

MIT List Visual Arts Center  
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[listart.mit.edu](http://listart.mit.edu)

## Edgar Arceneaux: Written in Smoke and Fire

October 14, 2016 – January 8, 2017



FRONT *A Book and a Medal: Disentanglement Equals Homogenous Abstractions*, 2014  
Installation view, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, 2014  
Photo: Robert Wedemeyer

ABOVE *Until, Until, Until...*, 2015  
A Performa commission for Performa 15  
Co-commissioned by the MIT List Visual Arts Center and Performa  
Photo: Paula Court, courtesy of Performa

INSIDE *Library of Black Lies*, 2016  
Wood, mirror, glass, mylar, newspaper, hardbound books, sugar crystals,  
lighting fixture, audio component  
Courtesy of the artist, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, and  
Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Bruelles  
Photo: H el ene Hillaire, 2016



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In Edgar Arceneaux's hour-long film *A Time to Break Silence* (2013), titled after Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 speech denouncing the Vietnam War, an archaic human enters a derelict church and roams about the debris. Another person, representing King himself, orates from a ruined pulpit while DJ Ray 7 (of the techno collective Underground Resistance) is positioned on the crumbling balcony. Alternating excerpts from King's speech with the electronic score, the film reveals some of Arceneaux's signature preoccupations: science fiction (the opening sequence is a nod to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* from 1968), recent American history, and the contemporary urban landscape as epitomized by the decline of Detroit, where the work was filmed. In staging a dystopian kind of time warp where the historical civil rights and anti-war movements may either be relics of a distant past or aspirations for a far-off future, Arceneaux also bridges 1960s history with recent events such as the Black Lives Matter movement and America's ongoing military engagements overseas.

*A Time to Break Silence* is the earliest work in the exhibition, which presents three recent projects that consider the production of knowledge and the contingency of historical, social, and cultural narratives. A body of work titled *A Book and a Medal* (2014) revolves around King's legacy and personal belongings. In mirrored wall works and lightboxes, Arceneaux reproduces a redacted document known as the "suicide letter," which was sent to King anonymously by the J. Edgar Hoover-led FBI in an attempt to blackmail the civil rights leader. Juxtaposed with the letter is a recent statement by King's daughter criticizing her brothers' efforts to sell his Nobel Peace Prize medal and bible at auction, as well as a series of *vanitas* drawings and mirror pieces, which play on the word's meaning changing from the original "futility" to describing a character trait and a moral flaw. Arceneaux states that in these works he attempted to "explore the vulnerabilities of a person who is in a position of leadership."

The mirror theme is carried forward in the large-scale sculpture *The Library of Black Lies* (2016). The spiral-shaped interior includes reflective mylar surfaces and shelves filled with altered books, some of which have been burned or encrusted with sugar crystals. While Arceneaux is here concerned with the inherent limits of translation and transcription, he also homes in on a particular narrative in crisis. One section displays several biographies on Bill Cosby, a figure whose legacy as beloved and barrier-breaking comedian has been overshadowed by numerous allegations of sexual assault.

The installation *Until, Until, Until...* (2016), which originated as a theatrical play, looks at Broadway legend Ben Vereen's controversial blackface performance at Ronald Reagan's inaugural celebration in 1981—a staged musical number in homage to trailblazing black vaudeville performer Bert Williams. Broadcast in a truncated version that subverted Vereen's critical intention, it triggered a backlash and derailed his career for decades. Arceneaux, who has restored the performance to its entirety and projects it together with excerpts from the original television recording inside a sculptural recreation of the stage, presents a Greek tragedy of sorts, where an error in judgement has devastating consequences. The acute awareness of individuals' flaws threads throughout the exhibition,

Hayden and Reference Galleries October 14, 2016 – January 8, 2017

further tied together by Arceneaux's wariness of any single story and his persistent questioning of narratives of progress.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Edgar Arceneaux (b. 1972, Los Angeles) lives and works in Los Angeles.

*Edgar Arceneaux: Written in Smoke and Fire* is curated by Henriette Huldish, Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### Public Reception

Thursday, October 13, 6–8 PM

### An evening with Edgar Arceneaux

Friday, November 18, 6–7:30 PM

Remis Auditorium, Museum of Fine Arts Boston

### Reading Group

Thursday, December 8, 6 PM

For further details, visit: [listart.mit.edu/events-programs](http://listart.mit.edu/events-programs).

   #MITList #EdgarArceneaux

## SUPPORT

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