

Gary Simmons
by Jodie Bass

Building a mutable sound system with found materials.



Gary Simmons in front of his piece Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark, on view in the Treme, New Orleans. Photo by Jodie Bass.

Gary Simmons is a contemporary artist, teacher, collaborator, and proud father of one. He was formally trained in painting, but his body of work interrogates notions of race, pop culture, social stereotypes, and politics through a variety of mixed media. After twenty-five years of art making, his work has been acquired by a host of major public art institutions including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Museum of Modern Art, The Studio Museum of Harlem, and the Whitney Museum of Art. Simmons' was born and raised in New York, where he currently resides. He completed graduate studies in Los Angeles.

I caught up with him at the site of his current show in the Treme, as participant of the biennial Prospect.3, the afternoon before the performance with the hip-hop artist Beans (Robert Edward Stewart II), a long time friend. This is Simmons' first experience working in New Orleans.

Jodie Bass Tell me about this project. What is the title of the work?

Gary Simmons It's called Recapturing the Memories of the Black Ark. The Black Ark was the name of Lee "Scratch" Perry's recording studio where he really developed the early dub reggae sound. He created a provocative space using found wooden materials around Jamaica. He was in an improvised setting, so he would use everything around him, corrugated roofing, found wood, metal, you know, whatever it was. Whenever somebody wants that booming sort of Reggae sound, they usually create that kind of tower. So what I really wanted to do was create a sculpture activated by live musicians. I used the Lee Perry spirit, so to speak, as my starting point. I really like the aesthetic of how he constructed an audio sound through an aesthetic gesture. I wanted a sculpture that was interactive. It's a performance space. Basically, a performer is invited to play and they can reconfigure the speakers in anyway that they need. Not strictly hip-hop or reggae, it could be punk, or zydeco, second line, or jazz. All of their needs are different, so they can take their PAs out here, it doesn't make a difference, I just want them to use it in a way that they see fit, whatever form that is. Then they are asked to leave the speakers in place, so there's a trace of their presence and their performance.

JB So have they been rehabbed? It's new equipment essentially encased in found objects, more or less?

GS Yeah I told John Craun, who helped build it, to go around New Orleans—particularly the Treme—and find wood on the street, at construction sites, or houses that were effected by Katrina ... as long as he wasn't going down to Lowes or Home Depot to buy brand new lumber. He found some really great stuff. We talked a few times on the phone, and I sent some pictures and drawings. He's a musician as well as a carpenter and really knew what I was after, right away. It's all very much in the mold of the old dub-constructed sound.

JB Aesthetics, process, using found material, all of that?

GS Exactly. They're all graffitied and beat up.

JB How long will the piece remain here?

GS The duration of Prospect. I'm getting a lot of invitations to have it travel. I'd like it to go to LA, Nashville, Chicago, Austin, wherever there's a thriving music scene. I'd love to see some San Francisco punk band in here, just thrashing—not thrashing the speakers, but, you know ...

JB How did you choose this building and what was the process of getting it to Market Branch?

GS This has been the third or fourth building that I had as an option. The first one was a boxing gym, which for one reason or another fell through. Ylva Rouse—an organizer with Franklin Sirmans—and I drove around to look. Then I went back to New York and she found this space, probably three, maybe four weeks ago.

JB Wow.

GS So it was down to the last moment. The speakers were made, but the installation is very integral to the project. The space dictates how you're going to construct the stage and how this thing sits, so I had to change things on the fly. In its first iteration it was a much longer space, and was in total disrepair. I really wanted the architecture to be a part of the work. Also, boxing was an element in the first design.



Gary Simmons. View of Recapturing the Memories of the Black Ark, 2014. Treme Market Branch, New Orleans. Photo by Jodie Bass.

JB Boxing is something you've referenced previously in your work, right?

GS Right. So that made sense. I was going to scrim it and use a lot of posters specific to that gym and New Orleans, but when that went out, I started to strip it down. They found this space and I thought, that's it, that's the one, it's perfect. The acoustics are great, the building is perfectly square. Also, these folks, the owners, are trying to turn it into a cultural center, with a music performance element to it. It's in the Treme, which was really important to me because of the music history. I love the neighborhood. Everything came together, and then I responded to the building. I wanted to make sure the stage was centered, as opposed to pushed-back, because I didn't want a frontal concert stage thing. I like the way you can move around. It worked out well.

JB It is beautifully Basilican, it didn't occur to me before. How difficult was it to let go of the boxing ring? Everything that was sorted out in your head before, is that something that you bring back at some point? Do you just have to let it go?

GS I had to let it go a little bit. When I was trying to stitch together the boxing component with music, I was thinking of a battle of two boxers going at it, that kind of interaction—like two rappers free-styling, or two guitarists who one-up each other.

JB A little dance-off ...

