

Meliksetian MB Briggs

# ***THE GENIUS LIST***



## **Todd Gray —Conceptual Artist**

**“Always question power and embrace your fear.”**

**TGL: How was your childhood?**

TG: I'm from Los Angeles, however my parents grew up in Chicago. For context, Chicago is extremely segregated. Blacks over here, Jews over here, white Europeans over here. My grandparents moved to the section next to

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the Jewish community, because they knew that they would go to the same public schools. The history of Judaism and studying the books really placed high emphasis on education. My grandparents knew if they sent their kids to a public school in a Jewish district, they would get a good education. Although Jewish people have white skin, they have suffered historically, they know suffering. They have empathy.

When my parents moved to Los Angeles, the first thing they did was move close to the predominantly Jewish Fairfax district. When I went to John Burroughs Junior High School, we were the highest-performing academic high school in Los Angeles. That's how I got involved with The Doors. Years later my friend from school, Danny Sugerman, was managing Iggy Pop and The Doors.

## **TGL: What were your interests as a child?**

TG: I loved to ski, and I was in a snow ski racing club. I also surfed - I'd go to the beach all the time, because that's what my peers were doing at school. The first museum exhibition that really hit me was a surrealist exhibition at the LA County Museum of Art. I saw the photos of Man Ray, and I saw paintings by Magritte. That blew my mind. It was the first time I was really interested in art, because it opened up a world that I'd never seen before.

## **TGL: When did you first want to be an artist?**

TG: When I picked up my first camera as a 12 or 13-year-old. I was completely enchanted, because before I didn't think it was possible for me to make a picture. I couldn't draw. And now I could actually make an image,

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make a picture that looked like reality. I've had a love affair with photography ever since.

**TGL: You started your career as a music photographer. How did you engage with music before art?**

TG: I love rock music and I wanted to be close to the stage, so when we were 15, my friend Neil Zlozower and I got our friends to make us fake photo passes, and we started shooting concerts. When I was 17, I was on the first part of the Rolling Stones' Exile On Main Street tour. When I just got out of high school, I was friends with Led Zeppelin and Robert Plant, and I was photographing them. I did a lot of music photography in high school and after high school. Ray Manzarek of The Doors spoke to me, and he's the one that convinced me to go to art school. I started working for Michael Jackson when I got out of CalArts in 1979.

I have two lives, my music-photographer life pays the rent. Then I have my art life, which only for the last few years has started to pay the rent.

**TGL: How did working with Michael Jackson impact you?**

TG: 10 years later, I studied with Allan Sekula for my masters degree. He found out that I had been Michael Jackson's photographer and told me to read all of these books, like Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Michel Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Du Bois, James Baldwin, Stuart Hall...basically black cultural theory that I'd never been exposed to before. This was in 1988 and 1989, when people were criticizing Michael for turning away from his African features and embracing European features by plastic surgery. I started writing about Michael Jackson for my thesis, using my photos and using him

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as a poster boy for someone whose mind is colonized. Halfway through me writing my thesis I went, "Oh, God. That's me." That's when I realized the hegemony of dominant culture, how it sort of seeps in. It's like a fish. The fish has no idea there's water.

## **TGL: What is your perception of mental colonialism?**

TG: Something in my head made me feel self-conscious when I was in public, that I would speak softer. I would smile more, so as not to appear like I could intimidate you, or I was the-black-man-as-criminal, or the-black-man-as-angry. I realized all of these decisions I made about my presentation in public spaces was to soften all the stereotypes of black men. I don't speak in black idioms. I do when I'm around black people, but when I'm in institutional or academic circles, I speak the Queen's English. I also remember when I was an undergraduate, I decided only to shoot landscapes, because they wouldn't know I was black if I shot landscapes.

Early in my career, I showed at the Studio Museum in Harlem, but I took the exhibition listing off my resume, because I didn't want people to see that I was black. That's when I realized the importance of addressing mental colonialism, because it's institutionalized racism. It's institutional white supremacy that really affected everything I made. After that, I had to have a strong critique about colonialism and so forth.

## **TGL: You went to CalArts twice. What is your relationship with the school?**

TG: The first time I was an undergraduate. When I got out I needed a job, so I went back into music photography, because I already had a reputation there.

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Then, I picked up an art journal and I couldn't understand it. They were using words like symbiotics and polymorphis and all sorts of things I couldn't understand. In the art world there's a code where the language is so specific that a common person can't understand it. We're not doing it to keep people out, but I think art and philosophy are a serious investigation of ideas, so we use philosophical strategies and terms. I needed to learn those philosophical strategies and those terms, so I went back to CalArts for my MFA. Within six months, I forgot about aspiring to become a fashion or commercial photographer. I drank the Kool-Aid. A steady diet of Marxist art history and feminist theory, mixed with critical thinking, left me searching for a no-blur path to take with my camera. We wouldn't be sitting here and talking if I did not go back for my MFA.

