

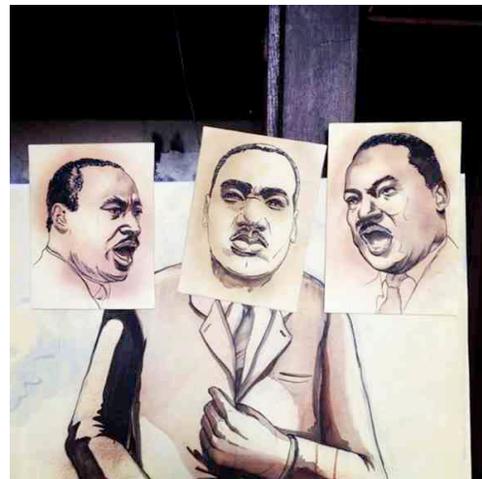
## Intertwined Histories: Edgar Arceneaux Re-imagines Martin Luther King

Edgar Arceneaux used to fall asleep to "2001: A Space Odyssey." Stanley Kubrick's lyrical 1968 science fiction epic is, to be fair, slow and daunting for a young child. But Arceneaux knew there was something there, and the movie slowly enveloped his consciousness as he began to make sense of it through repeated viewings. At the same time, Arceneaux grew up black in Los Angeles during the 1970s and 1980s. These two attributes of Arceneaux have gestated, entwined within, and become major motifs in his work for most of his career as an artist. Their latest interweaving occurs in Arceneaux's new solo show, "A Book and A Medal: Disentanglement Equals Homogenous Abstractions," which opened at [Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects](#) this weekend.

"Through time, as I became more and more interested in history and the way in which life and science fiction are often so intertwined, it became a major motif in my work -- thinking about the relationship between technology and society, and it's ability to be used as either a weapon or a tool," says Arceneaux. A flurry of activity is happening around us; the install of the show in full force. He is bent over, polishing a mirror he made that looks like it's been etched away, leaving images of the Martin Luther King, Jr. and, curiously, Kermit the Frog.

The show revolves around the last major speech Dr. King gave, April 4th, 1967, one year to the day before he was assassinated. In the speech, Dr. King rails against the Vietnam War, while explicitly laying out the steps that need to be taken to move toward a free and just society. "The Vietnam War was America's way of advancing its economic policy," says Arceneaux. "It was when factory jobs were starting to be shipped overseas. So, King's speech basically saw the war as a weapon against the poor, both in Vietnam and in America, because people [from poor American communities] were being shipped off to fight people from poor communities. It was under the guise of a fight for democracy, but really, it was tool to advance America's foreign economic interests."

The centerpiece of the show is a feature-length film titled "A Time to Break Silence" (the same title as Dr. King's 1967 speech) shot in a ruined church in Detroit, in which an avatar of Dr. King repeatedly makes the speech over and over again -- a sort of anti-war "Groundhog Day." Meanwhile, pulsing music made by Ray 7, a member of the "militant" Detroit techno collective Underground Resistance, scores the film, adding an essential sci-fi element.

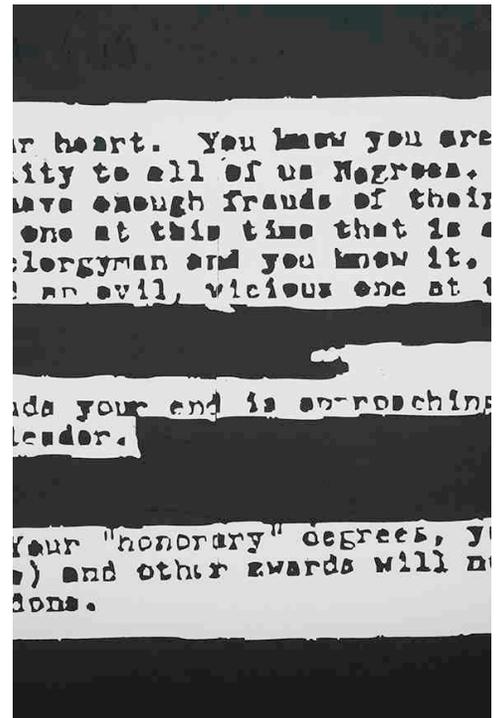


The title of the exhibition, "A Book and A Medal," meanwhile, refers to Arceneaux's interest in the recent news of the attempted sale of Dr. King's Nobel Prize and his traveling Bible. "There was this transition within the Nobel Prize and the Bible, from symbolic tools of self-improvement to becoming high value relics, and the question that I asked myself was what forces were operating on these things during this period of time," says Arceneaux. "On one level, it's natural -- things age, in which we fall out of step with the moment in which they were created. The other part that's synthetic is the economics of it -- the way in which economic value is attributed to things independent of its actual material worth. I tried to juxtapose this concept: 'disentanglement equals homogenous abstraction.' It's a concept advanced around Milton Friedman's 1953 "Essays in Positive Economics," which is the forefather of free-market capitalism. Basically, disentanglement basically means that 'to turn an object into an item which can be exchanged within the stock market and traded within futures, it needs to be detangled from its cultural context.' So, for the farmer, whom in the past would be able to value their harvest by the amount of wheat they grew, that changed with the start of futures trading."

Arceneaux's exploration into the idea that the Nobel Prize and the Bible have a separate value system affixed to them than they did in the 1960s is further conflated by the use of a heavily redacted letter, now known as "The Suicide Package," sent anonymously from the FBI to Dr. King, threatening to disclose his extramarital affairs if he didn't take his own life. The redactions have been transposed onto the letter written by Dr. King's daughter, Dr. Bernice King, urging her siblings to not sell the Peace Prize and Bible. "The extramarital affairs were a deep moral conflict for King as an individual," says Arceneaux. "Thinking about this on the economic scale of the family, the way in which these economic forces are causing brother to turn on sister, and then the way in which that then expresses itself within the larger body politic -- the individual to the masses. These pains of redaction that have nothing on them -- for me, it's a kind of way to produce a four-dimensional shadow. I was trying to imply that this is both the natural and the unnatural, the economic and also the person."

The last element of the show is the aforementioned mirrors, which are set into roughly built walls. "In the 14th century, 'vanity' meant futility -- the fruitlessness of human endeavor, that all things are transient," explains Arceneaux. "But it became a moral description later, and it went from being 'reflective of the self' to becoming 'possessed of the self.' When it made that transition, bouquets of flowers and a woman brushing her hair in the mirror were commonly motifs."

The flowers have been etched into the mirror, along with King, and, of course, Kermit. "It was an intuitive move in the beginning, but I knew that with grand, historic figures, oftentimes the vanity is so stripped away that you can't really think of them as a person," says Arceneaux. "Having Kermit busting in from the background is a way of adding some levity. It forces you to look at King peripherally as opposed to directly."



Through all the economic changes of these particular objects, Arceneaux notes that the world, economically, is still essentially the same. "Things kind of have a pendulum swing," he says. "All this stuff that's going on in Ferguson with the police brutality -- I mean, this is straight from the 1950s. But it doesn't take a genius to realize that the economic conditions then and today are very similar. That's the reason why people are so unhappy -- they just want jobs. A lot of the social safety net has been slowly deteriorated away."

In the end, Arceneaux returns to the idea that technology plays a large part in all of this, that the death of Dr. King and the release of "2001" were what he calls "serendipitous" events. "What's interesting is that both the speech and the film look at this duality of technology to be used either to build or to destroy," he says. "And they were both being written at the same time."