GS I wanted to keep that element. I love that part. The stars are sort of a bit of a calling card for me, though usually they're shooting stars. I like the way they are dispersed, so it's almost like a painting laying down.

JB I had wanted to ask you about that. Are the stars self-referential at this point, or is there added significance here, in this work or in this space, for you?

GS It's referential in that it's an element that I have used in the past, and I think that all things that the black stars, or the dark stars, embody relate. For me, boxing is more about falling stars, so the erasure of the fallen star is something that you either wish on, or is falling and disappearing. These are not disappearing, they're very much here. Those are crisp stars. They are referential, but I would say that they have their own integrity.

JB They're lovely. Just a little stain work, very nicely done.

GS I really wanted to keep it stripped down. We were debating whether to stain the plywood a different color, but then I thought, No, just put some polyurethane over it, and call it a day. I didn't want to get overly-determined with the material. I wanted to stay within the conversation of the speakers; I wanted it raw. It will get all gnarled up as people perform on it. You can already see how the footsteps are starting to appear. I am going to let it weather. For me it really reflects the beauty of the building. I don't like when someone drops something overly polished into these settings. I wanted it to feel as if it were here before, as if there's some kind of interaction between the space and the object.

JB Is there something in the dilapidation or ruin, in terms of architecture, that resonates with you? Renovation, rehabilitation, even as rationalization after the fact—are these concepts appealing?

GS Yeah, when Rouse was looking for space for me, those things came into play. I really wanted something that wasn't going to fall on your head, but at the same time, had a history to it. You feel the history in this room in a lot of ways, I think it draws you up, and you start to think, What was here? You are looking for markers. Even the way that arc is filled in, or the traces of the molding up at the top ... all of that came into play, that there's a past and present, an interaction between then and now. That's very important to me, the ghost of the space.

JB This little nave here, with the vault, the frame that's rusted, you have to duck to enter...

GS It's fantastic.

JB It's completely ritualistic, which I find stunning.

GS With the fewest number of touches you can make a space that releases its history. And then you just let it be.

JB The patina is important.

GS I wouldn't want to paint this place, drywall it, and turn it into a white cube. I'm not interested in doing that.

JB You've captured something ephemeral here, which seems to link to a previous focus on erasure. As you mentioned, the idea is that this work will have another life going forward, and will have to adapt to other contexts, is that right?

GS That's perfect, yeah. I think that's going to happen. I'd like get video of the performances in one place, whether it's on the web or some kind of archive, but yes, at some point I think it is going to get put in a museum space, if I can hold onto it being an alternative space. The Studio Museum of Harlem was here yesterday, and they're really interested in doing something. I'm like, That's awesome, but let's not do it in the museum proper, let's find something else like this in New York, a place that recaptures the same sort of vibe. That's why the title came to me at once, it's a way to recapture the spirit of what Lee Perry did. You know that his studio burned down?

JB No.

GS The legend is that he burned down his studio because he got frustrated. The other legend is that his joint was burning and fell on the mixer.

JB Of course they're going to say that. Yeah, shit happens when you're Lee "Scratch" Perry.

GS But he never built it again. Now people try to emulate that sound, and it's almost impossible.

JB It is almost ark-like!

GS For me architecture and the work that I do go hand in hand. Architecture is always there, even if it's a wall drawing. I love the fact that when I do those, they get painted over and become part of the architecture. I never save them or take them down. I always demand that people paint over them, because I like the idea that it becomes part of the architectural history of the space, whether it's a museum gallery or somebody's house. You have to reconstruct them in your head, through memory. The performances are the temporal versions of that. As such, I'm apprehensive about recording it.

JB I noticed that architectural fragments have entered your work as signifiers or cultural markers. Was that a conscious decision, or am I reading into it? At times your sculptures seem like an excerpt of an architectural reference, in a way different than, say Ghost House. I wanted to ask if you see a similarity there?

GS I think what you just hit on is spot on. What's important to me is fragmentation, whether it's the images that I draw, or the sites that I choose. That's an interesting link you've drawn between this project and the Ghost House. We searched all over New Mexico, and it just sort of found me—this nuclear family house—husband, wife, two kids, and a dog kind of thing, on Ruby Ranch, which was at one time this active small town. There was a school, a clinic, and all of it was left behind. And there was this perfect little house. It's iconic. It's everything that I am looking for. [It] not only bridges the imagery, but has that physicality that adds to the conceptual layer.

JB Right, the history is on the surface. You can see there's been a life lived there and time passed.

GS We didn't pretty that up too much. We cleaned it up so that people wouldn't get hurt, but the floor was still in a bit of disrepair, there were exposed beams, the ceiling was falling in ...

JB And did you just come upon it? What was the approach as a visitor?

