

*Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,  
And precipices show untrodden green.  
There is a budding morrow in midnight,  
There is triple sight in blindness keen.*

--John Keats, "To Homer," 1818

Edgar Arceneaux stands on a beach in Santa Monica, his outstretched thumb eclipsing the sun. In the projected slide series *Blocking out the Sun* which documents this action, Arceneaux's silhouetted hand inserts itself again and again into the photographic frame, obscuring the sun as it passes through the sky and sets over the ocean's horizon. In some images the artist's hand appears as the hand of God, a divine touch sparking creation ("let there be light") or imposing darkness. In others, this hand appears unavoidably human, a romantic insertion of the self into a sublime landscape. Yet Arceneaux's gesture is also directed toward more scientific ends: he mimics the practice of astronomers who hold out their thumbs, covering the sun in order to measure the clarity of the atmosphere around it and predict whether it will be a good day for solar observation. The direct perception of an object, Arceneaux suggests, may depend on its obfuscation. As in much of the artist's work, we find illumination by opening ourselves to what cannot be immediately seen or known.

*Borrowed Sun* is the name Arceneaux has given to a body of works that take the sun, the blazing star at the center of our galaxy, as their point of departure. Arceneaux's works tend to operate through a series of meandering meditations on linguistically related themes or ideas—in this case, the sun is his central metaphor—employing a variety of media, from drawings to sculpture to film and photography, to imbue those themes with a rigorous materiality and conceptual force. In this exhibition, three seemingly unrelated figures—Jazz musician Sun Ra, conceptual artist Sol Lewitt, and physicist Galileo—form a constellation that guides Arceneaux's artistic investigations. As in his past projects, Arceneaux juxtaposes disparate people and places, words and objects, that at first seem connected primarily through alliterative association and word play. Sun Ra took his name from the Egyptian sun god, Ra, Lewitt's first name is the Spanish word for sun (sol), and Galileo is famous for his observations that supported the Copernican claim that the sun, not the earth, is at the center of our universe. Yet inasmuch as linguistic permutations are central to Arceneaux's working method, his juxtapositions prove to be far from arbitrary. Taken together, they reveal unexpected correspondences, offering new ways to make sense of the world, and new modes of aesthetic experience, lifting us out of the linear thinking to which many of us are accustomed.

In *Counting from 1 to 99,999, Blind Contour Drawing*, the hand again figures prominently as an instrument of measurement. Arceneaux made a drawing of the contour of his hand blindly, looking at his outstretched hand, not at his paper. He then returned his gaze and his pencil to the paper, employing the traditional techniques of modeling that imbue a flat surface with the illusion of three-dimensionality, imparting shape and volume to muscles, joints, and veins. Yet the initial contour drawing is slightly off skew, like an automatic surrealist drawing. Combined with the subsequent graphite shading,

the flesh seems twisted, with tears at the knuckles and in the veins and folds of skin. Here two different systems of rendering the same object are superimposed, and another system, that of mathematics, is also overlaid on the hand. Numbers appear along the edges of the fingers, like some obscure anatomical diagram. In fact, they are based on a system of ancient Chinese calculation, in which one may count from 1 to 99,999 on one's fingers. For Arceneaux, 99,999 represents a threshold to infinity, but also the limit of what he as an artist is able to accomplish with his hand, or to imagine with his mind—both the primary organs of artistic creation. To emphasize this plunge into the infinite, Arceneaux draws lines extending out from the fingers, off the paper and onto the wall, pointing the viewer into the central space of the gallery.

There one finds another large-scale drawing, *Cycle a Single Moment*, based on Galileo's observation of sunspots—dark blemishes on the surface of the sun—that enabled the scientist to conclude that the sun revolved on its own axis. Though the shapes of Arceneaux's sunspots are inspired by Galileo's drawings of 1619, the artist's renderings are aided by what contemporary satellite images can now tell us—that sunspots are actually bundles of magnetic fields. Arceneaux's sunspots appear as gaseous bursts, shadowy abstract forms resembling synapses or peculiar cloud formations. Early observers believed that sunspots were the shadows of clouds or even tiny planets, and for Arceneaux these still mysterious forms represent a prime space for the projection of the imagination. Structured by concentric circles representing the periphery of the sun, Arceneaux's drawing charts the movement of the sunspots and the sun's rotation over a period of roughly a month. The drawing embodies a complex sense of time, presenting a kind of conceptual calendar in which thirty days are compressed into a single image, a single moment. Duration is further implied in the materiality of the drawing itself, which registers the temporal passage of the pencil on paper.

