

VISUAL ARTS
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HANDS ON

ARTIST

GARY SIMMONS

MANIPULATES

MATERIALS

AND

MEMORIES

BY GREG HERBOWY



Gary Simmons works on "Fade to Black," his 2017 – 2018 installation at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles. Photo: Tito Molina/HRDWRKER. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

NOT LONG AGO, Gary Simmons
(BFA 1988 Fine Arts) went
to see his daughter in a
children's theater group
play. Midway through the
production, one of the
actors forgot her line.
Everyone on stage froze,
unsure of how to continue.
The audience froze, too.

Gary Simmons, *Untitled*, 2009, oil on
canvas. © Gary Simmons, courtesy
Regen Projects, Los Angeles



“The whole room is this pregnant pause,” Simmons says. “We’re all sitting there going, ‘How’s this going to end?’” Finally, another performer made a silly gesture. “Everybody started laughing, and the scene closed right there,” he says. “That kid saved that scene. Not by saying something, but by *doing* something. It was the most honest moment of the play. And it’s those kinds of things, in art, that you’re after.”

It’s late May and we’re sitting in Simmons’ studio, a large and simple space in an anonymous section of Los Angeles. Canvases destined for upcoming exhibitions at the Baldwin Gallery, in Aspen, Colorado, and the Simon Lee Gallery, in London, are on the walls. Each has been painted to look like something between a dusty blackboard and a flickery black-and-white film. The compositions are layered: Racist cartoon characters from early animations appear as though they have been traced in chalk dust, while bold white texts—naming old, largely forgotten movies and African American actors—are stamped onto the foreground, in big typewriter-style letters that are bleary at the edges.

