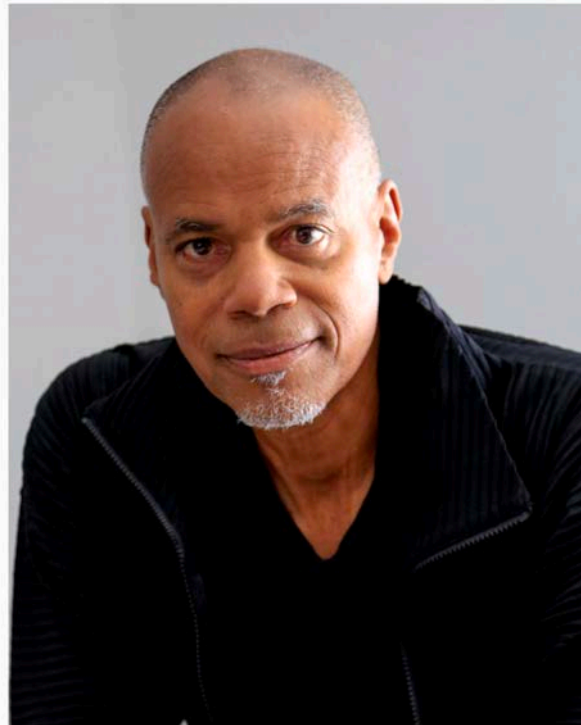


# MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

## OCT 26 TODD GRAY: CELESTIAL SEDUCTION

ISSUE 26, INTERVIEW



Portrait courtesy of Todd Gray Studio.

**TERRENCE PHEARSE:** *How did your early commercial work lead to the work you make today?*

**TODD GRAY:** So I was already shooting album covers and musicians before I went to CalArts. When I was in high school I shot my first album cover. That was published in *Life* magazine. It was a picture I took of Mick Jagger. I would do commercial work so I could buy time for myself to do my own work. So I could bank up, not have to work for a month or six weeks or something, work on something, and then get on the phone and get jobs again. I was doing that for 10 years or more. So I went to grad school and studied with Allan Sekula. He had a huge, huge effect on me. I mean, Allan Sekula turned me on to my Blackness and turned me on to the fact that I had a colonized mind. By simply giving me a reading list with Fanon, Foucault, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, bell hooks and on and on. As you know, Allan Sekula's practice is based on the archive.

**TERRENCE:** Right. I remember the essay: *"The Body and The Archive."*

**TODD:** Cathy Opie and Lyle Ashton Harris were in my class. Really great classmates. They happened to find out or mention that I was Michael Jackson's personal photographer, like, a few years past. She mentioned that to Allan. Allan just said I needed to dive into my Jackson archive and do something on race, class, gender, and do a project. So that was the first time I actually looked at my archive as having value that I could go and extract and make art from and create meaning that's outside of the mercantile. I realize that the commercial work I've done is culture also. And then 10 or so years ago I was in conversation with a couple of artists and they turned me on to the Jamaican theorist from London.



