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Crowd-Pleaser: Ken Gonzales-Day Turns the Lens Inward

By Victoria Thomas for *Art and Cake* | July 20, 2026

There's something about a hanging.

Whether legal or not, the visual experience seems mythic, supernatural, theatrical, and ritualistic, versus the efficiency of a swift kill.

If local authorities greenlight the killing, it's called a hanging. If they don't, the hanging is extrajudicial, and it's called a lynching.

Anyone with even the scantiest grasp of American history will know that our country has a sordid romance with lynching — a romance which persists. And unless you're acquainted with the work of Silver Lake-based photographer and artist Ken Gonzales-Day, you only know part of the story.

When you hop the Metro D Line to the recently opened Wilshire/Fairfax station, on the Concourse Level you'll be immersed in Gonzales-Day's work in the form of *Urban Excavation: Ancestors, Avatars, Bodhisattvas, Buddhas, Casts, Copies, Deities, Figures, Funerary Objects, Gods, Guardians, Mermaids, Metaphors, Mothers, Possessions, Sages, Spirits, Symbols and Other Objects*. This installation entices riders to stop at LACMA, inspired by Gonzales-Day's glass murals featuring photographic enlargements of more than 70 objects from the Museum's diverse collections.



Ken Gonzales-Day



Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching of Leo Frank*, Atlanta, GA., 1915, *Erased Lynching Series # 2*, 2016, 4 x 6.25 in. Courtesy of the artist & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

But the lion's share of Gonzales-Day's work delivers us to a far more disturbing place: the foul rag-and-bone shop of the human heart.

In his book *Lynching in the West 1850–1935*, Gonzales-Day shifts the focus from Dixie to the American West, noting 354 cases of lynchings in California alone, the victims being Latinx, First Nations, and Asian Americans. Elements that drove these grisly public displays align with some of the forces that sparked Jim Crow lynchings in the South: isolation, poverty, and the fear that the presumed racial integrity of white Americans would be undermined — contaminated, polluted — by contact with more melanated individuals of non-European and especially non-Anglo heritage.

In the book's introduction, the author-artist states: "Part pilgrimage and part memorial, my work has taken



Ken Gonzales-Day, *East First Street #1 (Lynching of Thomas Thurmond & John Holmes, San Jose, CA 1933)*, *Erased Lynching Series # 1*, 2006, 6 x 3.6 in. Courtesy of the artist & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

me to hundreds of California's lynch sites, and no matter how pristine or developed these sites may be, my experience of the landscape has been forever transformed."

He began by photographing lynching sites in the American West, where few records remain of the atrocities. From there, he used digital tools to erase the victims from historic photos of Western lynchings, in the interest of not "re-victimizing" them for his 2006 *Erased Lynching* series.

At first, this creative choice may be puzzling: why literally erase a rare record of marginalized lives and deaths already obscured by decades of American history books? That twist, however, is the key in the lock to the artist's insight.

Gonzales-Day comments: "I would say that many of these killings were racially motivated, or impacted by the race of the person killed. It may not have been the only factor, but my research, and now the research of many others, confirms that these communities were disproportionately killed in brutal public acts, often with women and children present, that appear to share more qualities than not with those lynched in other regions of the country."

"All of these killings must also be linked to false ideas around human difference, to the displacement of indigenous peoples from their lands, to the legacies of settler colonialism, and the history of slavery, which took many forms across the Americas over centuries of time."

His altered images become mirrors in which we glimpse ourselves, whether we choose to recognize our own reflected likeness or not: "The images are all photographic but were not made in an analog or 'wet' darkroom. Some are photographs of photographs. Some are photographs of postcards. All reference the history of the photographic postcard and the terrorizing legacy of lynching postcards in particular. The images have all been digitally processed in Adobe Photoshop or other image-editing software and may represent a combination of photographic techniques within a digital workflow. Some of the images have been altered and the lynching victims and ropes have been removed to conceptually redirect the viewer's attention away from the terrorizing spectacle of lynching and death and to make tangible the complex histories of settler colonialism, systemic racism, the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow laws, anti-Semitism, and whiteness that shaped the history of lynching in the United States."

"I used Photoshop to remove the victim and the rope from each image (when present) and to alter the original historic photographic postcards or archival images of lynching and other forms of extrajudicial killings from across the West, and beyond. The final digital images were then printed and mounted on heavy card stock to replicate the materiality of historic postcards and view cards to foreground the commodification of their distribution, often via the U.S. Postal system, as is suggested by two of the images that depict the card back or area reserved for 'correspondence' on the postcard, and reveal stains, handwritten comments, and of course, the space reserved for postage."