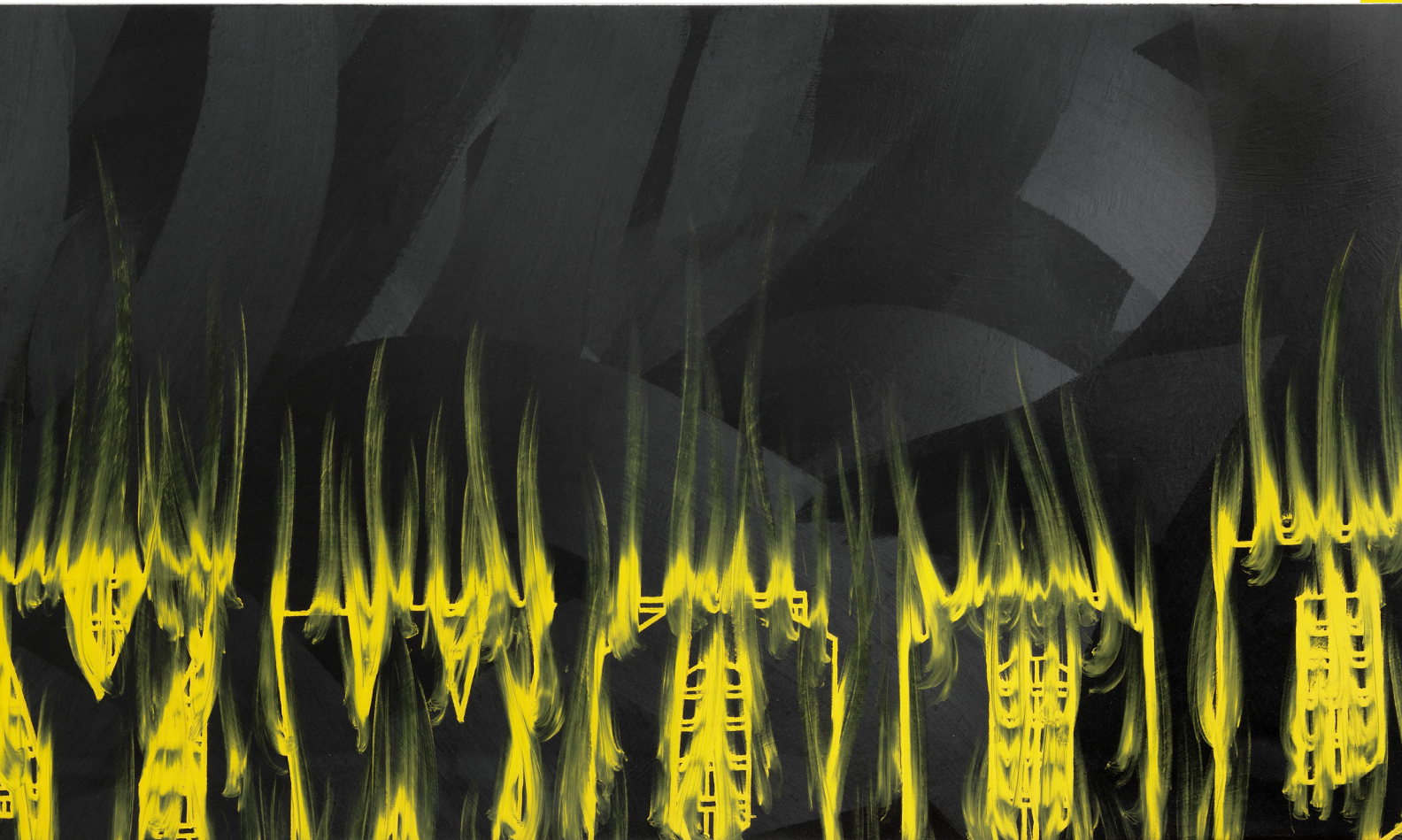
The smudgy quality of these works is a signature element of Simmons’ practice, known as his “erasure” technique. Simmons has been making erasure drawings and paintings for so long, he says, that he can now reference himself when he makes new ones. These latest paintings tie together some of his earliest and most recent experiments with the method. The texts are a continuation of newer works like “Fade to Black,” a 2017–2018 installation at the California African American Museum that celebrated little-known figures and films in early black cinema. And the cartoons call back to his first erasure drawings, from the early ’90s, when Simmons was just out of graduate school. Done in chalk on blackboard or surfaces prepared with slate paint, they isolated characters, objects, even lone physical features from 1930s and ’40s animated shorts and features to expose the ways that even something as

apparently innocent as children’s entertainment can employ and breed bigotry. *Black Chalkboards (Two Grinning Faces with Cookie Bag)* (1993), for example, shows two disembodied smiley faces with exaggerated features, leering at a bag of cookies. The works were widely acclaimed, but Simmons soon moved on to more enigmatic subjects.

“When you’re young, you kind of bounce from thing to thing and you never totally get done,” he says. “And I was working on this film-based stuff and thought, ‘I don’t think I’m done with these cartoons yet.’ ... They’ve always been attached to me, so I started to sheepishly bring them back, little by little. Now they’re back, and it’s like an old friend.”

Simmons has been a working artist for nearly 30 years, making sculptures, installations, drawings and paintings that investigate the capacity of symbols, make totems of everyday architectural objects, reveal the ways racism is knitted into culture and evoke the haunting, imperfect nature of memory. The bulk of that time has been spent between New York City and Los Angeles; he swears this last move, which happened about two years ago, is permanent. (“We were in New York, and one day I was like, ‘You know what? I’m done here, man. Let’s move to L.A.’ My wife was like, ‘Are you insane?’”) He has taught at Yale, SVA, the University of Southern California and the California Institute of the Arts, also known as CalArts, and is represented by galleries in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and London. His work is the subject of three monographs and countless articles and reviews, and in the collections of more than 20 institutions, including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Born in New York City, he grew up there and just north of it, in suburban Rockland County, as the son of West Indian immigrants. He was a skilled baseball player in his teens, and his father, a fine-art photography printer and devoted Dodgers



fan, encouraged him to pursue it as a career. But then his knees started to go, and he turned his attention to what he really loved, which he calls “making stuff.”

