

KEN GONZALES-DAY



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CUE Art Foundation
September 7 - October 14, 2006

Curated by Bruce Yonemoto

We are honored and grateful to present this exhibition generously curated by Bruce Yonemoto. For the CUE solo exhibition series, Mr. Yonemoto has chosen artist Ken Gonzales-Day, an artist living and working in California. Mr. Yonemoto's appreciation of Mr. Gonzales-Day's photographs demonstrates, we believe, the manner in which the Foundation's eclectic and discretionary process reveals, naturally but quite unpredictably, each curator's own artistic views.

For this exhibition Gonzales-Day will exhibit, among other pieces, a large-scale print. Were it not for the opportunity that the CUE gallery affords, it is unlikely that a work on such a scale would be available for public viewing. CUE is honored to be able to offer Gonzales-Day this opportunity, and together with Mr. Yonemoto, wish him a future of fulfillment and success.

Drawing its title from a book manuscript of the same name, *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935* considers the transracial nature of lynching in California from statehood to the last recorded lynching in 1935. Given the broad number of people touched by this history (Asians, Anglos, Blacks, and American Indians), many will be surprised to learn that Latinos (Mexican, Mexican American, Chilean, and persons of Latin American descent) were statistically more likely to die of lynching than those of African, Asian or European decent. The work included in the CUE Art Foundation exhibition considers, and responds to, this historical erasure though a number of conceptual interventions that interrogate the legacy of lynching and its relationship to photography. Such images once circulated as postcards, view cards, and were collected in albums. Today, many of these images continue to circulate through on-line auctions, antique stores, and archival (and not so archival) copy prints. The works included in the exhibition reflect upon this forgotten past while inviting the viewer to consider how these legacies of oppression and denial have been transformed within a more contemporary landscape. *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935* is a John Hope Franklin Center book, forthcoming from Duke University Press, 2006.



Bruce Yonemoto
La Vie Secrete, 1997
Altered screen, close-circuit
camera and LED screen

On the blank screen, a luminous disk was projected without any images of people or landscapes. The assembly of empty seats attentively followed some magnificent spectacle invisible to me. Furious, I wanted to see from closer up. I climbed towards the screen. I was blinded by the light from the projector lamp and saw in the screen two holes large enough to allow a man to pass through. I put my head through one of them. A panorama of the city was spread out before my eyes. Aragon and Breton had their bellies impaled on two cathedral spires. I understood that they also had wanted to see what was happening behind the screen and the great beauty of their suicide was revealed to me.

Robert Desnos

Much like a Freudian *screen memory* the photographs of Ken Gonzales-Day display, mask and translate histories many would rather forget. Gonzales-Day's pictures act as sophisticated *filters* which scrutinize information that has long been suppressed. His *erasures* reconfigure shadowed memories at once beautiful, genuine and scary.

I would like to thank Ken for producing such important work as well as Dr. Juli Carson for her insightful thoughts. I would also like to thank the CUE Art Foundation and its Advisory Council as well as a special friend of Ken, Juli and mine, Mr. Gary Wolf.

Anna Meliksetian

California Strange Fruit: Ken Gonzales-Day's "Lynching in the West"

(An essay on Ken Gonzales-Day's solo exhibition curated by Bruce Yonemoto on view September 7 – October 14, 2006)

Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us.

– Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*¹

At first sight, *At Daylight the Miserable Man Was Carried to an Oak* and *Golden Chain*, photographs by Ken Gonzales-Day, appeal to the senses as beautiful landscapes. That aesthetic appeal is challenged, however, by the knowledge that the distinctive trees at the center of these images have something in common: bodies once hung from their branches. In the 19th century these were lynching trees. The trees are grave markers, historic signs of horrific crimes.

