

TEACHERS' NOTES

Gary Simmons

This Must Be The Place

Hauser & Wirth London, 25 May – 29 July 2023



Gary Simmons, 2023. Photo: Tito Molina / HRDWRKER

About Gary Simmons

Gary Simmons has achieved wide acclaim over the past three decades for his work which explores the politics of race, class and social stereotypes through painting, sculpture, sound and architectural environments. Simmons uses imagery drawn from popular culture to create works that address personal and collective memories.

Born in New York NY in 1964, Simmons received his BFA from the School of Visual Arts in 1988 and his MFA from CalArts in 1990, studying under Charles Gaines, Michael Asher, Catherine Lord and others. Early in his practice, Simmons established a studio in a former

school in New York City. At this stage, he was working predominantly in sculpture, a medium he would return to in subsequent decades. In his most recent works, Simmons continues to engage with popular culture, however, in an increasingly nuanced and abstracted way, as his focus shifts towards the history and materiality of painting and sculpture.

For the artist's first exhibition with **Hauser & Wirth in London**, Simmons presents a selection of new paintings and sculptures. This exhibition coincides with the first comprehensive institutional survey of Simmons' work, '**Gary Simmons: Public Enemy**,' which will be on view at Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago from 13 June – 1 October 2023.



Installation view, 'Gary Simmons. This Must Be the Place,' Hauser & Wirth London, 2023 © Gary Simmons. Photo: Alex Delfanne

What does the exhibition look like?

This exhibition features large-scale, multi-layered paintings and large-scale bronze sculptures. Simmons employs the erasure of the image, a technique that has become synonymous with his practice, as a powerful and recurring metaphor. His paintings feature the white outlines of characters, scenes and words painted on chalkboard-like surfaces which are then blurred and smeared by hand. Simmons' work frequently references popular culture such as sport, music, film and cartoons to reveal how the national character of the USA is constructed.

In **'This Must Be the Place,'** Simmons is using bronze for the first time on a large scale. Reminiscent of the heckling crow characters from Disney's classic animated film 'Dumbo' (1941), two crow sculptures stand at a distance from each other. Despite the nature of the material, the form of the sculptures remains unrefined, as if still in the process of being modelled and defined.



Gary Simmons, 2023. Photo: Tito Molina / HRDWRKER

How does he make his work?

Simmons wipes the surface of his work while the paint is still wet to smear the image so that it simultaneously emerges and disappears. The erasure of the image is a form of painting indebted to action painting in its physicality and gestural or performative nature.

Simmons' process involves a constant building and removal of up to fifteen layers of paint. In 'Ghost Town Skies' (2023), subtle glints of yellow can be detected in and amongst the layers of monochrome paint, and flashes of pink can be seen in 'How Soon Is Now' (2023).



Gary Simmons, Ghost Town Skies, 2023 © Gary Simmons. Photo: Keith Lubow

What are the major themes within the exhibition?

Erasure

Simmons' 'erasure' technique holds deep cultural significance, capturing the effect of histories, as experienced by Black communities, being altered and overwritten. As the artist has stated, 'When you attempt to erase something, there's always a trace left behind.'

In 'Smalltown Boy' (2023), Simmons combines the star motif with the racialized cartoon character Bosko, who was created in the late 1920s and achieved popularity in the early 1930s. Simmons' use of erasure in conjunction with the Bosko imagery references the attempt to cover up the ingrained prejudices revealed by the popularity of the cartoons.

Star Motif

A universal symbol, stars take on many different meanings and interpretations, whether it be shooting stars or fallen stars, that imply inherent notions of hope, dreams and loss.

Individual and Collective Memory

'The work forces you to go down memory lane. It nudges you into rethinking how certain images came into your life, what they meant, and what they mean now.'—Gary Simmons'

Popular Culture

There are frequent references to mass cultural products in the USA such as cartoons steeped in the racist traditions of minstrelsy, film and music, which explore the relationship between popular culture and the prejudice within the imagery which reinforced stereotypes of Black individuals.

Materiality of Painting

This new series demonstrates Simmons' exploration of painterly issues such as background, depth of field, process and layering, citing Albert Oehlen and Martin Kippenberger as influences.

