



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ken Gonzales-
Day, 2020 July 31

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ken Gonzales-Day on July 31, 2020. The interview took place in Los Angeles, CA, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOSH T. FRANCO: All right. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Ken Gonzales-Day at his studio in Los Angeles—Los Angeles, California on July 31, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Ken, thanks for taking a few minutes to talk to me for the archives. We really just want to start with how have you been since March?

KEN GONZALES-DAY: Crazy, overwhelmed, uh, very busy, partially because I teach also and so my students were all sent home about the same time as spring break and then we did the rest of the semester online. So a lot of students were, were unable to get home, you know, may have had visa problems, had all kinds of issues. So on the—the teaching side it's been very intense, and then of course on the studio side, several shows were canceled, some shows were extended, things are online. So everything has been a little bit topsy-turvy.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. And you teach at Scripps College, right?

KEN GONZALES-DAY: I teach at Scripps College.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

KEN GONZALES-DAY: Where I teach photography, art theory, and humanities.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. With teaching, yeah, been particularly rough. And your—it sounds like your school has made the decisions for what the fall will look like?

KEN GONZALES-DAY: We're working on it. So one of the things that also happened, which is maybe not so interesting, but we have—we happen to have a Faculty Executive Committee which is a group of faculty that are elected to make decisions for the faculty, and I was elected as the chair of that committee last year, not knowing I guess that it was going to correspond with this. So as a result, I have additional duties that I [laughs]—that I—I'm finding challenging.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right. Yeah. Um, so as far as your practice, one thing we've been wondering, it sounds like your studio is in your home, but wondering about access to studios has really changed dramatically for some people. But what has it meant for your time in the studio?

[00:02:08]

KEN GONZALES-DAY: So, uh usually I have access to the dark room at school and I have—I have my office which has most of my books, which I have a lot. So for meeting and planning and stuff, we're not supposed to go back on the campus, or we're supposed to have permission to go on campus so they can clean and sanitize the rooms, so I have not been back on campus and so I haven't had access to need those materials. Also, I do a lot of research in my work, so I haven't had access to the library or the archives there at Scripps or the Claremont Colleges. And—so that's been a challenge also. And then in addition, we often have the library provide services. Like if you can't get there, sometimes they can make a copy for you or prints, but since there's no students, there's no one to help with that work either. So all of the levels of research that are normally a part of my practice are, are made more difficult. And then my other studio is home here um where I have a computer, many hard drives, and several monitors. So if I look like I'm looking over there, over here, it's because I have the two monitors set up. And I have a giant printer. My giant printer—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

KEN GONZALES-DAY: —there. So that's the jumbo one. Uh, I have been moving things in this room every single day. There's the old file cabinet. Flat files. I'm adding new flat files. So I'm trying to organize the space that I do have to be more efficient. I also, you know, I wanted to do a series of portraits this summer [laughs] of Latino models thinking about, you know, Latinx today in relationship to all the other issues going on at this time historically besides the pandemic. And so it's a little difficult to do portraiture in a space safely.

[00:04:02]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

KEN GONZALES-DAY: So I'm lucky if I need to shoot people outside, if I'm going to put the backdrop up in the yard, I don't know. So I'm having a lot of challenges uh, uh figuring out how to proceed on that project.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Can you say some of the archives or books and topics that were—that you can't get to right now that you were particularly interested in looking at right now?

KEN GONZALES-DAY: Well, I was actually going to do even a project for the Archives of American Art. I was researching to do a project, and I was looking to look at the history of artists representing lynching, right. Because of course there are many artists that have done that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

KEN GONZALES-DAY: And many of those objects are in interviews or in the collection there in the American Archives, but I have not been able to access them online. So that's one example. In Claremont, we have—we have [inaudible] by interlibrary loans and access to visual that way, which since they're closed makes it more difficult. I did request a few things that had been sent home to my house. By the time they got here, they were due back because, you know, the interlibrary loan is not anticipating the pandemic. So the turnaround plus shipping, you know, so all of those have added additional challenges that I was not expecting.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right. Because you'd have to read a book like in an hour and then send it back. [Laughs]. Your work is so much about race and violence and historically positioning it and picturing it. Has—have other people reached out to you in this time? Because our—just to, you know, clarify, our secretary, Lonnie Bunch, has clearly identified two pandemics going on now. One, COVID-19, but the other, the surge in anti-Black racism which lynching is very close to. You have a little bit of a different view on lynching, but certainly relevant. Have people been reaching out? Or have you thought about your own work differently as we've watched violence happen, race-based violence?

