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Ken Gonzales-Day

Hang Trees

front cover: **Nightfall** 2006 60 x 75 inches chromogenic print

PROJECT SERIES 30 **POMONA COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART**

Ken Gonzales-Day

Hang Trees

September 10 –
October 22, 2006

FOREWORD

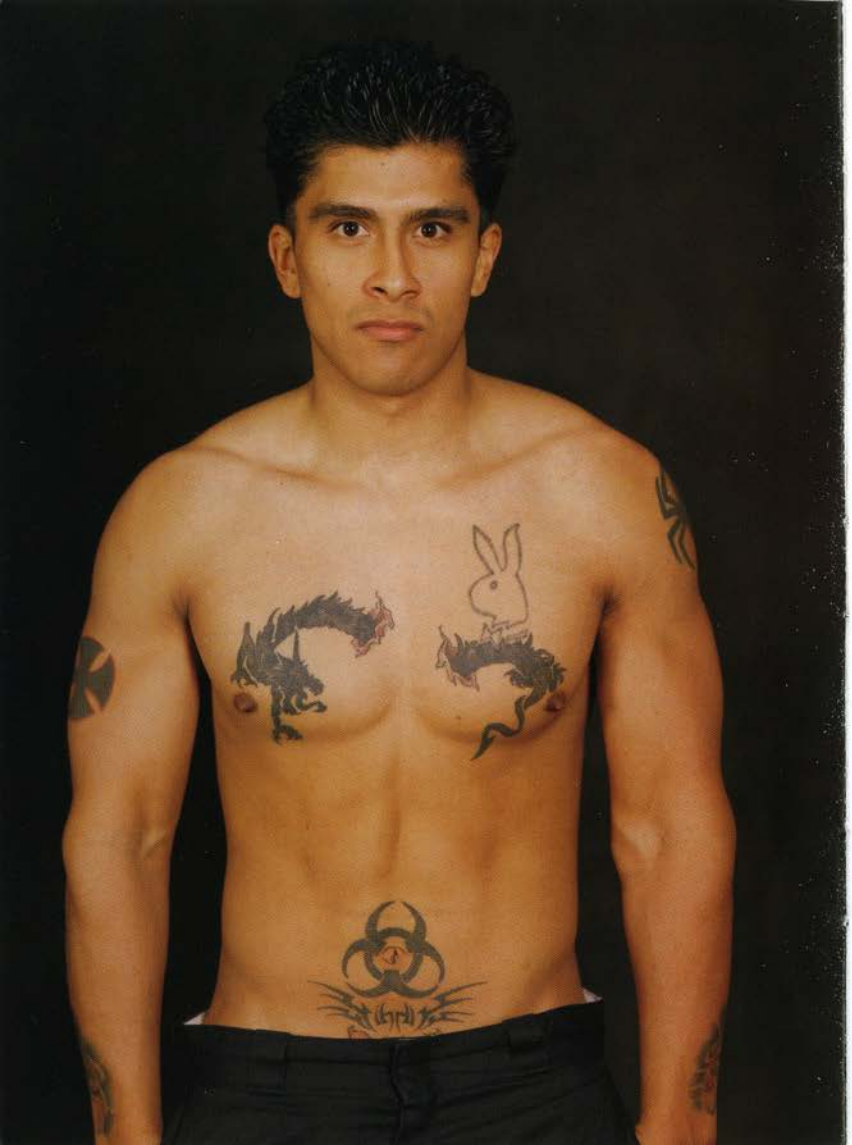
The Pomona College Museum of Art is pleased to present this publication on the occasion of Ken Gonzales-Day's exhibition at Pomona College. The exhibition includes new photographs from three related bodies of work, all connected through Gonzales-Day's investigations into the representation of, and, more significantly, the absence of representations of Latinos in the documented history of the American West. For the past five years, Gonzales-Day has explored, with a variety of strategies, the history of lynching in California.

His current project began five years ago as a photographic study of Latino portraits from 1850 to 1900 in California. During his research, he discovered that the earliest photographs of Latinos he found were of living criminals condemned to die, and later of lynched victims — the latter images widely disseminated on postcards that documented the executions. Thus began the artistic process and the scholarly research that culminated in both the works on view in this exhibition, and in a book to be published this fall from Duke University Press, *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935*.

