

ART VOICES

Gary Simmons

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Gary Simmons makes site-specific drawings, installation pieces, and various forms inspired by such things as television, memory, iconography, presence, absence, and the politics of race on a global level. Simmons expresses more universal social issues through the influence of hip-hop, specifically a reverence for the legendary group Public Enemy. In an interview with Okwui Enwezor, Simmons said that his aim is to “integrate the theoretical with the beautiful to

create stunning objects.” Simmons accomplishes this goal, and in his recent project based on the political implications of boxing, goes beyond it. It is the artist’s job to present something beyond the spectacle, to uncover the layers of dialogue beneath the headlines.

Gary Simmons met with me in his New York studio to discuss some of these issues for Artvoices Magazine.

Noah Becker: Your new exhibition at Metro Pictures, is it kind of like a retrospective looking back at the variety of ways in which you produce work?

Gary Simmons: Yes, kind of a retrospective. I mean, there’s a lot of work. People have followed me for a long time and know that I started out as a sculptor, making objects, installations, things like that. And, as I

started to show more, the drawings started to get more attention and so in my work I started to steer towards that.

NB: Do you think about the audience directly and how they might be reading it?

GS: I think that I have different types of audiences — folks who know me from way back and other people that are familiar with my paintings and drawings only. There have been sculptural pieces along the way, usually in conjunction with a painting or drawing, so I think that at Metro, since the book covers a lot of work, they wanted to give a view of a procession over the years. Maybe some things that haven't been shown as much, or things that haven't been shown here in New York. So it will be a mix of older work, and some new pieces as well, and also the new book.

NB: Right, I was thinking about how your work might be presented in book form.

GS: Yeah, the book basically covers almost everything I've done, it's like twenty-five years of work. It starts with some of the earliest pieces and goes up to minutes before the show came together. There's a lot of developmental stuff, there's four different articles in the book.

NB: The work that you have done, and the work that you continue to do comes out of your ethnicity. At what point did you start to see your work as something that could express social issues?

GS: Early on. I went to school for visual arts in the '80s. At that time I studied with a lot of minimalists, also a lot of conceptualists, Joseph Kosuth was there and Jack Whitten. There were a number of people and different types of work. I was also looking at a lot of minimalist work, and I was really trying to find a voice of my own. You know minimalism was very much about aesthetics and form, as was conceptualism, and it was really hard for me to find my voice in there. In terms of finding it, everything kind of came together in a perfect storm sort of way. I was heavily into the music scene at the time; there was a lot of politically driven music going on from punk rock, to heavy hip-hop. Bands like Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions, these guys were very outspoken. For me it was like forging the two. As I started to move through the work, I started to play with fragmentation, taking certain objects or signifiers out of my work, and making it more my own.

NB: Was it a sudden shift, or did you kind of slowly begin to communicate in this way?



Step into the Arena (The Essentialist Trap), 1994
mixed media,
91.2" x 120" x
120" (900 lbs)
COURTESY
OF THE
ARTIST AND
METRO
PICTURES

GS: Initially, I was using very politically charged objects or images and then slowly I started to open up the dialogue to address a larger community. I think the political thread is always going to be there in something like the chalk boards — they started out exploring different pedagogical issues, school, learning, teaching, voiced the absence of a voice, all of those things started with the cartooning and slipped into an abstraction.

NB: Slipping into abstraction and utilizing a chalkboard as the vehicle for drawings brings up other arguments about where a work can exist. Keith Haring would free chalk from its classroom association by drawing with chalk in the subways. Chalkboards seem like a general area of use to have as a basis for certain ideas to be expressed in that way for those reasons, as opposed to a specific space.

GS: The chalkboard provides a space for me to provide an undercurrent of the work; the politics will always be there but it doesn't always have to be so present as it was earlier on. It's a fortune to have that base to draw on, as soon as I use my chalkboards, all of those things are already applied. So let's say I draw something like a roller coaster and it has a certain kind of political charge to it, but at the same time all of us have a recollection of going to amusement parks as children and so other things come into play as well.

NB: Yes, and the chalkboards bring up those associations even, more so. You get enough momentum in that direction with your work and you can almost do anything and because it becomes yours it acts as part of that experience.

GS: Right, and I think that opened up for me when I started to travel as a younger artist, I started to see the work was being read as an American experience. As I traveled I started to see that I had a great thirst for this conversation to be larger

NB: Where were you traveling and what was your experience in these places?

GS: Different parts of Europe, I moved to Paris, cities like that. With every different culture, there is a different kind of interaction. The commentary early on was very specific and then it opened up to different avenues. Since then I think that my interest in experience and memory of place has really taken on a real position.

NB: Was there ever a moment or place where something really stuck with you in a really direct way during your travels? Where you saw something that really opened you up to different readings and different ideas?

