

Todd Gray

*While Angels Gaze*

January 23 – March 22, 2025

New York



Todd Gray, *Blues Ship (makes me wanna holla)*, 2024 (detail)

Lehmann Maupin is pleased to present *While Angels Gaze*, an exhibition of new work by Todd Gray. *While Angels Gaze* marks the gallery's first New York exhibition with the artist and his first since joining Lehmann Maupin's roster in 2023. Best known for his photo assemblages that feature subject matter ranging from imperial European gardens, to West African landscapes, to depictions of pop icons, to portraits of the artist himself, Gray builds critical juxtapositions in his work that examine accepted cultural beliefs—particularly around ideas of the African diaspora, colonialism, and societal power dynamics. In *While Angels Gaze*, Gray presents a suite of new pieces that combine images from his music photography archive, work made in the early 2000s, and photographs taken during his fellowship at the American Academy in Rome in 2023. The exhibition opens on Thursday, January 23rd, with a reception with the artist to be held from 6:00–8:00 PM.

In addition to his recent fellowship at the American Academy in Rome, which he completed as one of the winners of the prestigious 2022–23 Rome Prize and Italian Fellowships, Gray has been featured in many notable museum exhibitions, including the Whitney Biennial in 2019 and the Hammer Museum's *Made in LA* exhibition in 2016. His work is represented in numerous museum collections, including the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia; the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada, among others.

In his newest body of work, Gray integrates Roman Catholic imagery and architecture with photographs sourced from his own archive, including self portraits, images of the Ghanaian landscape, and figures from pop music. The mining of his multi-decade music photography archive is an important component of Gray's practice and one that offers a view into the history of music, featuring recognizable figures from Al Green to Iggy Pop. In *While Angels Gaze*, Gray combines these titans of the music industry with images of Roman Catholic cathedrals and ancient Roman statuary, drawing parallels between religious or mythical personages and the idols of today. In these compositions, modern pop stars are cast as the contemporary equivalents of historical figures—where societies might once have inlaid images of saints in golden basilica ceilings or erected statues of religious leaders on building facades, modern idols play on elevated stages to crowds of tens of thousands, becoming enshrined as mass media icons.

Throughout the exhibition, Gray's lens extends beyond imaging pop icons, with some works devoid of figures all together. In *Blues Ship (makes me wanna holla)* (2024), for example, Gray depicts an image of a ship in the foremost panel, which appears to sail out of an image of the cosmos captured by the Hubble Space Telescope. Both photographs are set in circular frames against a rectangular foundation image that shows an ornately decorated ceiling. The ship is a model of a French slave ship from the Maison des Esclaves (House of Slaves) museum on Gorée Island, a UNESCO world heritage site and former center of slave trading on the African coast, while the ceiling is located in Villa Torlonia, the former residence of Benito Mussolini in Rome. Here, Gray's use of cosmic imagery functions as a conceptual bridge, condensing the time between the painting of the ceiling and the photographing of the ship. In works like these, Gray moves beyond celebrity adoration to examine the veneration of other false gods—commerce, wealth, power—exploring the enduring nature and consequences of such idolatry across centuries.

*While Angels Gaze* also showcases Gray's use of formal compositional techniques. The curving ovals and circles the artist employs in this body of work disrupt his consistently rectangular format, creating portals through time that bridge the far past and the present. Throughout the series, Gray creates a sense of visual reverberation—body gestures are mirrored from one figure to the next in works like *Other tellings (Hollywood, Florence, Cosmos)* (2024), architectural shapes blend across images in *Gorée Island, Villa Torlonia* (2024), and color palettes echo across compositions, from the gold-ground mosaics of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice to the glittering sequins of Michael Jackson's shirt in *Glitter 'n Gold, 2(St. Marks)* (2024).

Although Gray's scenes are overlaid and juxtaposed, his work is never meant to be dissected—rather, each image can be thought of as a discrete stanza that composes a poem of completed work, reflecting his deeply intuitive process. In *The Song Remains (assumptions about the nature of time)* (2024)—one of the exhibition's smallest works, composed of just two panels—Gray depicts Iggy Pop in black and white, his image overlaid against a statue from Villa Torlonia of a figure holding a pan flute. The gesture of the statue's outstretched arm on the left is mirrored in Iggy's raised hand on the right, connecting the two figures across time as if by an invisible thread. The image suggests an enduring human archetype, different and yet unchanged over the course of many centuries, and invites wider questions about the essence of human nature. Throughout *While Angels Gaze*, Gray invites us to ask not only who we are, but who we have been—and how much, if at all, this has changed over the course of millennia.



**Todd Gray** (b. 1954, Los Angeles, CA, lives and works in Los Angeles, CA and Akwidaa, Ghana) is a photo-based artist whose work aims to destabilize assumptions about the veracity of photography and provoke reconsiderations of long-accepted norms and beliefs surrounding the medium, including the role of the viewer in constructing meaning. His lush photo assemblages are composed of images ranging from imperial European gardens, West African landscapes, and architecture, to rock icons and portraits of the artist himself, all carefully arranged to create critical juxtapositions that examine ideas of African diaspora, colonialism, societal power structures, and dominant cultural beliefs. With an eye informed by his four decades as a professional music photographer as well as his B.F.A. and M.F.A. from California Institute of the Arts, Gray's photo sculptures are infused with a certain subversive beauty, reflecting his strong sense of visual aesthetics.

