

EXHIBITIONS

Chalk Film Titles 'Fade to Black,' Challenging Erasure in America



ANTWAUN SARGENT

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Gary Simmons: Fade to Black at the California African American Museum. All installation images courtesy of Brian Forrest and the California African American Museum.

The 440 square-foot chalk wall is at the California African American Museum.

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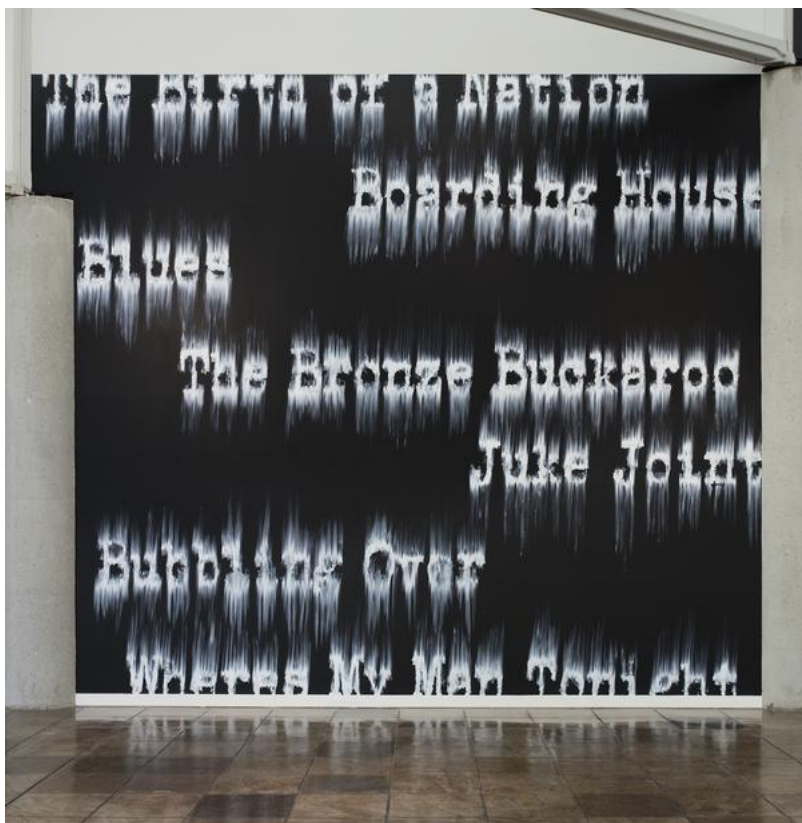


Covering five walls in the lobby of the California African American Museum (CAAM) are titles of classic American films like *Law of the Jungle*, *Juke Joint*, *Moon Over Harlem*, *Go Down Death!*, and *Soul of Sin*, among others. They harken to a time when cinema was America's greatest pastime and a primary form of representation.

Families would gather and go to the movies to see their communities, histories, desires, and fantasies—which is to say, themselves—move across the silver screen.

During that golden age of American cinema, black folks were hardly seen on screen. Black audiences might identify with the help, but more likely they pushed those demeaned characters out of their minds, silently imagining themselves as the white hero or leading lady, living freely in a world full of human complications.

The film titles printed in smudged, white chalk on black walls at CAAM are part of artist Gary Simmons's large-scale installation entitled *Fade to Black*. Taking its title from the traditional film technique, the work employs Simmons' signature use of white chalk as a way to speak to the ways in which filmic and national memory often blur or erase black American life.



"I actually sat with the space for quite a while, watched how people moved through it and dealt with the architecture," Simmons tells *Creators*. "It's a challenging location to work with, because it's not your standard white box," he says of mounting the work in CAAM's lobby. "I was thinking of the way the walls felt, that they almost grew out of the ground, reaching a kind of continuum that expands beyond the building itself. It led to a notion of how film credits run, and that was the genesis."

Simmons has spent his career mining overlooked territories; he gravitates to film, because it is one of the most powerful mediums of the past century. "Black actors and actresses had a place in the foundation of film that's almost forgotten. When people think of the great films like *Gone with the Wind*, they think of the main characters, but then there's Hattie McDaniel."



The movies included in *Fade to Black* are mostly silent films, with several more contemporary works. Through his research, Simmons unearthed that these films cast black actors and actresses in both minor and major roles. Simmons's text installation, both in scale and composition, recalls an endless film reel rolling across an old-fashioned silver screen, creating a kind of history of early black Hollywood, much of which has been forgotten.

"A lot of the great actors and actresses of color we have now are a part of a history," he says. "For every Halle Berry, there's a Hattie McDaniel; for every Denzel Washington, there's a Paul Robeson. For me, it's those forgotten figures I'm engaged in, hovering between representation and abstraction."



Gary Simmons at work at the California African American Museum. Portrait credit: Tito Molina/HRDWKER

The placement of the film titles in the installation summons competing images. On one wall, *The Birth of a Nation*, the controversial 2016 film about Nat Turner's historic slave rebellion, lies above *Juke Joint*, the 1947 race film. The films portray distinctly different representations of black and white characters, creating tension that speaks to the stories Hollywood tells about race then and now. "*The Birth of a Nation* sets a tone, then you look across the wall and see you something like *Gang War* or *Juke Joint*, and they embody other kinds of experiences that you can conjure in your own head," Simmons says.

