

## Charles Gaines at Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles

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Charles Gaines is interested in where art and politics collide. His work is simultaneously an aesthetic and cultural/socio-political exploration. Associated with artists making conceptual and system-based works in the 1970s Gaines has continued along that path-looking at how following specific parameters can construct a work of art-yet has deepened the scope of his inquiry and in his most recent works includes texts by Bataille and other cultural/political theorists as the source material for his manipulations.

Gaines has long been involved with the process of selecting, arranging and representing existing texts and images to create new meaning and to direct a politicized reading of his artwork. While well known for his serial works on paper, he has also created evocative sculptures that surprise the viewer with the aggressive nature of their machinations. Before 9/11, Gaines created *Airplanecrash Clock* (1997), a thirteen-foot long tabletop sculpture that resembles New York City, fashioned from models of famous buildings. A motorized airplane floating above the cityscape begins to dive, and just before it crashes to the ground a trap-door opens up and swallows the airplane. The sequence takes about seven minutes and then begins again. It's a chilling work that incorporates audio as well as visual elements that speak to one's worst fears-fears that became a reality. Another dynamic work from 2000, *Falling Rock*, also confronts the viewer in an unconventional way. In this piece, a large rock is held by a rope in a glass case. Every ten minutes the rock falls but stops just above a piece of glass that serves as a barrier at the bottom of the sculpture. It's a charged work full of anticipation, daring the viewer to consider what would happen if the rock hit the glass. And then it does. While programmed to stop above the barrier most of the time, the rock is allowed to crash into it twice a day.

Explosions and disasters have served as the subject of many of Gaines photo/text works. He has explained that disaster narratives are "exaggerated examples of metonymy where the sentiments that are produced are not the result of realistic identification with the experience but are instead the results of a floating feeling that happens when one cognitively encounters unrealized anticipations of unimaginable consequences."

Gaines is especially articulate about what goes on and into his work, and the particulars of the theoretical and aesthetic cues that inspire him. While delving into a work's critical and philosophical sources gives viewers a deeper understanding and provides intellectual stimulation, the pieces can also be appreciated or marveled at for their formal qualities. If Gaines wanted to deny visual pleasure he would not make such compelling and well crafted pieces.

Gaines once remarked, "I work best when I remove my will from the process of making art." To that end he began to engage with specific systems which he now calls rules for creating his works. He continued, "I wish to use art as a tool for investigation." This investigation began by examining the relationship of the part to the whole and the logic of natural systems. In the mid 1970s, he plotted the rate that a tree lost its leaves, presenting the natural process through a series of photographic images and graph paper drawings that mapped the location of the fallen leaves. His work has used nature as well as the motion of the human body (*Trisha Brown Dance* (1980-81)) as its starting point.

In his most recent work Gaines begins with Georges Bataille. Using the writer's seminal works "Eroticism" and "General Economy" as sources, Gaines has devised specific rules by which he rewrites Bataille, enlarging the new sequence of words to fill large sheets of drawing paper. To those who are not intimate with Bataille's writings, the language in Gaines's drawing could be mistaken for the artist's own words as his interventions are subtle. His rules are specific yet allow for maximum clarity.

For example:

A. Rules for the formation of sentences

- 1) Select a page of text.
- 2) Select the first word from the first paragraph and write it down.
- 3) Go to the next sentence in the same paragraph and select any word that fits grammatically with the preceding selected word. Write it down.
- 4) Repeat the process until you form a sentence. Each selected word must help in the formation of a complete thought.
- 5) When a sentence is formed start the process again. To do this, select the first word in the next sentence and write it down.
- 6) Then select any word in the next sentence that fits the selected word grammatically and write it down.
- 7) Repeat this process until all the first words of all the sentences have been selected. You will wind up with a list of sentences. During the process, once a word is selected, you cannot use it again.

In *String Theory: ReWriting Bataille #8* (2011) the text reads in part: "Pleasure is death in excess. For joy, slyly, sequesters the dreadful scenes of doom. And pleasure explodes the voluptuous presence of love [...] Hell requires our courage to leap from truth. But the edge is set to fear only leaping mystics." The 50 x 74 inch work looks like an enlarged paragraph where each word has been outlined in red and filled in with graphite. The words, in a serif typeface, are overlaid on an abstracted ground that resembles an explosion. The drawing is ambiguous yet purposeful. It is the essence of text-based work, a handmade reproduction of a mechanically reproduced object that has been rearranged. While referencing the original it becomes a kind of poetry. Gaines is using appropriationist strategies filtered through a conceptual rubric. His works are dense and deep and while not appealing to all, the presentation and reading of the language is undeniably beautiful.

While framed works on paper coupled with texts is what Gaines is best known for, he is not married to a single medium. He makes sculptures, photographs and drawings in addition to using video and sound, molding whatever the medium to fit his message. The centerpiece for his current installation is *SkyBox* (2011) a work that is simultaneously a light box and a text display. The three-panel piece continually cycles from dark to light. When the lights are on the words are readable. Gaines presents excerpts from texts about social justice by Gerard Winstanley (1649), Leopold Sedar Senghor (1970), Frantz Fanon (1961) and Ho Chi Minh (1945). As the text fades the room goes dark and the night sky appears. Cut into the surface of the light box are small holes that reference the constellations from the dates of the written texts. Gaines allows the separate constellations in the night sky to merge under the texts and while the cycle from light to dark allows for time to read some of the words one has to experience the work in fragments.

Gaines continues to make works that perplex and challenge his viewers. While there is often something entertaining that draws the viewer in, these devices are always a means to an end. Gaines has stated, "I want to make the argument that art is completely absorbed within politics, and that art has an ethical and moral responsibility." While it may appear that Gaines allows chance to enter into his work, it is a controlled chance, one that follows precise rules that leads to the place where art and politics meet and reinforce each other.

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