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New Work: Edgar Arceneaux

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Eye 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 *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 Egyptian 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.



Installation view of the film *Permutation without Permission* on the reverse side of *Broken Sol*, with *Cycle a Single Moment* visible at right (all works 2004)

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 decidedly



Place Is the Space, 2004

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."³ 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

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Notes

- 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*.
- The earliest and most important such account is Rosalind Krauss's essay "LeWitt in Progress," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).
- John Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21, 1817.

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; Frehrking Wiesenhäfer, 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 Artpace 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

<i>Blocking Out the Sun</i> , 2004 Slide projector, 16mm color slides, and concrete blocks Dimensions variable Collection of Stephanie and John Rubelli, Los Angeles	<i>First Drawing</i> , 2004 Graphite, oil and acrylic paint, colored pencil on paper, glass 18 1/2 x 32 in. (47 x 81.3 cm) Collection of Sean and Arwin Duffy, Valencia, California
<i>Broken Sol</i> , 2004 Paint and chalk on concrete blocks 76 x 77 in. (193 x 195.6 cm) Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects	<i>The Immeasurable Equation</i> , 2004 Graphite, tape, and colored paper on vellum 46 x 36 in. (116.8 x 91.4 cm) Collection of Demetria Kerrison, Newport Coast, California
<i>Counting from 1 to 99,999, Blind Contour Drawing</i> , 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	<i>Permutation without Permission</i> , 2004 16mm color film 10:00 min. loop Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects
<i>Cycle a Single Moment</i> , 2004 Graphite and tape on paper, graphite 108 x 120 in. (274.3 x 304.8 cm) Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects	<i>Place Is the Space</i> , 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.