images to create narratives that weave through places and time. On view in his exhibition *Portals* are both small-scale studies and large-scale finished works. The differences are curious. The small pieces are intimate and draw viewers in as the imagery can be absorbed as a whole; the layers working together, though in separate found frames. Due to their size, the larger works appear more fragmented, while still cohering to create a narrative.

In a recent conversation with LACMA Director Michael Govan, Gray spoke about visual pleasure and his desire for the images to immediately captivate viewers because of their aesthetic beauty and formal inventiveness. After enticing viewers with his evocative sequences organized by shape and color relationships, he then invites them to delve further — to think about the layering within each assemblage and how the elements work together. He is interested in exploring the relationships between the places depicted (Ghana, Rome, France, as well as the United States), and their history within the Black diaspora.

Analyzing *Paradox of Liberty (Monticello, Elmina, Akwidaa)* (all works 2026) brings to light three separate photographs. In the vertical construction, the image at the bottom looks up at palm trees in Akwidaa, Ghana, where Gray has a home and a studio. Over this picture and encased in an oval frame is a marble bust of Thomas Jefferson photographed by the artist at Monticello. Another smaller oval frame is superimposed atop Jefferson’s face covering it completely. Within this frame is a doorway to a dungeon at the Elmina slave fort in Ghana. Looking carefully at the image, one sees a map of Africa on the wall behind Jefferson’s bust. Gray thoughtfully collages the dungeon door — one of no return — reinforcing the fact that Jefferson owned many slaves who worked his 5,000-acre plantation at Monticello.

In *The Promise (Ghana, Rome, Gorée)*, Gray juxtaposes four photographs. The image on the left shows a park or garden in Ghana and depicts a large, manicured tree whose crown forms the shape of an oval. In the center of the triptych is another image of wall-

paper depicting tree branches and birds perched on an open trellis. It is covered by a small oval frame where Gray captures the backs of three schoolchildren entering an arched passageway. The image was taken on Gorée Island in Senegal, also known as slave island. The image to the right was shot in Rome and depicts the natural landscape. Here the reflection of trees in a pond form an oval that parallels the shapes of the other images.

*Kind of Blue in a Silent Way #1* combines an image of the cosmos from the Hubble Telescope with a painted mural of workers and slaves on view in a museum at Fort Apollonia in Beyin, Ghana. Gray's nude silhouette, positioned as if he is looking at the mural, is set in an oval frame covering portions of both photographs below. This meditative and poetic image poses the question: What if (and how can) I make sense of the world on a celestial level, as well as in a personal way?

A portal is an entrance, a way in, a point of access, as well as more metaphorically, a bridge. As portals, Gray's photographs are fragments that link locations and time spans while offering an approach to understand an aspect of history that relates to what it means to be Black in today's world. Gray's images are personal — for the most part, he uses photographs he has shot, often including portraits of friends and even self portraits. That Gray started his career in the music industry as a commercial photographer is also relevant as pictures of Michael Jackson (Gray was his personal photographer for ten years) sometimes appear in the works. Black and white images depicting Crips' hand signs from Jackson's *Beat It* video appear within the cut-out circles of *Ghost In The Machine (Fever Dreaming Fear)* and juxtaposed with a distorted landscape — a digital glitch that Gray embraced rather than dismissed.

Gray's exhibition at Perrotin overlaps with the debut of a major commission for LACMA. *Octavia's Gaze* is a giant multi-panel work that explores enslavement and colonialism while bringing together many of Gray's interests. Despite the weighty subject matter, his pieces are intriguing and subtle. While his works link past and present and offer insight into that trajectory, the visual is always foregrounded and is the point of departure for his complex layering.

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