

The Financial Times

Charles Gaines: Peeling back the layers

21. Januar 2021

Visual Arts

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The artist's conceptual leanings often put him at odds with identity politics — but the world is finally catching up

Jonathan Griffin YESTERDAY

When Charles Gaines was in elementary school in Newark, New Jersey, in the 1950s, he showed an aptitude for drawing. His well-meaning teacher suggested to his mother that perhaps he should be an artist. He could be the first black artist in the history of the world, she said.

Gaines lets out a yelp of laughter when he relates this story, speaking to me by Zoom from his studio in Los Angeles. It's outrageous, he says. The teacher was genuinely unaware of any history or tradition of art-making among black people, not just in the US but worldwide. "Africa was just Joseph Conrad, the way people understood it," Gaines says.

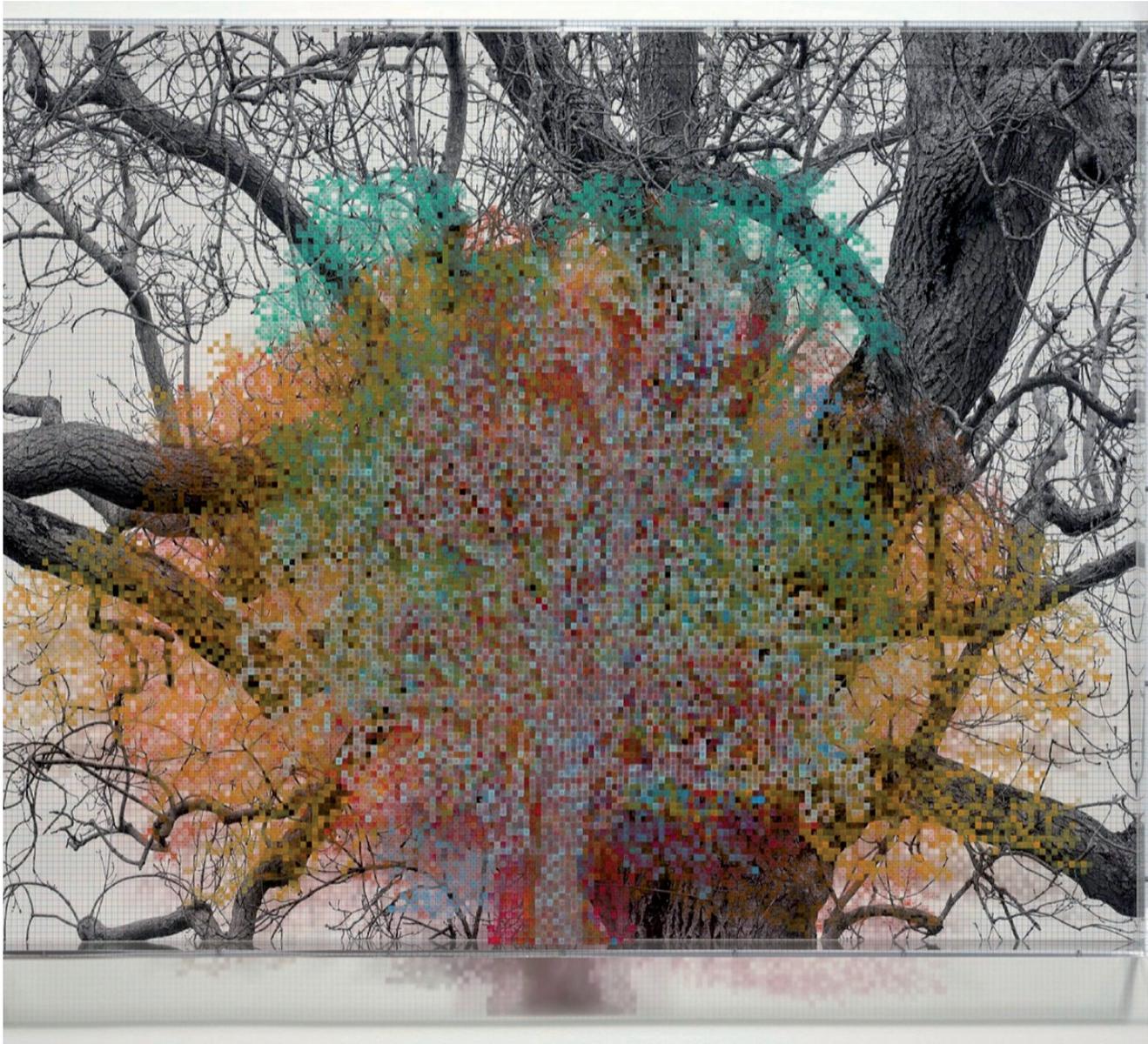
One of the joys was the fact that I could experience things that I couldn't predict, that I couldn't anticipate

Such ignorance, today, beggars belief. But vestiges of it persist, unconscious and generally unchallenged, and are responsible in part for the art world's slowness to fully acknowledge Gaines's contribution and achievements.

