

Artforum

Berardini, Andrew: Review: Charles Gaines at Hammer Museum

22 February 2015



Charles Gaines, *Numbers and Trees II, Spike #4*, 1987, watercolor, ink and pencil on masonite and acrylic sheet. 48 × 39 1/2".

LOS ANGELES

Charles Gaines

HAMMER MUSEUM

10899 Wilshire Boulevard

March 3 - May 24

In his early work, Charles Gaines pursued a cool hunt for the unknown at the far end of the hyperrational. Sol LeWitt claimed that Conceptual artists were mystics rather rationalists, but his branch of the movement certainly employed the most rational means possible to reach their spiritual ends. With correspondence between Gaines and LeWitt on view in this early-career survey, “Gridwork 1974–1989,” the elder artist’s gnomic utterances function almost as geometric postulates, but Gaines takes that Conceptualist affection for algorithmic indices to their logical conclusion and beyond.

Staring down a grove of trees, Gaines carefully breaks them into constituent parts and grids them by color (in *Falling Leaves #10*, 1978) to gridded Plexiglas overlays transforming black-and-white deadpan snapshots into richly hued brocades (*Numbers and Trees V, Landscape #8: Orange Crow*, 1989). His arbitrary but exhaustive systems, with their dependence on precise handwork and no discernable utility, can only mean the exercise is done for some other purpose. Seurat becomes a weird reference and not just in their procedural deployment of color, but also because the Impressionist obsessed over his own system, finding through science a rigid hypothesis for pictorial

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and emotional harmony (though Gaines clearly favors the joy of the process).

After 1989, issues of race, class, and power began to define Gaines's material. Instead of trees or the lyric whirl of Trisha Brown dancing ("Motion: Trisha Brown Dance," 1980–81), Edward Said and Frantz Fanon began to cameo in more explicitly political work. With a restrained quietude, Gaines' early examinations into structures that underlie perception began to hint at other systems, those crafted by human's and marked by their inequalities, and which also truly shape the way we see.

— Andrew Berardini