

REGEN PROJECTS

Pitcher, Cherri, "Gary Simmons," *Creative Quarterly*, Spring 2007, p. 10-15

"I usually START with an IMAGE and then start to ERASE IT AWAY." Gary Simmons

WHEN I FIRST SAW THE WORK of Gary Simmons, specifically his erasure pieces, I was captivated by the visual and intellectual connections to *Erased de Kooning*, the mysterious but compelling "drawing" by Robert Rauschenberg. I use the term "drawing" with reservation—if you're familiar with the work you know it's really not a drawing at all, but the determined unmarking of a drawing done by Willem de Kooning. At first glance, it is one of those works that anti-art snobs dismiss as an incomprehensible blank piece of paper...but to the invested viewer, a ghost image of the original drawing remains and the reward appears. Located within this relatively small piece is the powerful, unexpected reversal of the concept of creation. Like Rauschenberg, Simmons creates images that resonate with themes of creation and deletion. Whether or not *Erased de Kooning* influenced Simmons really isn't the point. The point is that

Simmons, like Rauschenberg, is undoubtedly—even by his own admission—a member of the modernist legacy.

In a talk with the MoMA in 1999, Simmons recounted the birth of his erasure drawings. His studio was located in a vocational school and filled with portable chalkboards. He was looking for an effective way to comment on American education and saw the chalkboards as a conceptually "loaded" medium. "So I started these chalkboard pieces," Simmons recalls, "which were probably derived

from Ad Reinhardt's black-on-black paintings and some of Franz Kline's paintings." Judith Russi Kirshner of *Art Forum* acknowledges his relationship to modernism as well. "Sensitive to the resonant history of erasure as practiced by artists from Rauschenberg and Twombly to Kentridge, Simmons invests this wrenching process with a performative aspect and brings it to the forefront of his project."

It is this modernist-laden presence of performance that becomes the key in Simmons' art. In a previous interview, Simmons commented on the gestural presence in his work and his connection to Jackson Pollock. "Pollock was one of the first artists that I started to look at as almost a performance artist. Pollock's paintings, especially the drip paintings, were much more about a kind of evidence of performance. I see myself as very different from Pollock, but at the same time, the same...Pollock was about cramming information into his frame. My work is about taking away information from a frame. I always thought that his work was much more about drawing, in the way that the mistakes are all there, that he uses the mistakes. The way that Pollock painted is additive, whereas I usually start with an image and then start to erase it away."

The connection between Simmons' erasure works and the signature efforts of the American mid-century masters like Pollock, Reinhardt and Kline is a given. What isn't so clear is the dichotomy that is present in his art. Simmons is black and his work more often than not embodies black themes, but the dichotomy of race versus gesture creates a unique conceptual tension. He talks about the connection between the gesture of erasure and racial stereotypes. As a child, he remembers noticing the racial stereotypes



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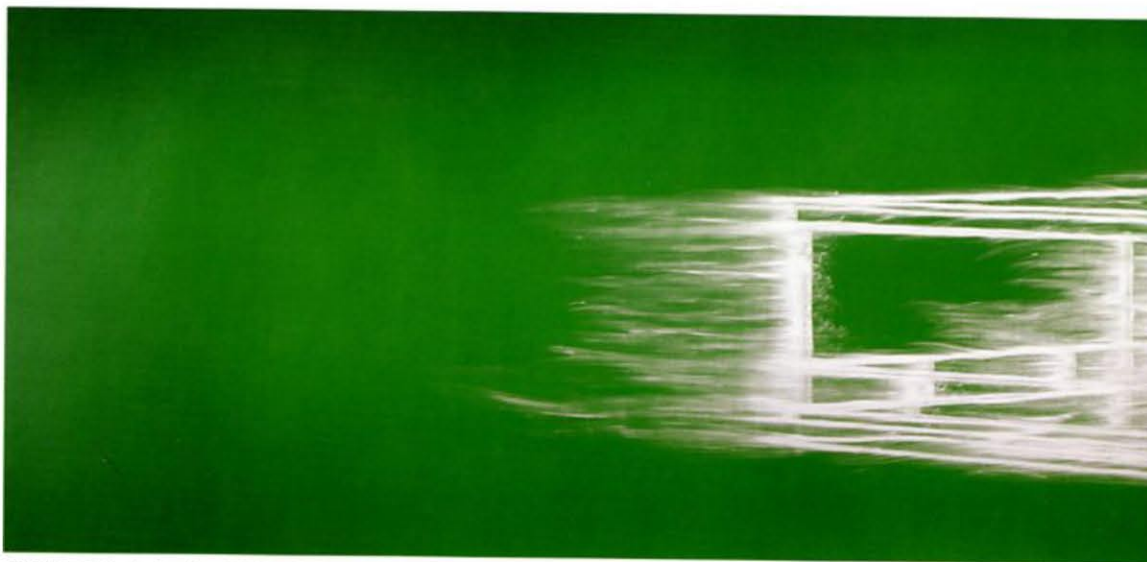
(Left) TITLE: Paradise YEAR: 2005 MEDIA: Oil on canvas SIZE: 54" x 54" (Above) TITLE: Stardust Showers YEAR: 2006 MEDIA: Oil on canvas SIZE: 54" x 54"

TITLE: Marnie's Room (from 1964 installation at the Bohen Foundation) YEAR: 2006





On subject: Simmons' more recent works seem to be less about African-American culture and racial issues and more about the broader concepts of memory, erasure and performance.



