

art US

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Ken Gonzales-Day BY Mitra Abbaspour

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Ken Gonzales Day's recent *Lynching in the West* (2006) installation and book launch at CUE Art Foundation, curated by Bruce Yonemoto, aims to portray history not as a series of isolated events from the remote past but as a continuing process of reinvention and correction, in which photography plays a pivotal role. Initially, Gonzales-Day set out to compile a dossier of photographs of Latinos from early California days, but it soon evolved into a major investigation into archival documents of Latino, Asian, and Native American lynchings in the West, a forgotten counterpart to better documented African American cases in the South.

Lynching in the West is displayed on three walls arranged like a horseshoe. On the first wall hang two large-format color photos of massive trees in isolated settings, while the second presents a grid of lynching postcard "mementoes."

The third is covered with a life-size documentary blowup showing a throng of men in suits and sharp fedoras and the occasional well-dressed woman, all milling around a lone upright tree in the dead of night. Disentangling these three



photographic sources, Gonzales-Day uncovers a little known chapter in the history of wild frontier justice. By digitally removing the dead bodies from his suite of souvenir snapshots, he highlights the spectacular nature of these vigilante-driven diversions, shifting attention to the (absent) original sin of mob violence. What remains is the casual and almost macabre gaze of the lynchers themselves, who are shown either as mounted on horseback with guns aimed pointlessly at the sky, standing idly around beaming at the camera, or arching their bodies back to gawk at the empty tree next to them. And in the nighttime gala scene, we see its elegant thrill seekers seemingly spill to the right of the tree and out onto the gallery floor, reminding us of our own

Complicity in spectacular violence once it becomes the object of idle fascination.

Ultimately, though, the two six-foot-square landscapes are the most hypnotic images in the show, encapsulating the myriad

issues involved. In each, the central tree is massively foregrounded and shot at such an angle as to exaggerate its leafy or gnarled monumentality. Gonzales-Day's strategy is to

present the tree not as a general object of nature study, but rather as a limb of paleontological inquiry, one bearing the full extent of photography's history and all those

wrongfully strung up on its boughs. Standing in for those victims of the ultimate hate crime, the tree's immense girth stretches back to the dim western era of unrecorded racial lynchings, its stark solitude recalling the high incidence of such practice, and the unmarked surroundings



their long-buried money. Yet far more than being about identity or loss, these photographs also pose troubling questions about how we can understand or account for such horrific spectacles from the past without somehow re-staging and thus exonerating their concealed violence. *Lynching in the West*, both the photographic series and the book, attempts to peel back the layers of these fossilized atrocities while simultaneously revealing their disappearance.