Todd Gray, *Study (Berlin Conference/Cosmic Shaman)*, 2021



Todd Gray, *Slipping into Darkness, All the Honey Gone*, 2018

**TERRENCE:** Oh, *Stuart Hall*.

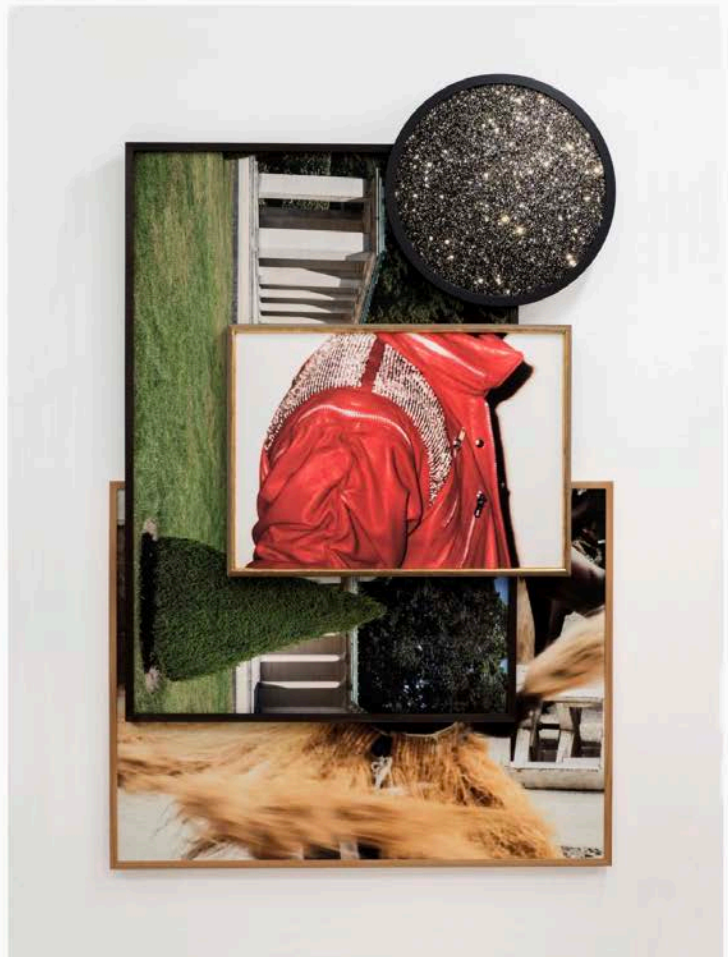
**TODD:** Thank you — turned me on to Stuart Hall. After reading Stuart Hall, I decided to jump back in and position the work and use the most identifiable Black man in the world, which is Michael Jackson. I don't even have to say that, the most identifiable man in the world period. But position him in the African diaspora. My wife and I had a home in Ghana since 2006 or 2007. So I started combining my archive that I made there with my archive of Michael. And that's how the current work came about, where I'm putting photographs on top of photographs. And basically, that's from reading Stuart Hall, which is to always question normativity. And normativity basically is a way that hegemony maintains order and maintains your subject-hood.

**TERRENCE:** How did you implement what you read from *Stuart Hall* into your photographic practice?

**TODD:** I decided to question everything that I thought was a norm in photography. I was trained as a photo-based artist. So I decided to go against the grain and just break all these rules. I thought about Michael's immense creativity and genius. And I thought, he's not from this planet. And that made me think of Sun Ra who always said he came from Saturn as a way to exorcise the trauma of Jim Crow and the racist violence that he witnessed and was subject to. So I thought, well, Sun Ra came from Saturn, maybe Michael's celestial too because of his gifts. And that's when I decided to start using references of the galaxy and things like that. I was using images of gangsters and gangbangers that I had photographed on the "Beat It" video. And I would use celestial images with them. Because for me, it was a way to say, hey, you know, there's infinite possibility, but look at the least amount of options that Black people have. We live in this universe that has infinite possibility, yet how is it that it's still contained? That was my way of inferring that it's systemic — it's an illusion that it's equal, that there's infinite possibility. It was a critique, saying, yeah, there is infinite possibility.

**TERRENCE:** *Your photo assemblages engage with themes of colonialism, slavery and the African diaspora. What comes first? A concept or photographs from your archive?*

**TODD:** After I received my Guggenheim Fellowship in 2018 to photograph European imperial gardens, where the owners enrich themselves through the slave trade or their colonization of Africa, and then combined those with images of African landscape and African people. I was putting those together, and it was so direct — the logic was so strong, I felt that I needed to open the work up so that there would be more possibilities. So that's when I thought, "I'm going to use this image of the cosmos," because what it also does, it signifies different things for me, as the work is developed. When I was doing some of the Guggenheim work, which was called *Euclidean Gris Gris*, that work opened up the possibility of hubris. We're this infinitesimally small item in this vast universe. And so I liked putting that in there so that the work could open up. There's more when you look at it, and then you can make the logic. A viewer may see the relationship of the garden, how it represents



Todd Gray, *Euclidean Gris Gris (2)*, 2018



thinking, logic, and Western ideology. And then these, this whole idea of Africa, African people's control, but then when you put a celestial body in there. You have to pause because now you have another part of the equation. And I'm hoping that it causes one to rethink and reconsider so that the work stays fresh, you can come at it from different points. There was a work that's in the Wadsworth Atheneum Collection. I had these African women who'd just come from a funeral in a picture. I wanted to put the spirit in there. So I put them adjacent to a galaxy. So it almost appears like they're coming out of the galaxy with this reference. It opens up the image, and it gives it a broader emotional palette.

