

# Layers of Leimert Park

It was a Sunday in June 2014, and a parade in Leimert Park Village was almost starting. There was an array of colorful handmade costumes, prolonged prayer rituals, and men balancing a ghost ship made of fabric over their heads. The event, part of an annual Day of Ancestors celebration, was held to commemorate the bodies and spirits of Africans who died in transit during the Atlantic slave trade. The whole affair had an optimistic yet raw and unresolved energy—it was a collaborative performance by members of a community still grappling with how to define the darkest parts of their shared history. When the parade finally did start, its participants stayed together for only the length of a block, passing by a series of buildings that were still mostly nondescript but that, less than a year later, would house a new nonprofit called Art + Practice, or A+P.

A+P opened in February 2015, with a show by L.A. based Charles Gaines, an artist who concurrently exhibited his elegant, gridded conceptual work from the 1970s at the Hammer Museum. It sounds trite to say that Gaines is finally having his moment. It's more like the moment is opening up to Gaines, and the way he's skirted stereotypes over his four-decade career. (He's told stories about the surprised reactions of 1970s art worlders when they've met him in person, or about being disinvited from a gallery dinner because he was black; his systematic art hadn't *looked* black.) The text-based series he made

for the A+P show was called *Librettos*. It paired a tragic 1904 opera by Manuel de Falla called *La Vida Breve* (*Life is Short*) with 1967 speech by Civil Rights force Stokely Carmichael (originally delivered at a Seattle high school).

In the opera, an aristocrat spurns his nomadic lower-class lover, and in the speech, Carmichael talks about Black Power, self-respect, and how important—and difficult—it is to own your freedom. Gaines had Carmichael's speech printed on sheets of paper yellowed to match the original opera manuscript. The sheets hung inside specially fabricated clear Plexiglas boxes, each three inches deep and three feet wide. The opera score was printed, in red, gold, and black script, onto the surface of the boxes. Gaines lined the bars and measures of the score up as well as possible with the transcription of Carmichael's speech, so the two looked at first glance like they belonged together, which is something Gaines is good at: bringing together components that don't conventionally go together, and treating them with a seriousness that makes their togetherness seem sensible and even necessary.

All the works in *Librettos* were minimal, consistent, methodical objects, even though the content—a tragedy of classism obscuring a call for empowerment—was complicated and cacophonous. So the exhibition functioned as a carefully produced frame for grappling with complexities that are unwieldy in life and very present in the neighborhood where the work debuted.

Hammer Museum curators Anne Ellegood and Jamillah James organized *Librettos* as the museum's

Catherine Wagley writes about art and visual culture in Los Angeles. She is currently art critic for *LA Weekly* and frequently contributes to a number of other publications.



first off-site exhibition under a grant to bring programming to South L.A., a grant the museum will use specifically to help with A+P's exhibitions. With no admission fees, welcome desk, or stairs to climb, the show had none of the exclusivity of a museum space (though there was at times a suited security guard stationed outside). One of the great benefits of a local art space that's free from the established weightiness of a major institution is the increased likelihood of conversations about how artworks and art spaces relate to their actual environments. And even before this show opened, it seemed clear the exhibition's location would, or should, be key to conversations around the artwork being shown.

Leimert Park Village, a triangle-shaped collection of storefronts that all angle toward a park with a fantastically dramatic fountain, occupies an area of Los Angeles formerly known as South Central (City Council voted to change the name "South Central" to "South L.A." in 2003), but its residents openly defy South Central stigmas.