The NAACP website states that 4,743 known lynchings took place in America between 1882 and 1968. This finding is centered in the American South and the murders of Black children, women, and men. As Gonzales-Day infers, the number can only be considered a conservative estimate, since it's likely that not every lynching made headlines.

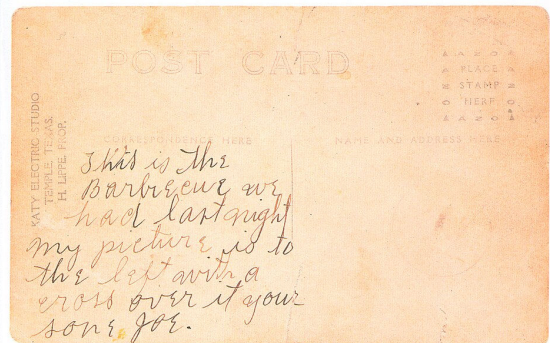
Public hangings and lynchings, like bear-baiting, bullfights, and air shows, always draw a crowd. The term "lynching" did not always refer to hanging. It was derived from a proper name — not Merrill, but Charles Lynch, an eighteenth-century Quaker minister — and "Lynch Law" originally meant punishment without a legal trial. Floggings, tar-and-feathering, and other forms of vigilantism were considered "lynchings" until the mid-nineteenth century. Less lethal forms of public shaming, including the stockade and the pillory, were in use in the colonies until the beginning of the twentieth century. With this in mind, the May 25, 2020 murder of George Floyd has correctly been labeled a lynching.

The specter of strange fruit continues to haunt Americans. In 2006, Seinfeld's beloved hipster doofus Michael Richards shocked Laugh Factory audiences when a few Black patrons dared to chat through his standup set. Recorded live, amidst a torrent of N-words, Richards barked back: "Fifty years ago, we'd have you upside down with a (expletive) fork up your ass." More recently, on January 6, 2021, rioters erected a gallows near the Capitol Reflecting Pool and threatened to hang Vice President Mike Pence. The specific nature of these threats illustrates the persistent presence of hanging and lynching in our cultural consciousness as the ultimate humiliation.

Remembered history is often incorrect. It's commonly thought that alleged witches were burned at the stake à la Joan of Arc during the Salem witch trials. In fact, witches were hanged. However, extrajudicial lynchings in the Jim Crow South included victims being burned alive in numerous documented cases. In Iran, the death penalty by hanging is routinely practiced by the Islamic Republic. Reports confirm that at least 22 political prisoners — protesters against the regime — were hanged between March 17 and April 27, 2026. Many of the hangings, which are carried out without due process, make use of construction cranes in city squares as impromptu gallows. The victims are largely members of ethnic and religious minorities such as the Baluch and Kurdish communities. Americans correctly express moral indignation, although our own hands are far from clean.

These examples underscore the ritualistic aspect of violence as political theatre. Bloodsport continues to have an audience. Current neurology research confirms that the human brain responds to violence in complex ways. Scientists call the common response "arousal" — not necessarily in the erotic sense. Myriad NIH studies document that witnessing an act of violence may suppress the regulating influence of the prefrontal cortex and deliver a powerful dopamine surge to the Nucleus Accumbens (NAcc), the hedonic reward center of the human brain.

This queasy neural cocktail of blended shock, shame, repulsion, and excitement may explain the range of expressions recorded among historic spectators of lynchings. Many face the camera with grim resolve, while others smirk. These captured responses are where the rubber meets the road for Gonzales-Day. "Lynching picnics" were common in the South. Vendors sold refreshments, and local municipalities hired professional photographers to document the event, culturally positioning the lynching as both a warning and a victory lap. These photographs were reproduced en masse as souvenir postcards, even as spectators sometimes collected pieces of the hangman's rope, tree branches from the site, pieces of the victim's clothing, and parts of the victim's body as trophies. A cannibalistic air accompanies the 1915 souvenir postcard of the lynching and burning of William Stanley in Temple, Texas. An attendee named



Ken Gonzales-Day, 'Executing Bandits in Mexico,' n.d., Erased Lynching Series # 1, 2006, 6 x 3.6 in. Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.