**TERRENCE:** *How do you use the lens of race, class, and colonialism to challenge the binaries of the past and present?*

**TODD:** I think I use the whole idea of challenging normativity, because I think normativity enforces all of those paradigms. Photography is overwhelmingly rectilinear. Here I am introducing ovals and circles and curves and so forth and putting them on top of each other to challenge normativity, because I think that all comes back to not questioning. So the photographs I use by juxtaposing signifiers of the West, signifiers of colonization, signifiers of African diaspora, turn photography on its head to show that I am raising questions. So what I try to do is to raise questions, because by questioning normativity, we then have the option of thinking of a different way, of another possibility. I'm using my imagination as much as I can. And I'm using signifiers of these binaries. But then I have them collide, by putting them in unsettling juxtapositions. Photography warmly posits a statement as a fact. I use photography to posit a question. So therefore, the viewer is not given a statement. They are given a question that they must answer. And hence, I'm hoping that I'm encouraging them to think critically, to rethink what they're looking at. And by rethinking, other possibilities may enter into their imagination or the meaning of what they're looking at.



Todd Gray, *Opposite: Eyo Walker, Versailles*, 2020.

**TERRENCE:** *What is the relevance of the way you frame your work?*

**TODD:** Simply by the act of framing, it's excluding a lot of information. And therefore, it's not as objective as we think it is. Because we have no idea of what's outside of the frame, but we accept it, because that's how we have been culturalized. So what I'm doing is I'm actually covering up portions of the image with another frame so that you are not given that information. And you see that a photograph is built. It's a constructed object. I want to bring some light that it's a construct. When I begin a series, I go to thrift stores and garage sales. I've gone to Soweto, Johannesburg and predominantly South LA. And I get frames that once were in homes and on walls of people of color. Now I'm bringing frames with their history, with their signifier of class. And I'm putting them in a white cube, and they're going to museums. Here you don't have those signifiers and they're containing the work. That's sort of important because then that raises the question what is it doing there and how come it's not just the beautiful pine frame? That came from Bachelard's, *The Poetics of Space*, where

he says every item has a history and a memory. In one exhibition, some people were saying, "Oh, man, my grandmother has that frame with my diploma in it." I mean, I heard somebody say it and they brought their story to it. It created an entry point for a lot of viewers.

**TERRENCE:** *You mentioned Ghana earlier. When did you first go to Ghana? Then talk to us about the work you are doing in Ghana with Sedabuda.*

**TODD:** I originally went to Ghana with Stevie Wonder to shoot his album cover in 1992 and he was saying, oh, this is where we're from because of the Atlantic cross. Then I was in an exhibition that Deb Willis curated at the Goethe-Institut because NYU opened up a campus there. I was on sabbatical because I was a professor of photography at Cal State Long Beach at that time. I just remembered what Stevie had said that this is where we're from. So I traveled around. I found this beautiful spot of three acres on a beach and had a grant. I used my grant money then my wife and I pooled our resources, bought it and started building. And so I did it as a way to return — sort of this romantic notion of returning to Africa, which is really fraught with complexity and contradiction. We built an adobe home with 15 villagers. Let's see who's been there, Kenturah Davis has been there. Lisa Soto and April Bey to



name a few. Sedabuda is a very casual residency by a fishing village. We only got electricity two years ago, so it's really like glamping. But it's really a place to read, think and be in the rhythm of nature.



