

William Christenberry & RaMell Ross: *Desire Paths*

January 13 – February 25, 2023
 510 West 25th Street
 New York



Left to right: William Christenberry, *House and Car, near Akron, Alabama, 1981* © William Christenberry, courtesy Pace Gallery; RaMell Ross, *Man, 2019* © RaMell Ross, courtesy Pace Gallery

New York – Pace is pleased to announce a two-person exhibition that juxtaposes works by the late photographer, painter, and sculptor William Christenberry, and the interdisciplinary artist, photographer, and Academy Award-nominated filmmaker RaMell Ross. Organized by Ross in collaboration with the Christenberry family and on view from January 13 to February 25 at the gallery’s 510 West 25th Street space in New York, the show will shed light on the two artists’ distinct approaches to creating a portrait of a place: Hale County, Alabama.

Reflecting distinct artistic visions and historical contexts, works by Christenberry and Ross employ radically different modes of engagement with the spirit of Hale County, yet both artists deal directly with the racial violence embedded in its history. Ross’s photographs serve as lush, tender portraits of Black life in the American South, while Christenberry’s beautifully composed yet largely unpeopled images focus on the region’s changing landscape over time. Ross began his photography practice while employed as a social worker in Hale County. His work has been deeply influenced by that of Christenberry, whose childhood in Hale County and encounters with the Ku Klux Klan had a profound impact on his practice. Exhibited in dialogue with one another, the artists’ works grapple with the beauty of everyday life over and against the legacy of white supremacist terrorism that has shaped the history of both Hale County and the United States itself.

In contrast to Ross’s focus on the daily lives of Black Americans in Hale County, Christenberry’s photographs are conspicuously devoid of people. Christenberry’s enthralling images of decaying structures overgrown with kudzu speak to the weight of history and the passage of time, but they also offer an intimate portrait of a place. Pace’s exhibition will highlight Christenberry’s *Green Warehouse* series of 21 photographs of the same idiosyncratic building, captured over the course of 30 years, from 1973 to 2004. A semi-abstract painting of the green warehouse, created by the artist in 2001 in dialogue with his series of photographs, will also be on view. Christenberry photographed the warehouse, an enduring subject in his work across mediums, during annual trips to Hale County. Christenberry once said of the building: “...I can’t really express the excitement of finding a subject and the sense of wonderment when you see that for the first time. Or find it one time, go back the next year and look at it again, and see it differently.” The exhibition includes other iconic photographs of built structures by Christenberry that similarly reflect the artist’s rigorous and durational approach to image-making, including *Palmist Building (Winter)*, *Havana Junction, Alabama, 1981*; *House and Car, near Akron, Alabama, 1981*; and *Red Building in Forest, Hale County, Alabama, 1974–2004*.

The exhibition will include Ross's photographic works *Caspera* (2019), *Yellow* (2013), and *Kool See Mountain* (2019), which depict figures amid the landscape of Hale County and function as counterpoints to Christenberry's images. In *Man* (2019), also on view, a small child situates his body between the tire and fender of a blue car, gazing at the viewer from this curved crevice. These works relate to the artist's critically acclaimed 2018 documentary *Hale County This Morning, This Evening*, which chronicles the everyday lives of Black Americans in Hale County. Ross wrote in 2015, "I'm for an art that tries to erase the horizon. With my 4x5 camera upright, swinging the three-leg, glass-nosed puppet into position, I daydream about a postmodern South, of melanin liberation and a less profit-centered humanity."

The exhibition will also feature a selection of Christenberry's sculptural works from his Dream Buildings series—mysterious, imposing structures forged in wood, metal, white paint, and encaustic. Speaking of these works, Christenberry once recalled, "I dreamed I was on a winding, back country Alabama road and, as I came around a curve, there before me was a building with no windows and no doors. The building had an unbelievably pitched roof. The walls were covered with these outdoor advertising signs that I love. I got up the next morning and the dream was as clear as a bell." A sculptural rendition of *Green Warehouse, 1995* will also be on view—this work is installed on a bed of Hale County's famous red soil, which Christenberry routinely collected and referred to as "red earth."

Ross, inspired by Christenberry's use of "red earth," also collects soil from Hale County as part of his practice. In his Earth, Dirt, Soil, Land series, the artist displays this material in variously shaped glass cases, including triangular memorial flag cases. One such work in Pace's upcoming show—*Earth, Dirt, Soil, Land; Light in the Attic* (2021)—incorporates a Shel Silverstein illustration of a figure, which Ross has modified using brown crayon. With these dynamic sculptures, Ross meditates on histories inextricable from Hale County's terrain and examines his own relationship to enactments of violence and resiliency, hate and love in the American South.

In addition, this presentation will feature Ross's sculptural and performance work *Return to Origin*. For this piece, Ross draws on the history of 19th century abolitionist Henry Box Brown's escape from slavery. In 1849, Brown mailed himself to freedom inside a wooden box, journeying 27 hours from Virginia to Philadelphia by railroad, steamboat, wagon, and ferry. With *Return to Origin*, Ross constructed a 4 x 8-foot box that he remained inside during a 59-hour freight shipping trip from Rhode Island to Hale County in 2021. The interior walls of Ross's box bear the artist's *Black Dictionary*, an experimental text for which he revisits a military-issued, childhood dictionary and inserts the word "Black" before each entry.