Two decades later, Gaines was making a living as an artist and professor, even in what he calls "an extraordinarily racist art world". In 1975, he was included in the prestigious Whitney Biennial; three years on, he began showing with Leo Castelli, in New York. Nevertheless, to his frustration, he found his work was rarely written about critically, nor was it included in exhibitions in African-American institutions.

"Why do you make white art?" was a question Gaines was sometimes asked, to his bewilderment. "I couldn't give an answer!" he says.

His work belongs to a branch of conceptual art specifically concerned with processes and systems. The aim was to remove subjectivity from art by following self-determined rules and procedures. His breakthrough came in 1973, with his "Regression" series, in which he wrote sequential numbers in the squares of a hand-drawn grid to generate an amorphous form that grows from drawing to drawing, each generating the next. "It looks complicated, but it really isn't," Gaines assures me. "One of the joys was the fact that I could experience things that I couldn't predict, that I couldn't anticipate."

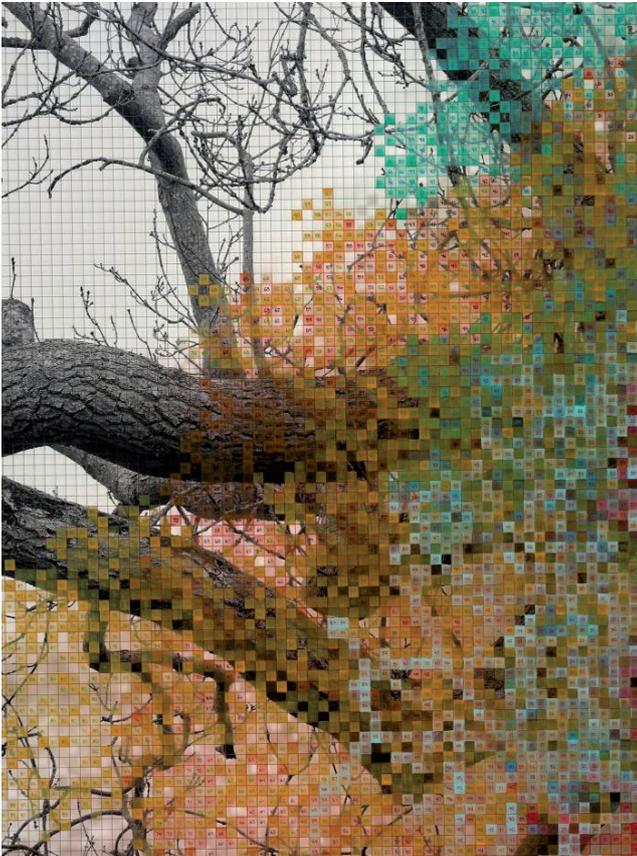


aines' 'Numbers and Trees: London Series 1, Tree #6, Fetter Lane' (2020) © Charles Gaines, courtesy Hauser & Wirth

There were other, less joyful, things Gaines didn't anticipate. In the 1970s, the thriving black art scene in the US was connected especially to the Black Arts Movement, which held that art should represent the lived experience of its maker; Gaines was making art that appeared abstract, impersonal and systematic.

"My big challenge was, how do I explain this to people? How do I say that drawing 450 million numbers is really my expression of racial identity?" Gaines says, with a laugh. "But the world came around to the way I saw it. I ultimately didn't have to convince anybody of anything."

In recent years, things have been changing. In 2018, he began exhibiting with the international gallery Hauser & Wirth: his exhibition *Multiples of Nature, Trees and Faces*, opening in London on January 29 (online only until current restrictions are eased), will be the 76-year-old artist's first solo show in the UK.



Charles Gaines' 'Numbers and Trees' series will be on show — online at first — at Hauser & Wirth from January 29

At Dia:Beacon, New York, a long-term display of Gaines' work, including early pieces from the museum's collection, will open on February 12, while at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in California, an exhibition of new work is scheduled to open on February 27.

