

**HONOR FRASER**

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### The Believer By Eric Bryant November 2014

Early this fall, inside a vast, disused brick building in the gritty Southeast quadrant of Washington, D.C., a ribbon of gold about three feet wide and more than 100 feet long traced a path heavenward. At once soaring and weighty, Glenn Kaino's *Bridge*, 2013-14, reveals itself on closer inspection to be made of identical gold-painted casts of a muscular arm, outstretched with fist clenched, suspended side



by side. But only the most observant visitors would recognize it as the limb of Tommie Smith, the Olympic runner who in 1968 ascended the podium in Mexico City and, upon receiving his gold medal, raised his arm in what would become one of the most enduring expressions of the Black Power movement. With this knowledge the work shifts from broadly lyrical to personal and poignant. And, like the rest of Kaino's omnivorous works, it transitions from political to poetic in one graceful swoop.

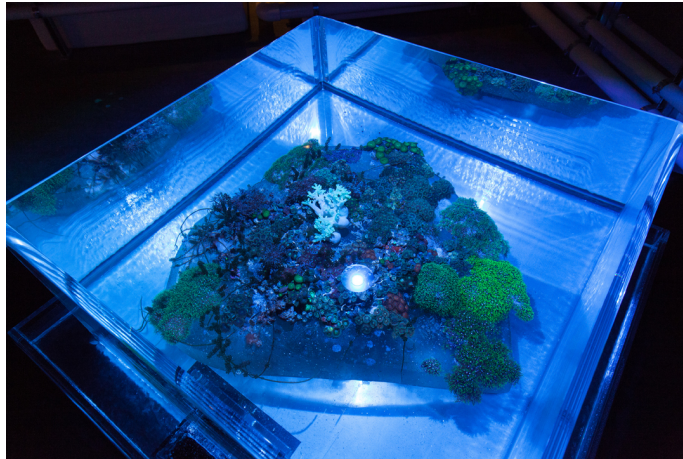
*Bridge* had its genesis when a visitor to Kaino's studio in Los Angeles noticed the artist had the famous picture of Smith as a screen saver on a computer and offered to introduce him to "Coach Smith." Kaino, no stranger to social activism himself, had no idea what would come of it, but jumped at the opportunity, and a week later was sitting in the athlete's Atlanta home. "He spent 20 minutes relating the step-by-step story of the race. His memory of these 20 seconds has lasted a lifetime," Kaino recalls. "I said to him, 'I was born in 1972, so to me, your action has always been symbolic. But for you it is still personal. To the world, that black-gloved fist raised in the air changed everything; to you, that hand is what you use to brush your teeth this morning. What if we were able to collaborate on a project where I remove the arm from your body and create some type of art allowing you to be a spectator for the first time?'"

In the final piece, 200 disembodied arms—cast in fiberglass from a mold made when Smith visited Kaino's studio—lose their defiant vertical reach, rendering the gesture an anonymous stepping-stone on a shining path for those who have taken up the struggle. That sort of intermingling of fact and metaphor, the melding of the individual and the universal, is at the heart of Kaino's practice, which is widely on display this season. On the heels of *Bridge*'s unveiling in September, under the auspices of "The 5x5 Project" with curator Shamim Momin, a show titled "Leviathan," featuring major new sculptures that tackle themes of cultural upheaval and balance, marked the artist's debut with Kavi Gupta gallery in Chicago. Currently in New Orleans, Kaino is exhibiting a group of aquariums filled with coral as part of the Prospect.3 biennial, curated by Franklin Sirmans, on view through January 25. In January

he will also fill the Honor Fraser gallery in Los Angeles with new, room-size wax candles modeled on landmark buildings built atop important structures from earlier civilizations.

With these diverse works, Kaino aims to help us perceive the complexity of human relationships and to look upon both our environment and ourselves from new perspectives. "My practice is conceived as a means of creating spaces and moments where disparate systems of knowledge touch," Kaino says. "I am interested in reconciling the irreconcilable, translating things that are not supposed to be communicated." The approach has earned him solo shows at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh as well as major public art commissions—including one for a new permanent installation in downtown Los Angeles making use of the Sixth Street Bridge site, which Kaino is in the initial stages of designing.

The rebellious spirit that led him to be kicked out of four high schools drives Kaino's art today. When a teacher at his last school pulled strings to get him into the undergraduate art program at the University of California, Irvine, he came under the tutelage of Daniel Martinez, who helped guide him toward the notion that art should be engaged with social issues. Coming of age in the early 1990s, around the time of the culture wars and the burgeoning Internet, identity and technology have been persistent themes, even as he eschews readings of his practice in terms of his personal narrative.



The aquariums in New Orleans, which Kaino refers to as "living paintings," are filled with plastic pieces cast from an M60 tank. For nearly a year the tanks part were submerged in water at a lab in Chicago where they were colonized by polyp rocks, *Galaxea*, *Acropora*, and other species. But this is no simple statement about nature's victory over man's belligerent ways. "Ostensibly these corals live nicely together, but they are truly doing battles," the artist explains. "They have these tentacles and at night they actually shoot at each other." He continues, "Doctors recommend looking at coral reefs to realize stress without realizing you are looking at a war zone. It is only scale and our subjectivity that prevents us from reading this as a battle."