"Ken Gonzales-Day Hang Trees" brings together images from three series: digitally altered historical postcards of lynchings in which the victim has been erased; photographs of lynching trees presented in the classic tradition of landscape photography — the "Hang Trees;" and the newest work, photographic portraits of Latino men that evocatively resist the erasure of the Latino subject. As an artist, photographer, and scholar, Gonzales-Day traveled to and photographed as many sites of lynchings as he could. He describes his work in the introduction to *Lynching in the West*, "I retraced the steps of the lynch mob and vigilance committee and these photographs have become an irrefutable record of my journey. Standing at these sites, even the most beautiful landscape is un-done... the photographs have come to symbolize points of resistance in a vast landscape...I have documented the empty space that lies between the historically unseen body of the lynch victim and my own unseen body." Gonzales-Day's complex project corrects the historical record, reveals this tragic history to the public, and acknowledges and memorializes the victims by addressing the legacy of violence and terror experienced by racial communities in the American West.

Gonzales-Day's exhibition is the thirtieth in the Pomona College Museum of Art's Project Series, an ongoing program of focused exhibitions that brings to the Pomona College campus art that is experimental and that introduces new forms, techniques, or concepts. I am grateful to Ken for his intelligent and elegant work; to Jaeger Smith for the catalogue design; to Kathleen Howe and Jill Walker Robinson for careful editing; to Pomona College Museum of Art Advisory Committee member Sarah Miller Meigs and the Pasadena Art Alliance for their support of the Project Series; to Maria Torres, Dean of Students at the Chicano/Latino Student Affairs Center, for sponsoring a talk and reading by the artist in conjunction with the Latino Heritage Month celebration; and to the staff of the Pomona College Museum of Art for their support throughout the planning of the exhibition.

Rebecca McGrew, curator



Anthony
2006 60 x 45 inches
chromogenic print

"With none but the omnipresent stars to witness": Ken Gonzales-Day's Hang Trees

by RITA GONZALEZ

In 1908 the United States Postal Service banned the mailing of lynching images. Photographs of lynchings taken with a cutthroat entrepreneurial savvy by professionals and amateurs had grown rapidly in popularity and circulated broadly alongside souvenir postcard images of world expositions, buildings, and peaceful promenades.[1] But the early use of these cards to circulate the documentation of such heinous and violent acts is startling when one considers that the format for the postcard (frontal imagery and a divided back for text) had been endorsed by the postal service only two years prior. Almost one hundred years later, the artist and writer Ken Gonzales-Day is re-circulating these cards, but in his series of *Erased Lynchings*, it is that which is excised and re-circulated that haunts and challenges the contemporary viewer.

Gonzales-Day has consistently been concerned with the relocation of history into the present.[2] His pursuit of historical materials is steeped in the conscientious considerations of historiography but shaped by

both deluxe edition photography book and dramatically designed exhibition); the photographs had been decontextualized (especially when encountered on a coffee table); and the images had been commercialized. It was around this moment of intensified debate about the legacy of racialized violence that Gonzales-Day began his research into the extralegal practice of lynching in California.

Gonzales-Day's exhibition for the Pomona College Museum of Art features three strands that emanate from his scholarly research: the documentation of "Hang Trees" which he began in 2002; the "erased lynching" postcards which are digitally manipulated and printed to mimic their original format; and a new series of portraits that is loosely and evocatively related to the themes of embodiment and disembodiment in photography.

The "Hang Trees" series involved the performance of the photographic encounter within the landscape. Gonzales-Day's images are above all about the trajectory of the image — and in this case, the trajectory of the photographer with large-format Deardorff camera is part and parcel of the traffic of the image. How did this (type of) image come to be placed before us? Rather than a spectatorial encounter drowning in affect that renders one speechless ("without sanctuary"), we are left in a space that opens up a dialogue with the visual and textual forms of historical address.

In looking at images of frontier masculinity in the West, the photographic typologies of mastery, dominance, and submission are clear. Whether these images occur in the classic western or in images of vigilantism, the facts of racialized violence are portrayed in strikingly similar — and enduring ways. After dealing with the legacy of violence in California through erasure and palpable absence, Gonzales-Day is returning to re-embodying the figure. The artist began to experiment with images that pushed the associations between lynching and torture imagery with images of sexuality and power. As Susan Sontag once noted, "All images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic."[4] In looking for a way to deal with gender and sexuality in the spectatorship of brown bodies, Gonzales-Day is interested in reinserting (and reasserting) the body in photography of Latino masculinity in the American West.

