

Arts Publications

Gary Simmons - Critical Essay

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By Judith Russi Kirshner

With the willful impermanence of their blurred chalk marks, Gary Simmons's monumental "erasure" drawings position themselves somewhere between black and white. His bravura subtractions are perplexing expressions of the politics of difference and the paradox of memory, incorporating what he has called "mark-making as well as a literal 'unmark'-making": He executes drawings in white chalk on panels and walls that have been coated with slate paint or schoolroom blackboards on wheels and then smudges the images with his hands, partially wiping them out. Meaning resides in the tension between what is drawn and the act of erasing, a kind of representation in reverse. Sensitive to the resonant history of erasure as practiced by artists from Rauschenberg and Twombly to Kentridge, Simmons invests this wrenching process with a performative aspect and brings it to the forefront of his project.

In the past Simmons has applied the formal and conceptual strategy of erasure to subject matter derived from sources in popular culture, where an insidious, instructional racist subtext often lurks. In the late '80s he began making chalk-on-blackboard drawings of Disney crows and cartoon bug eyes along with sculptures, such as a row of Ku Klux Klan robes in miniature. Like Kara Walker and Kerry James Marshall, Simmons has invoked the atmospherics of history, but unlike them he has concentrated on locations restricted to the privileged. Several series of drawings from the early '90s imply powerful narratives through vacant, grand architecture (ghostly ballrooms, abandoned gazebos, echoing staircases) and regal fixtures (thrones, chandeliers). These works gave rise to his first large-scale site-specific wall drawings in 1995.

The projects on view in this first museum survey are not limited to identity politics and ghosts. The Studio Museum in Harlem's Thelma Golden (working with Elizabeth Smith, the MCA's chief curator) chose to focus on Simmons's more recent erasure drawings as well as installations, skywriting projects, and paintings from the past seven years. Many of the drawings depict seemingly innocent, even romantic subjects: evergreens, trains, shooting stars. But what political theorist Iris Marion Young terms the impossibility of an "unsituated group-neutral point of view" persists. Though any normative label makes him wary--whether stemming from African American cultural legacies, resistance to the art world's demand for slickness and spectacle, or the rhetoric of "post-black" (Golden's term, meant to unpack the notion of race as a cultural burden, inevitably functions as a normative label itself)--Simmons insists that race consciousness is embedded in his representations no matter how much he might tone it down.

Simmons's erasures generate fluvial swirls, lacy residues of chance that conjure waves, feathers, and vapor. Anxious to sleuth out images that have been intentionally obscured, viewers must resort to titles for clues then reenact Simmons's process in reverse. In 1996, preoccupied with the notion of abandonment that had informed his wall drawings, Simmons traveled to Death Valley to film the skywriting project *Desert Blizzard*. The result was projected on a wall here: The white trail of a tiny plane inscribes a slow storm of asterisk-shaped snowflakes, one by one, each evaporating when the next begins, in a Sisyphean circuit of visibility and invisibility. Tantalizing and mesmerizing, the drone of the plane lulls you away from the idea of war evoked by the title; as in the erasures, appearance and disappearance coexist in the frame. Also on view, for the first time, were six color photographs documenting another skywriting work, *Sky Erasure Drawings*, commissioned for the opening of the MCA's new building in 1996.

Other projects have a sharper political edge. Leaving aside issues of so-called urban primitivism, Simmons has carved out a number of backwoods outlaw fantasies, for instance constructing all-white moonshine stills in foam and fiberglass. In *Here, Piggy Piggy* (from *Memory Series*), 2002, the sinister hillbillies who humiliate the he-men city slickers in the 1972 film *Deliverance* are transformed and enlarged into a pair of crudely made, horribly grinning bobbleheads (the

commercial souvenirs that are available at sporting events). Whites painted white, sentenced to eternal spasms of head-waving, these grotesque toys are the other of the other.

The Simmons show coincided with the blockbuster "Mies in America," which had traveled from the Whitney Museum, and in the juxtaposition difference is once again writ large. Certainly this disjunctive pairing with the international modernist who built spirituality into the American skyscraper was not lost on Simmons. For Ramshackle Tumble, a site-specific forty-foot-long chalk drawing on a slate-painted wall, he drew three humble lean-tos, America's vernacular constructions, and then blew them away on a majestic scale: A trio of tour de force swirling forms--twelve-foot twisters--have dismantled, indeed almost obliterated the abandoned cabins. To make this monumental work Simmons projected drawings onto the prepared walls then executed athletic, wide-armed gestures from a scissors lift. The baroque scale itself certifies trauma. Huffing and puffing, the cyclones seem to incorporate both sound and movement; the central form especially appears to rise and aggressively thrust itself into our space. Nearby are black chalk drawings on vellum; one terrific example shows a particularly speedy-looking cabin leaning into its own inexorable destruction. These smaller drawings are like thumbnail notes for the flourish and velocity of the wall-size chalk marks.

Mining multiple connotations of erasure, from the theoretical to the autobiographical, Simmons keeps us from forgetting what can't be erased: the limits of narrative. The formal record of his subjective gestures linger in memory even more insistently than his sources, those corrupting images of difference and discrimination we can never suppress, those lessons that remain indelible. But what is also obscured then revealed in the act of erasing is Simmons's own double consciousness: As the agent of these actions he embodies a positive sense of difference as well as the forces of assimilation that wipe away distinctions. In the interstitial space of these works, one false move might eliminate too much: not only the drawing, the sacrificial image, but also the gestural endgame itself, in which erasure appears as gorgeous finale.

"Gary Simmons" travels to SITE Santa Fe June 22-Sept. 8 and the Studio Museum in Harlem Oct. 9, 2002-Jan, 5, 2003. Judith Russi Kirshner is dean of the College of Architecture and the Arts at the University of Illinois, Chicago.