GS It's a bit unfortunate what happened to Ghost House. The guy that owns Ruby Ranch was so excited to have that piece there. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by vandals. But, you needed an appointment because it was in the middle of nowhere. I wanted to do it in Death Valley, where there's nothing, like an old Western where you see Clint Eastwood on a horse and he's coming through flatlands and then he comes across this little Western town. I wanted that vibe. The house was basically that, sitting in the middle of this property, perfectly flat as far as you could see in every direction around. But you couldn't just drive twenty miles out in the wilderness and see that house.

JB You had to be in the know.

GS You had to know. And then you had to get there. It was kind of a journey to find it. Which maybe isn't different from this.

JB But theoretically anyone can wander in here, for now. Or that's the hope.

GS Yeah, I think there's a chance that there will be a lot of folks here tonight. I wanted that too. It was billed as a VIP thing, but I didn't want that. I want folks from the neighborhood, everybody from around here who are interested in coming to hear Beans. There's no charge at the door.

JB Like a street party.

GS Music has always been a big influence on me and my work. I was in Dallas, Texas like 1992 or something, and I saw Nice and Smooth perform. I was in a room of maybe twelve people, and I was standing right next to Greg Nice. I'd never get that close in New York, and they didn't care. They were like, We're having as good a time as we would if we had packed twenty thousand people in a concert hall ... That's awesome, and that's what I want to happen. If there are twelve people here and they remember the show and they go and tell somebody, then it has a resonance after the actual performance.

JB There's a quote from an essay by Nancy Princenthal in *Paradise* (2012), in which she describes the tension in your work as "the presence you can't quite see." I thought that was really interesting and eloquent. I wonder if that's operating for you here? I think she was referring more to the polemic of social and racial stereotypes that one senses but can't quite name, but it's similar in that there is a performance that isn't here, but is marked here. Is that still true?

GS Yeah, it's totally here. It's the main artery of what I do. That's why I don't see myself as just a painter or somebody that draws or does sculpture. Whatever the project—if it's a performance space I'm constructing or if it's a boat—it doesn't matter, its going to have that thread. I was talking to a good friend of mine David Adjaye recently, and I think one of the reasons we are tight creatively is that he's really interested in doing a lot of those same things with architecture. He designed a house for me and my daughter years ago that we haven't built yet, but watching David work was fantastic. I saw him last night, and I said, "Dude, we are still going to build that house." In a similar way to the way that I walk around, he was looking at the house, and talking to us about the way we use the space, the interior and exterior getting together, and this that and the other. And I was like, Jesus Christ, this is like me getting ready to do an installation. Then he did a couple of scrawls, and said, "This is the house. I'm done, I got it." The living room felt like being in the garden, and he just got that. He knew how to respond to light, and how it effects physical experience of space. He really responds to space differently, as an artist does to imagery. I think that's one of the main reasons why we get along. There's a mutual respect. I admire folks that incorporate the way you physically and mentally move through space into their work. It's not just purely visual.

JB I've read that you've characterized your work as going from specificity to a more nuanced and universal take after moving to Paris and gaining a wider experience. I am wondering how you deal with the duality of being really particular, or specific, in drawing out the history of a place, while allowing it to be more than just that. Incorporating the Treme, and then perhaps in it traveling elsewhere, do you think the work takes on more universality?

GS When I walked in, I was blown away. The guy that I worked with to construct all this, I told him, "This is exactly what I was thinking of. Wherever this piece goes, you go. I am not having somebody else rebuild this thing. I don't care if it goes to Borneo, your ass is getting on a plane and going to Borneo to build it, because I need that kind of response to a space and somebody who gets it."

JB So in terms of collaboration, you clearly are not working alone. How big is the army of Gary Simmons?

GS There's not an army. I make sure, because I've had assistants, I've had four or five guys that have worked for me, but I don't like the idea that my hands aren't in the ugly stuff. There's something about being in it, when you're elbow deep, and the changes that you do on the fly, that you can't do when you're a boss.

JB I've read of your influences in terms of artists and painters, but do you ever look to design or architecture for inspiration? Historic buildings maybe?

GS Yeah. Walking through New Orleans, there's a structure to the way that they laid out certain streets—proximity to the sidewalk, a kind of compression that leaves a big impact. I walked from where they had the ribbon cutting at Washington Square to here, down Esplanade. You get so much just by walking around and looking. The mansions around here, those are going to have resonance for me, some little nuance that's going to show up in the work. It might be the compression of the space too, or the way the façades are constructed, or the wrought iron detail, or the balconies, which is West Indian by the way.

JB Really?

GS Yep, Barbados, that's my people. (laughter)

JB How much will you continue, not necessarily with Recapturing the Memories of the Black Ark itself, but with this type of installation work? Is this part of a larger trajectory, or just a stop along the way?

GS It's hard to say. An opportunity comes up and I just respond to it. It's something I have always wanted to do. There are associations, when you start looking at all of my work, that I am not specifically aware of on the front side. I don't say, I am going to go back and do what I was thinking about with Ghost House. It just reemerges.