



Gaia | MARSHLAND

G A I A



26 September - 8 December 2013

# MARSHLAND

Rice Gallery





## FOREWORD

I first encountered a work by Gaia, a Baltimore-based street artist, not on the side of an abandoned building, but at the Baltimore Museum of Art's (BMA) celebration of its newly renovated contemporary wing. For the occasion, Kristen Hileman, Curator of Contemporary Art, had commissioned Gaia to create a temporary installation. Combining painting, printmaking, and sculpture, Gaia produced *Remington Project* (2012-13), a remarkable work that captured the look and feel of the historic neighborhood and its residents. I learned that *Remington Project* grew from Gaia's practice of spending time in any place he works, talking with people about the local history, culture, and social issues. The City of Houston, now the most diverse city in the United States, seemed a perfect starting point for Gaia's approach, and I thank Kristen for helping me contact the artist, who was soon on his way to Rice Gallery.

Gaia was stunned by Houston's sprawling energy and how palpable was the sense of its upward economic trajectory, so unlike northeastern cities

still struggling from deindustrialization. During his whirlwind visit, our staff transported Gaia to as many areas of Houston as possible and introduced him to people with whom he could discuss the city's present and future. We are grateful to everyone who gave of their time and knowledge including Rice University professors Stephen Fox, Lecturer, School of Architecture and Stephen Klineberg, Professor, Sociology and Co-Director, Kinder Institute for Urban Research; Linda Shearer, Director, Project Row Houses; Danielle Burns, Consulting Curator at The Gregory School; and Rice Gallery summer interns Jessie Anderson and Emily Nichol.

In our Professors' Perspectives lecture series, Rice professors and a graduate student shared their research interests as they related to Gaia's *MARSHLAND*, and we appreciate the contributions of José F. Aranda Jr., Chair of Spanish & Portuguese, Director of the Americas Research Center; Alexander Byrd, Associate Professor of History, and Elizabeth Korver-Glenn, PhD Candidate, Sociology. We also



thank Sandra Zalman, Assistant Professor of Art History, University of Houston, who presented *Building on the Abyss: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*, her talk on an artist who, like Gaia, made his art out of the fabric of the urban world using abandoned buildings and spaces. We are grateful to Mary Wemple for conducting her highly popular Words & Art program, and to Rice doctoral percussionist Brandon Bell and fellow students from the Shepherd School who planned and performed a concert for our New Art / New Music series.

During a week of interactions with many of the people who make up the Rice community, its staff, students, and faculty, Gaia began to recognize the campus as a microcosm of Houston's diversity. He interviewed students newly arrived from other nations and those who are lifelong residents, and employees ranging from individuals on the custodial staff to the university president. Our thanks to everyone who participated: Lilibeth Andre, José F. Aranda Jr., Paige Bailey, Ryan Bell, Alexander Byrd, Jorge Castañón, Priyanka Chandraker, Omar Chris-Rotimi, Erika De La Garza, Alyssa Dugar, Linh-Tran Do, Stephen Fox, Carlos Garcia, Juan Hernandez, Christene Kimmel, Elizabeth Korver-Glenn, David Leebron, Melissa Leuellen, Joe Lipe, Judy Liu, Mary Lowery, Bobby McBride, D'Ondra McGee, David Medina, Marisela

Maldonado, Paul Negrete, Tracey Rhoades, Brian Riedel, Lisa Sampson, Tamara Siler, Roland Smith Jr., Scott Solomon, Richard Stoll, Richard Tapia, Alexander Tran, Leticia Trevino, LemLem Terke, Kyle Xu, and Tsvetelina Zdraveva.

My deepest appreciation goes to Gaia, a "Robin Hood" of art who often dedicates his public works to exposing social injustices, celebrating those who serve others, and preserving the memory of that which is disappearing and irreplaceable. Gaia recognized what Houston has achieved, while at the same time, he was acutely conscious of what was sacrificed and lost forever in the face of the city's inexorable forward momentum. It took Gaia and his assistant, fellow street artist Nanook, just under two weeks to paint and construct *MARSHLAND*; for months afterward gallery visitors loved the installation's audacity, maximal energy, and the chance to see their city anew through someone else's eyes. One visitor wrote, "Thank you for embracing our awesome city! H-town!" while another summed up the experience of *MARSHLAND* for all of us: "Speechless! The complexity and uniqueness of your art is mind blowing! I am inspired! Thank you."

