

## Gary Simmons Shines a Light on Historic ‘Race’ Films with All-Black Casts

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Sep 19, 2018 • 9:58 am



Installation view of "Gary Simmons: Fade to Black" at CAAM

A MONUMENTAL INSTALLATION has transformed the atrium/lobby of the California African American Museum (CAAM) in Los Angeles. The five wall-sized panels read: "Juke Joint," "Moon Over Harlem," "Midnight Shadow," "The Joint is Jumpin," "Souls of Sin," "Jivin in Be-Bop," "The Bronze Buckaroo," and on and on. Cab Calloway's "Hi De Ho." "The Emperor Jones" which stars Paul Robeson. "Blood of Jesus," a Spencer Williams film. Oscar Micheaux's "Murder on Lenox Avenue" and "Son of Satan."

The 31 titles and their histories are largely unfamiliar, which is precisely why artist Gary Simmons wanted draw attention to them. Made in the 1930s and 40s, the "race" films feature all-black casts and most are silent or music-only productions.

"A lot of these film titles—and actors and actresses—have sort of disappeared through history. And I wanted to recall some of them because I think they're the foundation of early film," Simmons told [the Los Angeles Times](#).

"They're an important part of Hollywood history that [has] faded away in certain ways, and it's nice to have them back here."

"[Gary Simmons: Fade to Black](#)" is executed in the artist's signature "erasure" style, which he developed about three decades ago. Living in New York, he took a studio housed in a former school building. Some old chalkboards were left behind in the space.

He was researching race films then, along with early cartoons, and he was struck by his memories of the characters. They conjured certain signifiers, based on race and class.

Works on view in "Gary Simmons: Green Past Gold" at Simon Lee Gallery: From left, GARY SIMMONS, "Lenox Ave. Larry," 2018 (paint and chalk on paper, 127 x 92.1 cm / 50 x 36 1/4 in.), and "Hamtree," 2018 (mixed media on canvas, 274.3 x 213.4 cm / 108 x 84 inches). I via Simon Lee

"I started thinking about how images that were drawn on the chalkboard couldn't be completely erased. So I started to combine the images of the cartoons with the chalkboards and that was sort of the beginning of the erasure drawings," Simmons says in the video below.

"It was about trying to erase a stereotype, the traces of racial pain that exists, that you drag with you. The viewer is looking at the traces of a performance that they never see—the space that's occupied between representation and abstraction and, for me, that's where the power of the work exists."

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SIMMONS WAS BORN in New York City. He studied sculpture at the School of Visual Arts, graduating in 1988. Then, he earned an MFA at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia (1990), near Los Angeles, and returned to New York where he has been based throughout his career. About two and a half years ago, he decamped to Los Angeles.

His practice explores race, class and politics, culture and sports, and history and memory, through drawing, painting, sculpture, and installation. Although Simmons works in a range of mediums, he is best known for, and regularly returns to, his erasure works.

He has employed the smudge technique with images such as chandeliers, nooses, microphones, architectural structures, signage, and text. What began as chalkboard drawings, over time have become erasure paintings with the same visual affect.

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Installation view of “Gary Simmons: Green Past Gold,” Simon Lee Gallery, London (Sept. 13-Oct. 20, 2018). I via Simon Lee

THE EXHIBITION AT CAAM is Simmons’s first museum show in Los Angeles. The presentation is intended to replicate credits rolling at the end of a film, which Simmons says people often ignore.

He told the LA Times, how the work came together. The letters in “Fade to Black” resemble a typewriter font, an homage to the artist’s mother, who worked as a typist. It took a team of eight people to help with installation, which began with preparing the walls for the mixed-media painted work. Norm Laich, a legendary Los Angeles sign painter, made the perforated templates that were used to stencil the film titles. The erasure part, Simmons did himself.

“Fade to Black” opened last summer and that fall Simmons had a solo exhibition at Regen Projects, where he presented new works with a similar theme. The billboard-size erasure paintings featured the titles of race films and the names of some of the actors and actresses who starred in them.

The CAAM installation also inspired “Gary Simmons: Green Past Gold,” the artist’s latest exhibition which opened Sept. 13 at Simon Lee Gallery in London. The show features new paintings that Simmons describes as fragmented, remixed versions of the concept he realized with the installation.

In the 13 works on view, “he depicts the names of African-American actors of the silver screen alongside the titles of the silent films and early ‘talking pictures’ in which they starred. Towering over the viewer as though cinema screens themselves, each work is crafted over time with washes of grayscale pigment that evoke the wiped-clean slate of a blackboard. At centre stage, the oft-forgotten names of black screen actors are illuminated in glowing white paint, while the titles of the films recede into the background, smudged almost to oblivion.” **CT**

TOP IMAGE: Partial view, “Gary Simmons: Fade to Black,” California African American Museum (July 12, 2017-July 31, 2018). I Photo by Brian Forrest, CAAM

“Gary Simmons: Fade to Black” closes Dec. 31, 2018. “Gary Simmons: Green Past Gold” is on view Sept. 13-Oct. 20, 2018 at Simon Lee Gallery, London.