Big Still, 2001, Mixed Media

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GS: I was in Paris in the early '90s and the World Cup was being played. There was some description of a match that France was playing against I can't remember who. The headlines in a lot of newspapers were very specific, racially. I had this conversation in a gallery when someone said, "Your work is very much about America." And I said, "Well that's not really true, because if you look at this Paris headline you will see."

NB: What did the headline say?



GS: It said something like “the black,” meaning this one footballer made a mistake that had cost them the football match. And that moment was when I realized that the conversation had to get broader. And some of the issues I was dealing with had to go outside of just one experience. That sort of opened me up. Often as a younger artist you become known for a mark and, you’re not all that comfortable with just being known for one kind of mark-making, and it was a desire to push into different areas. So it opened up a lot of the materials I was using and installations I was doing, you know I was doing a lot of photography, a lot of video, opened things up a lot more than just drawing. I was also interested in placing the viewer, and creating the sense of place, where you enter this room and that is its own occasion that sort of reflects the outside world. So installation has always kind of been a constant for me

NB: I spent some time with Ornette Coleman recently. There is an aspect of your work that reminds me of the way he thinks about things. Because he doesn’t think of the saxophone physically. He doesn’t think about the physicality of the saxophone. He is conceptual in a way. He doesn’t see the instrument as something that is specific to him as a saxophone player, he sees it as something that anybody can touch. You don’t have to be some kind of special person to relate to that, or make a statement.

GS: Interesting.

NB: When I look at pictures of yours, where you’re doing drawings of newspapers, and articles and that sort of thing, the process of it, you’re doing a little bit of handwork that is not in the tradition of non-crafted conceptualism. How do you feel about handwork in that way?



Everforward. . ., 1993, leather, metallic gold thread, satin, laces, nail hanging; 35" x 15" x 6" Edition of 20
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES

GS: You know, I've always said that if I were a collector I would collect artists' drawings. More so than anything else. Because for me, that is the purest form of ideas, for an artist. The minute you come up with an idea you sketch it. If I were to give you directions to go to somewhere, I would instantly draw you a map. You're not conscious of your mark-making; you're just sort of moving through to get from point A to point B, and you leave a lot more mistakes and thoughts in a drawing because it's a little more casual then,

say, like once you stretch out a canvas. At times, artists can become frozen, just from the history of mark-making on canvas and I think that on paper it's not quite the same thing. I really think that the hand is something I'm always drawn to. In somebody like Gauguin, somebody like Richard Tuttle, somebody like Gerhard Richter, even though Richter is using his hand with the squeegee, there is a manipulation of the surface with the hand. It's not just machine.

NB: Well I think its amazing how much of the material you use can still retain a conceptual approach to it, whereas most people have to reduce that as much as possible.

GS: The marks that I see an artist make is what I'm drawn to. If I was looking at [Cy] Twombly, some of the marks that Twombly would make, for example, I'm looking at the mark of the artist. Not to say that I'm against fabrication, I love fabrication too, but I'm really drawn to the hand.

NB: Yes, I can understand how the hand is imperative to your process. As far as the drawings go, these newspaper pieces and the boxer poster pieces are about Joe Lewis and about that mood and political climate surrounding this historic fight?

GS: Yes, they're Joe Lewis. These pieces are for a show I'm doing at Fort Worth Modern in November. Boxing has popped up in my work a number of times. It represents, for me, a lot of things outside of just the sport. It's not just the brutality of two guys, two gladiators beating the shit out of each other. There is a political component to boxing, a cultural component to boxing, a tragic hero that I'm after in this work. Where [It occurs with] most of the figures in this particular piece that I'm dealing with, in the Schmeling/Lewis fight of 1932, which some people regard that has the greatest fight ever had because it had such political impact. At the time Schmeling was handpicked by Hitler to represent the Nazi Party. Schmeling wasn't himself a Nazi, as far as I understand, but he was picked to represent them.

NB: Interesting.

GS: Yes, Lewis is a very interesting figure because he came after Jack Johnson — who was very flamboyant, outlandish, divided his audience; people either loved him or hated him — and Lewis was the exact opposite; a calm, machine-like boxer. He was a beautiful boxer. But in an interesting twist [he] almost ended up representing the United States, and as a black boxer in the '30s, almost representing the United States is a pretty big statement.

NB: So in actual fact this was a global event. That fight was a Jessie Owens- style moment.

GS: Absolutely, this fight was really looked at globally as these two political forces going up against each other. The really interesting thing for me is that in the first fight, Schmeling beat Lewis, the second Lewis knocked out Schmeling in two rounds. From that point on both mens' careers took totally different tracks. Lewis, who was a champion for a while, became destitute once he left boxing, he was broke. It was a very tragic thing to happen to a great figure. Schmeling, on the other hand, lost the fight and went on to become an amazing businessman. At a certain point Schmeling reached out to help Lewis through his troubled times. So, I thought that was a really interesting point historically to look at in regards to these two figures. I'm really interested in the tragic sports icon. There are a number of fighters, historically, who dealt with this situation. The boxing posters serve to recall that time in history.