Kimberly Davenport  
Director



## THE MASSIVE METROPOLIS

Gaia named his installation *MARSHLAND* as a nod to Rice University's founder, William Marsh Rice, and to Houston's geographic legacy as a swampy landscape. In the *tour de force* installation, Gaia combined painting and sculpture to create one monumental work expressing the larger-than-life impression that Houston—its sprawl, diversity, and spirit—had made on him.

Gaia's first impression of Houston was of a prosperous urban center, in contrast with those American cities blighted by economic downturns. Contradictory indicators, however, found their way into *MARSHLAND*. Gaia was struck by the incongruity of the site of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, the oldest African American Baptist church in the city, alone amidst encroaching urban surroundings. He recalled his visit to Freedmen's Town in Houston's Fourth Ward where decaying row houses are framed against the skyline of corporate skyscrapers. At the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, he saw Hiram Powers' neo-classical marble sculpture, *The Last of the Tribes* (1867-74) depicting a young Native American woman





looking over her shoulder, which played a prominent role in *MARSHLAND*, where it served as an allegory for cultural loss and change.

Gaia plunged into books and articles about the city, researching where oil money has gone, where financial institutions that service the oil business invest, histories of different neighborhoods, the architecture of downtown, contributions made by prominent individuals, the shift from manufacturing jobs to financial services, and the emergence of a new economy based on technology, medicine, and energy. During his three-week residency to construct *MARSHLAND*, Gaia followed these threads and discovered new ones while interviewing Rice staff, faculty, and students. Participants were found through recommendations of colleagues, the heads of student associations, and Rice Gallery's pre-existing contacts. The sampling was random, haphazard, and allowed for an organic mix of international students, second-generation immigrants, native Houstonians, long-time residents, a recent Rice alumna, and even Rice University President David Leebron.

In his interviews, Gaia asked people what brought them to Houston, why they stayed, where they have lived, and how they viewed Rice's relationship to the larger city. From these, he selected individuals

to feature in the installation that reflected a mix of ethnicities, cultural and economic backgrounds, gender diversity, and a wide map of places lived under the umbrella of "Houston," from the Heights, to the Fifth Ward, to Pearland, Sugarland, and beyond. Though this diversity reflected Rice's effort to become a more diverse, open-minded 21st century institution, interviewees did not gloss over a past of racial exclusion and ethnic tensions that still exist. Dr. Roland Smith, who oversees Rice's Office of Diversity and Inclusion, spoke about when African Americans were excluded from campus and of people having to walk around the campus gates. Dr. Richard Tapia discussed how his own identity as a Mexican-American is perceived in complex ways because of his position at Rice. Others talked about broader issues beyond the university. Elizabeth Korver-Glenn, a sociology PhD student, discussed her ethnographic research of the gentrification and development of Northside, a predominantly Latino neighborhood where she lives. LemLem Terke, a member of Rice's custodial staff, described coming to Houston 23 years ago as a refugee to escape the war in Eritrea in East Africa. Gaia learned that outside of the Rice campus, hardly anyone finds Houston to be a beautiful place (probably unsurprising to Houstonians), however, most interviewees noted that the open, welcoming spirit of the city make up for its lack of aesthetic charm.





Gaia called his floor-to-ceiling mural painted across three gallery walls “an impossible portrait of this massive metropolis.” Riffing on the style of landscape painter Frederic Remington’s depictions of the Old American West, Gaia frenetically layered images and symbols of Houston to show an urban “frontier” of unrelenting change and movement. Downtown Houston’s recognizable skyline dissolved into glass facades obscuring historic sites such as shotgun row houses and Antioch Missionary Baptist Church. A herd of cattle symbolized how investors often follow the same speculative trends. Portraits of entrepreneur George R. Brown, architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee, and Rice architect Ralph Adams Cram represented pivotal figures who helped shape Houston and Rice University. The flight of Gulf coast migratory birds and local signage in various languages signified how immigration follows opportunity and the desire for better quality of life.

The mural formed a background for the sculptural colonnade at the center of the gallery. The architectural design of its pillars, capitals, and arches alluded to Rice University’s Academic Quadrangle, and how Gaia saw Rice as a microcosm of Houston’s diversity. Hanging from each archway was an oil painting of a Rice staff, student, or faculty member who Gaia interviewed during his residency. Together, the portraits gave a human face to the city and the Rice community that Gaia called, “a chorus of voices.”





