

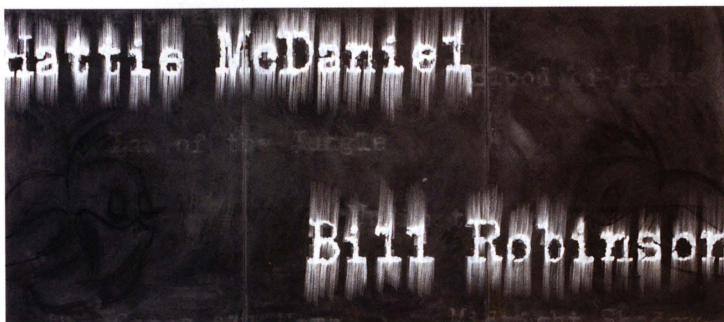
REGEN PROJECTS

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ARTFORUM

Gary Simmons REGEN PROJECTS

Since the early 1990s, Gary Simmons has brandished the act of erasure as a means to visualize race and the history of its representation and misrepresentation. To employ this technique, the artist would first draw on a chalkboard, then smear the image, leaving faded traces of the drawing surrounded by chalky, gestural streaks. Although these marks seemed violent, the image refused to disappear.



Gary Simmons, *Law of the Jungle*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 12' 1/4" x 18".

In his six large, mixed-media works at Regen Projects (all works 2017), Simmons built on his early chalkboard drawings, utilizing the formal aftereffects of erasure—forceful blurring—in the service of text-based compositions. The text in this series includes both the names of African American screen stars and the titles of the early motion pictures in which they appeared. In *Law of the Jungle*, the largest canvas in the show, the names of Hattie McDaniel and Bill Robinson are rendered in stark white over a smudged, grayish-black ground. Encircling the names, movie titles—*LAW OF THE JUNGLE*, *BLOOD OF JESUS*, *THE GANGS ALL HERE*, and *MIDNIGHT SHADOW*—are just visible against the thick pewter fog of the background. In *Body and Soul*, the monikers of *PAUL ROBESON* and *REX INGRAM* are cropped by the frame, as if the invoked memory of the two actors is too large to be contained. Each of these text-based canvases features a font resembling that of early typewriters and, more specifically, screenplays. Dramatic in effect, these compositions function as a roll call of names, mimicking the appearance of illuminated movie credits in a darkened theater.

The space of the theater was even more blatantly pointed to by the sculptural work *Balcony Seating Only*, a black-painted staircase suspended on a black wall with the word *COLORED* written across its facade in lightly smeared white oil paint. The work refers to the segregated section of the movie theater where black patrons were forced to sit during racial apartheid in the South. Unlike Simmons's canvases, with their delicate, handworked surfaces, the sculpture was hulking and awkward in the space. Perhaps purposely, it didn't play well with the other works, disturbing the otherwise pristine environment of the gallery. Like many of Simmons's sculptures, *Balcony Seating Only* is

simultaneously a pseudo-readymade and a history lesson; if it verges on didactic, it is didactic like a punch to the face.

The sinister specter of Jim Crow-era America was further alluded to by Simmons's return to the appropriation of racially stereotyped cartoons in his canvases. Simmons first used similar cartoons in his iconic works from the early 1990s. *Wall of Eyes* and *Black Chalkboard (Four Mouths)*, both 1993 (the former was included in that year's Whitney Biennial), lifted aspects of racist caricature from 1930s and '40s cartoons such as *Dumbo* and *Little Ol' Bosko and the Pirates*. Whereas these early works are starkly drawn in white chalk on black and green chalkboards, the cartoons in Simmons's latest canvases are so subtle as to be nearly invisible—black-line drawings painted on ebony grounds. *Lena*, for example—a small canvas with only the first name of Lena Horne floating on a smoky black field—depicts Honey, the monkey character from the *Bosko* cartoons, faintly drawn behind the titular word. *Law of the Jungle* and *Body and Soul* also contain ghostly cartoon forms. With roots in vaudeville and minstrelsy, these figures come loaded with a residual history of racism in popular entertainment. Situating such signs alongside the names of great black actors, Simmons teases out an important awareness and likely indictment of the industry operating just outside the front door of the Hollywood gallery.

—Catherine Taft