High school was an unhappy time for Simmons, who was bored and subjected to racism from classmates and teachers. After graduation, he moved back to the city and, at the suggestion of a former art teacher, enrolled at SVA. After graduating, he did a residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, in Maine, then drove across the country for the MFA program at CalArts. Like New York, Los Angeles was a different city then. Before GPS, Amazon and Uber, an errand as basic as buying art supplies could take a full day of driving. Simmons says he could spot his fellow out-of-towners by seeing who else was pulled over on the shoulder, flipping through a road atlas.

Simmons is full of praise for the teachers and mentors he found as a young artist: at SVA, Douglas Crimp, Joseph Kosuth (1967 Fine Arts), Jack Whitten and Jackie Winsor, among others; at CalArts, Michael Asher, John Baldessari, Catherine Lord and Mike Kelley (“probably the smartest artist I ever met in my life”). His undergraduate and graduate experiences were complementary, he says. Where the prevailing ethos at SVA was “make stuff, and then think about it,” at CalArts students were taught to “think about stuff, think some more, then think it through again, and then make it.”

“It was pretty cool to have both,” he says. “I think that really made me who I am.”

Post-MFA, he returned to New York and began his career in earnest, supporting himself by assisting other artists, hanging

art in galleries and museums, and working the odd renovation job, often with a crew of fellow up-and-comers, including painters John Currin, Sean Landers and John Zinsser—“all those Yale boys,” he says.

Simmons started out as “an object maker,” creating austere, immaculate-looking sculptures and installations for which everything “had to have a reason for being there.” He credits this rigor in part to advice he once got from Jackie Winsor. “She once said, ‘Gary, we should be able to roll this sculpture down the hill, and anything that falls off is completely meaningless. The sculpture is the object at the bottom of the hill.’”

Much of his early work attacked the ways that educational institutions can perpetuate inequality and enforce control. Pieces like *Disinformation Paragraph* and *Eraser Chair* (both 1989) cast common classroom objects like blackboards and erasers as tools that could as easily be used to confuse and subjugate as to teach. Others, like *Six-X* (1989), for which he hung six child-sized Ku Klux Klan outfits from a schoolhouse coatrack, were more explicit in their indictment.

If Simmons drew at all then, it was as a way to think through his ideas. The turning point came with *Pollywanna?*, a piece that he first put together for a 1990 exhibition at the White Columns gallery in New York, then reproduced the following year for the Roy Boyd Gallery in Santa Monica. *Pollywanna?* consisted of a blank chalkboard background, a podium with a microphone and a live cockatoo, which perched at the lectern and screeched whatever phrases it had been taught, just as educators might unthinkingly pass on lessons





OPPOSITE Gary Simmons, *Six-X*, 1989, mixed media. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

ABOVE Installation view of Gary Simmons' "Balcony Seating Only" at Regen Projects, Los Angeles, November 11 – December 22, 2017. Photo: Brian Forrest. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

LEFT Gary Simmons, *Study for Wall of Eyes (Cartoon Bosco)*, 1993, chalk on paint. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

