New Work: Edgar Arceneaux
August 12–November 27, 2005

Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,
And precipices show un trodden 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 Blocking Out the Sun (2004), the projected slide series that 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 his hand appears as the hand of God, a divine touch sparking creation or imposing darkness. In others the hand appears unavoidably human, a romantic insertion of the self into a sublime landscape. Yet Arceneaux's gesture is also directed toward scientific ends: He mimics the practice of astronomers who cover the sun with their thumbs in order to measure the clarity of the atmosphere 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 immediately be seen or known.

Arceneaux's recent project Borrowed Sun takes the blazing star at the center of our galaxy as its point of departure. His practice tends to operate through a series of meandering meditations on linguistically related themes or ideas, and he employs a variety of media, from drawing to sculpture, film, and photography, to imbue those themes with rigorous materiality and conceptual force. In this exhibition, three seemingly unrelated figures—physicist Galileo Galilei, conceptual artist Sol LeWitt, and jazz musician Sun Ra—form a constellation that guides Arceneaux's artistic investigations. He juxtaposes disparate people and places, words and objects, that at first seem connected primarily through etymological association and wordplay. Sun Ra took his name from the Egypti an sun god; LeWitt's first name is also the Latin and Spanish word for "sun"; and Galileo is famous for supporting 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. They reveal unexpected correspondences, lifting us out of the linear thinking to which many of us are accustomed.

The large-scale drawing Cycle a Single Moment (2004) is based on Galileo's (1564–1642) observation of sunspots—dark blemishes on the surface of the sun—which led 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, the artist's renderings are aided by what contemporary satellite images can now show us. They appear as gaseous bursts—shadowy, abstract forms resembling nerve synapses or cloud formations. Early astronomers 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, the drawing charts solar rotations and the movement of sunspots over a period of roughly one month. It 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.
To make *Counting from 1 to 99,999, Blind Contour Drawing* (2004), Arceneaux first sketched the contours of his hand blindly, looking only at his outstretched fingers. He then turned his gaze to the paper, employing traditional modeling techniques to flesh out muscles, joints, and veins. After superimposing these two different systems for rendering the same object, he then introduced yet another system, that of mathematics. The numbers along the edges of the fingers refer to an ancient Chinese method of counting from one to 99,999 on one's hands. For Arceneaux, 99,999 represents a threshold to infinity as well as the limit of what he as an artist is able to accomplish with his hand or imagine with his mind. To emphasize this plunge into the infinite, lines extend out from the fingers, off the paper, and onto the gallery wall, pointing viewers into the space of the exhibition.

For his sculpture *Broken Sol* (2004), Arceneaux “borrowed” a wall drawing from LeWitt (born 1928)—specifically *Wall Drawing #295* (1976), a white-on-black composition of geometric forms inscribed in a square. LeWitt is known for predetermining the visual outcome of his wall drawings by writing instructions that can be executed by assistants rather than by the artist himself. He is fascinated by permutations of simple, impersonal forms such as lines and cubes, and his geometric variations often expand and multiply to the point of near-absurdity. Though many initially interpreted his work as the very embodiment of reason and mathematical precision, some critics have observed that his cubic proliferations evidence something more like a spectacle of unceasing, irrational production.
Despite LeWitt’s delegation to others of the installation of his wall drawings, Arceneaux’s act is one of arch appropriation. Lacking the instructions for *Wall Drawing #295*, he surreptitiously snapped a photo of the work at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and re-created it on a wall of concrete blocks on the front lawn of his Pasadena home. Arceneaux then dismantled the wall and reassembled the blocks at random, so that the original wall drawing appears as a jumble of broken arcs and lines, furthering the irrationality implicit in LeWitt’s original project.

Onto the surface of this seven-foot-tall concrete-block wall, Arceneaux projects *Permutation without Permission* (2004), a film comprising thirteen twenty-five-second intervals that document the making of *Broken Sol*. Each new take tracks back to the moment just before Arceneaux last left off drawing, producing a sense of seriality reminiscent of LeWitt’s practice. In the darkened gallery, light from the projection passes through gaps in the blocks, casting a luminous grid onto *Cycle a Single Moment*. Light becomes the mortar that holds Arceneaux’s sculpture together. One shot captures prismatic reflections that appear on the wall above the point of a triangle, like the sun setting over an Egyptian pyramid.

*The Immeasurable Equation* (2004) presents a deftly drafted likeness of Sun Ra (1914–1993) as he appears in the 1974 cult film *Space Is the Place*. The musician, costumed in an Egyptian pharaoh’s headdress crowned by a solar disk, floats on a translucent ground of vellum; his lightly sketched robe almost disappears, emphasizing his unearthly persona. Saturn, the planet he claimed as his birthplace, hovers above, and a reproduction of Galileo’s original sunspot drawings is visible behind him, positioned beneath the frosted vellum sheet.