Gonzales-Day originally set out to find Latino subjects who had been omitted from California history. Instead, he stumbled onto records, visual and written, of events that have virtually disappeared from California history. He found documentation of 352 lynchings in the state, and that the greatest number of victims was Latinos. In his search through the past Gonzales-Day found souvenir postcards, historical photographs, and written documents of the events. These records were often inaccurate and incomplete. Intrigued, the artist spent four years on the project, which became *Searching for California's Hang Trees*. He visited the sites where the lynchings occurred and photographed the trees as traces of the incidents, both witnesses to and participants in the deaths. In doing so, he paid homage to the often-anonymous victims.

Revisiting the past in the present allowed Gonzales-Day to visualize the horrible events that took place in each particular setting. From newspaper accounts of the period he was able to retrace the steps of a victim, dragged from a courthouse or jail cell and hanged from a nearby tree. Such events are moments in time, moments that have not simply passed, but have disappeared from memory. The only tangible, living object that remains from this harrowing excavation of cruelty is the oak, the lynching tree.

In this exhibition, *Lynching in the West*, Gonzales-Day juxtaposes *St. James Park*, a life-size historical image of a lynching, with two large-scale images of photographed oaks from his recent *Searching for California's Hang Trees* series. The historical postcards also included in the exhibit serve as a chronicle of the events, altered only by the artist's erasure of the victims. The mural overwhelms the exhibition space, re-enacting the event without revictimizing the lynched. The

postcards of the era give context to the mural-size picture and anchor the enormous images of the oaks in history. The title *At Daylight the Miserable Man Was Carried to an Oak* sets the tone for a haunting image of an oak tree. The artist frames the image from below, capturing the tree's almost anthropomorphic presence. Enrobed in velvet green moss, the trunk of the oak leans back, weighed down by its gnarled dry branches, which twist and turn in every direction and extend far beyond the picture plane. The oak looks ancient and resilient, yet emanates a sense of dread. It possesses the memory of racial hatred, torture, violence, and murder. A silent witness and unwitting participant, the tree retains traces of past, present, and future. The exquisite contrast of the tree's barren branches with the plush green moss climbing its trunk attests to the cycles of life, death, and regeneration. The oak continues to grow and change with the passing seasons, yet remains stable and strong. If it cannot escape its history in our annals, it can grow beyond all that in nature.

By contrast, *Golden Chain* shows a massive tree that radiates against a bright blue sky blanketing a sunburnt California landscape. In Gonzales-Day's photographic treatment, its lush green foliage imparts majestic beauty, strength, and life-giving energy. This beauty has been distorted by the lingering traces of its past, provoking a deep bitterness. Yet the healthy, regenerative and enduring aspects of the oak convey a sense of hope, promising renewal and change. Despite the compelling beauty of the tree images, what intrigues is precisely what cannot be seen: the presumed subject, the body of the lynched man. The absence of the victims brings up the aspect of erasure. The viewer expects to see heart-wrenching images of mutilated bodies hanging from trees. There is discomfort and disorientation in seeing the unexpected or not seeing the expected. Focusing on the bodies may evoke intense feelings of sympathy, anger, shame; but with the erasure of the victims Gonzales-Day directs the viewer to go beyond. He wants the viewer to think, contemplate, analyze rather than feel. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag expresses the danger of merely feeling: "So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent – if not an inappropriate – response."²

In the mural-size image titled *St. James Park*, the focal point is the trunk of a tree with three bare branches. In semiotic terms, the tree is the signifier of a hidden signified, the body. The victim is anonymous, invisible, not of consequence, the suppressed other. What the viewer is forced to contemplate is the spectacle, the mob gathered around the lynching tree, the dynamic of the perpetrators. With the erasure of the victims, the perpetrators become the active subjects and the viewer of Gonzales-Day's photographs is forced to engage with the community of lynchers, united in their thirst for dominance and revenge.

