

# The Boston Globe

## At MIT, there's smoke and fire

By Sebastian Smee | OCTOBER 20, 2016

**Edgar Arceneaux's video installation "Until, Until, Until. . ." is among the works on display at "Edgar Arceneaux: Written in Smoke and Fire" at MIT List Visual Arts Center.**



PETER HARRIS STUDIO

CAMBRIDGE — It's 1981. An African-American man appears onstage before Ronald Reagan in blackface.

Excuse me? What year?

Nineteen eighty-one. And yes: It happened. The performance is the subject of "Until, Until, Until. . .," a video installation by 44-year-old Edgar Arceneaux, of Los Angeles, at MIT's List Visual Arts Center.

It's one part of an ambitious, haunting, and yet at times conceptually overloaded body of work in "Edgar Arceneaux: Written in Smoke and Fire" at the List through Jan. 8.

The startling performance took place at a gala to celebrate Reagan's inauguration. Ben Vereen, a celebrated African-American actor, performed the song "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee" in the guise of Bert Williams, the great black vaudeville entertainer.

Needless to say, the whole tradition of blackface, which evolved out of minstrelry, was racist. But already by Williams's time, it was a [complicated trope](#), infused with nostalgia. Williams knew what he was doing. Booker T. Washington once said of Williams that he had "done more for our race than I have."

So when Vereen reprised Williams's song-and-dance performance at the gala, he also did it knowingly. His act was in two parts: first the song-and-dance; and then, a switch. Still in blackface, Vereen praises the audience ("Oh you marvelous!") and offers to buy them a drink ("I's buyin!").

But he is denied service because of his skin color. ("Oh. Is that right? . . . No sir, that's quite all right. I just forgets my place . . . sometimes.") The performance ends with a somber rendition of Williams's great, pathos-saturated tune, "Nobody."

But here's the rub: The first part was aired live on ABC. But the second part — Vereen's odd but poignant critique — was not. ABC cut away to a different performance.

And so millions of people saw Vereen performing in blackface before a new Republican president. And they had no idea why. The backlash was terrible, Vereen's career irreparably harmed.

At the List, Arceneaux shows footage of a restaging of the performance — parts one and two — before a small audience, in an installation that resembles a theater set. It's mesmerizing — you can scarcely believe either that it happened or that it is being revived in this way, at this moment. The dismay and fascination mingling in your heart and mind are mirrored by the facial expressions of the audience.

Arceneaux uses footage from the performance, some of it screened on a smaller monitor behind the projection screen. Vereen's final thank you ("It's an honor to be in your presence. You are so gracious to allow this. Really") is repeated but with cutting emphases so that the thank you slides into sarcasm.

In a reference to the Marie Osmond number the ABC producers cut away to during the telecast, we also see an upbeat duet parodying Reagan's presidency: "The money will trickle down and our troubles will soon be gone. . . . They're building a fence, it's rather immense, just pretend it makes sense."

This part feels, artistically, out of tune with the rest of the work, which is otherwise extraordinary. By looking to the past, "Until, Until, Until. . ." skewers our present political moment like no other work I have seen. And it does so without naively wishing away its complexities.

Arceneaux's slightly earlier projects, in the List's second gallery, suggest the same ambition, the same nose for cultural pressure points, but also, unfortunately, a tendency to over-elaborate.

One of them, "A Book and a Medal," centers on an hour-long film titled "A Time to Break Silence." A black man — standing in for Martin Luther King Jr. — stands at a ruined pulpit in a derelict church in Detroit as we hear a recording of King's 1967 speech denouncing the war in Vietnam. Meanwhile a man in a black, Neanderthal costume leaps about in the church's rubble.

The film is complemented by two- and three-dimensional works that take up King-related themes, including the so-called "[suicide letter](#)" sent to King by the FBI, whose director, J. Edgar Hoover, sought to discredit him, and a letter by King's daughter urging her siblings not to sell their father's Nobel Peace Prize medal and Bible.

It's all juicy and more than a little intriguing. But Arceneaux fails to make persuasive art from it. The film is visually arresting but too long, and the various references — to

Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" and much more besides — never cohere, except perhaps in Arceneaux's head.

The third work, "The Library of Black Lies," is a wooden labyrinth into which you can walk. Inside is a library of books, some of them coated in black, others in crystal formations. Arceneaux is making a connection between "library" and "labyrinth," dramatizing the limits of what we can know. The books that do have visible covers range from Bibles to biographies of Bill Cosby. Some have arch plays on the name of the contemporary art curator [Germano Celant](#).

Here, too, Arceneaux struggles to bring the various threads together. But no matter. "Until, Until, Until. . ." is a brilliant work. The artist's flair for big, accessible storylines and visual drama, and his genuinely philosophical interest in the relationship between knowledge and power, will produce more powerful works in the future.

**EDGAR ARCENEAUX: Written in Smoke and Fire**

At: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 20 Ames St., Cambridge, through Jan. 8. 617-253-4680. [listart.mit.edu](http://listart.mit.edu)