Eventually Gaines arrived at an answer to those questioning the role of identity in his work. "Now I think that anybody who makes art is participating in a reflection of their lived experience. Anybody. But it's a question that white artists aren't asked."

The assumption, Gaines came to realise, was that white western art tapped into a universality that was unavailable to other cultures. Modernism, as he sees it, was simply the most recent manifestation of a whole history of white cultural production that stretched back to the Enlightenment, which, thanks to philosophers such as Hegel and Kant, saw itself as demonstrably superior to the so-called "primitive" art and culture of non-white peoples. The Enlightenment, Gaines believes, "is totally responsible for the invention of racism".



aines uses an overlaying technique in his Los Angeles studio © Fredrik Nilsen

Gaines was born in the Jim Crow South, moving from Charleston, South Carolina, to New Jersey at the age of five. He attributes his intellectual curiosity to that highly politicised environment. “As a child, I was very interested in these questions, ontological questions, and would ask why things are this way and why things are that way,” he says. “The most fundamental question, of course, is why are white people white and black people black? And why are white people treated better than black people?”

In college, Gaines became interested in the work of composer John Cage, who led him to eastern spiritual and artistic practices, including Tantric art. There were other long-established practices by which the experience of artistic beauty could be created without relying on the maker’s subjectivity.

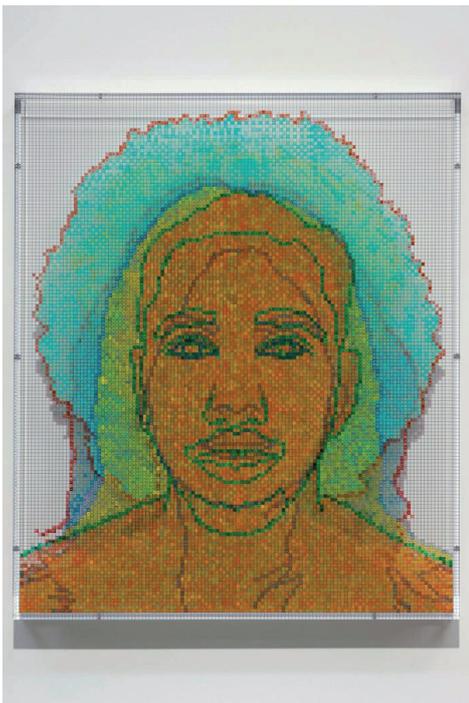
Other conceptual artists were suspicious of beauty, which they considered the enemy of rational thought and pure ideas. “Fortunately, I escaped that trap quite early,” Gaines says. Beauty — “an ideological construct that has been used by western art in various ways to justify certain practices”, as he puts it — was the central object of his critique. “It doesn’t take away my ability to enjoy it,” he adds. “I just don’t think it’s a product of the creative imagination.”



'Numbers and Faces: Multi-Racial/Ethnic Combinations Series 1: Face #11, Martina Crouch (Nigerian Igbo Tribe/White)' (2020) © Charles Gaines

In the mid-1970s, Gaines was driving in California's agricultural Central Valley when he passed an orchard of walnut trees. He noticed that their criss-crossing branches formed a kind of organic grid, and that the orchard itself was a gridded system. Soon after, he made the 26-part series "Walnut Tree Orchard" (1975), the first in a body of work depicting trees that continues today.

For his London exhibition, Gaines has made "Numbers and Trees: London Series 1". He photographed entire trees and transcribed them using coloured acrylic paint on to a grid. As the series progresses, each tree is overlaid, on Plexiglas, on to the one before; a close-up photograph of a different tree is fixed beneath. These new pieces, like the trees they depict, are majestically large.



Gaines' layering technique is also used to explore ...

