

Press Release

Gary Simmons. This Must Be the Place

Hauser & Wirth London
25 May – 29 July 2023



One of the foremost artists of a generation which emerged during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Gary Simmons has achieved wide acclaim over the past three decades for his work which explores the politics of race, class and social stereotypes through painting, sculpture, sound and architectural environments. Simmons uses imagery drawn from popular culture to create works that address personal and collective memories. For the artist's first exhibition with Hauser & Wirth in London, Simmons presents a selection of new paintings and sculptures. This exhibition coincides with the first comprehensive institutional survey of Simmons' work, 'Gary Simmons: Public Enemy,' which will be on view at Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago from 13 June – 1 October 2023. Covering over thirty years of his career, this institutional show will be the most in-depth presentation of the artist's work to date, traveling to Pérez Art Museum Miami from 5 December 2023 – 24 April 2024.

In this new body of work, Simmons employs the erasure of the image, a technique that has become synonymous with his practice, as a powerful and recurring metaphor. Simmons is best known for his figurative paintings in which white outlines of characters, scenes and words—based on 20th-century cartoons steeped in the racist traditions of minstrelsy, disappeared architectural sites, vintage film title cards, evaporating clouds of smoke and stars—are painted on chalkboard-like surfaces, then blurred and smeared by hand. This 'erasure' technique holds deep cultural significance, capturing through formal, painterly means the effect of histories of erasure as experienced by black communities, and of history more widely being constantly altered and overwritten, as in a palimpsest, while its narratives and energies continue to shape life in the present day. As the artist has stated, 'When you attempt to erase something, there's always a trace left behind.'

Through his work, Simmons has enacted the idea of erasure as it pertains to African American history and culture. He employs popular culture—sport, music, film, cartoons—to reveal how the national character of the USA is constructed. In his new body of work, Simmons continues to engage with popular culture,

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however, in an increasingly nuanced and abstracted way, as his focus shifts towards the history and materiality of painting and sculpture. In these multi-layered paintings, the artist uses the star motif to create works with multiple meanings. A universal symbol, stars take on many different meanings and interpretations, whether it be shooting stars or fallen stars, that imply inherent notions of hope, dreams and loss. A form of painting indebted to action painting in its physicality and gestural or performative nature, Simmons wipes the surface of the work while the paint is still wet to smear the motifs so that they simultaneously emerge and disappear.



For Simmons, the multiple layers of paint he uses in his works also carry the implication of multiple layers of history, whether it be in reference to the history of painting or of race. In 'Smalltown Boy' (2023), Simmons combines the star motif with the racialized cartoon character Bosko, who was created in the late 1920s and achieved popularity in the early 1930s, though discontinued in 1933. Simmons' use of erasure in conjunction with the Bosko imagery references the attempt to cover up the engrained prejudices revealed by the popularity of such cartoons. Though these subjects first appeared in his seminal chalkboard drawings from the early 1990s, this new series demonstrates Simmons' exploration of painterly issues such as background, depth of field, process and layering, citing Albert Oehlen and Martin Kippenberger as influences. Simmons' process involves a constant building and removal of up to fifteen layers of paint, exemplified in 'Ghost Town Skies' (2023), where subtle glints of yellow can be detected in and amongst the layers of monochrome paint, or through flashes of pink in 'How Soon Is Now' (2023). Evoking layered histories lying deep beneath the canvas, Simmons likens this effect to aged chalkboards, containing the traces of years of markings.

Using bronze for the first time on a large scale, Simmons has created sculptures for this exhibition that similarly cite racist tropes from historical cartoons rooted in minstrelsy. The sculptures are thus in dialogue with the paintings on display and were created with the gallery space in mind. Reminiscent of the heckling crow characters from Disney's classic animated film 'Dumbo' (1941), two crow sculptures stand at a distance from each other, acting almost as outliers. Simmons embraces the irony of using a material as permanent as bronze when dealing with themes of disappearance, erasure, ghosting and the slippages between representation and abstraction. However, the forms of the sculptures remain unrefined, as if still in the process of being modelled and defined. As Simmons says, 'All of my work exists in a place that hovers between becoming and disappearance, that is the power of erasure and what links the sculpture and the paintings.'

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An additional aspect of Simmons' practice is that it is often informed by music and performance, and draws specific inspiration from dub, punk, hip-hop, reggae and rap. The title of the exhibition and of the new paintings on show are taken from British and American dance and post-punk songs from the 80s, including 'How Soon is Now' (1984) by The Smiths, 'Smalltown Boy' (1984) by Bronski Beat and 'This Must Be the Place' (1983) by Talking Heads. These references conjure themes frequently revisited by the artist such as curiosity, longing, displacement and the passage of time. Simmons also employs music metaphorically, describing his process as 'visual DJing' in reference to the way he samples visual imagery from different sources, leaving viewers to experience fleeting moments of recognition and reflection.

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Gallery hours:

Monday to Saturday
10 am – 6 pm

www.hauserwirth.com

Caption and courtesy information:

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Gary Simmons
Ghost Town Skies
2023
Oil paint and cold wax on canvas
213.4 x 274.3 cm / 84 x 108 in
Photo: Keith Lubow

Gary Simmons, 2023. Photo: Tito Molina /
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Gary Simmons
Big Star
2023
Oil paint and cold wax on canvas
213.4 x 274.3 cm / 84 x 108 in
Photo: Keith Lubow

Gary Simmons
Smalltown Boy
2023
Oil on canvas
243.8 x 365.8 cm / 96 x 144 in
Photo: Keith Lubow