

# KEN GONZALES-DAY AND EDGAR ARCENAUX

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**EDGAR:** This seems like a side question, someone told me that you changed your name. That you added Gonzales to your name?

**KEN:** Actually it was the other way around, I was Ken Gonzales and then I added the Day. But originally, when I was in grad school getting my masters in Art History, I used "Ken Day" as sort of my pen name for my writing because I sort of kept it separate from my art making, then I eventually realized I had to bring the two together.

**EDGAR:** I was thinking about it, Ken Day? Nobody would ever guess you were Latino. You sound like you're Barbie's boyfriend or something like that. I was just curious about the desire to add that back on again, like whenever anybody changes their name, it usually sort of marks a transition in somebody's life.

**KEN:** Absolutely. *[Looking at Ken's work.]*

**EDGAR:** These are all postcards?

**KEN:** Originally, the majority of lynching images were postcards or a great many were produced as postcards. That was part of the reason for photographing them, so they could be sold. So these are all appropriated images in which the body and the rope have been digitally erased.

**EDGAR:** And you use Photoshop.

**KEN:** Classic Photoshop 101.

**EDGAR:** What do you have to do to erase it? Is it like a replacement tool? How do you make it so that it's seamless? You take in a piece of background from someplace else and add it in on top of it? Is it like a digital layer that hides it underneath?

**KEN:** Basically, depending on the image, there's a number of different techniques one uses obviously to mask or hide [the erased body]. The main idea, of course, is to make the erasure visible and to let that speak for itself.

**EDGAR:** How is the erasure visible?

**KEN:** Because the body is missing. It's a metaphor. So, it's a metaphor that speaks back to the missing history of lynching in California.

**EDGAR:** No, no, I get that part, but, when you say the body is missing, how do you know it was supposed to be there?

**KEN:** Well, you know from the series title, it's called the "Erased Lynching" series, I think many people are familiar with lynching images, there's certainly been a lot of exposure to them in recent years, and I felt that displaying lynched bodies was not something I wanted to create as a practice.

**EDGAR:** Yeah. I guess I'll be more pointed about the question, and maybe it's an oxymoron to say, well is absence really visible? Somehow, that absence has to be manifested by something. Like the way in which memory functions is that it's pointed to, so how is it pointed to? Is it pointed to because of a charged atmosphere? Is it pointed to because it's written and then you read it? Those are two different kinds of processes of recognizing something.

**KEN:** I think it works as both. Obviously, the series has a title so most people will realize that. One can't help but acknowledge that language will be read. The other is that the images themselves, obviously, have traces or clues. In this particular one, you can see there's a piece of clothing that's left in the foreground, which has fallen off the body and the sights, of course, are still there. I think when they've been exhibited, it seems that people are very, very conscious of what's missing and they spend a long time looking at the images, looking for clues or traces to the event. Obviously this has to do with the indexicality of the photographic image as well.

**EDGAR:** Yeah, yeah. I remember when I first started making video, I knew that I could rely on the sort of back and forth between the two, between the body there and the body not there.

**KEN:** For those that are reading, of course, Edgar is looking at images of the race lynching Santa Rosa 1920.

**EDGAR:** Because you could rely on some sort of inherited, will emerge sort of sense of television timing, like if the black between an episode to a commercial is one second

too long, we'll know that something's not functioning properly. The indexical part of the photograph I can definitely understand, because it's something that you're conditioned to recognize. There are certain qualities that a photograph is supposed to possess.

**KEN:** That may be a good way to segue into your work specifically. How did you think about that absence or that space or that inner relationship between the two? It seems indexical as well: one is pulling back to the other.