The arts have been a tool for defiance since the 1960s. "If we were going to be activists, we were going to be activists in the arena of the arts and culture," says artist John Outterbridge in Jeanette Lindsay's 2006 documentary, *Leimert Park*, talking about the feeling in the village in 1967. It was just after the Watts riots, when white flight was in full force and Leimert Park was becoming an African-American neighborhood. That year the Brockman Gallery (run by two brothers tired of the way the segregated city kept forcing artists of color to its fringes) opened in Leimert. In the nineties, legendary pianist Horace Tapscott would sometimes play at the jazz venue, The World Stage, through the night; underground hip-hop jam sessions called

Project Blowed met on the corner of Leimert and 43<sup>rd</sup> Place. Then the economic slump of the aughts tamped the neighborhood's energy, so recent announcements of a Metro stop in Leimert Park Village and A+P's grand opening seemed hopeful.

Artist Mark Bradford, best known as a painter and a 2009 recipient of the MacArthur "Genius Grant," co-founded A+P, which hosts exhibitions, an artist residency, and a mentorship program for foster youth. One of his two co-founders is philanthropist Eileen Norton—she bought Bradford's early paintings and used to get haircuts from him when he still worked part-time in his mom's Leimert beauty salon, which later became Bradford's studio and is now one of A+P's exhibition spaces. He met his other co-founder, former Mid-City neighborhood council president, Allan DiCastro (A+P's founding director) in 1997, the year he got his MFA at CalArts.

The official narrative behind A+P is that it is Bradford's way of giving back to the community; the nonprofit's stated mission is to stress "the cultural importance of art within a larger social context." Its programming, and the artists A+P has already supported, are making admirable gestures in this direction. But this narrative becomes blurry when considering A+P's role in its own specific "social context" of the Leimert Park Village, a place where the "cultural importance of art" has rarely been in question though the resources to sustain it have sometimes been scarce.

Part of the blurriness has to do with anxieties about class and gentrification, some of which are amplified by recent real estate activity in the neighborhood. A+P's founders purchased a large Art Deco building on the corner of 43<sup>rd</sup> Place and

Degnan in 2012, which will eventually be the nonprofit's main exhibition space, and also, according to public records, purchased a parcel of buildings along Degnan. Tenants in these buildings—including the World Stage and the jeweler, Sika, who have both been there for over 25 years—did not receive renewed leases and have been paying month-to-month (other tenants, like Zambezi Bazaar have moved out). Since Bradford, Norton, and diCastro opted not to comment directly on this situation, to either tenants or the press, a cloud of opacity surrounded their intentions. “Whose interests are really at stake?” asked musician J.J. Kabasa, who frequently performs at the World Stage, after asking of Gaines’ work, “Is it political?”

The work is political, even though it conveys how difficult it can be sometimes to communicate a clear political message. The context of Gaines’ work (within A+P and Leimert Park) made it more politically charged. Art always exists in loaded contexts, though, contexts we discuss with some trepidation because there are so many interests at stake: those of donors, museum administrators, curators, and artists. The interests of audiences and community members are often last on the list.

“It is a question of he who has power and he who has control. That’s all it’s about,” says Carmichael at one point during the 1967 speech that Gaines transcribed. On its own, this statement sounds straightforward enough. In Gaines work, this message is obscured by so many other details, like the overlain opera score. The measured, consistent formatting of the words tempt viewers to read them for their rhythm over their meaning. And reading them for rhythm would, ironically, resonate with what Carmichael says at one point: that

rhythm is something black Americans have a lot more of than power.

Getting to that part of the speech in the gallery setting, moving through panel by panel to read what each said, required slow progression, learning to see through the layers. Gaines’ systematic approach has always done this: made meaning-making a matter of attention rather than interpretation. In the case of *Librettos*, spending time with the work felt useful in an uncannily immediate way, like a warm-up for a walk around the block, where signs of Leimert Park’s cultural history contrast with signs of the neighborhood’s impending change.

1

Public opening of *Charles Gaines: Librettos: Stokely Carmichael/ Manuel de Falla* at Art + Practice, Los Angeles. February 28, 2015.  
Photo by Andreas Branch.

2

The A+P campus from Leimert Boulevard in Leimert Park, Los Angeles. June 16, 2015.  
Photo by Natalie Hon.