What allows this form of murder to happen is the complicity of a community. The historical postcards that document lynchings attest to the fact that people enjoyed and wanted to record these events as entertaining spectacles bringing together hundreds of local citizens. The postcards are a visual reflection of the beliefs of a community – one that felt entitled to violate the human rights of these victims. Atrocities continue to be re-enacted when large groups and communities support and reinforce them. The mob, the community that enacted these murders, has evolved through generations into a community of silence and denial. Erasure stems from discomfort, denial, and ultimately the refusal to take responsibility

² Ibid, p. 102

¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 89

for the actions of our ancestors. Gonzales-Day's work confronts the viewer with the act. One can no longer deflect responsibility from the perpetrators and must contemplate these heinous crimes. Through this body of work, our community is given the opportunity to become conscious, to initiate and maintain dialogue, to accept and learn from the past.

Anna Meliksetian

Los Angeles, July 2006

This essay was written as part of the Young Art Critics Mentoring Program, a partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays for loose-leaf insertion into CUE Art Foundation exhibition catalogues. The writer, Anna Meliksetian, is an art historian who received her M.A. from California State University Northridge in 2003, with an analysis of the late paintings of the Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington. Meliksetian teaches at C.S.U. Northridge, Pierce College, and other Southern California institutions. Peter Frank, an art critic for Angeleno Magazine and the L.A. Weekly, was the mentor.

AICA (International Association of Art Critics) was formed in order to revive the critical discourse that had suffered under Fascism and the war, and which was under pressure in nations around the world. It was founded in 1948/1949 in Paris and originally affiliated with UNESCO as an NGO ("non-governmental organization"). At present there are 72 member nations representing more than 4,000 art critics. AICA USA, headquartered in New York, is the largest national section, with a membership of over 400 distinguished critics, curators, scholars, and art historians around the country. Please visit www.aica-int.org for further information.

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CUE Art Foundation's operations and programs are made possible with the generous support of foundations, corporations, government, individuals, and its membership. Exhibition assistance is provided in part by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Holland & Knight Charitable Foundation, Inc., Viking Foundation, Accademia Charitable Foundation Ltd. and with public funds from the City of New York Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York State Council on the Arts through the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and The Experimental Television Center.

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511 WEST 25TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10001



Photographer Unknown
**Santa Rosa Triple
 Lynching**, 1920, Gelatin
 Silver Print mounted on
 postcard stock, 5" x 3 1/2",
 Collection of the Artist

It would be bourgeois reaction to negate the reification of the cinema in the name of the ego, and it would border on anarchism to revoke the reification of a great work of art in the spirit of immediate use-value...Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up. It would be romantic to sacrifice one to the other.

Theodor Adorno "Letter to Walter Benjamin," 1936¹

Three years into Hitler's reign as Chancellor of Germany, Adorno and Benjamin debated the imperative relation between aesthetics and politics in the context of fascism. Benjamin famously argued for a de-mythologized "aura-less" art, one that embraced mass technology against the neo-classical, aestheticized politics of the Third Reich. But as Adorno would remind us, we know the end of that story: cinematic technology is neither inherently critical nor Leftist, witness Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. This historical debate analogously anticipates the contemporary dialectic between "relational aesthetics" (as participatory anti-aesthetic) and formalist painting (as pure myth-aesthetic), though it is a problematic iteration of the original argument. For any literal, schematic iteration of the Benjamin/Adorno debate would inadequately explain away the massaging and feeding of gallery-goers as a willful complicity with the service industry, on the one hand, and the resurgence of expressive, formalist painting as an ego-reifying process, on the other. Where does this false polemic leave a political-aesthetic consciousness in contemporary art in the context of such xenophobic events evidenced by California's Prop 187, the Minutemen Militia border control, Bush's "guest worker" program, and the ongoing interrogation tactics (i.e. torture) at Guantanamo Bay? Any artwork borne of a *critical aesthetic* today must take up this debate over the representation of civil violation and/or atrocity. Perhaps this challenge is best taken up as a psychic operation *aimed* at a given event (within the context of art) versus the simple pictorial act of *re-presentation* of the event itself. This is the task of Ken Gonzales-Day's *Lynching in the West*, which speaks to the question of identity and identification in the dual contexts of aesthetics and politics.