Sirmans encountered Kaino's work in 2003, the year of his first New York solo show with the Project. Earlier in the year the gallery made a splash at the Armory Show in Kaino's *In Revolution*, an Aeron chair that, when spun on its base at 220 rpm, takes on the form of a chalice. "There was something about the work—so based around science and technology but at the same time based around magic and spirituality. Glenn mixes them so easily," the curator recalls. When Sirmans was appointed to organize Prospect.3, Kaino was one of the first people he knew he wanted to include. "The exhibition is about human relations and what we do to each other because we don't take the time to understand each other," Sirmans explains. "Glenn's use of these corals that are innately at war is just the perfect metaphor."

Unlike his specimens, Kaino sought to forge new links in his development of the coral colonies. He reached out to both academic marine biologists and amateurs who grow the animals in home aquariums, and went so far as to initiate a conference bringing the two

groups together to exchange their knowledge. Within his practice, the use of aquariums can be linked back to his contribution to a group show at Los Angeles's Rosamund Felsen gallery in 1999, in which he showed fish tanks rigged to allow visitors either to provide food or disable the life support systems.



Likewise, the use of military tank parts in the aquariums connects to another ongoing body of work. In his "pin drawings," he renders an image inside a vitrine by pinning tiny pieces from plastic model kits like so many insect specimens. The artist likens the drawings to "kit-bashing," a term used by model makers to refer to building unexpected objects by combining pieces from multiple kits. Kaino also uses the term as shorthand to describe his entire practice, which he says derives from his dissatisfaction with the choice between the divergent paths of process-based art and conceptualism that he faced after MFA studies in visual arts at the University of California, San Diego, in the mid'90s.

Working with two full-time assistants in his 2,000-square-foot Hollywood studio (not far from where he lives with his wife, fashion designer Corey Lynn Calter, and their two daughters), Kaino is intensely involved in the physical production of his work. He experimented with dozens of molds and wicks to "learn to draw in wax," as he puts it, for the upcoming show at Honor Fraser.

He still places every one of the hundreds of pins in the kit-bashing drawings himself. But the essence of his practice rests in scavenging and creating component parts—be it a title, a found object, an iconic image, a production method, or a metaphor—then recombining them.

The ethos is on display in his show in Chicago, the signal work of which might be *Escola*, 2014, a giant mobile made from antique scales kept in balance with rocks and candy. That show mixes references to revolution with notions of equilibrium, which he feels has led to simplistic thinking about the world's problems. "What if equality—in the sense of dividing resources in a zero-sum approach—is not the answer; what if generosity is the answer?" Kaino asks. Lining the gallery walls are sheets of stainless steel cut to the rough dimensions of windows at U.S. embassies around the world that have had rocks thrown at them. Dents in the shimmering metal warp and invert the reflected surroundings. Although it is impossible to ignore the overtly political content, Kaino shies away from didacticism, preferring to point out how the divots "bring everything in them closer together to create a sort of utopic vision."

Kaino initially picked up stones in Tahrir Square in 2012 when he was visiting Egypt in preparation to represent the United States at the Cairo Biennial in 2013. As is often the case, he didn't know if he would make use of the rock, but he recognized its symbolic value and spent time ruminating on possible meanings. "I had this thought that this rock is only an instrument of revolution when it is in the air," Kaino says. "On the ground it is junk; after it has hit someone or something it has lost its potential energy." He is currently using a 3-D

printer to make brightly colored plastic copies of some of the stones, a takeoff on the use of 3-D printers to fabricate plastic guns, taking the idea of military innovation to an absurd extreme.

His practice extends beyond conventional parameters, too, into performance and ad-hoc productions. Early on he collaborated with Martinez to create River Deep, a nonprofit exhibition space in downtown L.A. He has continued to serve as a facilitator, first on the board of LAXArt and currently on the board of the Mistake Room, the new L.A. nonprofit he cofounded. "The idea is always bigger than any object," Kaino



states. In this same spirit, he has stipulated that a healthy portion of revenue from the sale of the Tommie Smith works goes directly to Smith: "It is a way to upset the logic of the art world and bring tangible change into Tommie's life." Kaino radiates an idealism that seems equally rooted in radical and the romantic. "Like a scientist, he believes in the possibility to change the world through ideas," observes Sirmans. "He is a real dreamer, and today there are not that many artists like that."

That may be why Kaino elected to take a hiatus from the art world after experiencing a crisis of conscience while visiting Art Basel Miami Beach during the financial upheaval of 2008. He shut down his studio for 18 months and traveled to learn from magicians around the country. He wasn't interested in tricks per se, but he apprehended key lessons that helped him shift his attitude. "Magic unlocked for me the notion of the unseen in a very nuanced way," Kaino says. "I started thinking about unseen connections, belief systems and having different types of poetics inform what I do."

Kaino says the most important lesson came while learning the comparatively easy sleight-of-hand to make a coin vanish. His instructor told him to practice 10,000 times while actually holding the coin. "He told me, ' You have to know what it feels like for the coin to really be there so that you can believe it is there, more than anyone in the audience,'" Kaino recalls. "I thought, 'What a beautiful analogy for the studio.' I make conceptual art with the ludicrous hope of crafting a work that can create a shift in thinking or change the world. All of us practitioners of the imagination aspire to that. But if we don't believe the most, no one else is going to believe more."