

Arts Publications

# Gary Simmons at the Studio Museum in Harlem - a showing of "erasure" drawings

Art in America, June, 2003 by David Ebony

This exhibition, Gary Simmons's first U.S. museum survey, featured 37 works produced over the past seven years. Curated by Thelma Golden, the show was co-organized by the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, where it debuted early last year before traveling to SITE Santa Fe and New York. Focused on the artist's well-known "erasure" drawings, made by forcefully rubbing or smudging intricate chalk or charcoal renderings on paper, canvas or slate-colored painted panels, the survey also included a site-specific mural, a video installation and photographs. Also on view were two large, white cast-fiberglass sculptures made especially for the show: Big Still, featuring the numerous vessels and tubes of a moonshine distillery, and Here Piggy Piggy (from the Memory Series), showing two figures of white hunters with bobbing heads, oversized versions of the kitschy novelty figures made for display in a car's rear window. Without other sculptures in the survey, however, these works seemed a bit out of place in an otherwise cohesive show.

Using a vocabulary primarily based in Minimalism and Conceptual art, Simmons addresses in his work issues of identity and race as well as broad concerns surrounding the passage of time, the fleeting nature of life and the precariousness of the human condition. He suggests an often-disturbing dichotomy in works of considerable physical beauty that evoke the ethereal, the invisible and the immaterial.

While figures rarely appear in the work, the ghostly images often imply a human presence, as in a group of three double-sided chalk drawings of fir trees, churches and big houses on large, freestanding schoolroom blackboards from 1998, installed in one room. Here, one can imagine an instructor in a city school making these hazy sketches to illustrate a point about suburban or rural living; Joseph Beuys drawing on blackboards during certain of his legendary performances also comes to mind.

Among the exhibition's highlights were examples of Simmons's "Ghoster Series," showing blurry details of roller-coaster trestles, like those that might be glimpsed by a speeding passenger on a ride. Impermanent or uninhabited structures, such as gazebos, wishing wells, lighthouses and cages, appear in other major works.

Lost Ones (for L.), the sprawling (12-by-40-foot) mural in the museum's main gallery, was a dynamic composition showing two large birdcages swinging from ceiling chains. With their occupants set free, the empty cages seem about to crash in the center of the slate-gray field. Created for his first New York show since 9/11, the work could refer to the collapsing World Trade Center towers. Simmons's enigmatic vision, however, equally conveys a tumultuous yet exhilarating sense of freedom.