The "event" to which *Lynching in the West* returns is a readymade historical paradox, at once there and not there. Accounts of North American lynching within academic and popular culture have focused on the violence waged against African Americans in the southern United States, while the lynching of Latinos in California has yet to enter historical consciousness. And yet at the *time* of the event that Gonzales-Day addresses – 354 instances of lynching that

¹ Theodor Adorno, "Letter to Walter Benjamin," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, (New York: Verso, 1995), p. 123.

occurred in the state of California between 1850 and 1935, the majority of which were Latino-lynchings in the West were readily documented in popular culture through the dissemination of postcards containing photographs of the lynched subject. The question for Gonzales-Day is how to approach this subject without re-spectacularizing the event and thus re-instancing it in the here and now. As Adorno again pointed out to Brecht, the Left's representation of atrocities is a problematic affair because "when genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of [art], it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder."² For Gonzales-Day, this crisis of representation is *itself* the work. Which is to say, the *form* (or operation) of Gonzales-Day's documentation of the event is at once the *content* of the documentation. Drawing upon newspaper articles, periodicals, court records, historical photographs, and souvenir postcards, his study of the subject began by traveling throughout California and photographing the actual or approximate lynching site, which is to say the event's singular remainder: the "lynching" tree itself. The event is recreated as an absence of historical atrocity in the presence of what, on the surface, appears to be landscape photography. The pictorial and the obscene thus rub together through the visual negation of the subject or event, emblematic of the lost history of lynching in the rural West.

The installation itself places the viewer squarely within this site of erasure. Upon entering the gallery, we are presented with three visual "propositions": a mural-size historical photograph of a crowd focused on a single tree, a series of historical postcards framed in archival format, and a large scale "landscape" photograph of a tree. Accordingly, what we have are three instances of the lynching event: the event itself, the event's secondary documentation, and the contemporary return to the event's site. What nevertheless *insists* in these three different aesthetic presentations and "time zones" is the erasure of the lynched subject, the singular gesture of the artist's return to – and representation of – the event. By extension, we have three different sites of lynching's discursive erasure: documentary photography, popular culture, and landscape photography. And yet, because the viewer is put squarely in the position of erasure – there is no *body* for us to see and control with our gaze – we are at once, phenomenologically, put into the *place* of the subject of the work, both as the lynched (it could be me up on that empty tree) and the lyncher (it could be me in that lynch crowd). This operation, the *aiming* at the event through the very negation of the event, underscores and activates our *jouissance* or psychic ambivalence towards the representation of lynching (I *want* to see that which I *don't want* to see), evoking Adorno's warning that "[t]he so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it."³

² Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, (New York: Verso, 1995), p. 189.