A related text-based drawing, *Place Is the Space* (2004), plays upon the film title *Space Is the Place*: Sun Ra’s 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. Arceneaux’s reversal of the phrase pays homage to the musician’s philosophy even as it rethinks its implications, pushing toward a model of place that encompasses space itself. One’s own place, the artist suggests, is the only space from which one can perceive the world. Emphasizing this point, Arceneaux’s drawing also includes the phrase “Can you feel it?, “ a reference to the 1980 song by the Jackson 5, but also a nod toward an experiential model of perception that is inseparable from the “place” of the body. It should not be lost on us that Arceneaux’s work contains a décidély
political dimension. Sun Ra's radical pronouncements of the
1970s, for instance, sit side by side with the (predominantly)
white tradition of Conceptual art developed by LeWitt and other
artists during the same decade. This, too, alludes to what it
means to navigate the complexities of lived experience.

Arceneaux has long been interested in John Keats's concept
of negative capability, which the poet described as the ability to
inhabit "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable
reaching after fact & reason." Borrowing from philosophical,
scientific, and artistic experiments throughout history, the artist
finds unexpected affinities and poetic resonances where others
have not thought to look. His art offers new modes of aesthetic
experience, new ways to make sense of the world, even as it
embraces the mind's inability to comprehend the infinite
expanse of the universe. The sun, Arceneaux's work suggests,
sheds light over us all and gives us the capacity to see, yet its
brilliant rays are also sometimes blinding.

Jill Dawsey
Curatorial Associate, Department of Painting and Sculpture

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Edgar Arceneaux was born in 1972 in Los Angeles, where he continues to live and
work. He received a bachelor's degree in fine art from Art Center College of
Design, Pasadena, California, and a master's in fine art from California Institute of
the Arts, Valencia. Most recently, Arceneaux has had solo exhibitions at Kunst-Werke
Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles
Projects; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Kunstverein Ulm, Germany; Galerie
Kamm, Berlin; Frhrung Wiesehörfer, Cologne; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New
York; and the Project, New York. His work will be the subject of an upcoming
exhibition at the Kitchen, New York, and he will be an artist in residence at ArtSpace San
Antonio in 2006. Arceneaux's art has appeared in the group exhibitions Double
Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970 at the Contemporary Arts
Museum Houston; Quicksand at De Appel, Amsterdam; True Stories at Witte de
With, Rotterdam; Urban Aesthetics at the California African American Museum,
Los Angeles; Lateral Thinking at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego; and
One Planet under a Groove at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York.

Works in the Exhibition

**Blocking Out the Sun, 2004**
Slide projector, 16mm color slides, and concrete blocks
Dimensions variable
Collection of Stephanie and John Rubeli, Los Angeles

**Broken Sol, 2004**
Paint and chalk on concrete blocks
76 x 77 in. (193 x 195.6 cm)
Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter
Los Angeles Projects

**Counting from 1 to 99,999, Blind Contour Drawing, 2004**
Graphite, ink, and plastic strips on paper
60 x 60 in. (152.4 x 152.4 cm)
Collection of Debra and Dennis Scholl, Miami Beach, Florida

**Cycle a Single Moment, 2004**
Graphite and tape on paper
108 x 120 in. (274.3 x 304.8 cm)
Collection of Debra and Dennis Scholl, Miami Beach, Florida

**First Drawing, 2004**
Graphite, oil and acrylic paint, colored pencil on paper, glass
18 7/8 x 32 in. (47 x 81.3 cm)
Collection of Sean and Arwin Duffy, Valencia, California

**The Immeasurable Equation, 2004**
Graphite, tape, and colored paper on vellum
46 x 36 in. (116.8 x 91.4 cm)
Collection of Demetrio Kerrison, Newport Coast, California

**Permutation without Permission, 2004**
16mm color film
10:00 min. loop
Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter
Los Angeles Projects

**Place Is the Space, 2004**
Gold paint and ink on paper
67 x 60 in. (170.2 x 152.4 cm)
Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter
Los Angeles Projects

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Reverse, left to right:
**Blocking Out the Sun (detail), 2004**
**The Immeasurable Equation (detail), 2004**
**Broken Sol (detail), 2004**
**Counting from 1 to 99,999, Blind Contour Drawing (detail), 2004**

All photography by Gene Ogami, courtesy Susanne Vielmetter
Los Angeles Projects.

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Notes
1 See, for example, Wall Drawing #232: The location of a square (1975),
installed on SFMOMA's fifth floor to coincide with New Work: Edgar
Arceneaux.
2 The earliest and most important such account is Rosalind Krauss's essay
"LeWitt in Progress," in The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other
3 John Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21, 1817.