Ultimately, MARSHLAND was as much about Rice/Houston as it was about Gaia and his own set of very particular ways of viewing urban change and development. The installation's energetic style of painting, flood of ideas and images, and joyful portraiture gave a lasting impression of a hopeful place. Noted Gaia:

Houston has such a future, and it has such an ability to adapt itself according to various business climates, global dynamics, and the economy; whereas if I am in Rochester, it feels like the story has already been told. This is a totally different American city experience than the Northeast. I am fascinated by the incomprehensible energy, size, and scope of Houston, which on the surface may appear to be a bland metropolis. There is a tremendous sense of interconnectivity in the ways in which people relate to one another and navigate their city.

Joshua Fischer  
Assistant Curator

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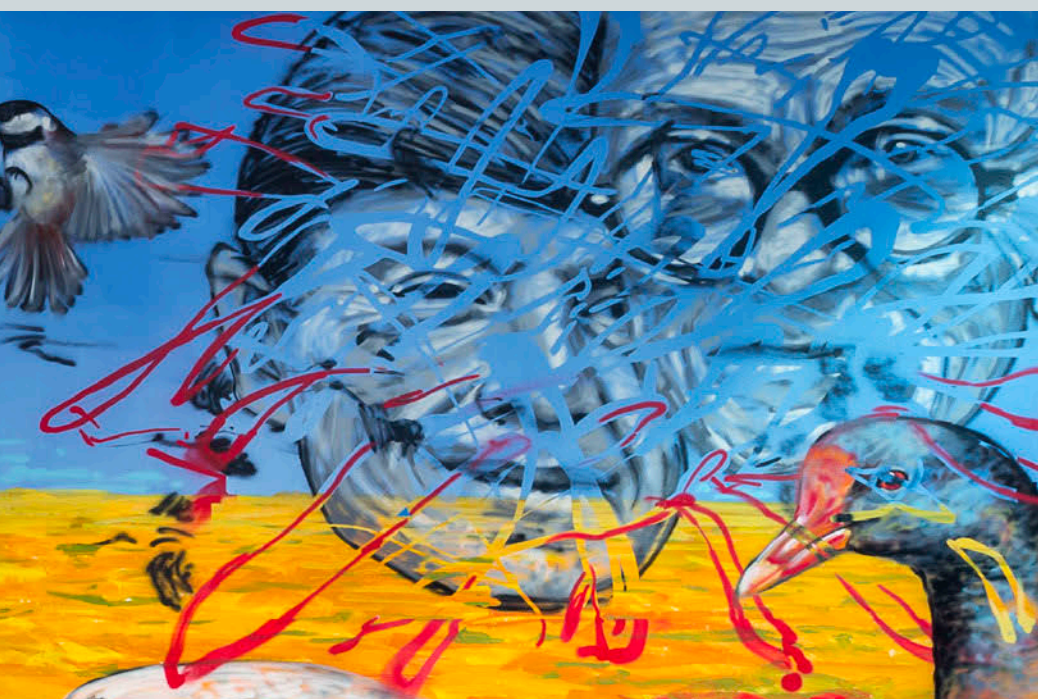
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قائمة  
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PEANUTS  
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AUTO

MARINE'S















GAIA  
MARSHLAND











## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in New York City, Gaia holds a BFA in Interdisciplinary Sculpture from the Maryland Institute College of Art (2011). Recent museum commissions include *Gaia and the Girl Scouts: A Live Painting Project at the National Portrait Gallery* (2012), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, in which Gaia created a large-scale on-site portrait of Juliette Gordon Low, founder of the Girl Scouts to celebrate the Scouts' 100th anniversary, and *Remington Project* (2012-13), an installation for the Baltimore Museum of Art. He curated *Open Walls* (2012, 2014), a biennial street art project for Baltimore's Station North Arts & Entertainment District for which street artists from around the world contributed to an outdoor mural exhibition.

Solo exhibitions include Maxwell Colette Gallery and Pawn Works, Chicago; Jonathan Levine Gallery, New York City; Gallery Heist, San Francisco, and Irvine Contemporary, Washington, D.C. Gaia has had residencies at Ewha Women's University in Seoul, South Korea and at Acrylic Walls in Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa. His work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time Out Chicago*, and *The Baltimore Sun*. Gaia lives and works in Baltimore, Maryland and Brooklyn, New York.





Gaia, *MARSHLAND*

Comission, Rice University Art Gallery

26 September -8 December 2013

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at [ricegallery.org](http://ricegallery.org).

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