



Visual Arts

Art Review: Gary Simmons: Confronting the Haunting Presence of America's Fading Past

By Cassandra Emswiler

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Location

Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth 3200 Darnell St. Fort Worth, TX 76107

Dates

Jan 13 thru Mar 14

Gary Simmons' FOCUS exhibition confronts visitors of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth long before one enters the trio of intimate galleries at the museum's north end. Spanning the full length and

height of the central gallery wall, *Subtlety of a Train Wreck* calls out to viewers in the adjacent main exhibition space and demands closer inspection. Executed with the artist's signature style of blurring drawn or painted imagery by hand, finger trails move from the center outwards, emphasizing the momentum of two massive trains towards an inevitable impact. Up close, the texture of chalk on blackboard paint brims with nuance and human presence—it's invigorating to know that Simmons had to travel to Fort Worth to re-create this work, which was originally completed in 1998.

The choice of image that greets the viewer to this exhibition is significant. The Industrial era steam locomotive invokes grand American ideals and myths that are left to be openly applied to a personal drama or a reflection on society. Witnessing the moment just before the trains collide, it's impossible not to complete the crash in our imaginations, and in that sense, the image floats above time in a strange calm as a

past and future event—it has wrecked and will wreck again.



'Starlite Theater,' 2010.
Pigment, oil paint and cold wax on canvas; 60 x 144 inches. Courtesy the Artist and Metro Pictures.

Given Simmons' interest in American identity as it relates to race and class, reading the trains as manifestations of W.E.B. Du Bois' idea of double consciousness is

unavoidable. As near mirror images, the locomotives can be seen as the merging of a fragmented identity or the clash and confusion of a double self. Embedded in a classic symbol of growth and progress, *Subtlety* becomes a rich exploration of the results of America's most significant paradox: slavery amidst freedom and discrimination alongside equality.

Race more directly informs *In This Corner*, recently created in 2012, which conjures the famous 1938 boxing fight between Joe Louis, a black American, and Max Schmeling, a German co-opted by the Nazi party as a symbol of Aryan superiority. Like *Subtlety*, *In This Corner* shares the advantage of being installed by itself in the space. Comprised of plywood panels and boards of varying size, the work leans against the back wall clustered in a temporary but deliberate state. About half of the wood surface is left bare while the rest is coated in paint and imagery referencing the fight. Sky blue and lemon yellow accent blurred recreations of street posters advertising the boxers, which are fixed in defiance of multiple notices to "POST NO BILLS."



'In This Corner,' 2012. Mixed media; Variable (Overall Dimensions: 219" x 96" x 18" on 18 plywood sheets) Courtesy the Artist, Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, and Metro Pictures, New York.

The boldest of the images, a boxing ring microphone, swings in the upper right, while a newspaper article announcing Louis' victory and what is assumed to be a WWII battleship provide more context on the left of the installation. Decisively

winning this second of two fights, Louis' achievement was clouded by a nation that would celebrate him as an American hero yet deny him civil rights and basic freedoms. Simmons' piece gives form to the many layers of this complex history, some in plain view, some overlapped and obscured.

As part of the *Construction Site Series*, *In This Corner* spurs a mental narrative that travels from a city street to the thick of the fight—allowing the pieces of the story to project into the void of the gallery that coincidentally approximates the size of a boxing ring. There are no definitive conclusions on the part of Simmons, just a presentation of materials as moveable and “constructed” as Louis and Schmeling were by their respective admirers and governments at the horizon of WWII.



'Senator Drive-By,' 2010. Oil, pigment, and wax on canvas; 54 x 54 inches. Courtesy the Artist, Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, and Metro Pictures, New York.

After such such strong installations, the third gallery leaves a more immersive experience to be desired, especially knowing that the five pastel drawings of blaxploitation film titles are markers of a 2010 floor to ceiling installation titled *Credit Roll*. However, these works do interact nicely with neighboring paintings of drive-in theaters, particularly *Starlite Theatre*, a long gone establishment of 1950's Dallas that was one of only a few in Texas to welcome black patrons. Rendered with less contrast than *Senator Drive-By*, the painting feels closest to the idea of "erasure," a term so often applied to Simmons' technique of blurring and smudging.

Common to all works in this FOCUS exhibition is an auditory layer realized in the viewer's internal soundtrack—we hear the train roar, the ring announcer call the fight, and give voice to "Starlite" and "Cleopatra Jones" in our minds. Added to the mix of materials and the tactility and openness of Simmons' strategy, these invented sounds echo history's shifting status as always becoming, fragmenting, and disappearing.

Image at top: Subtlety of a Train Wreck, 1998. Paint and chalk on wall; Variable (Collection of Mellody Hobson)