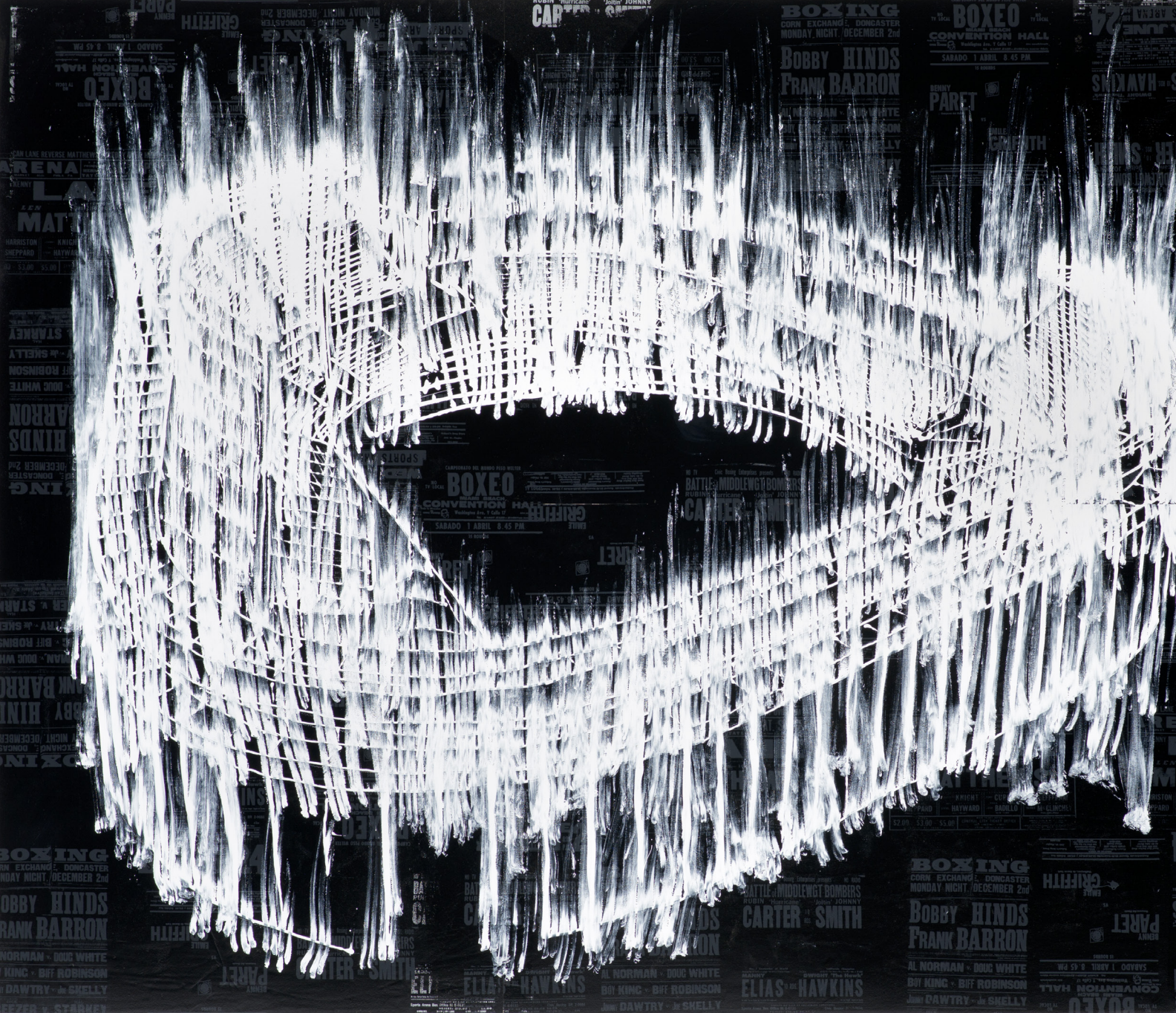
that they learned by rote. "It was hilarious," he says, but he was distracted by an unplanned aspect of the piece: The bird's flapping white wings, set against the matte black of the board, left illusory traces in their wake.

"It was this kind of cinematic effect. These weird trails. I thought, 'Wow, that's incredible. I've got to get that in my work.'"