[00:06:06]

KEN GONZALES-DAY: Yes, people have been reaching out, and I suppose it's worth mentioning since people may not know um, that the work I'm most known for at this time has really been the *Erased Lynching* series and the work that sought to raise awareness of the history of lynching in California, and particularly of Latinos, Native Americans, Chinese. So, that project is ongoing, and the research still continues in the sense that the *Erased Lynching* series are created by working from historic postcards.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

KEN GONZALES-DAY: And then erasing the body. So like this one I just got yesterday. So that series is ongoing and is about 60 images so far. So there's been a lot of interest in that. The project over the years has expanded beyond just California, which is where it began, which of course is why there are so many Latinos, to really look at it as a national phenomenon. And so there are overlaps in terms of thinking about racial formation and racialized violence that are connected between the lynching of Latinos and of course the better-known history of the lynching of African Americans. So all of those things are tied together. I just did a Zoom with the National Holocaust Museum in D.C. which is also trying to create—help people see connections between the Holocaust and our own time. And certainly, this question of racialized violence or ethnic cleansing or other kinds of targeted killing are part of—are part of their mission. So, I think there's a lot of interest in trying to go back and look at the nuanced history of racialized violence in America.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Um, another sort of—again, it's—I just am having this thought that the

postcards you gather are sort of the Instagrams of their day. Um, that's a crude analogy. But I want—you know, social media has kind of elevated. We're all alone and stuck at home now, or some of us are alone, but we're all stuck at home and that's taken on a new—it's an even more important kind of outlet to see what's happening in the world. And I'm interested in your—has your relationship to social media changed?

[00:08:22]

KEN GONZALES-DAY: Well, I think yes, in the sense that photography is really the first social media, right [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

KEN GONZALES-DAY: So it's about remaking and reproduction, and that reproduction lives on in a way that represents some version of the real. And so maybe historically that was one print, 10 prints, 100 prints, then it became newspapers, then it became magazines, then it became, you know, the internet and TV. So the idea that images carry meaning continues to be the same. The difference is that in terms of social media, many other people are using, for example, my images or other people's images, and the question of authorship is different in, for example, Instagram. Most of my students will freely publish somebody else's work without citation or notation. So the images, my images in particular, are circulating in ways that are not controlled by me, which is different than the usual way that artists work. So particularly photographers, usually you determine the context, the work will be seen in this place, under this exhibition title, with this specific label, so that there's a sense of regulating the experience for the viewer or anticipating a viewer or an audience, and then helping them to engage with it as a fine art form, meaning that there—there's a space between what you see and what the artist intended that happens in the viewer's—in the viewer's experience. And so that part has been transformed because at this point, you really can't even go see the shows that I manage. Right?

[00:10:02]

JOSH T. FRANCO: No.

KEN GONZALES-DAY: They're—so instead of thinking that it's physical art first and then the social media after, in this particular moment it's the reverse. The social media is the primary experience for—and again, particularly for my students because they're looking me up or trying to figure out what my work is or just looking at art in general and come across it. Whether they're my students or not, they're encountering the social media component first and then clicking through to find potentially somewhere to see the actual thing. So that's a complete reversal. And in terms of value systems for the history of photography, it shifts the way we have historically shaped the notion of a photographic document, its value, its meaning, its significance. I don't know if that answered your question.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. No, it's—I want to ask a lot of question about the official media streams and their use of images too, but also—but more close to what you were saying, can you recall some instances where you've seen your own work reproduced in some context or with a caption that really surprised you or you found really interesting that maybe—that you would not have thought of or that disturbed you?

