Transformation of the Mundane: Charles Gaines' *Landscape*

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"An authentic work of art is, by definition, an imposition. Speaking its own language, residing in a time zone of its own making, art, when it works well, disrupts and rearranges the way we understand and know the world."[1] Charles Gaines' 1981 work *Landscape: Assorted Trees with Regression* closely follows these claims from former Studio Museum executive director Marie Schmidt Campbell. An unassuming work comprised of intricately constructed graphs, *Landscape* explores topics of black consciousness and identity formation despite little evidence of the artist's hand and the absence of black bodies. Through a transformation of the mundane, Gaines subtly calls us to question the validity of social systems and structures mandated by society, as well as its relation to the black experience.

Born in 1944 in Charleston, South Carolina, Charles Gaines received his BA from Jersey City State College and his MFA from the School of Art and Design at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Upon his graduation from art school, Gaines struggled to create abstract and figurative paintings that were free from perceptions of African American art, remarking in an interview that "the idea of a black cannon was problematic to the degree that it limited any critique of blackness or the idea of black representation."[2] His artistic breakthrough came when he encountered methodological Tantric Buddhist art, and he was inspired to create dense grids that freed him from the expressive gestures he had previously felt pressured by. Produced from

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[1] Mary Schmidt Campbell, "Foreword", in Courtney J. Martin, ed., *Four Generations: The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection of Abstract Art* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2016), 7.

[2] Miranda, Carolina. "How the Dense Grids of Artist Charles Gaines Took the Ego out of Art." *Los Angeles Times*, 3 Mar. 2015.

this period was a 1981 ten-piece series entitled *Landscape: Assorted Trees with Regression*. My

essay will focus on the first piece, which is pictured below.
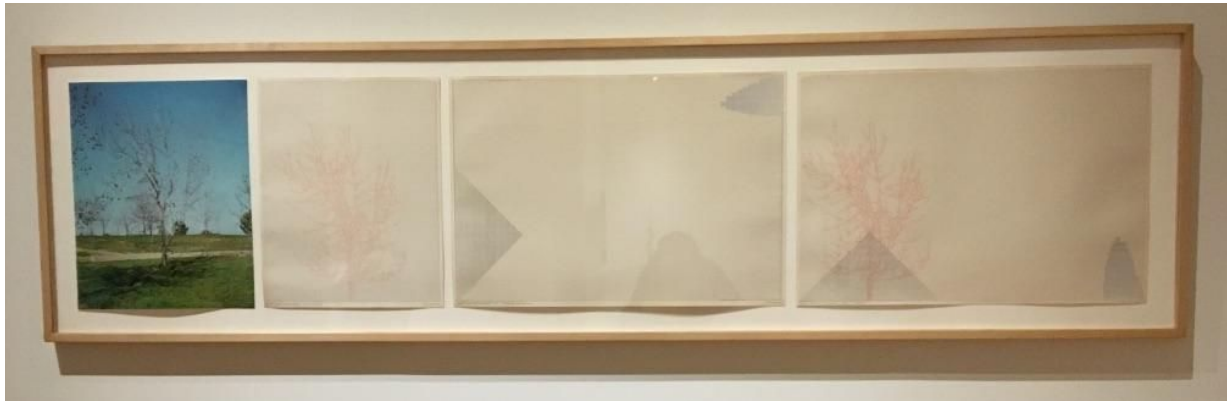
Landscape: Assorted Trees with Regressions, Set 1, 1981
Color photograph, ink on paper

Unlike many of Gaines' other graphical pieces that feature faces and bodies like the following

artwork,

FACES: Set #4, Stephan W. Walls, 1978
Photograph, ink on paper

Landscape features a stand-alone tree. With a black man's face as the primary subject, the above

artwork could be immediately associated with a political or societal message. *Landscape*, on the

other hand, is seemingly apolitical with no societal message. In the following paragraphs,

however, I will discuss how the artwork's overall construction, significance of the tree, and

symbolism of the pyramid and ziggurat shapes merge to form an undeniable critique of the social systems and structures ingrained into society.

Examining the overall qualities of the piece, it is important to note the painting's 26 x 99 inch dimensions. On the smaller scale of artworks typically shown in art galleries, *Landscape* was clearly created with accessibility for the general public in mind. In line with his goal of questioning societal practices, Gaines' *Landscapes* is sufficiently large so we take notice of it, but not so overwhelmingly large as to limit his scope of audience with artwork transportation issues. Another detail to note is the lack of the artist's hand within the artwork. In commenting on his artistic process, Gaines explains "The art work, the total art work, involves many aspects of myself, not just one, and they all want to participate in the work. But when the work is done they all disappear."[3] Consequently, this allows us to focus less on the artist's intentions behind the art, and more on our own interpretations and our own ways of generating meanings. What becomes apparent is the point that black identity should not be confined to certain ideas or stereotypes. Black identity should be whatever the individual defines it to be. Furthermore, we see that the juxtaposition of the organicness of the photographed tree with the graphs' manufactured qualities reminds us that the social systems we have in place are human constructs that determine our reality and experiences. In partly titling his work "regressions" (defined as "a return to a former or less developed state"), Gaines attempts to dismantle our perceptions and makes us question how we see the world.[4] The breakdown of the tree's elements throughout the panels forces us to consider different parts in turn and give consideration to details we might have overlooked. Gaines also makes use of the psychological "uncanny" effect, which is

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[3] Miranda, Carolina, "How the Dense Grids"
[4] "Regression ." *Oxford Dictionaries | English, Oxford Dictionaries*, en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/regression.