Gray's distinctive photo collages range in size from the domestic to the monumental, with his largest to date spanning over 30

feet. The artist utilizes layered frames in his work—from simple wood to ornate, rococo pieces—which are either artist-made or sourced from flea markets and estate sales. Gray stacks these frames on top of one another, deliberately obscuring certain elements of his photographs and striking a delicate balance between revealing and concealing his subject matter. Images are rotated, cropped, and subtly abstracted, even as they remain firmly representational. All of the photographs (with the exception of those from the Hubble telescope) are sourced directly from Gray's own catalog in a process the artist refers to as "appropriating his own archive." As the creator of now iconic imagery of cultural figures such as Michael Jackson, Iggy Pop, and the Rolling Stones, the artist navigates an area between the appropriation of the Pictures Generation and Pop Art's acknowledgement of popular imagery and commerce as drivers of so-called high culture. Across his collages, Gray weaves historical imagery into pictures of the present, reminding us that the realities of our world today are shaped by those of our collective past.

Gray received both his B.F.A and M.F.A from California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA in 1979 and 1989, respectively. Solo exhibitions of his work have been organized at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, MI (2021); Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT (2021); David Lewis, New York, NY (2021); Pomona College Museum of Art, Pomona, CA (2019); Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs, CA (2018); Meliksetian | Briggs, Los Angeles, CA (2018); Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA (2017); Gallery Momo, Johannesburg, South Africa (2017); Lightwork, Syracuse, NY (2016); Samson Projects, Boston, MA (2015); California State University, Los Angeles, CA (2004); Pasadena City College, CA (2003); and Cal Poly Pomona, State University, Pomona, CA (2002). Select group exhibitions of his work include *Impact: Contemporary Artists at the Hermitage Artist Retreat*, Sarasota Art Museum, Sarasota, FL (2024); *NGV Triennial*, National Gallery of Victoria (NGA), Melbourne, Australia (2023); *Inheritance*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2023); *Afro-Atlantic Histories*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA (2022); *Claiming the Narrative*, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, NJ (2022); *Black American Portraits*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA (2021); *Photo Flux: Unshuttering LA*, The J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center, CA (2021); *TELL ME YOUR STORY: Storytelling in African American Art, From the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, Kunsthal KAdE, Amersfoort, the Netherlands (2020); Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2019); *Mapping Black Identities*, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN (2019); *A Brilliant Spectrum: Recent Gifts of Color Photography*, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA (2019); *Michael Jackson: On the Wall*, National Portrait Gallery, London, UK; Paris, France; Bonn, Germany; and Espoo, Finland (2018); *a, the, though, only, Made in LA 2016*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA (2016); *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA (2013); *The Bearden Project*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY (2011); *Black Is Black Ain't*, Detroit Museum of Art, Detroit, MI (2009); *Oz, New Offerings From Los Angeles*, Instituto Cultural Cabaña, Guadalajara, Mexico (2009); *Black Is Black Ain't*, Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL (2008); *Framing the Triangle*, Goethe Institute, Accra, Ghana (2005); and *Committed to the Image*, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, NY (2001).

Gray's work is held in numerous public and private collections, including the Benton Museum of Art, Pomona College, Claremont, CA; California Community Foundation, Los Angeles, CA; Getty Center, Los Angeles, CA; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, MI; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA; Los Angeles International Airport, Los Angeles, CA; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN; Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles, CA; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA; Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; University of Connecticut, Hartford, CT; University of Parma, Parma, Italy; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.

He is the recipient of several awards and fellowships, including the Rome Prize Fellowship, Visual Arts, American Academy in Rome, Rome, Italy (2022-23); John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship for Fine Arts (2018); Bellagio Creative Arts Fellowship, The Rockefeller Foundation (2016); and the Hermitage Artist Retreat Fellowship, Englewood, FL (2015). In 2007, Gray was commissioned to create a public artwork for the Los Angeles International Airport.

Artist portrait by Brian Guido.



**Lehmann Maupin**

Rachel Lehmann and David Maupin co-founded Lehmann Maupin in 1996 in New York. Since inception, Lehmann Maupin has served as a leading contemporary art gallery with locations in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. For over 25 years, Lehmann Maupin has been instrumental in introducing international artists in new geographies and building long-lasting curatorial relationships. Known for championing diverse voices, the gallery's program proudly features artists whose work challenges notions of identity and shapes international culture. Today, the gallery has permanent locations in New York, Seoul, and London, as well as team members based in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, and Palm Beach. In recent years, with growing opportunities in new markets, the gallery has opened seasonal spaces in Aspen, Palm Beach, Taipei, and Beijing.

**New York**

501 W 24th Street  
New York, NY 10011  
+1 212 255 2923

**Contactw**

Julie Niemi, [julie@lehmannmaupin.com](mailto:julie@lehmannmaupin.com)  
Associate Director of Public Relations

McKenna Quatro Johnson, [mckenna@lehmannmaupin.com](mailto:mckenna@lehmannmaupin.com)  
Communications & Research Associate

General Inquiries  
[newyork@lehmannmaupin.com](mailto:newyork@lehmannmaupin.com)