

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Behind 'Smoke,' fiery messages

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
ART CRITIC

Gary Simmons is adept at traversing intersections of art and popular culture in ways that pry open otherwise overlooked meanings. His five new paintings and four drawings at the Margo Leavin Gallery continue this long-standing practice. They also deftly insert the result into a political season disturbingly marked by the contradictions between the election of the first African American president and the coded racism of much of the opposition to him.

"Smoke," as the body of work is collectively titled, shows schematic linear renderings of Modernist skyscrapers and office buildings as well as some cultural edifices. Most are in Century City, but the familiar curve of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in downtown Los Angeles is easy to identify. One 7-foot-square canvas features just the first 1½ letters of the Hollywood sign, which is so distinctive it's immediately recognizable. The fact that the Chandler is the former home of the Academy Awards floats

into mind.

The inspiration for "Smoke" was the 1972 movie "Conquest of the Planet of the Apes," in which Century City was a prominent set. The hyper-violent "Conquest," fourth in the series of "Planet of the Apes" films, has been interpreted as a general metaphor for racial alienation — of the rise of the black liberation movement in the late 1960s, which generated anxieties among white liberals — and specifically for the 1965 Watts rebellion. (Eric Greene's well-received book, "Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race, Politics and Popular Culture," is the classic analysis.)

Simmons has slightly altered his signature technique in these paintings. Known for his erasure works, in which chalk drawings on racial themes in popular culture are partially erased as a metaphor for cultural forgetfulness, he smears paint in these works to suggest a fiery conflagration.

"Where there is fire, there is smoke," exclaims the movie's simian rebel leader, Caesar. "When we hate you, we're hating ... the dark side of ourselves," intones the persecutor, Gov. Breck. Simmons memori-

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BRIAN FORREST Margo Leavin Gallery

L.A. BURNING: In his painting "Landmark," Gary Simmons depicts a fragment of the famous Hollywood sign.

alizes these lines in smeared drawings, as Century City burns.

He makes his surfaces rich and dense — like mottled asphalt in several paintings, whose structures are white or yellow on monochromatic, black backgrounds. Dark green is mixed into the black ground of a six-panel drawing of a single office tower. The upward smears of white or yellow paint make them seem to dissolve — up in smoke, like a mysterious apparition.

The most resonant work is

"Landmark" — the fragmentary Hollywood sign — which ricochets in multiple directions.

It obviously recalls Ed Ruscha's iconic paintings and prints of the sign. More obliquely, its flaming imagery recalls Ruscha's "Los Angeles County Museum on Fire," a painting finished in 1968 but begun in 1965, the year of the Watts rebellion. Ruscha's imaginative assault on authoritative cultural histories and assumptions is apt for Simmons' current project.

Simmons has mixed wax into the black pigment, sweeping the background paint into the broad swirls of a tempestuous storm, against which the chrome-yellow sign flashes like lightning. The burning of Los Angeles evokes the apocalyptic violence of Nathanael West's "The Day of the Locust," with its bleak Depression-era vision of marginalized people suffering from unrealized hopes. In this timely show, the disarming topical references keep piling on.

Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood, (310) 273-0603, through Nov. 15. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.artnet.com/gallery/174240/margo-leavin-gallery.html.

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