produced by erasing the distinction between imagination and reality. It is taking the familiar and making it peculiarly unfamiliar, as opposed to pure mystery. For example, it is due to the "uncanny" effect that walking around ghost towns make us feel uneasy. The presence of cars and stores is comforting and familiar to us, yet we become uneasy as the distinction between reality and imagination becomes blurred. We sense that something about our environment is amiss, and we scramble to form interpretations and explanations for the town's eeriness. In the case of *Landscapes*, Gaines blurs the distinction between imagination and reality by recreating the photographed tree in a realistic manner. From far away, the graphed tree seems like a normal tree. As we move closer to the artwork, however, we realize that it is a ghostly rendering of an actual tree, lacking life and movement. This creates an uncomfortable emtion for the viewer, and we are called to make sense of the artwork and grapple with why Gaines chose to graph the tree in this purposeful, calculated manner. This ambiguity within the artwork leaves an open space for discourse, as well as gaps for our subjective interpretations. Additionally, Gaines' repetition of the tree throughout the panels serves as a tool to filter the way we see reality. In this way, he explores the mediation that takes place between perceptual functioning and the objects we see. The fact that the graphed tree barely changes from panel to panel sends the message that we can never escape our personal biases even if we diversify our experiences. As humans, we are devoted to the systems we have in place and are unable to move on and imagine a world with different values. Through this, we begin to question reality and the representational systems around us.

In sending a message about societal issues, it is very odd that Gaines chooses a tree as his main subject. Seemingly mundane in nature, the tree, I argue, metaphorically symbolizes the

American black experience. Given that Gaines takes great interest in philosophy, the tree can be regarded as an observer witnessing the evolution of humans. It acts as a supreme judge of our actions and the way we construct our society. If we consider the philosophical conundrum "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" in terms of *Landscape*, we see that the artwork calls into question the metaphysics of the dissimilarity between sensation and reality. In other words, we are called to question the difference between what something really is versus how we as humans perceive it to be. America's doctrine of the self-made person imposes on us the belief that we are in control of our own identities. Gaines, however, challenges this belief and contends that we are subconsciously influenced by the judgments of others. The tree could also be a reference to the Bible's Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, where Adam and Eve eat from the tree and their disobedience leads to disorder in creation. In this light, Gaines wants to explore why things are the way they are and why bad, chaotic things like racism and racial oppression exist within society. The world is unstable, despite the systems we create in attempt to enforce order in the world. Additionally, the tree is known as a site of horror and pain in black history. A place of lynching, the tree is reclaimed and turned into a source of discussion and power in *Landscape*. By using a tree in place of a black body, Gaines makes the statement that African Americans are not reducible to ideas of primitivity or emotionality. Rather, African Americans are capable of intellectual thinking. Through this tree, Gaines inserts a blackness that cannot be reduced by societal perceptions. As lineage is often represented in the form of a family tree, the tree also connotes intergenerationally. Thus, *Landscape* emphasizes the fact that issues pertaining to the black experience (such as black consciousness, identity formation, stereotypes, or brutality) are neither simply things of the past nor the present, but are realities that have

continually affected, currently affect, and will affect African Americans. These realities are not bracketed to a specific time frame and do not end when the current generation passes on. Gaines invites us to consider black experience issues on a broader scale that stretches beyond just today's society. Years from now, we can come back to this artwork again and find new meanings and interpretations.

The use of the pyramid and ziggurat shapes in conjunction with the tree also brings an interesting character to the artwork's meaning. Initiated in the third panel, the pyramid and ziggurat shapes intrude into the artwork. Coming from all sides of the graph, they create the sense that entrapment that is inevitable and inescapable. Historically known as a temple for the dead, the pyramid symbolizes death's inevitability. The pyramid's sudden appearance references the fact that death for African Americans is a sudden event due to black brutality and racial profiling. Although African Americans may try to push death to the back of their minds, it is a constant factor in their day-to-day life and cannot be ignored. The fact that the pyramid is the only shape that covers the tree in the final panel further enforces the perpetual presence of death in the black experience. However, Gaines use of the pyramid also places some positivity in death. As Egyptians placed their deceased royalty in pyramids with the belief that they may be resurrected in the afterlife, Gaines restores a nobleness and dignity to brutalized and dead black bodies through pyramidal representation. Recognizing that religion also plays a large role in the lives of African Americans, Gaines uses ziggurat shapes to represent spirituality. Whereas today ziggurats are commonly associated with tombs and death, they were actually built as temples and shrines for gods. While religion can also be a factor in identity formation, the ziggurat's placement in the final panel (where it is far away from the tree) implies that religion, at its core,

is also another influencer in the shaping of societal systems. The way we think about people and life is heavily determined by our beliefs and relationships to religion. Thus, spirituality, to a certain extent, must also be viewed with caution. Ultimately, the removal of the tree from the third panel indicates that we are all equal in our fates to live and die. In a world full of inconsistencies, injustice, and variables, life and death are the only constants that we can be certain of.

Charles Gaines' *Landscape: Assorted Trees with Regression* challenges us to rethink the social systems and structures in place, and how these systems and structures in turn affect the black experience. Using the stable nature of graphs to articulate a complex message about the unstable nature of the world, Gaines creates a paradox within his artwork that is timeless. Purposefully ambiguous, he creates a masterpiece that can be revisited again and again and can mean different things to different people. Within the context of modern African American Art, *Landscape* presents an innovative approach to portraying the black experience by forgoing depictions of black bodies and inviting audiences to make their own interpretations. Through repetition and representation of the mundane, *Landscapes* "disrupts and rearranges the way we understand and know the world."[5]

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[5] Mary Schmidt Campbell, "Foreword"