**EDGAR:** When I first approached it, it was meant to be really just an exercise in logic, which was just simply two things starting off at the same point, see how they move away from each other. But then that there's something tangible which is produced by first them seeming similar, then being different, then something that then emerges through the interplay of these two parts. It's like a sub-rhythm that is produced by the interlacing of two different beats, so something emerges through the overlap of those beats. But that is something that is meant to produce the experience of watching, something that is manifested in the imagination rather than me pointing out clearly what the similarities and differences are. At first when I looked at it, my original intention was to do a tri-part type thing: literally three different parts. One would be Charles [Gaines] playing the piano, one would be Norb [?] playing the piano and one would be just a shot of the piano by itself. If you remember, you saw that in the third channel. But as I started to look at it, and before I made any choices about what I was going to do with the work, I looked at it for about a year. My original intention was to do this sort of three layers of the same experience in that they would be a visual meshing. I said to myself, and I'm sort of doing this with my hands right now, what if I situated one screen in front of the other, so that you could see one performance and then through that screen you could see the second performance, and then through that middle screen you'd be able to see a third performance. So I tried to figure out a way of making these three parts spatially to result in a synthesis. That synthesis is meant to be echoed through the consonance and the dissonance of the music, because at certain points they're playing the same parts and at other parts they're sort of clashing with each other so as to produce a certain level of noise. I realized that trying to do this was an unnecessary manipulation. The concept could be expressed by the harmony of the numbers, if you will.

I'm looking at the race lynching image of the body which is missing and I'm digressing a little bit, but I wanted to just touch on this one point and maybe this is just a

byproduct of how the photographs are shot but, I notice that there's no presence of any shadows. And the shadow is literally a negative space. And this negative space is generally the only way that you can tell that an object is floating off in the horizon, right? It's floating off the ground because of this dark space that it leaves underneath. And in these photographs, I don't know if it's something that you erased or something that just wasn't there in the first place. That is something that is produced almost in the way in which condensation is produced. Condensation is produced by the combination of a cold surface that is met by heat. The combination of fire and a cold surface that seems like a contradiction, but it actually produces water. Water then kind of comes from the air, so it's the culmination of two elements which produces a third thing which is not necessarily a paradox.

**KEN:** I think in these images it's similar in the sense that even though the body isn't present, I think that there is enough historical and cultural baggage so that we all understand photography's relationship to lynching on some level. And the title alone is enough to trigger some references in our own minds, if not of this individual picturing its original form, of other images that we have seen. I found that people do bring those images with them. And they project them, as you say, in the layer on top and through them, and then they began to see the absence not simply as a simple Photoshop trick or something about taking the figure out, because the meaning of the work doesn't derive merely from the process of its making. It's about more than that. And yet, it's a very subtle thing that sort of somehow outside of the frame, somehow just outside of our view. In this case, I try to help the viewer make those connections by using the same size and then actually producing postcards that can be sent out. It literally opens a discursive space for commerce.

**EDGAR:** We're looking at Ken's book of postcards. There are three postcards on the back and the front part is a...

**KEN:** A walking tour of lynch sites for downtown Los Angeles.

**EDGAR:** This is sort of disturbing.

**KEN:** Yeah.

**EDGAR:** There's one part that I haven't heard you talk about yet in these relationships to the photographs. When you talk about the body being made present

through art history, you're saying that is something which is acquired or something which we learn through experience, as opposed to something that we intuit or something that we feel. Like the presence of the body is felt on an emotional level as opposed to an intellectual level. Billie Holiday was saying, these strange fruits, she was commenting on the fact that you feel the spirits of the bodies that are there. It becomes a troublesome thing when you try and attach these photographs to that history of specular photography or how spirits are necessarily going to be captured. I was hoping you could talk about that a little bit because you visited these sites, so that must mean that there is something experiential about it. You haven't talked about the eeriness of the image.

**KEN:** The erased lynchings, of course, are separate from the photographs that are taken by the eight by ten view camera at the actual sites.

**EDGAR:** Say that again.

**KEN:** The appropriated images of the erased lynching series are, of course, different from the photograph series of the actual lynching site or the approximate lynching sites from the large format images. So the journey I did in taking those photographs was to visit as many of the sites as I could. Obviously I was doing that for a number of reasons. One was to see if I could find it, to see if there were still any clues to any of this history. In some cases there were and in some cases there weren't. So whether there was an old jail cell still there as a museum, or whether there was now a 7-Eleven at the site or at the intersection where it should have been was part of the process of experiencing history, of experiencing the racial violence on a personal level. To get back to your question, for me, it was a very important personal journey to go and visit the sites, to stand at the sites and to determine if I was going to photograph the site or not.

**EDGAR:** Do you believe that you're actually capable of experiencing something by actually being at the actual location, like what is the experience you expected and then did you actually get something from going to the actual place?

**KEN:** The answer is, yeah, you can get something from it. Then certainly, it's obviously, the question that you're asking, is about one's personal emotions as opposed to one's artistic practice, necessarily. You're sort of asking for the intimate inside scoop on some level.

**EDGAR:** Part of it, it's like if you go on a tour of let's say the Lorraine Hotel or the motel where Martin Luther King was assassinated. You can go there, but they turned it into a museum, so it's totally loaded with all of the images that acts as a record for that moment. But, it's mediated through the images or reported records which are situated in front of it. But, there's a general kind of feeling that if you go back to a place where something happened, there's some residue that exists that will make you closer to that experience. I guess I'm asking you if you believe that?

**KEN:** I guess I do [laughs].

**EDGAR:** The reason why I ask is because it's completely not theoretical, it's totally human.

**KEN:** Yeah, that's true. I view it as a component in some strange way of writing a history that hasn't been written, at least not precisely in this way. There are many, many books on the history of lynching and I'm sure there are many scholars that would disagree with that statement. But from my perspective, I had not seen a book that really dealt with the individual of cases and with the number of racial groups that were victimized in this history. And I had not seen that fore grounded in many volumes or I'd seen it mentioned but not really given as much significance. So part of it, in being a solitary individual, doing research, doing scholarship and finding that there is no other voice like mine out there. There's no other person I could speak with. There's no other- there's a great disbelief even, that the things I was saying were true. Given my origins as an artist and not as a PhD historian, there's a bit of skepticism already: what is an artist doing messing with this field? All of those things, as well as reading daily, sitting in a dark library looking at microfilm, all by myself, hours on end, months on end, and seeing body after body, hearing about, reading about, these experiences of Mexican Americans who were brutally killed, and to find that there was no other person, no other source for me to go to, to debate, to talk about, to share these experiences. I found myself having to go jump in the car and really it just happened one day, I was looking at the details of the case and I thought, this is enough information, I think I can find this. I hopped in the car and drove for three days and wandered around looking for [the location] using the clues that I had which was not as hard as I expected. In some cases I looked in old maps, there's information that you can date from the period. Sometimes you could look up who owned which house and that kind of thing. So, I could get pretty close and in some cases I could get exactly, to the

same exact tree. But in many cases, it was just approximate and wandering through those hillsides into the beautiful California landscape, I found that allowed me to think about the history in a very different way, opened me up to think about my own practice so that when I was photographing these sites, I didn't really conceive of them as being historical documents, as much as kind of the idea of a performative document. But to prove that I had gone there, that I wasn't making up the story, that I found all these sites. I'd been looking really for over three hundred sites. And that I'm the only person who has done that. The only person that had-

**EDGAR:** Did you feel a sense of moral obligation to give some historical record to these lives?

**KEN:** It's a little Mexican day of the dead...

**EDGAR:** I'm asking the question just because with records that are like these, people can go in two different angles; one of them is totally like, yeah, I'm righting the wrongs of the past, or other people it's a historical record, it's dealing with what can be captured. Then they produce this sort of totalizing narrative. When artists do it, things become complicated because you don't have to follow along the conventions that a traditional historian would have to, because you could move, you could traverse between the purely theoretical to the really absurd, sort of direct and emotional guttural reaction. But people don't really address that because it's a really vulnerable space. Even with me, we all have beliefs that, if we communicated to someone, would be totally fucking absurd. Like, if I said, I believe in ghosts and there's one sitting over there in the corner right now, you'd be like, 'you professing that to me, I can't really roll with you on that, so I can only go to a certain point with you on that.' So, that's why, at least for the sake of this interview, I wanted to hear you talk about those things too, because that's where the trouble for me—whenever I'm reading about stuff, I always want to look for the troublesome parts, the parts that don't really...I guess I can just say it: the humanity of it.

**KEN:** And there's multiple layers of that in the book as well because I don't want to talk a bunch about the book—but just to say that in the introduction I try to lay out relatively straight forward for the reader that they're going to be encountering a number of different experiences, one would be the artist who's going on a certain journey and a series of photographs, one is the historian who is trying to gather some information together, another is the regional

historian, the Mexican American, the art professor, all of the various voices, the California resident, each of these things have a narrative. There's even sections on the, a little section, on the state of the trees and the endangered nature of California native oaks species. So there's all those overlapping problems laid out in the beginning. And then once it enters into the chapters, then I try to wrestle with specific questions. I didn't try to skirt those issues all together but of course I did not spend huge amounts of time on them either.

**EDGAR:** Yeah. There's this idea that I remember I was reading- remember when I said on the phone that I wanted to try and get at the foundations that underlie the decisions that we make in our work. That's sort of the trajectory of my questions to sort of be clear about that. So, I remember I had read a couple of things, one I was reading this book that was called *The Ethics of Memory*, which I don't know if you're familiar with this book or not, basically the author asks if there is an ethic to memories, how we record them, or why? Which I'm not exactly certain what to make of that, but one of the things that he talked about was that in Auschwitz when the Jews were being killed that there was this type of a double murder was what he said. He said that there was a killing of them as a person, their body, they were being murdered, but also there was a destruction of all record of them ever existing at all. So, not only were they killing them, they were also killing their name. So there was a double erasure so that they never even existed on the planet at all. Because anyone who ever knew who they were was also dead and every record of their existence has also been erased. So I was thinking about that, then this idea in chaos theory of how things emerge, like traditional sort of narrative of how things come into being is a cause and effect relationship, this happens to this and that produced this result. But there is this other idea of how things can emerge from the background and come forward and then sort of re-submerge themselves into a background. It's this antithetical to the left or the right sort of a reading, but that something can literally come to the foreground from the background and then sort of fade back in again.

I'm taking all of that and then wanting to ask you about how you imagine the process by which you actually erase the bodies. Do you consider it to be an erasure in the sense of like the analogy of erasing something from a piece of paper, you rub something across until it [disappears] or do you consider it to be more like a mask, like it's still there, it's just covered up, or do consider that you're sort of pushing it into the background, that it's still

there but you just can't see it because your perspective has been altered in relationship to it? How did you think about this [absence]?

**KEN:** I guess I would say I thought of it as being that they're still there but you just can't see them.

**EDGAR:** Do you think of it as a masking? Or would you not even use that kind of language?

**KEN:** I wouldn't use that kind of language because in the process of removing the bodies, there's a lot of manipulation that has to happen to make it work so that it looks like the bodies were never there. Obviously pieces of the world underneath that area are missing.

**EDGAR:** What tool—maybe this is getting mundane, I don't know if anybody wants to think about this but, to me, there's a difference between using the cloning tool and then cropping something, copying it, and then laying it on top or something. I'm assuming you used a myriad of processes.

**KEN:** That's right.

**EDGAR:** Let's say, for example, how would you remove the rope from being wrapped around a tree? What was that activity?

**KEN:** It really depends on the image because some images I have to literally recreate tree bark. Sometimes I can clone, sometimes I have to create from scratch because of the shadows or there's nowhere for me to clone so it's not simply one process. Nor should each process be reduced down to a metaphor of some kind. I feel like you're sort of moving in that direction.

**EDGAR:** Yeah, I am.

**KEN:** The technology is there, it's a tool for us. Our ideologies are not embedded within the particular tools that were assembled by Photoshop designers in and of themselves. I think to try and take it back to your own work, thinking about the way that you [choose] what you leave in and what you exclude. You said, for example, the edits are mostly only done in camera with a few exceptions. That sets up a certain kind of process for you, which alters the distance or alters the relationship between the two. Do you see that as being an ethically neutral stance, or do you feel that you've set up a system and once you set up a system, you have no choice but to follow it to its end?

**EDGAR:** Yeah, let me tell it like an anecdote and then I'll talk about how I see certain things which I consider to be expressive, just the byproduct of choices as opposed to a desire to produce, let's say, a certain type of emotional state. This astronomer by the name of [Jules Henri] Poincaré, he had this idea called the shrink-shrink rule. The shrink-shrink rule was based on the fact that he was observing planets, like moons that were rotating around stars. He knew that he could rely upon Newtonian law because Newtonian law is deterministic, right? If you know the size, the rate of speed, and its distance, you can basically figure out a regular interval in which the thing moves. But one of the things that he noticed was that when you have more than three moons, there's something irregular that happens in the orbit of the stars. He knew that one of the problems that he had was that his tools were limited because he was literally thousands and thousands of miles away from the thing that he was observing. So he had this principle called the shrink-shrink rule that, if he could get closer to it some way, if he had a measuring device that was twenty times more powerful than the one that he had, or thirty times more powerful, that he could get to a point where he could remove all of what appeared to be random. What he discovered was that, no matter what device you use, it'll be a yard stick to a computer that can do calculations. There's always some finite limit that exists. And that finite limit is the thing which determines randomness because there will always be something that resides outside of your ability to measure it. And that thing that resides outside of your ability to measure it is, what I guess you could call, "randomness" or "uncertainty." Uncertainty and randomness for me has some visual feel, at least within my own work. It becomes the part where you can... I call it "expression." Charles [Gaines] and I had debated about this. He doesn't call that expression, but that's what I call expression. Both of us being conceptualists, we try to figure out a way of making work that's not being determined by the producing of a certain kind of effect. To add to that effect, what he calls an "effect" and what I call "emotion" or "expression," will always exist because it resides outside the bounds of our system. That's sort of where disorder and all these other things sort of happen. I heavily rely upon them like with any system of measure that I try to work with. That's part of the reason I was asking you about the direct encounter with science, because there's always something that will reside outside your ability to know it. Let's [pause], because I want to show you one other project. This project that I've been working on for the last eight or nine years is called *Drawings of Removal*. Have

you seen this? It was at the Hammer Museum in '03, '04.... The catalyst for the project was me going back to my dad's hometown in Beaumont and Galveston, Texas, because he hadn't been back there for like forty years, so he wanted me to go back there with him to show me his past. One of the things I realized when we were going back there, just like the experience that you had when you were looking for the trees, is that a vast majority of the things that he was looking for were no longer there. One of the things that I recognized was that not only had the physical site itself changed—literally there were new streets that hadn't been there before—but with time and with my father's age, his memories had also changed in a very similar way. So there was this sort of amorphous [thing] between his recollections of the place and then the place itself. I became interested in that space between those two places, I guess you could call it the *sublime*, like the gap between the way in which he remembered and the way in which it is now.

What I did in the installation was that I took the physical sites that we visited and the house that he grew up in for the first half of his life. [When we visited] all that remained was a grassy tree stump and a field, a grassy field and a tree stump was all that was there when he took me back to see the house. Another site that we visited was the cemetery where my great-grandmother was buried, the woman who raised him for the majority of his life. The only thing that he could remember, that he could recall to locate the grave, was that there were cars passing by on the road so he could remember that the grave was located somewhere near the road. We all sort of spread out and we were looking for the grave and we could never find it. It was one of the picturesque cemeteries because it was like—it was in the South, summertime, it had just finished raining, it had just dumped down like buckets of rain. The cemetery itself was completely overgrown. There was grass growing over the tombstones, like the roots on the trees were knocking over the tombstones. Mosquitoes were completely flying around, eating us alive and the birds were chirping and there were crickets. It was completely bubbling with life. He could not find it based upon the things that he was recalling.

I started to think of that as this central kind of a metaphor because after we went and visited the oil refinery, a Texaco oil refinery, which is the backbone of the Galveston economy, I started to see a relationship between the cemetery and the oil refinery: that they're both these bodies which are buried underground sort of operating as fuel, all that lush life which is occupying the cemetery itself. But I started to think about the trees: what if these trees that seemed to be like a hundred or two hundred years old, had stressed themselves out?

What if the roots had stressed themselves out and had wrapped themselves around all the bodies and produced this underground system of relations that was completely invisible to us? It was me trying to wrestle with this metaphor of understanding how things which are not present, that you can somehow experience them. There's sort of this absence of presence thing. That's part of the reason why I was asking you about the trees and the bodies, because I had been sort of wrestling with it. I started this project in 1999 and so it's like an ongoing thing. I work on, now I'm only working on the space. It's something I try not to think about until I'm in there. Sort of to go back to this shrink-shrink rule idea that I was talking about earlier. So right now I'm showing an image of the cemetery. What I did is, I found myself using linear perspective to render things. It was for two reasons. One of them was because it was the most expedient way to render something on a wall, because you have gravity working against you. I could use a T-square, I could just slide this thing across and then I could reduce the image rapidly because I didn't want to get caught up in trying to fetishize the mark-making. That practicality sort of produced the tool that I would use and then the tool helped to determine what images I could render. What that started to do, to get to the point, when you try and render something like a tree using a ruler, it always comes out a bit sort of geometric. That sort of unnaturalness presents to you the inherit limit of the method in which you're trying to represent this thing. This limit, for me, is that limit of measurability, is that space where you're trying to point at that thing which you can't represent. Then it can only be sort of imagined. You can allude to it but you can't actually represent it. That thing, for me, which I'm trying to talk about but that you can't draw, is that gap that I was discussing earlier.

**KEN:** Sounds like Plato's Cave.

**EDGAR:** There is a part of it that is like Plato's Cave. Maybe that's part of the reason why I asked you about shadow. Which actually, we still didn't finish talking about that moment. Because I didn't notice, in the images there were no shadows, [from] the bodies, you know?

**KEN:** I had to remove the shadows, of course, otherwise you would know there was a body there.

**EDGAR:** Were the shadows in the shape of objects?

**KEN:** They were various things, I suppose. There's a number of images so they're all a little different. I think

the other issue that you bring up is that you sort of haven't really addressed, is this relation to ideology. You talk about the tool determining the limits of what you can draw or what can be seen, but obviously the ideology also is a tool that will determine the limits of what can be seen. So, if one's using a Marxist analysis or one's using psychoanalytic models, you refer to this idea that you have a conceptual practice and that drives you to think, to follow the logic of that series of decisions. But you also referenced, at least a few times, the idea of the sublime ideas of beauty and pleasure. How would you relate that idea of the sublime to the conceptual practice? Or maybe the larger question, ideology, in terms of the outcome of the work?

**EDGAR:** I guess I never really thought about it that way. Let me see if I can answer it.

**KEN:** Maybe how do you see the sublime in your work? And why?

**EDGAR:** There's a historical rigor that doesn't deal with the metaphysics part, but it just deals with the material history, right? I find that, even in a practice like with Sol LeWitt, for example, with his *Permutations of an Open Cube*. Supposedly, Sol was not making any subjective decisions in that work, that it was something which is being played out objectively. But I recognize that there was a flaw, that actually that wasn't holding true. Part of it had to do with the fact that I recognized the redundancy, which he decided not to acknowledge. For example, it's symmetrical on all sides, so if you're looking at it from the left side or if you're looking at it from the right side, it more or less looks the same. For example, if one of the shapes was like a three-prong where it had an X, a Y and a Z axis, where the X and the Y were going north and then one is going east and then the vertical one, the Z axis, is pointing straight up and down. If there was another one, which was actually the opposite end of that, the one that was pointing west and north and then the vertical axis was the Z, he would remove that one from the system because they look exactly the same. So there was a subjective decision, but it was disguised. Charles Gaines says that is not actually true, but it was a conscious decision to remove it. So I saw that as being like the breakdown of the system. Ultimately expresses something, which is very human and expresses a certain kind of contradiction, and that contradiction is something which is troublesome. Things which are troublesome, constructions which are troublesome, are things which we find inherently interesting because you can't reconcile them. So like using conceptual strat-

egies but also being interested in the sublime. Like I had said with Poincaré and the shrink-shrink rule, that is something which is always produced outside of its limit. That's always there and I acknowledge it because I find it to be something which produces a certain sort of asymmetry as far as ideas go. For me, asymmetry is perpetual. I don't know if that answers the question.

**KEN:** Not exactly. Do you think of your work as spiritual? Maybe that's the question I should have asked.

**EDGAR:** No. It starts off intuitively. It's not spiritual in the traditional sense, but it does—I do try to delve into the space in which it's difficult for language to describe.

**KEN:** Because I can see that obviously, with the revisiting your father's hometown images, they have that sort of, not nostalgia, this sort of attempt to tell a lost past or to revisit a past and then even with the Snake River project. Obviously it's romantic music, there's an inherent romanticism and that brings us back to debates about the sublime and natural beauty versus other forms of beauty.

**EDGAR:** Yeah, but tell me why—I want to answer that question, so tell me what do you think is missing from my response to what you said?

**KEN:** I guess there's a way in which, if I'm understanding correctly, you're arguing that the system that you set up, there's always some fall out, something that's missing that you didn't anticipate and that is part of your practice and that's part of what you embrace. But you also hinted that that's also where some of the magic comes or the unexpected and the sublime as you suggested. That sort of... there's a thinking about this equation that you're giving us, this pie where there's one slice, that is the unexpected. But that's the one slice that usually equals or seems to equal the sublime or equal some sort of degree of aesthetic conceptual cultural pleasure for you.

**EDGAR:** Yeah, and for me, if we use the pie analogy, that is the work. That, in essence, is what I'm trying to engender through the...

**KEN:** So it's the missing slice, right? The absent, the erased, the unrepresented.

**EDGAR:** Yeah. In this drawing here you can see that there's holes that are there and those holes are it for me. But it literally is the place where a drawing once was and then has been taken out and the thing that was behind

it is drawn upon again and then that's taken out, so it becomes this stratum of holes. The absence is manifest—its presence is manifest through its absence.

**KEN:** I like this piece particularly, too, because I was looking up, trying to do a little research for us. I thought this plays very closely with some of the issues that my lynching series plays with. Even the whole lynching series all together, from the visiting sites to what one represents and can't represent.

**EDGAR:** Yeah, exactly. It's the thing which intrigues me the most is the thing that you can't represent because it gets into the key, for me, it gets into the key...let's say it gets me to one of the most important places that I think that art can talk about today, which is a grand statement. But particularly in relationship to the strength of our market economy as far as art production goes. As far as making a work which is not being dictated by certain tastes or certain contemporary trends, try and manifest things that go beyond the traditions or conventions of taste per se. For me, that's the most important thing to think about today. I was looking at the images—I just happened to see a show in New York. It was this couple, and they had done some images of like—it was some lynching images but it was a lot of it was civil rights images. When I first walked in there I said to myself—and I had said this to myself before—that it's very difficult for us to make us see those images in a different way. What they did was, they had the photograph and then they silk-screened the same image on. Do you know this show?

**KEN:** Yeah, I know their work.

**EDGAR:** Yeah, they silk screened the same image onto a piece of silk I guess, or scrim, so that when you're walking through it the image that's on top is either a little bit bigger or slightly misaligned. So you have to really struggle to make the image become whole so that it meets that expectation that you have. I found that to be interesting and engaging just because it was defined from the way we normally expect to read it. That was probably the reason why I appreciated the tree images as well, these photographs of yours, these lynching images, because it's incredibly difficult for us to be able to want to deal with images of trauma and to have any sort of relationship to it at all, besides one of total alienation and empathy. On the other hand, I feel like that it's an incredibly difficult thing to do. I think it's pretty fuckin' hard to do actually.

**KEN:** I suppose the other part that runs through this that I'm wondering how it's going to read, we could edit

it out, but obviously both of us have referenced in our work cultural histories, social histories, personal histories, and I wonder how that will look on paper. In other words, this relationship between—for the reader, the unknown reader, the person we don't know who's out there—what their view would be of our conceptual practice given our cultural backgrounds, if that empowers us or disempowers us or...I find that certain critics in Los Angeles have made arguments against, as many people have, against whether work is being defined as identity work or whether it's being defined as conceptual, post studio. There's all these different sorts of categories. I think what's interesting about seeing your work and thinking about my works, I feel that we're doing more of by the objects, like a process, than like the specific reference, but the referents are there.

**EDGAR:** I remember when I was in in Amsterdam, and I was doing a show at de Appel. Catherine David asked me this question that sort of put me on guard for a minute, but in essence there was really only one way to answer the question. I was doing these drawings, some of it was dealing with the history of *Star Trek*, but some of it was dealing with contemporary history at the time that I was making it. She goes, "Well, how is someone who is from Europe supposed to read this work?" That is a question which could potentially stump you, that's if you're dependent upon an idea that the work is meant to be read in a way in which a book is meant to be read. Like there's a specific content and now you're indebted to familiarize yourself with this narrative. That is, for one, it's a burden which is almost impossible to carry. Secondly, it's sort of antithetical to the experience of being in a gallery anyway, which is like, you look at the work, and then generally your reflection is something that happens after you've already left. I sort of said to her, "Well, even though you may not know who this person is, what was made present is that, for one, it is history and then two, that there's a certain sort of formal dynamism which is transcendent of the specific story itself." Of course, like you said, there's an indexical thing that you sort of relied on looking at photographs. But the thing in LA which is really fucked up is that the beauty police want to see beauty and aesthetics being antithetical to sort of political, social, and cultural narratives.

**KEN:** That's why I wanted to make sure that we got to this because people are going to read this at some point and we're using words like *beauty* and *sublime* and I want to be sure that we articulate the full range of what we are working on. I think we all agree that work should not

be didactic, right? We don't want to be creating illustrations for some mysterious book out there. I had so much material, I just said, "You know what? It's not going to be in the art, it's just going to live its own life. It assembled itself and it deserves to exist as its own thing separate from my art practice." So, there's a few images that overlap, but really it is a separate object, and I think that it's an interesting time in many ways for Los Angeles artists, just because there's interest beyond the local scene as well. That does help us in some way.

**EDGAR:** Yes. Part of the problem is that as soon as—and again, this goes to some of the key problems with representation in general—that as soon as you see a person represented, a figure who's of color, then immediately, for some, it depends upon how it's used, but they immediately think it's a narrative of marginalization or subjugation, that somehow you're expressing some type of critique of otherness or an expression of otherness, which is like totally fucking absurd. I remember when [there was] a review about the very first show that I was in here in LA at LACE, it was the LACE Annuale. I hate the fucking thing that they stopped doing that, but I had these triadic drawings. This is a later incarnation called "Tupac Spock," and basically [the review] didn't even deal with the work in the show at all. But basically said that I was the affirmative action artist of the show. He didn't use exactly that wording but basically that's the function that I had. And then there was another artist whose name kind of sounded Asian and he said there was a Chinese artist who, of course, was actually white. Immediately there was a repulse to the image, but what the fuck can you do? That's their life. That history that you're talking about in that book hasn't gone anywhere and the *LA Times* played a big part in that, in the formation of the city. They printed those lynching images. They were behind the largest advertising campaign in the history of the United States at the time, to bring people to LA. The *LA Times* hasn't gotten much further than that. The *LA Times* did their best to merge and destroy all the other alternative forms of print media. The *Herald Express/Examiner* is gone. The *LA Times* wanted to have a monopoly on the press and the art writing is reflective of that monopoly. They have other writers now, thank God, but of the two, they were like the beauty police and anything that doesn't sit in that camp, they have a very difficult time writing about unless they sort of force them to.

**KEN:** Do you find that you have more opportunities abroad than in the US? Do you have a preference for places?

**EDGAR:** Yeah. I prefer showing in Europe. Now that Suzanne [Vielmeter] is here, she's also European. Most Blacks who expatriated or moved to Europe—from Richard Wright to James Baldwin to all the musicians that went there—got to live and express (it's like the pulse of their humanity there) and be appreciated for the gifts that they were given. That's been my experience, too. I've probably had more shows in Europe than I have in the United States. I actually kind of prefer it that way. Beyond the rampant sort of careerism that there is here, the people seem to have an appreciation of you as in, like, the fullness of your practice as opposed to just the quality of your last exhibition. Looking at the art of what you can do and your potential, more patient. ■■