TITLE: In the Blink of an Eye (from 1964 installation at the Bohen Foundation) YEAR: 2006

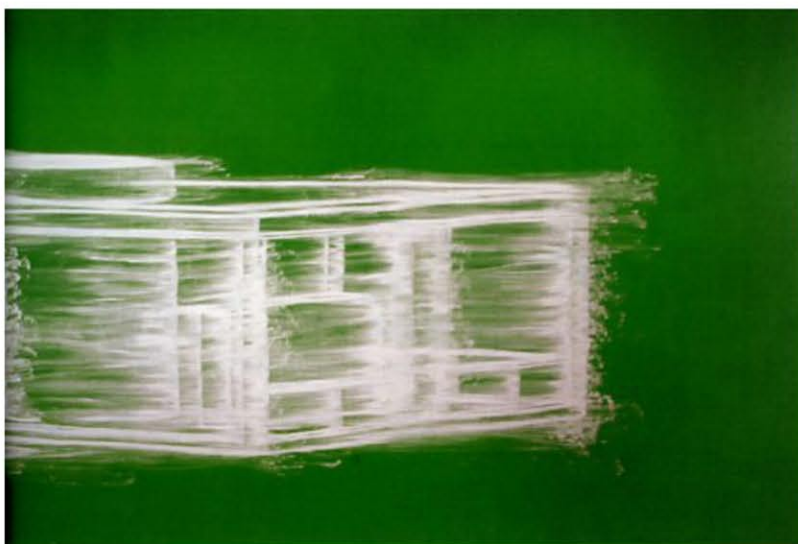
depicted in cartoons, specifically the black crows in Disney's *Dumbo*. "I realized that most people didn't remember the crows at all, and that was interesting to me. People didn't remember them until they were shown an image of them. So I thought that was interesting—that these images were only remembered by people of color. I started doing these drawings on the chalkboard surface, and then started to erase them—trying to smudge or erase the kind of stereotype that was being presented there."

The work of African-American artists is frequently pigeonholed into a simple discussion of race—think Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker—and many critics, and perhaps Simmons himself, would have you believe that this is the foundation of his work. There's no question that Simmons features an undeniable subtext of race in his works, especially the earlier erasure pieces. Disney's black crows may have been a starting point for Simmons, but he has expanded his visual political vocabulary to include references to the ghetto, prison life, slavery, alcohol and a host of other images that are culturally and symbolically tied to "blackness." Yet is Simmons' work really all about race,

or is about gesture and memory?

John Haber of New York City explains that categorizing Simmons is not so simple. "Decaying neighborhoods, alcohol, and broken hopes may confront one with memories of black experience or stereotypes of it. [These images] suggest a lesson, from a world that treats blacks as children. So may associations of chalk with graffiti or old lessons, and sometimes Simmons works on actual blackboards, displayed side by side in a charmingly haphazard arrangement. Then again, the work may refuse to offer a tidy lesson, just as slate gray can never equal blackness. Simmons delicately refuses to say, but he obliges one to ask."

Simmons' more recent works seem to be less about race and more about the broader concepts of memory, erasure and performance. His references to African-American issues and culture are still present but have become an increasingly esoteric subtext. In recent works like *1964*, Simmons retains his erasure method, presenting it on a grand scale and referencing a watershed year for black history in the title. However, his selected imagery is so obtuse that deciphering the exact importance of the chosen "icons"



requires a key (for viewers of any race). Kirshner judges that between race and performance, performance becomes primary in Simmons' art. "The formal record of his subjective gestures linger in memory even more insistently than his sources, those corrupting images of difference and discrimination we can never suppress." Even the inflammatory subject of civil rights is not enough to overcome the artist's Pollock-like performance.

I recently discovered a haunting yet mesmerizing work by Simmons on the Dia Center's website. In this work, entitled *Wake*, Simmons has inverted his own artist's act of erasure and transferred it to the viewer by creating an interactive Flash program where the viewer mouses over several staged photographs of historically evocative interiors. As the mouse moves across the screen, small segments of the photo are revealed one at a time while those left in the "wake" of the mouse quickly disappear. It is impossible to view any photo in its entirety all at once. It could be argued that these images are racially charged—the viewer is serenaded by a soft, resonant soundtrack of people humming old familiar tunes in a manner reminiscent of somber slave spirituals.

But the experience of *Wake*, its interactive quality, pushes the messages of race away from the surface of the work. In an explanatory essay introducing *Wake*, Sara Tucker notes, "The title is telling, given that 'wake' has two different meanings, both evoked here: evidence of a passing and the mourning of a loss." Simmons, no doubt, counts that loss as a cultural one, yet loss is a theme that, like the artist, refuses to be culturally stereotyped.

So what are we to do with Gary Simmons? He is a black artist working in a white man's artistic tradition, addressing controversial subjects of his own cultural heritage while refusing the identity of the stereotypical "black artist." Within his erasures a complex dichotomy appears. In my own mind, viewers of Simmons' art are so visually compelled to reconstruct the trace images left by his confronting gesture that the themes of color become merely a detour. His performance overrides his message. Or does it? Perhaps in riding such a precarious line Gary Simmons is even more complex than we give him credit for. **CQ**

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GARY SIMMONS WORK CAN BE SEEN AT THE FOLLOWING EXHIBITIONS IN 2007:

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

COMIC ABSTRACTION: IMAGE BREAKING, IMAGE MAKING AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, CURATED BY ROXANA MARCOCI, THROUGH JUNE 11, 2007

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

SIMON LEE GALLERY, LONDON, BEGINNING MAY 3, 2007

ANTHONY MEIR FINE ART

SAN FRANCISCO, SEPTEMBER 2007