Return to Origin will be displayed in conversation with Christenberry's installation *Klan Tableau, 1962–2007*, which has never before been shown in a gallery setting. On loan from the Christenberry family, this work, produced by the artist over the course of more than four decades, examines organized racism and white terrorism in the United States, incorporating some 400 objects that range from dolls dressed in hooded KKK robes to drawings, photographs, illuminated crosses, and Confederate flags. With this installation, the artist contemplates evils committed by and against humanity. Christenberry, a white southerner, used haunting depictions of the Klan throughout his work to address and attempt to reckon with the atrocities it perpetrated.

Ross wrote in a catalogue essay for the 2019–20 Ogden Museum exhibition *Memory is a Strange Bell: The Art of William Christenberry*, "His Klan room, its paraphernalia, sculptures, and images, as a whole and in each individual piece, are rigorous studies that arrive without anger or hate, sensationalization or fantasy. They appear to emerge from a pure obsession and fear. Christenberry is haunted. Perhaps obsession and fear of the terrific reflection of a potential self."

Christenberry's depictions of the Klan offer a salient counter-narrative to decades of revisionist history and propaganda that have often mollified the scale and harrowing intimacy of the KKK's domestic terrorism. Exhibited alongside one another, works by Ross and Christenberry cultivate an environment that is deeply attentive to both the horrors and enduring beauty of Hale County. Engagement with the self-contained *Klan Tableau* installation, situated at the end of the exhibition, will be optional for visitors.

William Christenberry (b. November 5, 1936; d. November 28, 2016) received a BFA and MA in painting from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. Following a 1961 meeting with Walker Evans, whose photographic portrait of Alabama sharecroppers during the Great Depression, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, deeply impacted Christenberry, he began to seriously pursue photography over his early explorations in abstract painting.

During annual pilgrimages to his native Hale County, Alabama, Christenberry recorded the changing appearance of the region's natural landscape and vernacular architecture in diverse formats and media for nearly five decades. Recognized as a pioneer in color photography, his images of rusted signage, winding dirt roads, and the weathered exteriors of humble structures present, with deceiving formal simplicity, prolonged studies of place that chronicle the passage of time in the rural South. Christenberry's most frequent subjects, such as Coleman's Cafe, Sprott Church, and the Palmist Building – often photographed straight-on and near the center of the frame – assume an iconic quality within his oeuvre as monuments of a disappearing past.

RaMell Ross (b. 1982) is an artist, filmmaker, writer, and liberated documentarian. His work has appeared in places like Aperture; Hammer Museum; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; Museum of Modern Art; Georgia Museum of Art; National Gallery of Art; and Walker Art Center. He has been awarded an Aaron Siskind Foundation Individual Photographer's Fellowship, was a 2020 USA Artist Fellow and a 2022 Solomon Fellow at Harvard University. His feature experimental documentary Hale County This Morning, This Evening won a Special Jury Award for Creative Vision at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival and 2020 Peabody Award. It was nominated for an Oscar at the 91st Academy Awards and an Emmy for Exceptional Merit in Documentary Film. RaMell holds degrees in Sociology and English from Georgetown University and is an associate professor in Brown University's Visual Art Department. His work is in various public and private collections.

Pace is a leading international art gallery representing some of the most influential contemporary artists and estates from the past century, holding decades-long relationships with Alexander Calder, Jean Dubuffet, Barbara Hepworth, Agnes Martin, Louise Nevelson, and Mark Rothko. Pace enjoys a unique U.S. heritage spanning East and West coasts through its early support of artists central to the Abstract Expressionist and Light and Space movements.

Since its founding by Arne Glimcher in 1960, Pace has developed a distinguished legacy as an artist-first gallery that mounts seminal historical and contemporary exhibitions. Under the current leadership of President and CEO Marc Glimcher, Pace continues to support its artists and share their visionary work with audiences worldwide by remaining at the forefront of innovation. Now in its seventh decade, the gallery advances its mission through a robust global program—comprising exhibitions, artist projects, public installations, institutional collaborations, performances, and interdisciplinary projects. Pace has a legacy in art bookmaking and has published over five hundred titles in close collaboration with artists, with a focus on original scholarship and on introducing new voices to the art historical canon.

The gallery has also spearheaded explorations into the intersection of art and technology through its new business models, exhibition interpretation tools, and representation of artists cultivating advanced studio practices. As part of its commitment to technologically engaged artists within and beyond its program, Pace launched a hub for its web3 activity, Pace Verso, in November 2021.

Today, Pace has nine locations worldwide, including a European foothold in London and Geneva, and two galleries in New York—its headquarters at 540 West 25th Street, which welcomed almost 120,000 visitors and programmed 20 shows in its first six months, and an adjacent 8,000 sq. ft. exhibition space at 510 West 25th Street. Pace's long and pioneering history in California includes a gallery in Palo Alto, which operated from 2016 to 2022. Pace's engagement with Silicon Valley's technology industry has had a lasting impact on the gallery at a global level, accelerating its initiatives connecting art and technology as well as its work with experiential artists. Pace consolidated its West Coast activity through its flagship in Los Angeles, which opened in 2022. Pace was one of the first international galleries to establish outposts in Asia, where it operates permanent gallery spaces in Hong Kong and Seoul, as well as an office and viewing room in Beijing. Pace's satellite exhibition spaces in East Hampton and Palm Beach present continued programming on a seasonal basis.






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