Gonzales-Day's image, *Anthony* (2006), performs a complex dialogue with the images of brown and black masculinity in the West — and not just the images of its victimization. The portrait calls to mind *In the American West*, a photographic journey undertaken by Richard Avedon with his own Deardorff from 1979-1984.[5] Going through those images of ranch hands, drifters, members of the Loretta Lynn fan club, oilfield workers, mental patients, and migrant workers, one is struck by Avedon's selection of subjects and his own desire to depict the westerner as outsider. Perhaps one of the most sexualized of his photographic subjects is *Juan Patricio Lobato, Carney*. Lobato

the associative and eclectic forms of contemporary art. Not merely an exercise in revisionist history, Gonzales-Day's work has been sustained by an open-ended and phenomenological yearning, not for any one historical truth but for a layered and even poetic understanding of the past — the past as absence and as presence. For the Pomona College Museum of Art Project Series 30, "Ken Gonzales-Day Hang Trees," the artist is exhibiting photographs that engage in a dialogue with the well-trafficked traditions of landscape and auteur

With none but the omnipresent stars to witness
2004 36 x 46 inches
chromogenic print mounted on aluminum

images of the West, as well as the vast trove of vernacular images that document an unacknowledged facet of American history.

The historical framing of lynching has created a polarized racial narrative for the most part along a black/white binary. The challenge of undertaking a book and photographic series to address the multiple narratives left out of this construction through an examination of the history of lynching in California certainly runs many risks, especially in this moment of racial, cultural, and class discord. Certainly, Gonzales-Day runs the risk of downplaying the horrors of white on black violence and diminishing the aftereffects of lynching in the South. However, his is a multi-faceted approach to history in that he is attempting to clarify the historical record *and* to amplify the ways in which we approach and engage historical narratives.

The images of lynching that once circulated legally — and then through a widespread underground network — came back into popular consciousness most recently with the 2000 publication and subsequent exhibition of images from the private collection of antiquarian James Allen. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*[3] featured mass-reproduced postcards and personal snapshots collected by Allen. The accumulation of these atrocious cultural artifacts and their contextualization was the subject of intense critical debate. Criticism was leveled on a number of counts: the images had been dangerously circulated in a highly seductive format (in

is pictured in a tight-fitting black T-shirt worn with the front pulled behind his neck to expose his jutting torso where packs of cigarettes (Lucky Strikes?) have been tucked into his black jeans.

Feminist and queer portraiture set out to explode the radioactive history of inventorying/quantifying long associated with scientific collection and conscription, as well as modernism's distanced lust for the other. Just as Gonzales-Day activates the latent dissonance of the bucolic landscape in his portraits of hang trees, so too does he mobilize or queer the portraiture of brown masculinity in the West. Thus, a project that began with elucidating regional historical inaccuracies has evolved in unexpected ways — through the choreography of erasure (in the *Hang Trees* and *Erased Lynchings*) to the making visible of the authorial conceits so critical to the fabrication of the American West.

Rita Gonzalez is Assistant Curator in the American Art Department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

1 Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob.* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004).
2 Jennifer Sternad Flores, "An Interview with Ken Gonzales-Day," in *The Harvard Advocate* (Summer 2004) 33.
3 James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America.* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000).
4 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others.* (New York: Picador, 2003) 95.
5 Richard Avedon, *In the American West: 1979-1984.* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985).

previous page: **Now he swings on a tree, two doors down from where I write**
2004 36 x 46 inches
chromogenic print mounted on aluminum

