

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE
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Gary Simmons

by Megan Heuer

Mention the name Gary Simmons to anyone engaged with contemporary art over the last decade and they are almost certainly to conjure up images of gold basketball sneakers in a police line-up and pint-sized KKK robes. As a young black artist in the early 1990s, Simmons made provocative and polished sculptural installations bluntly addressing "issues" (specifically race and class in urban America). But a familiarity with this work from the early 1990s makes the Studio Museum in Harlem's exhibition of Simmons's work produced over the last seven years all the more surprising, and complicated. A mini-retrospective of the artist's "erasure drawings", as well as sculpture, video, and photographs, "Gary Simmons" is a monographic exhibition of a black artist in his "postblack" period.

Developed while working in an abandoned school building with an abundance of blackboards, Simmons's signature "erasure drawings" employ a process of smudging chalk marks executed on slate covered paper as if to eradicate the image and start again. The results are vaporous traces of lines, not eliminated, but transformed by the artist's hand. In one series of drawings, Simmons plays with the iconography and architecture of roller coasters. His "Ghosters" take their imagery from the structure that lifts the amusement's track high into the sky, reduced in Simmons's visual vocabulary to a grid. The coaster itself is absent as is the ground below, leaving only the trace of the supporting architecture, a haunting abstraction of blurring lines that capture the downward speed and shifting perspectives of a roller coaster ride. The title of the work comes from the street slang "to be ghost," meaning to disappear or leave, imbuing the work to those in the know with an uncanny combination of hip-hop and earlier Americana. The hybridization of cultural signs is the source of the strength of Simmons's recent artistic vision, made literal through his process of blurring and the fundamental instability of his medium.

Many of the drawings on display were studies for larger, site-specific works and the smaller versions lack some of the punch that comes from being writ large. Luckily, the main first floor gallery is dominated by a site-specific wall drawing Simmons created for this presentation of the exhibition at the Studio Museum. Entitled "Lost Ones (for L)" (2002), two spinning tops dominate the twelve by forty foot wall. The erasure process creates a dizzying sense of movement, akin to Julie Mehretu's energetic wall paintings. But Simmons's leaves the direction uncertain: are they about to collide or are they parting company? This suspended moment of ambiguity and confusion is a strong metaphor both for individuals and for cultures.

Simmons seems to work best on a grand scale. The DVD "Desert Blizzard" (1996-97) records giant snowflakes from a skywriting plane falling in the bright blue of cloudless desert sky. The sky becomes the ultimate chalkboard, limitless in size. Drawing with vapor is just as ephemeral as drawing with dust: the marks of the snowflakes "melt" without the artist's

hand, erased by the wind instead. The work clearly articulates Simmons's relationship to minimalism and conceptual art: his embrace of airplanes, entropy, and the earth as a canvas bring to mind Robert Smithson as well as more recent work by Vik Muniz.

In his most recent work, Simmons's has shifted away from the language and symbols of urban blackness to a vocabulary culled from popular imagery of the rural white South. "Big Still" (2001) evokes a backyard moonshine distillery, an elaborate, sprawling system of trash cans and oil barrels, but drained of all color and rendered only in white. Simmons exults what curator Thelma Golden calls the "make-shift resourcefulness" and the beauty of a "lean-to sensibility" that rural white Southern culture shares with urban black communities, or anyone who has to make do with available resources. (And while Simmons's choice of a still seems to be aimed at a nostalgic stereotype, it serves as a reminder of the precedent for today's rural methamphetamine laboratories in the rural West, another disturbing hybrid of urban and rural, black and white.) Viewed against the white wall of the gallery, shape and volume are foregrounded, recalling the socially acute minimalism of Rachel Whiteread's "Ghost House". But Simmons's ghostly outlines make one think about everything that is lost in the removal of color: whiteness becomes a lack.

The absence of color pervades the galleries. The entire exhibition is rendered in black, white, and the blue, greens, and grays of chalkboards, creating a spare and somber, sometimes airless, atmosphere in a museum in the heart of one of New York's most vibrant and colorful neighborhoods. For an artist who borrows so much from contemporary black culture epitomized by the milieu on 125th street, Simmons's current work in this context makes a strong case for the transformative (and potentially stultifying) effects of conceptual artistic practices.

The initial curatorial invocation of "personal and collective experiences of race and class" addressed by Simmons's art also flattens the work in a way that feels anathema to his recent subtler, more ambiguous tone, developed with a visible engagement with contemporary art as much as with the symbols of American race relations. Taken together, Simmons oeuvre reflects the shift that curator Thelma Golden both observed and underwent herself with her exhibitions *Black Male* in 1994 and *Freestyle* in 2001: the move from highly politicized issue-based art to more apolitical considerations of identity along side the artistic process. Simmons's recent work certainly falls in Golden's "post-black" category. But the exhibition dramatizes the paradox of the triumph of the "postblack" sensibility: the "post-black" artist's concern with identity is championed while connections to other (read white) artists elided in generalizations like "Modernism," re-inscribing "post-black" artists in a discourse of identity politics. There also seems to be a missed opportunity in the failure to connect the concern with identity in the work of white artists (in Simmons case, artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Mike Kelly come to mind) to "post-black" artists. Luckily, Gary Simmons suggests the possibility of erasing such simple and limiting categories, leaving only the traces of their history behind.