Joe Meyers sent a postcard to his parents depicting Stanley's charred corpse with the inscription 'This is the Barbecue we had last night.'

Some existing images, like the erasures of Gonzales-Day, focus not upon the victim but upon those who came for the spectacle. The 1909 lynching of William James in Cairo, IL reportedly drew more than 10,000 spectators, and James himself is lost in the extant photograph of the enormous crowd out for a good time.



Ken Gonzales-Day, *The unsolved case of 'Spanish Charlie.'*, 2015, 36 x 47 in. Courtesy of the artist & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

The genius of Gonzales-Day's work in this vein is the banality of everyday evil. Few are wild-eyed. They look to be, in a word, normal. They look like anyone might look in a small town of families, neighbors, and churchgoers a few generations ago, just plain ol' folks. Fans of Woody Guthrie will be horrified to learn that lynching tarnishes the legacy of even our nation's most beloved gee-tar-strummin' hard traveller.

Charlie, Woody's father, reportedly joined a self-appointed posse of KKK members and other men who busted into the Okemah, OK county jail late in the night of May 25, 1911. An African American mother and her fourteen-year-old son, Laura and L.D. Nelson, were awaiting arraignment there for the shooting of a deputy over a stolen cow. The mob seized mother and son during the night. By dawn, hundreds of spectators had gathered on the nearby bridge that spanned the North Canadian River. Mother and son were hanged from the bridge. When TIME magazine columnist Joe Klein interviewed Charlie Guthrie's brother Claude in 1977 for his book *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (1980), Claude said: "I just kind of laughed. I knew darn well that rascal was — I knew he was in on it."

Fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was lynched on August 28, 1955, and seven decades later his name was attached to groundbreaking legislation. On March 29, 2022, President Joe Biden signed the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act into law, which now classifies lynching as a federal hate crime.

This body of work by Gonzales-Day steps into the hotly contested territory of atrocity photography and interrogates the narrative of visual ethics. Through the permanency of the captured image, violent recent history continues to burn in our collective memory long after we avert our eyes. In our era, literally thousands of brutal images confront us constantly. Some caution that this exposure threatens us with

desensitization, adding further poignancy to Gonzales-Day's practice of removing the victim from the image.

A devastating image from more than a century ago, when camera technology was still new, was taken by missionary-activist Alice Seeley Harris in what was then called the Belgian Congo, ravaged by King Leopold II for rubber to feed the booming automobile tire industry. The image shows a man known as Nsala of Wala contemplating the severed hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter. Harris' photograph and the global outrage it triggered forced Leopold to surrender control of the state in 1908.

A Pulitzer Prize was awarded to AP photojournalist Eddie Adams in 1969 for his photograph taken during the Tet offensive, now known as *Saigon Execution*. The image is cited as one of the cultural artifacts that swayed public opinion against the Vietnam War.

In 1994, photographer Kevin Carter also received a Pulitzer Prize for his photograph taken in famine-ravaged Sudan in 1993. Carter took his own life at age thirty-three, just four months after receiving the Pulitzer.

In her *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag opined that photos like those above should only be shared with people who "can do something about it...The rest of us are voyeurs, whether we mean to be or not."

For once, Sontag gets it wrong. What these historic photographs, including the work of Ken Gonzales-Day, insist is that we, as viewers — whether we witness the violence in situ or via reproduced images — are the ones who can and must "do something about it."

The most condemning counterpoint is the statement made by Mamie Till-Bradley of Money, Mississippi, mother of Emmett Till, about her decision to present her mutilated son in an open-casket funeral. After hours of brutality, Emmett Till's killers forced him to carry a seventy-five-pound cotton gin fan to the bank of the Tallahatchie River, secured the weight around his neck with barbed wire, shot him, and pushed him into the water where he was found three days later.

The boy's mother refused to allow the funeral director to make any attempt to alter her son's appearance. She said: "Let the world see what I've seen...I want the world to see what they did to my baby...There's no way I could tell this story and give them the visual picture of what my son looked like. I want the whole world to see this."

The last legal, public execution in the US took place in 1936, but lynchings of various, sometimes subtler forms persist. As witnesses, we are complicit and accountable. To quote Walt Kelly: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Further Reading:

Jim Crow Museum: jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu

A Man Was Lynched Today: lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/NAACP

on Lynchings in America: naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america

Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West 1850–1935*: kengonzalesday.com/publications/lynching-in-the-west-1850-1935/

About the Metro Installation: luisdejesus.com