Oak with bird
2006 36 x 46 inches
chromogenic print mounted on aluminum

Lynching in the West: Los Angeles Downtown Walking Tour

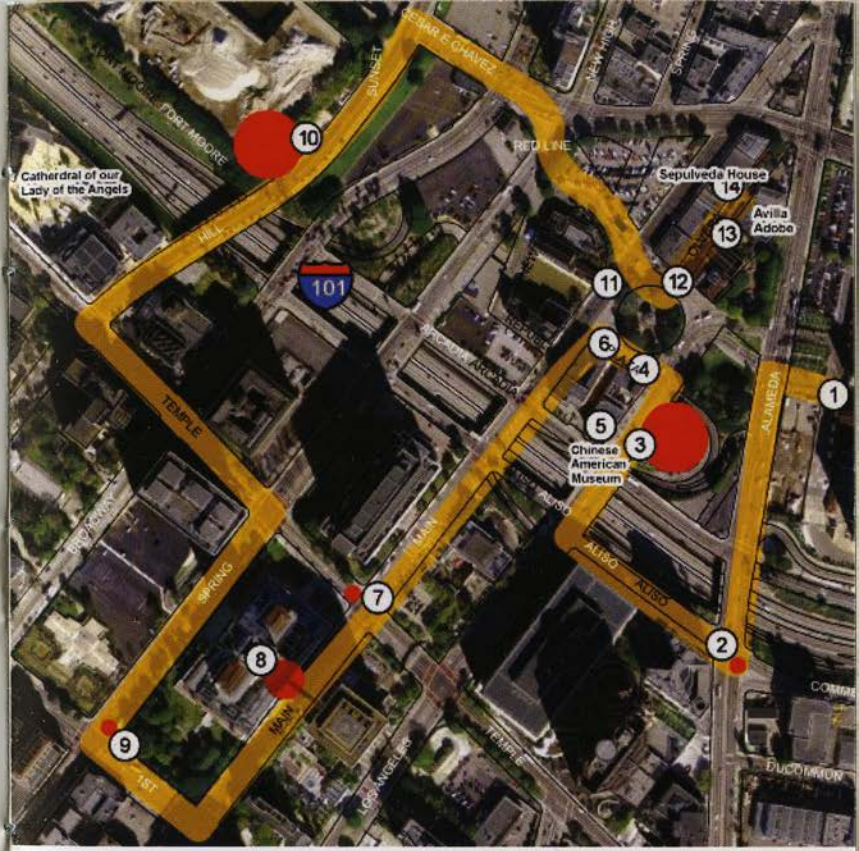
by KEN GONZALES-DAY

Introduction:

This walking tour revisits places and events made infamous in the first decades of the city — a period that was colored by great social, economic, and cultural unrest. The modern city has erased much of this past, but there are still places where the old city can be found, and like a war-torn battlefield, it demands recognition for its dead.

The Tongva tribe, later called the *Gabrieliños*, inhabited the region for over a thousand years. The combined Spanish and Mexican periods (1769 - 1850) did not even last a century. In the 1850s, the dirt roads leading out of the old Spanish plaza were still lined with many of the same adobe homes and families that had built them. In these early days, the plaza was little more than a dusty patch of land whose presence was intended to symbolize civilization more than embody it. Surrounded by prominent Latino families and some of the city's most successful entrepreneurs from Europe and the "States," it remained the city's center until the 1870s when, from such noble beginnings, these same streets would house brothels, bars, and Chinese gambling houses. Race hatred would also mark the city's first decades as cultural tensions, crime, and a fledgling legal system would each inflame and infect the plaza square.

Even in the 1850s, as visitors flooded into the Bella Union Hotel to dine on a bear that had been killed in the nearby San Gabriel Mountains, others made their way to the Montgomery Saloon where Anglos crowded



1. **Union Station**
2. **Aliso Street**
3. **Chinese Massacre of 1871**
4. **Firehouse**
5. **Chinese American Museum**
6. **Pico House**
7. **Tomlinson & Griffith Corral**
8. **Main Street**
9. **City Hall**
10. **Fort Moore Pioneer Memorial**
11. **Plaza Church**
12. **Olvera Street**
13. **Avila House**
14. **Sepulveda House**

in to get a glimpse at a rare necklace. The necklace was made of human ears that had once belonged to some of the regions most notorious Latino bandits. The necklace's maker remains a subject of historical debate, but one can be certain that in such fierce times, no person of Mexican or Latin American descent would have risked entering an establishment where the bloody gleam of such jewels was admired. Each of these buildings stood near the intersection of Main and Arcadia streets.

Getting There:

One can get to Union Station by any number of methods including bus lines, Metro's Red Line subway station, the Gold Line light rail, and Amtrak and Metrolink trains. Once there, you can walk or take DASH shuttles to many parts of downtown.

The Tour:

This self-guided tour begins at Union Station. Once known as the Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal, it is located at 800 N. Alameda Avenue in downtown Los Angeles **(1)**. The father and son team of John and Donald B. Parkinson designed this landmark building. It opened its doors in 1939 and is now on the National Register of Historic Places. Its design is as remarkable as the city itself, blending the Spanish Colonial, Mission Revival, and Streamline Moderne styles with Moorish elements.

Exiting Union Station you will immediately see the old plaza. Take a sharp left at Alameda and go south one block to Aliso Street **(2)**. This is the site where in 1861 an angry mob dragged Francisco Cota up from lower Alameda, repeatedly stabbing him before they hanged him in the vicinity of this intersection. He was fifteen years old and had killed Frau Leck, a local shopkeeper.

Return to Union Station, cross the street, and head to the small park next to, of all things, the entrance to the Hollywood Freeway — hardly a hollowed end for the site of the city's most notorious mass lynching **(3)**. Known as the Chinese Massacre of 1871, 18-24 Chinese men died here at the hands of a mob of over 300 Anglos and Latinos. The struggle lasted well into the night and when it was over at least fourteen men (and one boy) were lynched to anything that would hold the weight of a man. The original site was known as *Calles des Negros* or "Nigger Alley" but it was eliminated when Los Angeles Street was extended — and further altered by the construction of the 101 freeway through downtown Los Angeles.