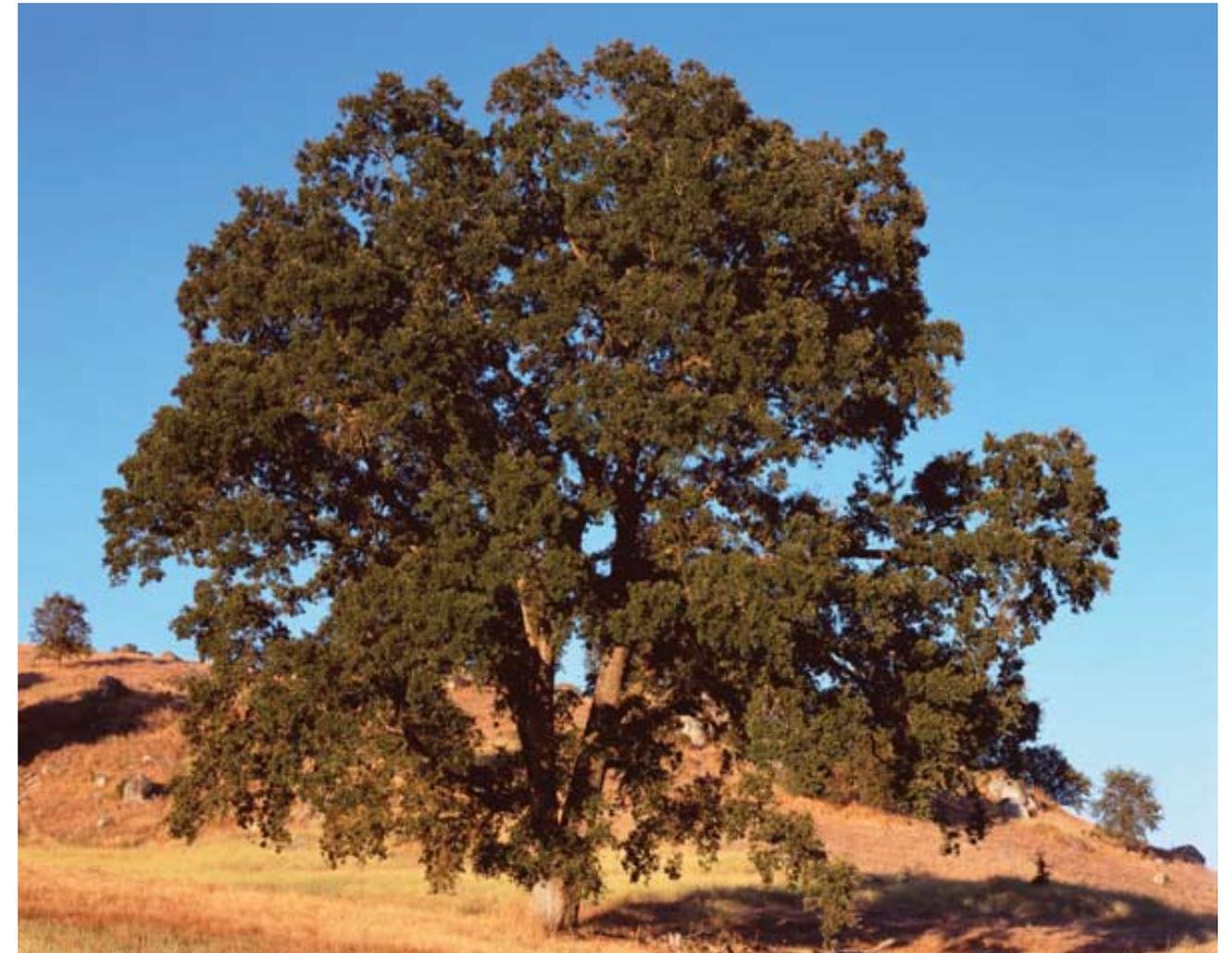
³ Ibid.

Which brings us back to the photographic paradox of the subject that *Lynching in the West* implicitly evokes; a paradox that activates the death drive in the spectator's desire to re-view historical events through the medium of photography. It is Barthes' formulation that the pleasure/pain the subject has in viewing historical photographs indexes the death drive's activation. For the desire to witness an event that occurred before one is borne, the desire to *return* to that very moment in time, is at once a desire *not to be*. "...[T]he life of someone whose existence has somewhat preceded our own encloses in its particularity the very tension of History, its division," Barthes claimed. "History is [thus] hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it. As a living soul, I am the very contrary to History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history." ⁴ Again, this psychic operation instanced by *Lynching in the West* is the site in which the subject (at once the viewing subject, the historical subject, and the subject of art) is unconcealed as present under erasure. "Unconcealment" is Heidegger's term for what Freud called the "return of the repressed." And the repressed fact that is "unconcealed" here is the very fact of the subject's essence: that surrounding the lightness of one's being is the darkness of one's own nothingness, a being that is thus paradoxically borne of, as much as it gives birth to, the subject's own nothingness.