**TGL: Can you talk about your recent project linked to Europe and monuments from colonialism?**

TG: I did the Rockefeller Bellagio Residency in Lake Como. It's a 17th century villa, maintained at the standard of the 17th century. I felt uncomfortable there, because I knew that if it was the 17th century I would not be a guest there. The gardens were a strong statement of wealth and control. The gardens took on a philosophical meaning to me, and they really became the equivalent of Western thought. I saw the garden as mathematical formulas, because they were so controlled and so precise in their design. It came to me: I will photograph royal gardens in the capital cities in Europe who acquired their wealth through the slave trade or the colonization of Africa. Then, I've been going and photographing places in Africa that were colonized, and people in Africa who were colonized. I wrote a proposal to the Guggenheim Foundation, and they awarded me a

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fellowship. My recent David Lewis Gallery exhibition called *Cartesian Gris Gris*, was the first showing of this project.

## **TGL: Can you expand on the dynamic of power in this project?**

TG: The power dynamic is evident in the gardens. It's an absurd idea that you have enough power to control nature. No one has the power to control nature. When I was in England, I was in the Kew Gardens, and they have a greenhouse full of plants from all of their tropical colonies. It was not only a way to show wealth, it also showed possession and ownership. It's implied, "Yes, we control these plants, because these are all plants from our colonies," but then the implication is also that "we control the people."

## **TGL: Why do you create triptychs and diptychs with frames?**

TG: I came up with the idea of putting frames on top of frames after reading Stuart Hall. He says you must challenge normativity at all times. Every time you make a decision, ask why, why, why. Through this interrogation of photography, I came up with my new series of work. I ask "Why?" every time I make a decision, so I don't do something that's normal, that one is supposed to do. I challenge it.

The frames I use came from garage sales or Goodwill in either South Los Angeles, Johannesburg, or Soweto. I got the really decorative frames from an estate sale in Beverly Hills. I wanted to use the decorative frames as a way to talk about art history - as a way to talk about the Baroque aspect of European aesthetics. I decided, I would put the African pictures - those that are thought to be "less than" culturally than European culture - in the frames,

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to shift the conversation. The frames are ornate and decorative signifiers of wealth, like the gardens are ornate and decorative signifiers of wealth.

**TGL: You are based in L.A. and Ghana, why did you decide to base yourself in Ghana?**

TG: In 1992, I was hired to photograph Stevie Wonder's album cover and to direct a video in Ghana. I'm there and Stevie keeps telling me, "This is where we're from." I don't have any history past my great grandparents, because my family won't admit that they were slaves. I have no stories, no names, nothing. I'm sure most black people in America don't have a family history that they are aware of. Stevie said there's a high probability that we came from Ghana, because it's a direct route to the Caribbean - the Eastern seaboard. He said, "You need to come back home and you need to build a home." I thought to myself, "There's no way I'm going to do that", but I just said to him, "Oh, okay."

10 years later, I was out of the music business, and I was a professor at Cal State Long Beach. I was on sabbatical and in an exhibition Accra, the capital city of Ghana. I went to the exhibition and I remembered what Stevie had said 10 years before - that you're African and you should have roots here. I had just gotten a Getty grant, so I had money. My wife, Kyungmi Shin, and I bought three acres of land on the beach, we built on it and now we stay there. When we're not there, it's an artist residency, people stay there.

**TGL: What are you currently working on?**

TG: I have an exhibition underwritten by the Andy Warhol Foundation and the Mike Kelley Foundation at Pomona College Museum of Art. This will be the

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first institutional showing of the *Euclidean Gris Gris*, where I mixed the gardens and photographs of Africa together. I'll also be an artist-in-residence at the museum. The museum has given me the gallery for an academic year. I'm drawing on the wall in charcoal.

30 years ago, I was trained in the postmodern trope - I was taught that beauty and aesthetics are not the highest form. We understand that beauty and aesthetics are culturally derived. They're camouflage to distract us from really seeing clearly what is happening in that historical moment. Since I've been going to Africa and making this work, I want to integrate my body and my intuition. I want to stop making work only with my head - what I call neck up - and I want to use my body, neck down. That's why I'm drawing and doing other things. I'm not relying totally on my mind, because my mind is a construct of Western thought and Western philosophy. I want to expand my thinking. The only way I've noticed I can do that is by being sensitive to my body and let my body into the process of dialogue when I make art.

**TGL: Who would you like to have lunch with that you don't already know?**

TG: I would be interested to have lunch with the Jamaican-British intellectual, Stuart Hall, because his thinking has influenced my work so much. He died about five years ago, or three years ago...it would be a lunch in heaven.

**TGL: What advice would like to give to the readers of The Genius List?**

TG: Always question power and embrace your fear