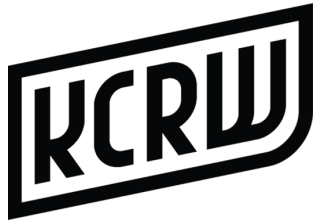


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1110 Mateo Street, Los Angeles CA 90021
213 395 0762 | gallery@luisdejesus.com
luisdejesus.com



Ken Gonzales-Day records the scars of history

By Carolina A. Miranda

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Aaaaand we're back to our regularly scheduled programming!

I'm culture writer Carolina A. Miranda and I have returned from a short summer break, during which I dug into Argentine novelist Mariana Enriquez's suspenseful occult tale *Our Share of Night*, felt like I was slipping into a paranoid internet wormhole with Ari Aster's *Eddington*, and was deeply moved by *Ode to 'Dena: Black Artistic Legacies of Altadena* at the California African American Museum.

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The latter, organized by independent curator Dominique Clayton, is suffused with grief, but it's also a warm embrace — paying tribute to the generations of artists who have made Altadena a hub of creativity. KCRW's Danielle Chiriguayo spoke with Clayton about how the show came together. It's on view through October 12th — do not miss.

A few other things not to miss:

LA artist Ken Gonzales-Day's survey at the Fisher

SCARS ON THE LAND



Ken Gonzales-Day, Nightfall II, 2006 . (Ken Gonzales-Day / Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

This summer, I worked on a story about a painter who was incarcerated with his family at the Topaz War Relocation Center in Utah during World War II for the simple reason that he was Japanese. As part of my research, I looked up Topaz on Google Maps to see exactly where in the state it was located. (About 150 miles southwest of Salt Lake City, in case you're wondering.) Out of curiosity, I then switched Google Maps into satellite mode. The camp and its barracks are gone, but their ghostly outlines still mark the earth.

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That idea, of the ways the land bears a record of terrible histories, was rattling around my head when I went to see Ken Gonzales-Day's new survey at the USC Fisher Museum of Art late last month.

The LA artist is perhaps best known for his project, *Searching for California Hang Trees*, begun in 2000. It consists of a series of magnificent landscape photographs that depict trees used in lynchings. The majority of the victims of these attacks were non-White, primarily Mexican. And to look upon the sites of their deaths is to see landscapes that, if not physically marked by this past, nonetheless feel haunted. The remarkable *Nightfall II*, from 2006, which extends to a width of almost 7 ft., and is on view at the Fisher, shows the branches of what appears to be an Indian Laurel Fig *extending into the inky darkness of night. What specters might inhabit its trunk?*



An installation view of images from the Erased Lynchings series. (Carolina A. Miranda)

Only three images from the *Hang Trees* series made it into the Fisher's survey, Ken Gonzales-Day: *History's 'Nevermade'*, which was organized by curator Amelia Jones. That's likely because many of these photographs are rendered at a large scale and the Fisher is a relatively small space. But though these are underrepresented, many other works on view examine the poignant connection between memory and place.

The artist's *Erased Lynchings* project emerged out of research for his 2006 book, *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935*. In those pieces, he appropriated historic lynching photographs, then manipulated them to remove the victim — which has the effect of highlighting everything around the body. In one, a dog sniffs at the bottom of an empty tree. In another, a group of men stand around a utility pole, their casual poses belying the gravity of their act.

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Collectively, these works reveal how episodes of vigilante violence were carried out with the complicity (and ghoulish support) of entire communities. They also subvert the heroic ways in which Western landscapes are often portrayed.



Untitled #36 (Ramoncita at the Cantina), 1996. (Ken Gonzales-Day / Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

The survey spans the arc of the artist's career, beginning with drawings and portraits he created in high school and college. There is also a series of photo collages made during the 1990s, in which he imagined himself as Ramoncita, a fictional transgender ancestor — a way of inscribing queer histories into narratives of the border.

More recent works round out the show. The digitally-crafted photographs of the Constellations series, first shown in 2019, depict arrangements of sculptures held in museum collections, from Classical works of art to ethnographic pieces. These invite the viewer to consider what (and who) is regarded as art and what gets relegated to scientific object. His Pandemic Portraits, made in 2020, are an elegant record of LA's artistic community at a moment of intense isolation, featuring familiar figures like conceptualist Susan Siltan and performance artist Ron Athey.

A slide show in one corner displays Gonzales-Day's images of LA murals; elsewhere, you'll find photographic studies of human skin. Given the Fisher's limited space, it can be a bit of a jumble. Some judicious editing would have made for a stronger, more cohesive show — along with accessible wall text. (The convoluted artspeak is turned up to 11.)

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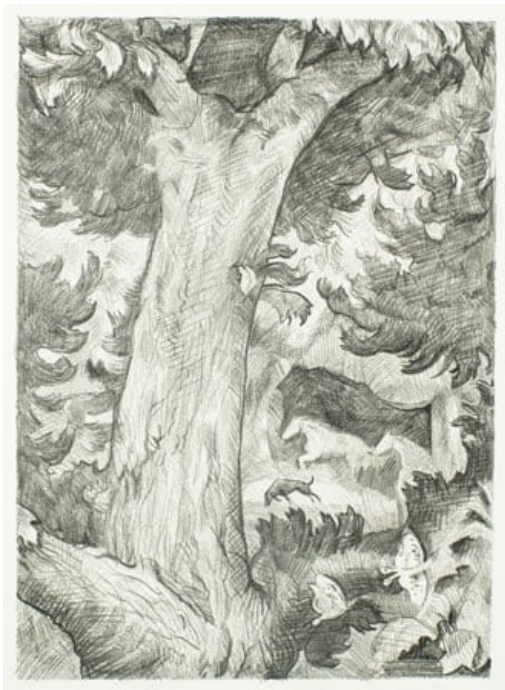
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In works from his Constellation series, the artist looks at ways in which people of different races and ethnicities are rendered in museum collections. (Ken Gonzales-Day / Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

Gonzales-Day is ultimately at his most powerful when he reckons with the physical and psychological spaces in which historical violence has occurred. In a small, side gallery, to which I returned more than once, you'll find drawings from his series *Another Land: By Another Hand*, inspired, in part, by the 1935 exhibition, *An Art Commentary on Lynching*. That groundbreaking show, organized by the NAACP's Walter White, grappled with the ways in which Black people have historically been targets of mob violence. And it featured searing prints, drawings, and paintings by esteemed artists such as José Clemente Orozco, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry.

In an echo of his *Erased Lynchings* series, Gonzales-Day redrew these works — but removed the human figures. The result is an eerie collection of broken columns, flickering fires, and desolate trees.



*A drawing from the Erased Lynchings series:
Untitled (After John Steuart Curry, The Fugitive, 1935), 2021.
(Ken Gonzales-Day / Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)*

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In a devastating political cartoon from 1934, artist Reginald Marsh showed a mother holding her child above a crowd that is viewing a lynching just out of frame. Its caption reads: "This is her first lynching." Gonzales-Day redrew that work, showing only a charming rural house and the placid field where the scene took place.

In the American landscape are embedded difficult, violent histories. Gonzales-Day has a way of making us see what we might otherwise overlook.

Ken Gonzales-Day: History's 'Nevermade' is on view at the USC Fisher Museum of Art through March 14th, 2026; fisher.usc.edu.