As you continue walking around the southern perimeter of the plaza you will encounter the city's first firehouse at 126 Plaza Street **(4)**. This structure dates back to 1884 and is open to the public. The Chinese American Museum is around the corner at 425 N. Los Angeles **(5)**, and the Pico House is just up the street at 430 N. Main **(6)**. It was built in 1869 and was the city's finest hotel. Its demise can be linked to shaky lending practices more than to its popularity. Connected to the Merced theater (1869) at 420 N. Main, the Pico House offered guests easy access to a late night supper of oysters and imported wine and practically guaranteed a celebrity sighting. In the 1860s, the city was hit with a massive drought that ended the days of cattle and ushered in an agricultural revolution of sheep herding, citrus groves, almond orchards, and vineyards.

Turning left onto Main, continue to Temple Street. This corner is near the original location of the Tomlinson & Griffith corral **(7)**. The high beam of its gate, and an angry mob, claimed the life of Michael Lachenais in 1870. Some historians have argued that as many as a half-dozen died at this site. Continue down Main and stop mid-block **(8)**. This was the approximate location of the city's first courthouse and no fewer than

seven men were summarily hanged or lynched in its shadow: David Brown (1855); Thomas the "Indian" (1860); Eli Chase, Boston Daimwood, José Olivas, "Wood," and "Ybarra" (1863). Today, City Hall stands atop the actual site. Continue down Main to First Street, and turn right. At the end of the block you will see Spring Street. Banning's corral gate was located on a part of Spring that now lies buried under City Hall **(9)**. This was where Charles Wilkins was lynched in 1863.

Turn right on Spring and continue north to Temple Street. Turn left on Temple and right on Hill Street. Cross over the freeway and the Fort Moore Pioneer Memorial will be visible to your left **(10)**. Once there, you can walk up the stairs to the top and you will be able to share the same view witnessed by at least nine men who were legally executed, and an additional seven who were lynched before the gathered citizenry: Doroteo Zabaleta, Cipriano Sandoval, and "Baramus" in 1852; Juan Flores in 1857; and Pancho Daniel in 1858. All seven of these men were of Mexican or Latin American descent, and the last two lynchings drew crowds that may have numbered in the thousands.

Continue north on Hill and turn right at Cesar Chavez Avenue. This will lead you back to the old plaza where you will pass the Plaza Church **(11)**. Continue into the plaza and you will see the entrance to Olvera Street on your right **(12)**.

The plaza has changed quite a bit since 1850 but there are places where the old city seeps out from between the cracks of this paved metropolis. In the earliest days of the city this plaza served as a bullring, a parade ground for Commodore Stockton's troops, and a dusty oval that housed the city's first water tower. Its current configuration is no less remarkable. Christine Sterling (1882-1963) had a passion for the city's past, and in the 1920s she waged a personal battle to save this historic street.

Olvera Street:

Wine Street was renamed Olvera Street in memory of the first County Judge, Agustin Olvera (d.1876) in 1877. He lived on this narrow little street, which still contains one of the oldest houses in Los Angeles. The Olvera home has long since returned to the earth from which its adobe bricks were made, but the Avila House (1818) is still standing and open to the public **(13)**. Other historic buildings include the Pelanconi House (1855) and the Sepulveda House (1887) at 622 N. Main **(14)**. This is the last stop on the tour.

Having witnessed this turbulent past, the hungry (and thirsty) explorer may wish to end their trip by visiting some of the many shops and restaurants on Olvera Street. Whether sipping an oversized margarita at La Golondrina (inside the Pelanconi House since the 1930s) or taking a rest under the massive plaza tree, I hope that you will agree that walking in the footsteps of the condemned cannot be easily forgotten. Los Angeles has always been a city of dreams, of flesh, and bone.

For more on the history of lynching in California, see *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935* (Duke University Press, 2006)

Other self-guided tours available at:
http://olvera-street.com/html/olvera_street.html
http://www.visitlittletokyo.com/
http://www.experiencela.com/MA_Chinatown.htm
http://www.laconservancy.org/

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"Project Series 30: Ken Gonzales-Day Hang Trees"

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POST CARD

CORRESPONDENCE | ADDRESS ONLY

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LYNCHING
1933

GONZALES-DAY
LA, CA

Searching for California's Hang Trees

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