

JAMILLAH JAMES ON CHARLES GAINES

Since 1975, the Los Angeles artist Charles Gaines (born 1944) has positioned trees at the center of his visual lexicon and of his systems-based conceptual practice. Similar to the chair in Joseph Kosuth's landmark work *One and Three Chairs* (1965; fig. 19), Gaines's images of single trees engage viewers in a game of semiotic distinction and symbolic association through their repetition and re-presentation. The ongoing series

Numbers and Trees highlights the artist's penchant for revealing the limits of the media he employs—drawing, photography, and painting—in accurately imaging reality as well as the potential disconnect, in the resulting works, between content and logic.

Gaines is noted for his serial production; he refers to each body of work as a “series” and each individual work, be it a single panel or multiples, as a “set,” with



Fig. 19. Joseph Kosuth (born 1945). *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. Wood folding chair, mounted photograph of a chair, and mounted photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of “chair”; height of folding chair 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (82.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund. © 2016 Joseph Kosuth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

multiple sets comprising a “sequence,” or one cycle of a given series. After completing his graduate studies in painting at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Gaines was exposed to the work of first-generation conceptual artists such as Adrian Piper, Hanne Darboven, and Sol LeWitt (with whom he maintained a close personal friendship) and began exploring seriality, the grid as an organizing structure, and numbers as a formal device. Elements of Gaines’s first “conceptual” series, *Regression* (1973–74), including the painstakingly hand-drawn grid and the use of numbers as a means of order, can be found throughout all his later works—although, occasionally, order devolves into visual chaos.

With *Numbers and Trees*, Gaines returned to tree imagery after a number of years spent exploring the body and physicality. The key difference between his earlier tree works, such as those in his *Walnut Tree Orchard* series (1975–2014), and the earliest iterations of *Numbers and Trees* is that the system he articulates in the latter occurs on a single panel, layered with information, rather than on three or four separate ones, lined up in a row. Gaines began producing the original sequence of *Numbers and Trees* in 1986; the work in the Joyner/Giuffrida Collection, *Numbers and Trees, Central Park, Series I, Tree #9*, was completed thirty years later, in 2016. It represents, on a single plane, the eight trees preceding it in the current sequence. Earlier works in the *Numbers and Trees* series consisted of a hand-rendered tree trunk and limbs behind the gridded surface of a plexiglass box embellished with a proliferation of “cells,” or numbered squares painted various colors. Later in the series, Gaines replaced the drawn tree with a black-and-white photograph as the symbolic index. The colored cells, which trace the shape of the underlying tree and create the illusion of foliage, are plotted to either side of the tree’s trunk, extending horizontally—a symmetry forged by the repetition of numbers on both sides of the center line. As a sequence progresses, the field becomes more dense with color.

In *Tree #9*, Gaines has split the picture plane into three parts, although the image remains continuous across the panels and would be incomplete without all three parts. In a way, Gaines has constructed a visual metonym; the linguistic device of metonymy, in which a whole can be represented by its various parts—a discursive alternative to metaphor, which relies on a single path to the making of meaning—is a central component of the artist’s later work. The shift in format from the original *Numbers and Trees* has allowed Gaines to further test the

limits of the systems he imposes, which he privileges over any aspirations to beauty. In a statement for a 1980 exhibition, he wrote, "I believe good work undermines categories, and its test (and its death) is its success. Aesthetic issues are by contrast very dull. Arguments over value and taste are dull. Confrontations are exciting."¹ Charles Gaines and series such as *Numbers and Trees* challenge viewers to set aside preoccupations with qualifying art objects by their aesthetic or emotional appeal. True beauty comes from the artist's commitment to an intense, conceptual rigor, embedded, in this instance, within a critique of painting's dominance in the hierarchy of creative practices.

1. Charles Gaines, quoted in John Paoletti, ed., *No Title: Collection of Sol LeWitt*, exh. cat. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University in association with the Wadsworth Atheneum, 1981), p. 49.