For many viewers, the inclusion of *Hi De Ho* recalls Cab Calloway's signature call and response. "There's this play that happens for the viewer that allows them to move around in the work, and I think that's essential to the experience. One of my favorite things about film is you and I can both see a film together and come away with different perceptions."



"I really wanted to create a work that didn't push the viewer away," says Simmons. "My hope for those titles is that they might ignite an interest in the viewer to go and see some of those films and get to know some of those actors and actresses." In this way, understanding the trajectory of representation in cinema can perhaps slow down the erasure of the history of black Hollywood. "There's a history, and there are folks who shaped the way we enter the theater. Let's just remember some of those people."

Gary Simmons: Fade to Black continues through July 31, 2018 at the California African American Museum. [Click here](#) for more information.

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ANDREW NUNES

Aug 11 2017, 7:58am



Installation view of Bunny Rogers: *Brig Und Ladder*, Bunny Rogers, 2017. Photograph by Bill Orcutt. Photos courtesy of the artist and Société, Berlin

Bunny Rogers' first museum solo show sees the young artist conclude her exploration of the Columbine School Shooting.

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Though she was only nine when the tragedy took place, young American artist Bunny Rogers has questions about the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, and has used the school's cafeteria and library as jumping off points for entire bodies of work in the past. Her Columbine arc reaches a haunting conclusion in *Brig Und Ladder*, her first museum solo show in the U.S., currently on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art.



Still from *A Very Special Holiday Performance* in

On this occasion, Rogers has moved on to the Columbine High School's auditorium, physically recreating the auditorium's seats within a dark room on the Whitney's first floor. More than static sculptures, these chairs become seating arrangements for viewers to watch *A Very Special Holiday Performance in Columbine Auditorium*, a projected video work which sees three animated avatars from the early 2000s cartoon *Clone High* perform an almost tragic rendition of "Memory," from the musical, *Cats*, in Russian sung by Rogers herself. Nearby on the ground lies a mopey body pillow of *Tilikum*, the deceased killer whale who gained notoriety after killing multiple people as an attraction at SeaWorld Orlando.



Installation view of Bunny Rogers: *Brig Und Ladder*, Bunny Rogers, 2017. Photograph by Bill Orcutt

The solemnness of the first room feels like a site of memorial, though not necessarily for Columbine. As the accompanying wall text explains, the installation is meant as "a mysterious and mournful narrative rife with encrypted intimate details of the artist's life." These works are the result of culture being filtered through the artist's personal sensibilities, then spit back out to the viewer to make meaning of.



Installation view of Bunny Rogers: Brig Und Ladder, Bunny Rogers, 2017. Photograph by Bill Orcutt

After leaving this first room, this sentiment becomes stronger. The darkness of the "auditorium" gives way to a room full of bright spotlights shining on more sculptures, dramatizing each of them with harsh shadows and causing them to stand out as distinct objects from one another (though they mostly come in sets of three).



Installation view of Bunny Rogers: Brig Und Ladder, Bunny Rogers, 2017. Photograph by Bill Orcutt

Familiar objects and more cultural references appear here, and again they seem to hold personal meaning to Rogers that are likely far from our own associations with these objects. Long pastel ladders, often missing rungs, lie slanted onto a wall leading to the ceiling of the space, functionally useless and somehow lonely for this reason. Three mops each equipped with two bright mop heads also lean on the space's walls, ultimately spotless and thus out of work. Three computer chairs at the end of the room serve as an antithesis to the mops, worn and used with huge chunks ripped from their cushiony flesh.



Installation view of Bunny Rogers: Brig Und Ladder, Bunny Rogers, 2017. Photograph by Bill Orcutt

The group of threes are interrupted by two final and singular works. One is a fence, reminiscent of those used in youth baseball fields, upon which dozens of leaf-shaped car fresheners hang, occasionally isolated by color and in other sections mixing all together, like the cacophonous politics of high school social scenes. The final piece is perhaps the eeriest of them all; a large recreation of Lady, a female "girl-next-door" figure from Thomas the Tank Engine. The sterile smile on the sculpture's face and the huge tacky ribbon around her head suggest a forced femininity.



Installation view of Bunny Rogers: Brig Und Ladder, Bunny Rogers, 2017. Photograph by Bill Orcutt

The nature of filtering cultural iconography through personal sensibilities and experiences makes the exhibition difficult to pin down. Explains Rogers, referencing the *threes* that thread Brig Und Ladder, "The idea for the show came out of wanting to talk about my relationship to two other people, so I guess it is a space for three people to exist."



Installation view of Bunny Rogers: Brig Und Ladder, Bunny Rogers, 2017 Photograph by Bill Orcutt

Brig Und Ladder will be on view at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) until October 9th, 2017. More work by Bunny Rogers can be seen [here](#).

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