At that time, his studio was in a former vocational school in Manhattan, in a room filled with old blackboards. He began experimenting with racist caricatures from old children's cartoons that he had drawn on the boards in chalk, working sketches done for a never-completed film project with a friend. "I realized that if you made a mark, there was no real way to erase that mark," he says. "Any attempt to erase this stereotype left a ghostly trail behind it," similar to the traces left by the cockatoo's wings. This partial erasure combined with the unsettling subject matter to make a work that illustrated how early, formative impressions may become clouded over time but are never unlearned. Moreover, depending on how he moved his hands through the chalk—or, with later pieces, the charcoal, pastel, wax or paint—the images could

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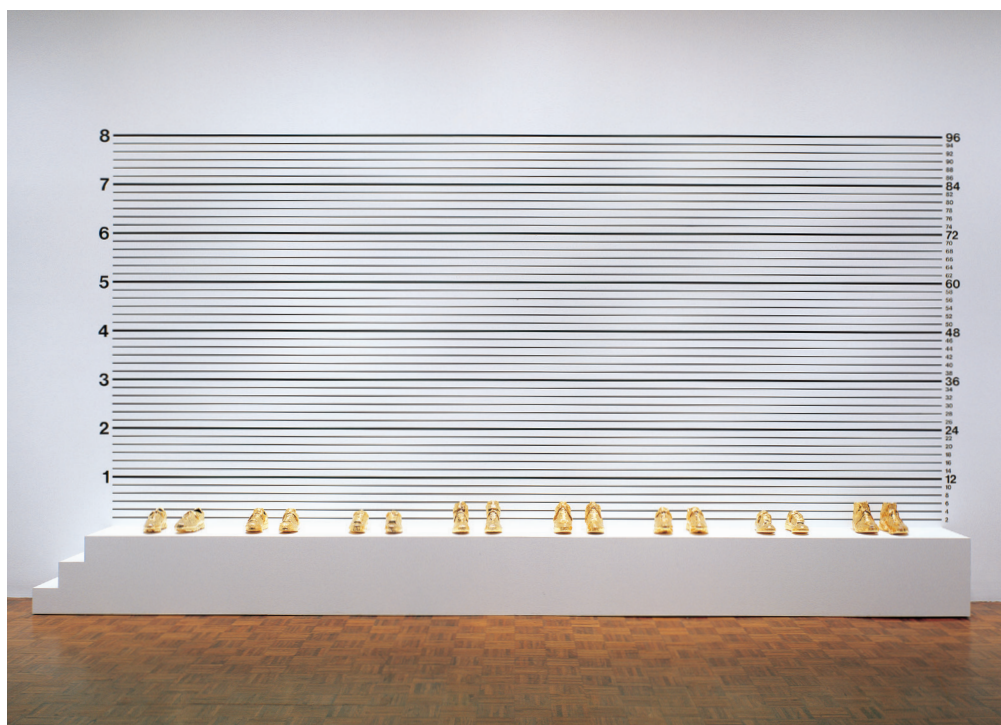
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be made to perform, in a way: spinning, burning, falling down, radiating, dissolving, flying.

“It's amazing to watch him do it—there's something bravura about him,” says Simon Watson, a curator, dealer and consultant who mounted an early exhibition of erasure drawings in New York. “Gary is a master of site-specific drawings and paintings. They connect with everything from Sol LeWitt [1953 *Illustration*] to phantom projections of cinema. They're stunning works.”

“The drawings are so well made, but they're almost the antithesis of what we think of as a good drawing, because they're willfully unfinished,” says Amada Cruz, director of the Phoenix Art Museum, in Arizona. In 1994, Cruz, who was then at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., organized Simmons' first solo museum show as part of the Hirshhorn's “Directions” series. “They're a metaphor for how memory works, and they're also very evocative. As you look at them, you start to recall your own history with the subject matter. They're about serious things, but they're playful at the same time.”



Wall of Eyes, made for the 1993 biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art—regarded now as a pivotal moment in recent art history—is arguably the most significant of Simmons' early erasure drawings. A constellation of blurred cartoon eyes on a slate-painted wall, it debuted at the exhibition along with the artist's *Lineup*, a sculpture in which several pairs of gold-plated, slightly larger-than-life sneakers were set in front of a police lineup backdrop. Both works took advantage of a common motif in Simmons' work, the absence of figures, daring the viewers to fill in the blanks and, by doing so, confront their own prejudice and complicity.

