

ART/ARCHITECTURE; The No-Tech Way Toward Art-Making

By FRANKLIN SIRMANS

Published: Sunday, September 2, 2001

THE reputation of Gary Simmons has been simmering for some time, and this could be the season when it boils over to a larger public.

At 37, Mr. Simmons has become a significant artist. His style, running the gamut from multiculturalism to what the curator Thelma Golden recently labeled "postblack," seemed to hover over the much discussed "Freestyle" exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem last spring. (Ms. Golden organized the show, which opens at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in California on Sept. 28.) And he is preparing for his first museum survey, opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago on Feb. 16.

While Mr. Simmons has enjoyed successful shows all over the United States, he has not been a part of the international carnival of biennials, which have overwhelmingly favored video. His significance may lie in what has come to define the best art of the 90's, a return to basics during a high-tech decade in which art required no more of an attention span than MTV.

That approach will be on view in his fifth solo exhibition, "Wishful Drinking," which opens on Sept. 15 at his New York gallery, Metro Pictures. The centerpiece is a "moonshine" still, one of the forms that Mr. Simmons has been using in sculpture since his exhibition last winter, "Country Grammar," at the Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles. As in his past works, the white-painted still is physically minimal and discreet, though conceptually layered with an abundance of meanings and contexts. Another room will hold a large-scale wall drawing of a wishing well, likening the inebriation produced by alcohol to the act of wishing.

On the surface a meditation on hillbillies, Prohibition and drunkenness, "Wishful Drinking" examines the territory of a consuming desire, getting your mind off to somewhere else. "It's about this publicly acted-out private state, where it's kind of like 'anywhere but here,'" Mr. Simmons said. "I'm interested in what makes someone wish to be somewhere else. What's wrong with being right here in this moment?"

Inspired by American popular culture ranging from cartoons to sports and vernacular architecture, Mr. Simmons's work has not always been so open to interpretation. He has dealt extensively with cultural identity and imagery in early sculptures like "Six-X" (1989), "Mr. Klanman" (1991) and "The Garden of Hate" (1992), in which he skewered icons of racist ideology with a potent mix of attractiveness and repulsiveness in a range of media including hand-stitched robes, a lawn jockey and a flower bed. While those

works, often room-size, seemed to scream for attention -- had there been a musical accompaniment it might have been a rattling, thumping fat bass beat -- Mr. Simmons cites youthful brashness as the norm for any artist at the beginning of his career. "You start off trying to kick some shins," he said, "and then after a while you say, 'O.K., let's slow things down here.' "

Simon Watson, the director of Downtown Arts Projects, has followed Mr. Simmons's work from the beginning. "In Los Angeles, in the summer of 1989," Mr. Watson said, "I wandered into a gallery group show where I saw a small, waist-level, wall-mounted aluminum clothing rack holding six miniature Ku Klux Klan robes. The visceral power was like a punch in the stomach. It was an especially insidious artwork because it had a sweet seductive side to it; it looked so innocent, small, clean and neat." Soon after, Mr. Simmons developed what would become a trademark visual language with his "erasure drawings," stereotypical images often taken from the likes of old Walt Disney cartoons, rendered in chalk on slate and then partly rubbed away.

In 1993 Mr. Simmons photographed sitters in front of large backdrop paintings with phrases derived from rap lyrics for a show that Jan Avgikos called "insider information" in Artforum magazine. In 1995, he referred to the parquet surface of the fabled Boston Garden in "Sound Garden," a flower garden and sound sculpture that audibly traced the squeak of sneakers on a basketball court.

Franklin Sirmans, a freelance curator and writer, is the former U.S. editor of Flash Art International magazine.

A version of this article appeared in print on Sunday, September 2, 2001, on section 2 page 27 of the New York edition.