What *Lynching in the West* thus "represents" is the crisis of representation itself. Recent performance and installation art theorized through the logic of Nicolas Bourriaud's so-called relational aesthetics is indicative of this crisis because what such work *erases* is historical consciousness in the space of a presumed, mythic "present." The panacea for this endemic might be a *non*-dialectical recall of Benjamin and Adorno's original debate. Such a recall would put into relief contemporary artworks that simultaneously take up a political *and* aesthetic proposition. Moreover, *Lynching in the West* aptly underscores the need to triangulate these propositions, methodologically, with a psychoanalytic proposition. This triangulation is essential when the question of representation is at stake, both in terms of historical atrocities and contemporary returns to 60s and 70s art practices. On this note, *Lynching in the West* performatively activates the impasse between definitive positions of subject and other, and by extension, event and history, all of which are acted out by the viewer in the space of aesthetics. In a moment when pundits make history in mass culture at lightning speed, phantasmatically dissolving us into a mythic succession of disempowered "presents," the slowing of time in the space of viewing historical events through the presentation of paradoxical identification is a critical, ethical event in itself.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 65.

Juli Carson PhD, May 2006



Golden Chain

2005
Ektachrome Print, 60" x 75"
Unique print



St. James Park

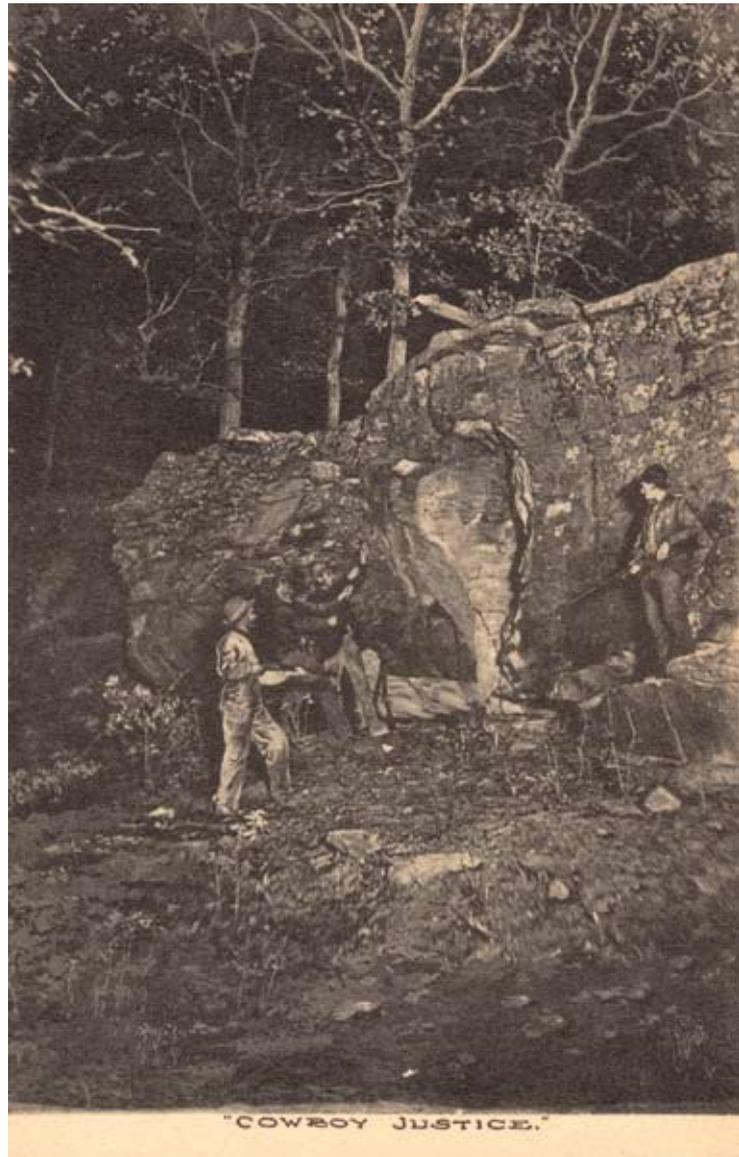
2006
Inkjet on vinyl
120" x 280"
Unique print



