



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
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ARTIST CONVERSATION: EDGAR ARCENEAUX AND JULIAN MYERS-SZUPINSKA

FRIDAY, MARCH 16, 2018, 7–8:30 PM
 YBCA SCREENING ROOM
 \$10

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

Cover image:
 Edgar Arceneaux
Until, Until, Until . . ., 2016. Courtesy the artist
 and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.
 Photograph by Robert Wedemeyer.

Edgar Arceneaux is organized by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and curated by Lucía Sanromán, director of visual arts, and Dorothy Dávila, associate director of visual arts.

YBCA Exhibitions are made possible in part by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Panta Rhea Foundation, American Council of Learned Societies Public Fellows Program, Meridee Moore and Kevin King, and United Airlines. *Edgar Arceneaux* is supported, in part, by Susanne Vielmetter 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, Grosvenor, 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.



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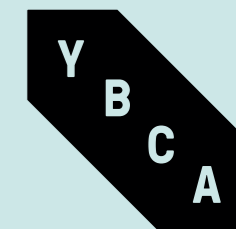
ARCENEAUX

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THE DOWNFALL PARADOX

DOROTHY DÁVILA
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF VISUAL ARTS

Edgar Arceneaux is a Los Angeles–based artist whose drawings, sculptures, and films interrogate how we construct history and memory. His sculpture *Library of Black Lies* (2016) and his installation and live play *Until, Until, Until . . .* (2015–17) both create narratives around black history that cast doubt on the possibility of trusting the historical record, and invite the viewer to unpack strata of time and space. Employing strategies such as layering, reflection, accretion, and occlusion, Arceneaux embraces the act of recovery as a way to approach the complexities of, and revisions to, misconstrued histories.

Until, Until, Until . . . involves stage props, curtains, and a projection to create a *mise-en-scène* that collapses the past—the stage setting of an original performance—and the present, in the form of that performance’s re-creation. It is based on Ben Vereen’s controversial 1981 blackface performance at President Ronald Reagan’s inaugural ball, which was inspired by vaudeville legend Bert Williams. The work shows fragments of Vereen’s original performance, which eventually become blurred beyond recognition, on a monitor that is also the reverse of the mirror on the actor’s makeup table. The full performance included a second act that was cut from ABC’s television broadcast, where Vereen, having been refused service at an imaginary bar, removes his blackface while singing Williams’s mournful dirge “Nobody.” Featuring the refrain “So until I get something from somebody, sometime / I’ll never do nothin’ for nobody, no time,” the song was meant as a scathing indictment of the conservative, mostly white gala audience.

In the gallery, translucent curtains divide the stage. On one side, the viewer watches the historical performance through the veil of time; on the other,

a projection shows Arceneaux’s 2015 play where actor Frank Lawson, playing Vereen, enacts the performance as it was originally intended. Arceneaux layers materials and histories, deploying mirrors to connect viewers and what they see. While Lawson performs his role as Vereen, who was himself performing the role of Williams, the contemporary audience is likewise standing in for the 1980s audience—both similarly indicted for their complacency in the face of racial inequality.

Complementing this work is the sculpture *Library of Black Lies*, a labyrinth where the viewer must walk a convoluted pathway that echoes the obfuscation of his or her gaze. Dozens of crystallized books—dictionaries, encyclopedias, art history tomes, books on African American history, and more—populate this maze, their texts partially or entirely obscured by sugar crystals that transform them into abstractions. Mirrors within the structure convey 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, here Arceneaux creates a kind of Borgesian “Library of Babel.”¹ It is a library that defeats its own purpose: instead of enabling knowledge, it obstructs it, hides 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 not 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 work’s title, and there is no demarcation regarding where each performance begins or ends. The three performers are in dialogue, each playing a role in history and its reconstruction.

Library of Black Lies also explores the power of occlusion by crystallizing, and thereby fragmenting and obscuring, books to obstruct a conventional acquisition of knowledge. Mirrors within the library reflect those who navigate the labyrinth, while the complicated pathways both submerge and uncover new layers of meaning frozen in the multitude of unreadable books. For the artist, libraries “contai[n] all truths, all untruths, and infinite variations upon these things. Past, present, future—all things.”² By obstructing and collapsing sources of knowledge, he effectively rewrites history by losing the viewer in an accumulation of its layers.

With these two works Arceneaux investigates what he calls the downfall paradox, a fall from grace, represented here by two performers: Ben Vereen and Bill Cosby. Vereen’s homage to Bert Williams employed the blackface of Williams’s time, the practice of the minstrel show that Cosby once called “the tradition of the lazy, stupid, crap-shooting, chicken-stealing idiot.”³ In seeking to recontextualize blackface, Vereen himself engaged in that same practice—an ambiguous decision that risked being misconstrued as an act of conceit, given that he was adopting the tradition even as he critiqued it. His intent was to condemn blackface and its associated histories, rewriting the past in an act of emancipation and reclamation. But ABC’s omission of his second act resulted in Vereen’s disgrace, the tarnishing of his professional reputation. Most 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 Dad,” recent allegations of sexual assault have recast the comedian as a sexual predator, prompting the public to revise its understanding of history. Arceneaux has said: “I’m thinking about the library being this place of projection and the production of certain myths. I see

something parallel between them.”⁴ 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 *Library of Black Lies* struggles to locate a space for deliverance in the midst of shameful revelations, *Until, Until, Until . . .* brings some measure of redemption to the historical injustice done to Vereen. The artist writes: “Knowing the entirety of the story prolongs its resolve into some unknown future. . . . From the ‘incinerated baptism of the flesh’ (Adrienne Edwards) we begin yet again with hope.”⁵ 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 story “The Library of Babel,” in which an infinite, labyrinthine library, serving as a metaphor for the universe, renders knowledge impossible.
2. Eungie Joo, “Library as Cosmos: Eungie Joo speaks with Edgar Arceneaux,” in *Lost Library: Edgar Arceneaux*, ed. Aimee Chang and Eungie Joo (Ulm, Germany: Kunstverein Ulm, 2003), 1.
3. Quoted in Claudia Roth Pierpont, *American Rhapsody: Writers, Musicians, Movie Stars, and One Great Building* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2016), 87.
4. Eungie Joo, “Library as Cosmos,” 3.
5. Edgar Arceneaux, email message, August 1, 2017. The mention of Edwards is a reference to Adrienne Edwards, “Fire This Time,” in *Edgar Arceneaux Written in Smoke and Fire*, ed. Henriette Huldish (Cambridge, MA: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2017), 87.

ARTIST BIO

Edgar Arceneaux (b. 1972, Los Angeles) is an artist working in the media of drawing, sculpture, and performance, whose works often explore connections between historical events and present-day truths. He played a seminal role in the creation of the Watts House Project, a redevelopment initiative to remodel a series of houses around the Watts Towers, serving as director from 1999 to 2012. His work has been featured at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Performa 15, New York; and the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, among other venues. Arceneaux lives and works in Pasadena, California.



Edgar Arceneaux, Detail from *Library of Black Lies*, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photograph by Robert Wedemeyer.