Todd Gray, *Slipping into Darkness, All the Honey Gone*, 2018

**TERRENCE:** *How do you think about space—social, physical, psychic—as an artist in your methodology?*

**TODD:** I think about both space and temporality—space and time. Oftentimes, I will enclose space so it's contained and compressed, so that the viewer can feel a certain amount of tension. And then, I may use a celestial image for release. So that when your eye is going around, the frame may be so compressed that you will want to pause in the celestial bodies. Then at that point, you can think, rest, other ideas can come into play, or you can try to make meaning. I like to have a certain amount of intensity or visual energy. When I'm constructing these photo sculptures or collaging them together, I just know there's a need to have a resting point. And the celestial body works that way. It's infinite. And it's something that a viewer, there's

a... certitude or certainty. They know what they're looking at. And they will have their own narrative. It gives them a time to insert their narrative, because it's like looking in the ocean, looking into the celestial bodies. You can have it reflect your own inner narrative.

**TERRENCE:** *I like that one of the first things you brought up was time. How do your photographs take us on a journey between time and space?*

**TODD:** Just a little bit. You know [John] Szarkowski from MoMA in the 1960s did a show called *Mirrors and the Windows*. Is a photograph a mirror or is it a window? I'm thinking of it as a portal and a temporality. A way to enter into different time and time shifts. When I have some of these round frames, they're almost like a wormhole. But it's a wormhole that's based on time, not necessarily a place, or both time and place. So I think of the possibilities of putting these time portals in there and that's really important because of history. I do that so that I can reference history in the current moment and how it's connected to the current contemporary moment so that we can have a long view.



Todd Gray, *If You Are The big tree, We Are The Small Axe (Cosmos, Sedabuda, Robben Island)* 2020.



Todd Gray, *Euclidean Gris Gris (3)*, 2019.



**TERRENCE:** *Do you think photography has a claim to neutrality or objectivity?*

**TODD:** Our first inclination is the veracity of the photograph — that it's the truth or that's the fact. That's why I put frames on top of frames and obscure what you can see. So that you are, you are conscious that you are making the meaning. It's not, you know, being given to you. There's something in the brain that's the survival mechanism and we have to determine if something's going to harm us or not. And so it's the fight or flight mechanism. That's beyond our conscious control. I try to use that when I construct my photograph. Because normally a photograph is going to make a statement and you'll know what you're seeing. And before you denote, you connote instantly, and you're not even aware that you have made that connotation. You've decided what the meaning of that is — it's instantaneous with a photograph. What I try to do is to place images on top of images, obscure things, so when you jump from the denote, you see it. When you get to the connotation where you made meaning, you define it and you name it, then you have to go on pause, because I've interrupted the process. I interrupt that fight or flight because you try to name it. So I try to use the veracity of photography and turn it on its head. I know I've said that before, but to turn it on its head, to make the viewer conscious that they are making meaning and the photograph does not get wrapped up with meaning. You know, that's, that's in that. I think the photograph is like what Stuart Hall was saying, that media is how hegemony maintains our dominance over culture. As soon as hegemony can name you, it can control the narrative. So what we must do is to keep moving, keep resisting and keep changing. And that's the philosophy that I have embraced for my photography: to keep moving, keep resisting, so that it doesn't fall into that trap of hegemony, again, normativity.

**TERRENCE:** *What constitutes artistic responsibility in the context in which you work?*

**TODD:** Ah, I like that. Artistic responsibility has multiple factors. One of which is, "it's got to hit it." I gotta hit it, I gotta find that note. And for me, it doesn't come out of the studio unless I hit that note. It's very important that there's a certain level in my practice that the work that is released maintains. I must constantly, of course, push and challenge that level. So that's one thing. And you can call that aesthetics. But to me, that's just part of it. There's multiple aspects to it. The other thing is that it is culturally significant. Everything I do has a social component, everything I do, there's a responsibility that I have. And that's because I'm putting something out there that is part of the culture. I have to be responsible for that and it can't be visually pleasing simply for the fact of pleasure. That's for me. I love retinal pleasure. I think that's why I got in the game — was because of the eyeball. But I think what I really look out for is that I'm not indulging simply in retinal pleasure. I'm using retinal pleasure to get to meaning. I'm using retinal pleasure to seduce the viewer to look and then to open up avenues of meaning and thought, and hopefully criticality. I suppose I'm just not satisfied with the beauty or the image. That's just the first veil. I'm putting multiple veils, and the first veil is there just to seduce you.





Todd Gray, *Cosmic Blues (Makes Me Wanna Holler)*, 2019.