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Dawson, Jessica: Review: Charles Gaines at Studio Museum Harlem

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Getting Charles Gaines on the Grid

Artist's Retrospective Opens at the Studio Museum in Harlem



'Numbers and Trees,' on display at the Studio Museum in Harlem as part of a retrospective of the art of Charles Gaines. ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Jessica Dawson

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Charles Gaines was postblack before the term "postblack" even existed. And that was exactly the problem.

In the 1970s and '80s, the Los Angeles-based artist created stark, grid-based work that defied expectations of what African-American art should look like. Though he was embraced by the largely white mainstream art world—he showed at the influential dealer Leo Castelli's gallery, was included in the 1975 Whitney Biennial and befriended the conceptual artist Sol LeWitt—his work went largely unremarked upon by scholars and critics, black or white.

Now the Studio Museum in Harlem is shedding light on those early years with "Charles Gaines: Gridwork 1974-1989," a retrospective of the artist's least understood work, opening Thursday. The 70-year-old's photography- and drawing-based art finally will hang on the walls of an institution he has longed to show in.



Charles Gaines's 'Faces,' 1978-79 ROBERT WEDEMEYER

"Even Charles jokes, 'Why didn't the Studio Museum show me back then?'," said Naima J. Keith, an assistant curator at the Studio Museum and the exhibition organizer.

"Given the fact that he was shown in a Whitney Biennial and at major galleries, maybe the museum didn't feel it was as critical for him to get a show here. It wasn't as dire as others who were not getting attention at all."

The exhibition includes the work Mr. Gaines made during his many years living and teaching in Mississippi and Fresno, Calif., far from the New York art scene (though he did spend a few years here).

In his 1975 series "Walnut Tree Orchard," he plots images of a series of trees on sheets of paper that he has drawn grids on, eventually overlaying one atop another. In another series, "Faces," he applies a similar strategy to photographs of friends, students and fellow artists of all races.

It wasn't until he moved to Los Angeles in 1989 to join the California Institute of the Arts faculty that he gained the traction that he enjoys today.

"At the time, there was a real interest in discernibly black art," Mr. Gaines recalled of the 1970s. "Art that's associated with some idea of black culture or black community. Since my work was conceptually based, perhaps that made my work less interesting to the curators."

Born in Charleston, S.C., Mr. Gaines was raised in Newark, N.J., and attended Arts High School. He received a master of fine arts degree from the Rochester Institute of Technology, after which he began making work influenced by conceptual and modernist theories.

Yet by the mid-1970s, when he produced his first mature works, curators and critics believed they'd reached the limits of conceptual art.

"He came right at the end of substantial conversations about conceptualism," Ms. Keith

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Conceptual artist Charles Gaines is pictured on July 11 at the installation of his solo exhibit at The Studio Museum in Harlem. ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

said. "While he was championed by well-known galleries, people just didn't know how to situate the work."

While the mainstream art world looked elsewhere, the black community worried that Mr. Gaines's work, which didn't explicitly delve into race relations or African-American identity, didn't reflect the black experience. Some of his fellow artists—even ones doing expressionism, a mode established in early 20th-century Europe—accused him of making "white art."

"If you are making work that emphasizes a gestural language," Mr. Gaines would tell his naysayers, "you're making white art, too."



Assistant Curator Naima J. Keith and Mr. Gaines preview his work being installed for his solo exhibit on July 11. ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL