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Los Angeles

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Edgar Arceneaux: My SoCal Art History

Artbound

The history of art in Southern California isn't linear; it is a fluid, multi-angled continuum made from the personal experiences of many artists from myriad backgrounds. So to trace the trajectory of Southern California art, Artbound is creating a collective timeline comprised of the decisive events that shaped artists' creative development. We hope that in the space between these personal histories, an impressionistic view of Southern California's art history will come into focus.

Today we talk to Los Angeles artist Edgar Arceneaux.



Edgar Arceneaux | Photo: Courtesy of Edgar Arceneaux.

Saturday Program in South Central Los Angeles.

What was it and why was it so influential for you?

When I began my studies at Art Center College of Design in 1994, I was living in Pasadena, a very diverse community, but when I would go and attend the school, which was up on top of a hill, it was one of the best art schools in the world, I noticed there weren't that many people that looked like me that were there. But if I went down the hill I would find a very diverse demographic. At the same time, I had this intense desire to share the things that I was learning, and to be able to share with those very same people, whom for whatever reason, didn't have access to this experience. I was fortunate enough to meet George Evans who was an artist and started a program down in South L.A., not too far from where I grew up called the Art on Saturday program. He said, "why don't you come down on Saturday and see how it works." I went down one Saturday and was there for three and a half years. I was a volunteer and it was the place where I was able to get the foundation of all of my teaching experience. I've taught for 12 years from university level, senior citizens, all the way down to elementary school kids. And most of that stuff came from one place.

This old fire station where we were centered was not only a place to be able to teach local area kids the fundamentals of drawing and painting but it was also a kind of intersection of a lot of interesting arts and artists, different generations, from Bill Paggio, to Richard Wieth, John Outterbridge--being able to meet people like that--Cecil Ferguson, who curated the first show of African American art at **L.A.C.M.A.** were coming through this little fire station. And it was at the time when I had no idea what contemporary art was, I didn't even have a concept of it. I just knew that I liked to make stuff. So I was getting this really incredible conceptual art, art theory training up on the hill in Pasadena, yet I was having a very different yet slightly interconnected experience of working down within this social and community space. The collision of these two worlds started to form within my own mind a kind of position for myself that I started to come to understand in clearer terms later as I got older. The space in which the high art can connect with broad audiences of creative people but doing it in a way that doesn't compromise the integrity of the work, but instead transitions and transforms the positions of other people so that they can imagine themselves differently in the transitions of their own space.

Why is it that people of color have to think of community in these cases and other folks don't? Why do people of color have to merge those two things?

The arts in its very nature is social, in that it is completely dependent upon dialogue. It is within the space of discussion where the social and societal norms we try to challenge as artists, that is the place where they reside. As we go through the experience of being trained as an artist, we realize that the spectrum of opportunities, the ranges of folks that you engage with, the wealthiest of the wealthy, the myriad of professions, the myriad of disciplines, different classes and economic realities, you're able to cross all of them. In the process you find yourself being transformed too. It's not just about reshaping the world but the world is reshaping you in the process. I think that the dilemma that the artist is then left with is who is it that I'm actually communicating to? There might be a sense of an actual indebtedness that we have to a sense of where it is we came from, what we call the community from which we have emerged. Part of the problem that is never fully articulated within that sense of dilemma is that community itself is also changing too, it's evolving as you are evolving--there is no one static thing versus the other. But still the sense of urgency of wanting to share these new experiences that you are having because you are bringing some sense of value back, something valuable back from the broad range of experiences that you are having as an artist. But then how do you translate that into terms which is meaningful for your community as it is for you? The dilemma is both a burden but it is also a blessing too because what it does is that it forces you to question what is it that is actually at stake in the choices that you make in your work. What is it that is being lost, what is it that is being gained when you decide that you're going to investigate one subject, or engage with one problem versus another.

What happened when the riots broke?

I got involved with Art on Saturday in 1994, and the riots had happened in '92, so it was a few years before. My family had left Los Angeles in 1986. We moved to West Covina in San Gabriel valley. I remember watching the city on fire from that distance and we lived slightly on a hill so I could literally see the plumes of smoke rising. And a good portion of my family is still there--my aunts, my cousins, I mean everybody was still in there. And the four freeways around the city had sort of more or less become the boundaries by which everyone was being contained. There really was no place to go if you were stuck in South Central when the uprising had begun. And there was a tremendous sense of helplessness that I felt in that process and also completely confused as to watching people sort of burn their own space. Like, why don't you go to the more affluent neighborhoods?



"Buildings Burning During 1992 L.A. Riots" by Gary Leonard | Image courtesy of LAPL.

Over the last decade or so, I've really spent a lot of time trying to understand that philosophy and I think I have a sort of a good grip on that now. But wanting to go and sort of be part of that process of rebuilding as a creative person, I mean you have a certain set of skills, and those aren't always immediately applicable to neighborhood transformation. But it was something that I never let go of and meeting Charles Gaines and Rick Lowe and John Outterbridge and Eugenia Butler, artist like that whom in different ways were engaging with community. I found myself trying to articulate another position, a position which was relevant to right now of how the arts could be understood not just simply making products, making objects, but a more sort of expansive understanding as a set of terms that reduces an ongoing process that can be directed towards anything. That same sort of sense that this incredible amount of built up frustration towards radical transformation of a neighborhood though acts of aggression. That same energy is still there but how can it be channeled towards a different kind of change was the thing that I found myself focused on.

The Watts House Project.

What was the L.A. riots' relationship with the Watts House Project?

There are never a direct cause and effect kind of relationship but it is definitely a part of it. I found myself pondering on it primarily because over the last seven years I've also been doing investigations into the city of Detroit, which is very similar to the history of Los Angeles and to Watts, which are communities that were formed around industry. Within the city of Detroit, it was around the automobile industry but within Los Angeles, it was around the railroad, the importing and exporting of goods. So Watts is a place that also had an automobile industry and light aerospace industry around the time of World War II. Folks were literally invited to come here, [under the promise that] you can build a place for yourself. But once the war was over, McCarthyism came into place, those jobs were gone, tax bases shrank, things collapsed. What were government housing projects became the projects that we know today. These kinds of transformations that you see over decades, these things to me are beyond my time on earth, but I still find we are all dealing with the ramifications of these things.



Watts House Project. | Photo: **Gelatobaby**/Flickr/**Creative Commons License**.

How can arts become part of the public consciousness?

People decide not to go to a museum, but they will go to see 10 movies a year or 20 movies a year. We are allowed to believe that that is our choice. When in reality that education is something that has been taken from us very gradually. In the state of California, it's probably worse than in other places. So to try to reintroduce the arts as an important aspect of creative problem solving should not be considered something alien to the process of neighborhood redevelopment but something that is completely integral to the solution because it is in essence part of the problem.

The Griffith Observatory.

What role did astronomy and the Watts Towers play in your outlook in the world?

The **Griffith Observatory** was important in that it corrected a misunderstanding of the universe. Einstein had believed that the universe was static that it was not expanding but through the Doppler Effect, the recognition of shifts in color which is something that is deeply aesthetic, Edwin Hubble proved that the Universe is indeed expanding. Where galaxies are either shifting towards the color blue or shifting towards the color red. So it's this beautiful new understanding of the macro of our universe.



"Observatory in Griffith Park" | Image courtesy of LAPL.

Simon Rodia's towers are interesting in a similar ways; they're sort of the creation of a micro-verse inside of his own backyard. These towers are composed of these beautifully mathematical dodecahedrons, polyhedrons, towers built inside of towers. He was a self-taught engineer. The tallest tower is 100 feet tall, and it is made up of the same sort of economy of means that has the same sort of beauty within the mathematics. Using the materials which is around him, a repurposing of the ecosystem which was there and also sort of telling a beautiful story in the process. It was really the testament to the will of the individual, what one person can do if they really commit to doing something great.



"Watts Towers - 2." | Photo: **Los Ojos De Muerte/Flickr/Creative Commons License.**

How do these two things particularly influence you?

Whenever I see towers, they also remind me of the inverse, which is a pit, a hole in the ground. So in the Bible, you were either locked in a tower or thrown in a pit. These two things are completely connected to each other. So excavation, digging down and discovering the nature of something which you can never comprehend just from the surface. Looking out to outer space, this is the--like the craters of the moon, is a record of the creation of our planet. These shifting galaxies point back towards a certain kind of understanding of the origin of the universe. I mean to be able to ponder the fractals of one and the fractals of the other at the same time, one kind of gives it a larger kind of heavenly relevance and the other one sort of grounds you right down to the earth.

The Hammer Museum.

What has been your artistic relationship with the Hammer Museum and Annie Philbin and Michael Govan.

Over the last three years, I've gotten to know Annie and Michael pretty well. One of the things that was really nice to see is that both of them, at one point in their lives, they were both trained as visual artists and now they run some of the most vibrant contemporary art centers within the United States. I could see that there are aspects of their practice as directors that have certain affinities to an artistic practice, I would say. Michael Govan goes as far as to describe him bringing in Michael Howser or John Baldessari into spaces of curation or exhibition of design as an extension of a conceptual practice, as a way of rethinking what a museum can be. Now these two institutions are very different in scale and in emphasis--I'm talking about the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Hammer Museum at U.C.L.A. The Hammer Museum is really fantastic because it's really become, in my mind, the artists' museum. I think there is a real community that has formed itself around there that has a lot to do with the leadership of Annie Philbin, to be very approachable to being on the ground with being very serious and very committed and very passionate. And also doing a lot of really great shows and making sure artists feel appreciated when they do have exhibitions there. And I think the breadth of programming is really top notch.

How does the Hammer Museum and the work that Annie is doing stand out within the landscape here in Southern California? You mentioned that Annie is an artist and that it is an artist museum, how does that differ from the rest? Is that a plus?

I think what describes a vibrant museum is that it has to have a permeable membrane that things from the local as well as the international are able to work their way in there not just through the traditional sort of channels of the curators or the program directors. If somebody like myself would go to them and say hey I have an idea about something that I think would be great, they would actually take the time to listen. It may not actually happen but you know they would take it seriously and that you can have an effect upon the direction of the institution. I'm also on the artist council there too, so my connection there goes a little bit deeper than just having had a few shows there too, which have been really fantastic experiences. The other thing is that it has been a platform for me as an artist, I mean when I did my exhibition there in 2003, 2004 in the project space it was really sort of a spring board for my career within the United States as well as sort of expanding upon that internationally too. That kind of recognition, to be able to come from your own home town, unfortunately is rare within Los Angeles. So it was nice I was able to have that experience.



"Hammer Museum." | Photo: **Smart Destinations**/Flickr/**Creative Commons License**.

Do you think Hammer is currently doing what Helter Skelter did 25 years ago?

I think the Made in L.A. exhibition is a way of continuing to recognize and create an even broader platform for L.A. artists to show just how great and how high the caliber of the work is here. Helter Skelter, I mean there is nothing else really like that but that is sort of a legendary exhibition now that Paul Schimmel did.



"House Upside Down" (2000) by Edgar Arceneaux | Image: **Hammer Musuem**.

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Could you talk about your relationship with Charles Gaines?

More My SoCal Art History



Alexandra Grant: My SoCal Art

History

When I met Charles, he was brought to Art Center College of Design. Charles Gaines is a conceptual artist. He is a professor at Cal Arts for more than a decade, maybe 20 years now. He is an amazing thinker, theorist, and artist. A lot of his work is very systems oriented, a lot of numbers and things that deal with the investigations into systems that we use on a daily basis to tell us certain stories about the world and turning those things upside down. When I met Charles, it was in my second year at Art Center and I had never met any other African American artist at the time that I felt that I really could relate to because my practice has never really been centered around identity politics or that kind of investigation. When I met Charles, not only was he able to expose me to a language that came out of French theory, but also a deeply political understanding of how aesthetics and politics are completely integrated into each other. That alone would be awesome. But he's also been a person in my life as a mentor, a friend, and a collaborator later on, who's continued to be a figure that I admire and someone who is sort of deeply nurturing as a friend and teacher and as an example of what a great artist can be.

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