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Gary Simmons at Regen Projects



Gary Simmons' mixed media "Black Star Shower" (rear) and "Just for One Day (detail)," both 2013
(Christopher Knight/Los Angeles Times / June 3, 2013)
By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic

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Boxing isn't what it used to be. What it used to be was a hugely popular, organized form of violent theater that crystallized the tensions among working class youth of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds in polyglot America.

“Arena,” Gary Simmons' wistfully beautiful exhibition of recent mixed-media paintings at Regen Projects, recalls that storied and controversial past, while shifting the social competition from sports to art. Twelve paintings on plywood and paper by the New York-based artist, including a dazzling mural-scale work affixed to a wall like a monumental billboard, are joined by a transparent, free-standing work that returns the billboard motif to three dimensions.

A century ago, boxing pictures became a staple of the so-called Ashcan painters – especially George Bellows, whose studio in Lower Manhattan was across the street from a bar with an illicit prizefighting emporium in the back room. The hyper-masculine subject of boxing was partly compensation for the activity of painting, which Americans had largely come to regard as representing a feminization of robust culture. Simmons picks up an unraveled thread of social, political and artistic history and runs with it.

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His paintings begin with printed matter – either vintage posters of actual boxing matches or photographs of [Yankee Stadium](#), where epic bouts were once regularly staged, and an announcer's microphone, suspended and swinging in space like a rather ominous noose. The appropriations ground Simmons' expressionist manipulations within a documentary sphere.

“Big Mic,” the microphone painting, is emblematic. The descriptive title slyly alludes to a derogatory but once-common name for an Irishman. Simmons painted the dramatically foreshortened image in bright white enamel on a pitch-black background.

While the paint was still wet, he used his hands and fingers to vigorously smear the image into a dramatic vertical blur, at once heightening the action of the implied narrative while also literally clawing at the painting. “The Stadium,” made the same way, appears to be going up in flames – a reflection of significant history inevitably being lost and, not incidentally, of the artist stormily consigning it to the ash heap.

The fight posters refer to celebrated boxers – African American Joe Louis versus German Max Schmeling, for example, whose epic bouts symbolized racial and political conflict in the 1930s; Rubin “Hurricane” Carter and “Joltin’” Johnny Smith at the Sports Arena in Los Angeles in the '60s, which never actually happened; plus, many other matches mostly forgotten now. Like faded memories, pale silk-screens form the background for emphatic painting by hand.

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The most imposing work features scores of posters printed on paper and affixed directly to the wall, stretching 40 feet across and rising 12 feet high, becoming virtually environmental. Painted and smeared black stars, large and small, cascade down the surface – a shower that is at once celebratory and elegiac.

The mural “Black Star Shower” is partly glimpsed through a free-standing, two-part billboard showing a boxing-arena photograph printed on mesh. The yearning legend “Just For One Day” is written in ornate script across the boxing-ring image, which is split in two. The gallery is revealed as an arena of its own.

As an avenue for social mobility and assimilation, boxing has largely been replaced by other entertainment forms – including, Simmons' work implicitly suggests, art.

Regen Projects, 6750 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood, (310) 276-5424, through June 22. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.regenprojects.com