For his sculpture *Broken Sol*, Arceneaux “borrowed” a wall drawing from the seminal conceptual artist Sol Lewitt, specifically *Wall Drawing #295*, 1976—composed of triangles and a circle inscribed in a square drawn in white on a black ground. Lewitt is famous for his system of predetermining the procedure and the visual outcome of his drawings in the form of written instructions that can be executed by others (usually trained artists) rather than by the artist himself. Yet despite Lewitt's delegation of the installation of his drawings to others, Arceneaux's act is one of arch appropriation: lacking the instructions to the drawing, he surreptitiously snapped a photo of the drawing at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and subsequently reproduced it on a wall of cinder blocks on the lawn in front of his Pasadena home. Arceneaux had to rely on deductive reasoning to reconstruct Lewitt's conceptual drawing. Only later did he learn that Lewitt's instructions specified “six white geometric figures (outlines) superimposed on a black wall,” and that he might have chosen to draw it other than the LACMA employees had done.

Fascinated with the permutations of simple, impersonal forms such as lines and modular units, Lewitt's geometric variations often proliferate to the point of near absurdity. These “multipart pieces with regulated changes,” as Lewitt has referred to them, exhibit an apparent rationale based on predetermined, systematic, and serial execution. Though his

work was initially interpreted by many as the very embodiment of reason and mathematic precision, some critics observed that his cubic proliferations evidenced a sculptural output that had less in common with “reason” than with a spectacle of unceasing irrational production. After recreating his own Lewitt, Arceneaux disassembled the wall and reassembled the blocks in random order, so that the drawing appears as a jumble of broken arcs and lines, furthering the irrationality implicit in Lewitt’s original project.

Inside the gallery, Arceneaux projects onto his seven feet tall cinder block wall a film, *Permutation without Permission*, which documents the construction process of Arceneaux’s illicit permutation of Lewitt’s work. Shot with a camera that had only a twenty-five second motor, the film’s structure is contingent on thirteen twenty-five second intervals. Arceneaux attempts to sketch portions of the drawing in the short segments, but is often unable to complete a given line or arc in the allotted time. Each new take tracks back to the moment just before Arceneaux left off, creating a sense of repetition in the film, akin to the seriality of Lewitt’s own works. When projected in the darkness of the gallery, light passes through gaps in the stacked cinder blocks, casting rectangular rays of light onto the drawing, *Cycle a Single Moment*, which hangs on the wall behind it. Where the light is unable to permeate the cinder blocks, the film’s image is reflected back at us. One shot captures prismatic reflections of the sun on the wall, just visible at the top of a triangular point, like the sun setting over an Egyptian pyramid.

*The Immeasurable Equation* presents a deftly drafted image of Sun Ra, who appears as he does in the 1974 cult classic film *Space is the Place*, wearing an Egyptian pharaoh’s headdress crowned by a solar disk. Sun Ra floats on a translucent ground of vellum, and his lightly sketched robe seems to disappear into space, emphasizing his unearthly persona. Saturn—the planet the musician claimed as his birthplace—hovers above him, and a reproduction of Galileo’s original sun spot drawings is just visible behind him, positioned beneath the frosted vellum sheet.

A related drawing, *Place is the Space*, takes the form of a spiraling text-based work, derived from a doodled note Arceneaux made for himself while working on this project. Arceneaux enlarged the note by many times its original size, blowing up the off-hand sketch to an unexpectedly large scale, and adding radiating lines of gold paint. For the shamanistic Sun Ra, the phrase “space is the place” invoked an invitation to African Americans to journey with him to outer space, the space of the unknown, untainted by the corruption and struggles of contemporary earthly society. (In the film, Sun Ra establishes the Outer Spaceways Employment Agency in Oakland, where he interviews prospective cosmonauts.) Sun Ra viewed the blackness of space—or “the outer darkness” as he once called it—as analogous to the spirit of black people. Arceneaux’s reversal of *Space is the Place* into *Place is the Space* pays homage to the musician’s philosophy even as he rethinks its implications. Arceneaux pushes toward a model of place that encompasses space itself. One’s own place, he suggests, is the only space from which one may perceive the world. Emphasizing this point, Arceneaux adds the line “Can You Feel It?,” a 1980 song by the Jackson 5, but also a nod toward an experiential model of knowing the world that cannot be detached from the place of the body. (Philosophical considerations aside, it is worth mentioning that a video made for

“Can You Feel It?” features the Jackson brothers hovering in outer space, bringing the earth and humankind into creation through a series of starbursts, and sprinkling star dust to animate scores of adoring fans.) It should not be lost on us here that Arceneaux’s work contains a decidedly political dimension. Sun Ra’s radical pronouncements of the 1970s sit side by side with the (predominantly) white tradition of conceptual art as developed by Sol Lewitt and others at that same moment. This juxtaposition, too, alludes to what it means to navigate the social realities of lived experience.

Arceneaux’s unexpected combinations challenge our received notions of history, of time, and of space. The artist has long been interested in John Keats’s notion of “Negative Capability,” which the poet described as the ability to inhabit “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Arceneaux’s work dwells in the unknown, embracing the limits of the mind to comprehend the infinite expanse of the universe. Borrowing from the philosophical, scientific, and artistic experiments of others, he posits a productive uncertainty regarding our received understandings of the world. The sun, Arceneaux’s work may remind us, sheds light over all of us, giving us the capacity to see, yet its brilliant rays are also sometimes blinding.