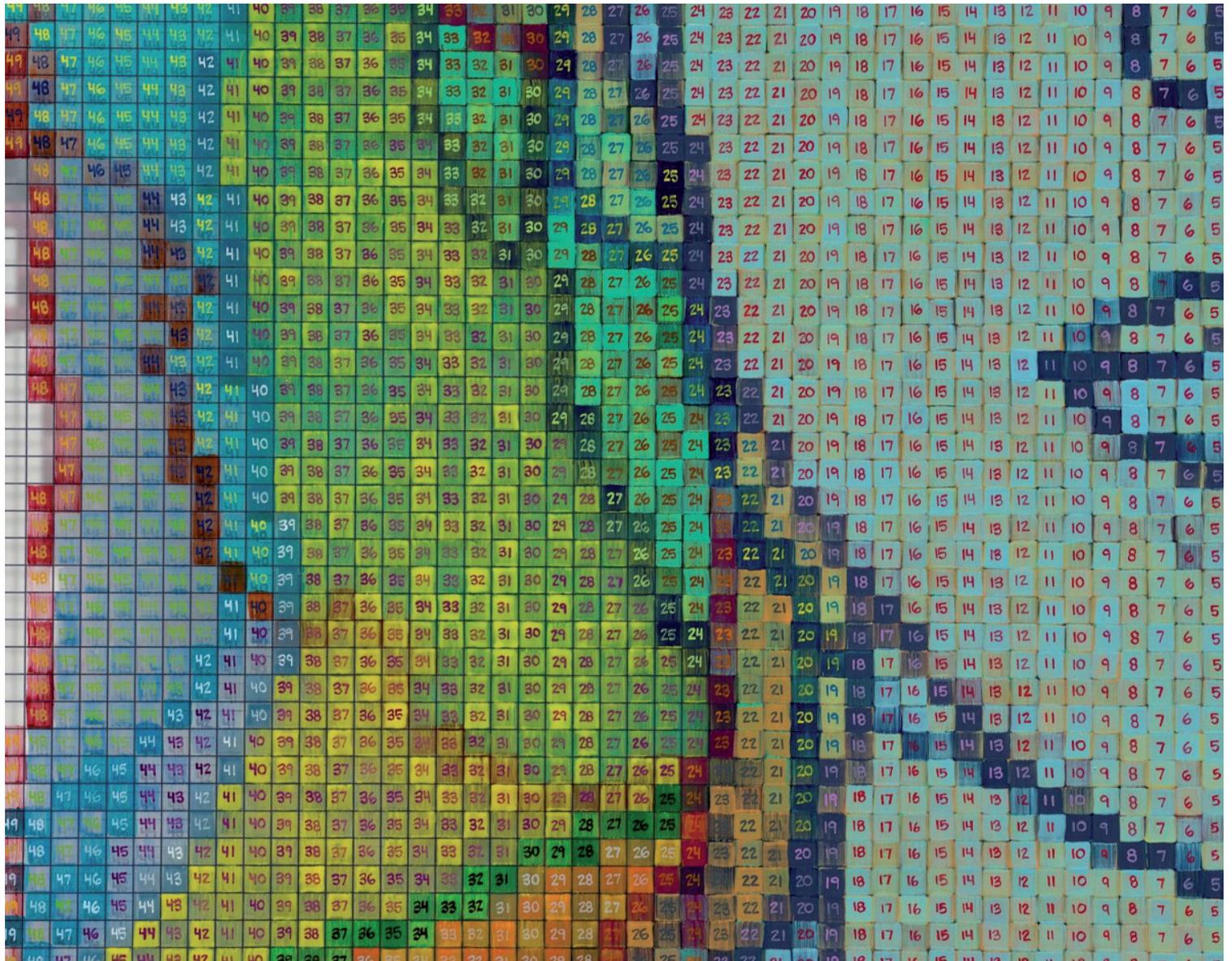


... levels of genetics and ethnicity © Charles Gaines

A parallel series, "Numbers and Faces: Multi-Racial/Ethnic Combinations Series 1", conducts a similar procedure using photographs of people. Gaines first made a work featuring faces in 1978; early on, his investigations into beauty, semiotics and arbitrary systems applied equally to genetics and ethnicity too.

Since 1989, Gaines has been on the faculty of the California Institute of the Arts. Some of Los Angeles' most celebrated artists — including Mark Bradford, Henry Taylor and Laura Owens — have benefited from his theoretically rigorous seminars. After such a long career shaping the artists of the future, how does he feel, I wonder, about the contemporary art of today, with its emphasis on identity politics and subjective representation?

Good, he says. The art world today is much more diverse, both racially and in terms of aesthetic possibilities. The debates going on are “very healthy, and infinitely more interesting than the kinds of debates that were going on in the ’70s, which were very narrowly prescribed. I feel quite happy about that.”



Numbers and Faces: Multi-Racial/Ethnic Combinations Series 1: Face #11, Martina Crouch (Nigerian Igbo Tribe/White) (2020)

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