KEN GONZALES-DAY: Well, it uh—I mean, yes. In many cases—or in some cases—I shouldn't say many. In some cases, some of the work that I've done, so basically the *Erased Lynchings* which are dealing with every um race that has been lynched, not just African Americans, have been characterized as being the lynching of African Americans, which they aren't. So because many people are not familiar with the research or the history of racialized violence in America, they just assume that it's white on Black violence. And so that's a kind of erasure of my artistic intention [laughs]. On the other hand, it also puts those images out there and those cases out there that they could research further if they—if they wish to. So there's been a bit of that. There's also been a bit of, you know, people questioning I guess just who's allowed to speak on different topics around racialized violence, and certainly I have seen those kinds of questions posted. Are Latinos allowed to speak about African American experiences? How many dead Latinos does it take to be able to talk about racialized violence with the same sort of cultural meaning that it has for other communities? How many deaths are enough to resonate as sort of significant, particular in a—in a time when really we are trying to—as a nation trying to focus on the Black Lives Matter Movement, on larger systemic problems of which, you know, of which the experience of Californians and Mexican Americans of my generation might be a very small or a

much smaller slice of the national dialogue.

[00:13:13]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I think important that it's come up with other Latino artists also and it's—I had to have a moment near the beginning of this crisis where I had to separate work I felt obliged to do as National Collector at the Archives and work I felt to do as a Chicano American more on the mestizo-faced end than the white end of Latino, although not the brownest. But yeah, the position of where we are as non-Black, Brown people is really like an underlying conversation that's really not being had until we force it in a lot of ways. So it's good to hear you think about—you think through that. And your work, you know, has made us think about that a lot, the lynching.

KEN GONZALES-DAY: Yeah. And the Profiled series really look at the gradations base, right. So if you—you know, it's sad that we have to talk about it this way but if we look at are our [laughs]—we are not at—you know, we are not the Indio. We're not the—and it— purely, though of course we have our DNA tests and we have all that stuff and we know our family histories, there is overlap, you know, and there's indigenous blood there. But is it enough? Right? What kind—it's—and so when people ask, you know, even what I am, which people still ask me almost every day —

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

KEN GONZALES-DAY: —you know [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, I know [laughs].

[00:14:32]

KEN GONZALES-DAY: So those kinds of performative discussions of race are not necessarily being helped in this moment, at least not yet from what I can tell. Um, so I think—I think it's good that at least the conversations are, um, happening, right, in a way that the—that racism is over. We heard—I used to hear that during the Obama era.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

KEN GONZALES-DAY: And think that was really not true. And of course, now we see the complete shift of that discourse, so.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Um, so we just have three or four minutes left but I'm just curious, the end, just what you've been doing personally to cope. And, like, people's relationships to home have changed, you know. Have you jumped on the sourdough train? How is—how is life at home now?

KEN GONZALES-DAY: I've been making a lot of pizza from scratch. Pizza dough [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Nice [laughs].

KEN GONZALES-DAY: Yeast is really hard to find so I'm actually making some yeast because you can only buy it—the store lets you buy two packets at my—the store near me. So that's been a new adventure. So that's carbs. Like, that's—okay. I live in California so, you know, carbs are like [laughs]—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

KEN GONZALES-DAY: —whatever. It's a conversation that people have about what you eat or don't eat. And so anyway, pizza has been a recent staple, you know. I can't go to the gym. I can't go to yoga. I can't do any of the stuff that I used to do. So I take the dog on a lot of walks, I try to do some running here and there with my mask on. So that's really changed. And then strangely enough, I'm on—well, I guess like everybody, I'm on Zoom a lot, so I was on Zoom yesterday for five hours.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

KEN GONZALES-DAY: And today, another couple hours. And this is my summer break, so this is normally a time that I get to just make work. So all of those things are changing the, um the way that I see my day unfold.

[00:16:33]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So I guess finally, you know, this is a record. This is the archives. We think about the audience in 100 years. Is there anything about being an artist in 2020 that you want to be sure is on the record for that audience?

KEN GONZALES-DAY: Sure. There are Latino artists in the 21st century. It's really hard to prove that. If you look—and I'm sure there'll be someone doing a dissertation. If you look at exhibitions happening at this—in this year, take the whole year, take last year. Really hard to prove that we do exist. But in places like California where we're the majority of the population, it's a chance for people to think about the legacies of colonialism and the challenges of imaging a more inclusive future which I hope you'll have.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Awesome. Alright. Thank you again.

KEN GONZALES-DAY: Sure. Thank you. Great to see you.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You too.

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