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Gary Simmons: Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark at Southern Exposure

Depending on when one visits *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark*, the current exhibition by the visual artist Gary Simmons at Southern Exposure, one will experience two very different, equally worthwhile shows. A visitor attending the show during regular gallery hours on any given day will face a work of installation art: An impressive tower of speakers sits, along with a boxy old television, on a low plywood stage. Encountering this ensemble feels like walking into a site with a history, a space where bodies once moved and sounds were made. Traces of this history are visible: shoe prints mark the stage; the wood encasing the speakers is worn, flecked with splattered paint and stained by graffiti; the television displays looped recordings of musical acts performed in front of those same speakers.



Gary Simmons. *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark*, 2014; installation view, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, 2017. Courtesy of the Artist and Southern Exposure, San Francisco. Photo: Shahzade Ehya.

But the installation refers to pasts beyond the performances playing on the television. The work as a whole is inspired by the producer Lee "Scratch" Perry's legendary Black Ark recording studio in Jamaica, the site where reggae and early dub music developed. Artists like Bob Marley and the Wailers, The Heptones, and Max Romeo recorded there, to name a few. Celebrated for its unique and inimitable acoustics, the Black Ark was an improvised setting and space of experimentation. Both the studio building and many of the innovative sounds and effects made there were created with found materials and everyday objects like corrugated metal, chicken wire, and broken glass. Sadly, the studio was short-lived. Built in 1973, it burned down in 1979, and while many have since tried to imitate the unique style of sound produced there, none have had any great luck.



Gary Simmons. *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark*, 2014; installation view, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, 2017. Courtesy of the Artist and Southern Exposure, San Francisco. Photo: Shahrzade Ehya.

Like Perry's studio, the installation *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark* uses local materials imbued with history and a specific sense of place. The wood encasing the speakers was salvaged from the Treme area of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and the installation was first shown during the city's Prospect biennial in 2014 in an abandoned Treme warehouse—a space Simmons liked because “[y]ou feel the history in this room in a lot of ways...and you start to think, ‘What was here?’” [1] The artist's comment points to what might be the only shortcoming in showing the installation at Southern Exposure. Whereas the dilapidation of the New Orleans warehouse led a viewer to feel the room's history, Southern Exposure's clean, white gallery doesn't convey a similar effect. Nevertheless, *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark* succeeds in incorporating and commemorating its histories, from Treme to Perry's studio in Jamaica. Despite the recorded activity playing on the television, the stillness in the gallery is appropriate to commemoration, with the tower of silent speakers standing like a giant monument to Perry's massive achievement.



Gary Simmons. *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark*, 2014; installation view, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, 2017. Courtesy of the Artist and Southern Exposure, San Francisco. Photo: Shahrzade Ehya.

And yet, to call Simmons's work a commemorative installation is not entirely right. As the television recordings make clear, *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark* is a platform for live musical performance. Just as the Black Ark was a setting for live sounds and acoustic experimentation—a place where musicians met and played and where people listened and moved—so too is Simmons's installation, if one visits Southern Exposure during one of the scheduled evening performances. For selected Thursday and Saturday nights in April, Southern Exposure has curated a series of performances with a diverse selection of experimental Bay Area musicians, playing not just reggae but also jazz, hip-hop, techno, and more. On these nights, the gallery lights dim, and the open space fills with people—by my count at a recent event, there were more fans of experimental music than enthusiasts of visual art—who are excited to dance and discuss the music, Simmons's show, and Perry's work. During these events, the old television is put away and the speakers come to life, blaring music and filling the space with heavy bass notes that reverberate in the walls and people's bodies. The space pulses with living energy.



Beast Nest performing at *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark*, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, April 6, 2017. Courtesy of the Artist and Southern Exposure, San Francisco. Photo: Shahrzade Ehya.

Perry once said the Black Ark “must be a living thing.”[2] Like living things, his studio was an ever-changing site of alternating action and inaction, movement and stillness. At times it was loud and filled with people; other times it was quiet and empty. At times it was home to eruptions of novel musical experimentation; other times it was silent and still. Like Perry's studio, *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark* is not a static or fixed thing. While commemorative, still, and relatively quiet by day, it can be filled with people, music, energy, and experimentation by night. Rather than try to reproduce the Black Ark, Simmons says he wants his work “to recapture the spirit of what Lee Perry did.”[3] One could say that he succeeded. By hosting performances from a new generation of experimental musical artists, Simmons's *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark* honors Perry's achievement. Simmons represents the Black Ark as a living thing—something not only with a past to be celebrated, but also with a dynamic present and future—and with each performance, Perry's influence continues and is given new life.



The Creatrix performing at *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark*, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, April 6, 2017. Courtesy of the Artist and Southern Exposure, San Francisco. Photo: Shahrzade Ehya.

Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark is on view through April 29, 2017. Performances begin at 7 p.m. on scheduled Thursdays and Saturdays through April. \$10–\$20 sliding scale at the door.

[1] Jodie Bass, "Gary Simmons," *Bomb*, January 7, 2015, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2000070/gary-simmons>.

[2] Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technologies* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015), 170.

[3] Bass.