Edgar Arceneaux
The Library of Black Lies (Invisible Inner Light Beneath the Floorboards), 2017. Courtesy the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photograph by Jeff McLane

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

OPENING NIGHT PARTY
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2017, 7–10 PM
GRAND LOBBY & FIRST FLOOR GALLERIES
$12 in advance / $15 at the door / Members FREE

UNTIL, UNTIL, UNTIL . . .
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22–SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2018, 8 PM*
FIRST FLOOR GALLERIES
$20 in advance / $25 at the door
*Private performance Thursday, February 22. Exclusive to members at the Curator’s Circle level and above, and invited guests. For information about this evening, please contact Emily Lakin in YBCA’s Development Department at 415.321.1320.

ARTIST CONVERSATION:
EDGAR ARCENEAUX AND JULIAN MYERS-ZUPINSKA
FRIDAY, MARCH 16, 2018, 7–8:30 PM
YBCA SCREENING ROOM
$10

Edgar Arceneaux and critic and historian Julian Myers-Zupinska will discuss the artist’s works featured in the exhibition and their shared collaborative projects.

Edgar Arceneaux is organized by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and curated by Lucia Saucedo, director of visual arts, and Dorothy Dávila, associate director of visual arts. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) is one of the nation’s most innovative contemporary arts centers. Founded in 1993, YBCA’s mission is to generate culture that moves people. Through powerful art experiences, thoughtful and provocative content, and deep opportunities for participation, YBCA is committed to creating an inclusive culture that awakens personal and societal transformation. YBCA presents a wide variety of programming year-round, including performing arts, visual arts, film/video and civic engagement. YBCA venues include the Forum, Screening Room, Galleries and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater. For tickets and information, call 415.978.ARTS (2787).

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.
DEC 1, 2017–MAR 25, 2018
1ST FLOOR GALLERIES

YBCA Exohutions are made possible in part by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Andy Warhol Foundation, American Council of Learned Societies Public Fellows Program, Meridas Moore and Kevin King, and United Airlines. Edgar Arceneaux is supported, in part, by Susanne Velshetter Los Angeles Projects. YBCA Programs are made possible, in part, by The James Irvine Foundation. Additional Funding for YBCA Programs: National Endowment for the Arts, Abundance Foundation, Grouseon, and members of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts is grateful to the City of San Francisco for its ongoing support.

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts for the Visual Arts, Inc.

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts is grateful to the City of San Francisco for its ongoing support.

Cover image:
Edgar Arceneaux
Dr. Edgar Arceneaux is a Los Angeles-based artist whose drawings, sculptures, and films interrogate how we construct history and memory. His recent projects include the Library of Black Lies (2016) and its installation and live play (Until, Until, Until...). He explores layers of meaning and complexity of race and occlusion. Arceneaux embraces the act of recovery as a way to approach the complexities of, and revisions to, misconstrued histories.

Library of Black Lies also explores the power of occlusion by crystallizing, and thereby fragmenting and obscuring, tools to obstruct a conventional acquisition of knowledge. Mirrors within the library reflect those who are at the center of the performance and others who are viewing the library; mirrors reflect those who are looking at the library, while the complicated process unfolds and new layers of meaning and memory are created in the library itself. Library artists "contain" all truths, all identities, and infinite potential. The Library of Black Lies is an extension of the "Library of Babel." It is a library that conveys a sense of the infinite, reflecting and refracting texts and viewers. Experimenting with the library as a place of knowledge containing an infinite number of histories, Arceneaux creates a kind of Borgesian "Library of Babel." It is a library that defeats its own purpose: instead of enabling histories, it obstructs them, hiding it in a labyrinth.

Both of these works explore the concept of occlusion, a kind of blockage that prevents resolution or conclusion. With Until, Until, Until... , the artist reconstructs an original performance, in an attempt to bring back what was lost. He does this through one performance, but by blurring and layering three of them, each a distinct type: vaudeville (Bert Williams), satire (Ben Vereen as Bert Williams), and restoration (Frank Lawson as Ben Vereen). Each element repeats itself three times in the dialogue, and also in the text, and in no manner, it is not legible. The song was meant as a scathing indictment of what Vereen, having been refused service at an imaginary bar, removes from ABC's television broadcast, included a second act that was cut at a performance in London. The intent was to condemn blackface and its practice—an ambiguous decision that history and memory. His sculpture sources of knowledge, he effectively rewrites history by losing the viewer in an accumulation of its layers.

With these two works Arceneaux invests what he calls the downfall paradox, a fall from grace, represented here by two performers: Ben Vereen and Bill Cosby. Vereen's homage to Black History Month risked being misconstrued as an act of restoration. But ABC's omission of his second act prevents resolution or conclusion. Most don't remember this moment in 1981 blackface performance at President Ronald Reagan's inaugural ball, which was inspired by vaudeville legend Bert Williams. Vereen himself engaged in that same practice—an ambiguous decision that history portrays as an act of conciliatory. Only when he realized that he was adopting the tradition even as he critiqued it, did Arceneaux comment that was to condemn blackface and its associated histories, rewriting the past as an act of emancipation and reclamation. His ABC's omission of his second act resulted in Vereen's disgrace, the tarnishing of his professional reputation. "We don't remember this moment in history, so Arceneaux reflects it in the actor's makeup mirror as a reminder. Cosby plays a role in Library of Black Lies, which incorporates a number of crystallized texts by this performer who has likewise experienced an infamous fall. Once beloved as "America's favorite red-faced comic," recent allegations of sexual assault have recast the comedian as a sexual predator, prompting the public to revisit its understanding of history. Arceneaux says: "I'm thinking about the library being this place of projection and the production of certain myths." taking on the Cosby myth, he spins multiple narratives, forcing viewers to question what they know and how they know it. And yet Arceneaux's work is optimistic. While a number of blackface performances locate a space for deliverance in the middle ground between revelations, interpretations, a second act brings some measure of redemption. The historical injustice done to Vereen. The artist writes: "Knowing the hope that prolongs its resolve into some unknown future. . . ." From the "incorrigible patient of the flesh" (Adrienne Edwards) we begin yet again with hope. Collapsing and reconfiguring our understanding of the past, he invites us to imagine a more hopeful future—one where redemption is possible, truth is knowable, and history is recoverable.

Notes
1. The reference is to Jorge Luis Borges's famous 1941 short story "The Library of Babel," in which an infinite, labyrinthine library, serving as a metaphor for the universe, renders knowledge impossible.