Music and Performance

Simmons is often informed by music and performance, and draws specific inspiration from dub, punk, hip-hop, reggae and rap. The title of the exhibition and of the new paintings on show are taken from British and American dance and post-punk songs from the 80s, including 'How Soon is Now' (1984) by The Smiths, 'Smalltown Boy' (1984) by Bronski Beat and 'This Must Be the Place' (1983) by Talking Heads. Simmons describes his process as 'visual DJing' in reference to the way he samples visual imagery from different sources.



Installation view, 'Gary Simmons. This Must Be the Place,' Hauser & Wirth London, 2023 © Gary Simmons. Photo: Alex Delfanne

What other artists does his work relate to?

Mark Bradford (b. 1961) is a contemporary artist best known for his large-scale abstract paintings created out of paper.

Stefan Brüggemann (b. 1975) is an artist whose work deploys text in conceptual installations rich with acerbic social critique and a post-pop aesthetic.

Ed Clark (1926 – 2019) was a contemporary artist whose experimentations with pure color, abstract form and the materiality of paint extended the language of American abstraction.

Ellen Gallagher (b. 1965) is an American artist. Gallagher builds multi-layered paintings that pivot between the natural world, mythology and history. Her painting process involves undoing and reforming trains of thought often over long periods of time and across linked bodies of works.

Richard Jackson (b. 1939) has been a pre-eminent figure in American contemporary art since the 1970s. Jackson's work is influenced by both abstract expressionism and action painting, exploring a performative painting process which seeks to extend the potential of painting by upending its technical conventions.

Paul McCarthy (b. 1945) is widely considered to be one of the most influential and ground-breaking contemporary American artists. McCarthy's multifaceted artistic practice includes performance, photography, film and video, sculpture, drawing and painting.



Gary Simmons, Smalltown Boy, 2023 © Gary Simmons. Photo: Keith Lubow

Glossary

Abstraction

Art that does not attempt to directly represent reality.

Action Painting

A style of painting in which paint is spontaneously thrown, splashed or poured on to the canvas.

Bronze

A yellow-brown alloy of copper with up to one-third tin.

Metaphor

A comparison of two separate things which are not related to one another.

Minstrelsy

The form of entertainment in minstrel shows, featuring songs, dances and designed comic routines based on stereotyped ideas and representations of African Americans.

Motif

An image or idea that is repeated within an artistic work.

Popular Culture

Popular Culture is typically understood as the accumulation of the various cultural products consumed by the majority of a society's population; it is characterized by mass accessibility and appeal.

Racialized

To make something or someone racial in character.

Representation

Representation refers to who is shown and highlighted within society and how they are displayed, referred to, seen and heard.

Stereotype

An unfair generalization or a preconceived idea about a group of people.



Installation view, 'Gary Simmons. This Must Be the Place,' Hauser & Wirth London, 2023 © Gary Simmons. Photo: Alex Delfanne

Discussion Questions

- Simmons states, 'When you attempt to erase something, there's always a trace left behind.' Examine this statement within the context of how the artist creates his paintings through process and layering, and consider how the metaphor of erasure speaks to the socio-political themes of his work
- How is history recorded and by whom? What makes history unreliable? Can our personal or collective understanding and perception of history change? In what ways can art help us to 'see,' 'remember' and 'recall' history?
- How do images and objects from mass popular culture—such as film, cartoons and music—help us to understand the culture and values of societies? In what ways does Simmons' art reveal ingrained racial prejudices that are both historic and contemporary?
- Simmons has spoken about the importance of British and American dance and post-punk songs from the 1980s to his work in this exhibition. Listen to songs from this era, including 'How Soon is Now' (1984) by The Smiths, 'Smalltown Boy' (1984) by Bronski Beat and 'This Must Be the Place' (1983) by Talking Heads, and discuss in what ways this music may have informed these paintings, considering titles, themes and process.



Gary Simmons, Big Star, 2023 © Gary Simmons. Photo: Keith Lubow

Supplementary Research

Hauser & Wirth: Black Ark: Gary Simmons and Elvis Mitchell in Conversation Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S991cmOgY00>

Ursula: Residue, Traces, Ghosts video

hauserwirth.com/ursula/37018-residue-traces-ghosts/

Los Angeles Times Article: Gary Simmons on how his artwork 'forces you to go down certain parts of memory lane'

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2022-04-22/gary-simmons-hauser-and-wirth-los-angeles-artwork>

Hauser & Wirth: Gary Simmons Artist Page

<https://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/33677-gary-simmons/>

Hauser & Wirth: Gary Simmons Press Release

https://www.hauserwirth.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GarySimmons_HWL_PressRelease.pdf