Disguised Bandit 2005
Ektachrome print
6" x 3.8"
Edition of 10



Water Street Bridge 2005
Ektachrome print
6" x 3.8" Edition of 10



Cowboy Justice 2005
Ektachrome print
6" x 3.8"
Edition of 10



Der Wild West 2005
Ektachrome print
3.7" x 6"
Edition of 10



Five

2006
Ektachrome print
3.7" x 6"
Edition of 10



Tucson

2005
Ektachrome print
6" x 3.7"
Edition of 10



This is What
He Got

2004
Ektachrome print
3.7" x 6"
Edition of 10



Franklin Ave.

2004
Ektachrome print
6" x 3.7"
Edition of 10



**At Daylight
the Miserable
Man Was
Carried
to an Oak**

2002
60" x 75"
Ektachrome
print
Unique print

Biographies

Ken Gonzales-Day

Ken Gonzales-Day is an artist and writer living in Los Angeles. He received his MFA from UC Irvine, CA, and his MA in Art History from Hunter College, New York, NY. He was a fellow in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program. Other fellowships include the Rockefeller Foundation Study and Conference Center in Bellagio, Italy and the Smithsonian Institution's American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery where Gonzales-Day was a Senior Fellow in Latino Studies. His writing has appeared in various arts publications and journals including: *Art & Text*, *Artissues*, *Art Journal*, *Art Papers*, *Aztlán*, *Exposure*, *Poliester*, *ArtPress* and *NYQ*. His manuscript *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935* will be published by Duke University Press in 2006. Exhibitions of his photographs and installations include: *An Image Bank for Everyday Revolutionary Life*, REDCAT at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles; *Log Cabin*, Artists Space, New York, NY; *Picarte*, Heard Museum, Phoenix, AZ; *Made in California*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; *Cyborg Manifesto*, Laguna Art Museum, CA; *Beyond Boundaries: Contemporary Photography in California*, Ansel Adams Center for Photography, San Francisco, CA; and *Reimagining the West: A New History*, SF Camerawork, San Francisco, CA. Gonzales-Day is an Associate Professor of Art and Chair of the Department of Art at Scripps College.

Bruce Yonemoto

Bruce Yonemoto has developed a body of work which positions itself within the overlapping intersections of art and commerce, of the gallery world and the television screen. His work attempts to manipulate an audience with a simultaneous recognition of the machinations of the manipulation. He believes that the *composition* of mass media has become a new historical site of the domination of human behavior. During Mr. Yonemoto's twenty-year collaboration with his brother, Norman, he has been honored with numerous awards and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the American Film Institute, The Rockefeller Foundation, and the Maya Deren Award for Experimental Film and Video. Most recently, Mr. Yonemoto's solo installations, photographs and sculptures have been featured in major one person shows at the ICC (Intercommunication Center) in Tokyo; the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia, and the Kemper Museum in Kansas City. He has had solo exhibitions at Blum & Poe and Lemon Sky, Los Angeles; Gray Kapernekas Gallery, New York; Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo and his work was featured in *Los Angeles 1955-1985: Birth of an Art Capital* at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. Mr. Yonemoto is a professor of Studio Art at the University of California, Irvine.

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CUE Art Foundation was established in June of 2002 with the aim of providing educational programs for young artists and aspiring art professionals in New York and from around the country. These programs draw on the unique community of artists, critics, and educators brought together by the foundation's season of exhibitions, public lectures, workshops, and its studio residency program: all are designed to be of lasting practical benefit to aspiring and under-recognized artists. The entire CUE identity is characterized by artistic quality, independent judgment and the discovery of genuine talent, and provides long-term benefits both for creative individuals associated with CUE and the larger art marketplace. Located in New York's Chelsea gallery district, CUE's 4,500 square feet of gallery, studio and office space serves as the nexus for educational programs and exhibitions conducted by CUE.

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