By the mid-'90s Simmons began to depict widely recognizable things that have multiple, dreamlike meanings: roller-coasters, grand ballrooms, gazebos, clock towers, 19th-century ships, speeding trains, swaying pines. For a 1996 group exhibition that Cruz put together at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Simmons worked with a skywriter to draw giant, ephemeral stars in the city's sky—erasure works on an enormous scale. *Reflection of a Future Past* (2009), a permanent installation for New York-Presbyterian

Hospital, is a doubled image of the skeletal remains of the iconic New York State Pavilion, an architectural leftover from the 1964 World's Fair in Queens. This shift in focus, he says, was motivated in part by his overseas audience's narrow interpretation of his earlier work.

"I started to realize that maybe the imagery was anchored to an American experience, and if I opened up this notion of erasure to architectural things, or vacant spaces that people were familiar with, it would create an avenue for people to access on their own terms, with their own cultural references. Everybody has a relationship to a gazebo. There is a class

LEFT Gary Simmons, *The Stadium*, 2013, enamel on panel. © Gary Simmons, courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

TOP RIGHT Installation view of Gary Simmons' "Fade to Black" at the California African American Museum, July 12, 2017 – December 31, 2018. Photo: Brian Forrest. Courtesy of the California African American Museum, Los Angeles.

BOTTOM RIGHT Gary Simmons, *Lineup*, 1993, synthetic polymer on wood, gold-plated shoes. Installation view, Whitney Biennial, 1993, Whitney Museum, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.



component to what it represents, from culture to culture.”

In interviews, Simmons, a devoted music fan, has compared his working method to that of a DJ: Take preexisting things, drop them into new contexts and manipulate their form. References to music—and in particular its politically charged, DIY subcultures—can be found throughout his work, but he has recently been paying direct homage to his inspirations. In 2016 he wallpapered rooms with altered dub, hip-hop and punk concert posters for installations in San Francisco and Detroit. *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark*, a stack of speakers housed in scavenged wood and named after legendary producer Lee “Scratch” Perry’s similarly homemade recording studio, served as both a sculpture and the sound system for performances in New Orleans in 2014 and in San Francisco in 2017.

Another influence is his time as an athlete, which he says conditioned him for the exertion and resolve required by his work. Even today, no matter how large the size of an erasure art, he does all of the image manipulation alone and in one go; in this way, the pieces double as records of the labor that went into making them.

“The attitude I bring to the studio comes right out of

sports,” he says. “The competitive nature of it, the drive to get through difficult patches. If you don’t have that, you’re going to get run over.”

But if there is any one major inspiration for Simmons, it is film. An avid moviegoer—“I’m one of those guys that sits through the credits,” he says—he has cited a childhood viewing of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) as the reason he became an artist, and made sculptures based on the hillbilly caricatures of *Deliverance* (1972) and paintings referencing the science-fiction feature *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972). He is voluble on his fellow artists’ forays into directing: Among other things, he is a booster of *Johnny Mnemonic*, his friend Robert Longo’s largely unloved 1995 feature, starring Keanu Reeves. And though he is wary of dilettantism, he has lately been considering using the medium itself in his work.

“Using film as part of what I do makes sense to me,” he says. “Early on I was so locked into these specific pockets: I never used color, I never used figures, everything had to have a significance and a meaning. It all had to have a reason for being there. That’s limiting, in a way. I think you have to loosen the reins up.” *



LEFT Gary Simmons, *Untitled*, 2014, ink jet posters on CDX plywood. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

BELOW Gary Simmons, *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark*, 2014, wood stage, PA speakers, monitor. Installation view, "Prospect.3: Notes for Now," 2014, Tremé Market Branch, New Orleans. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

