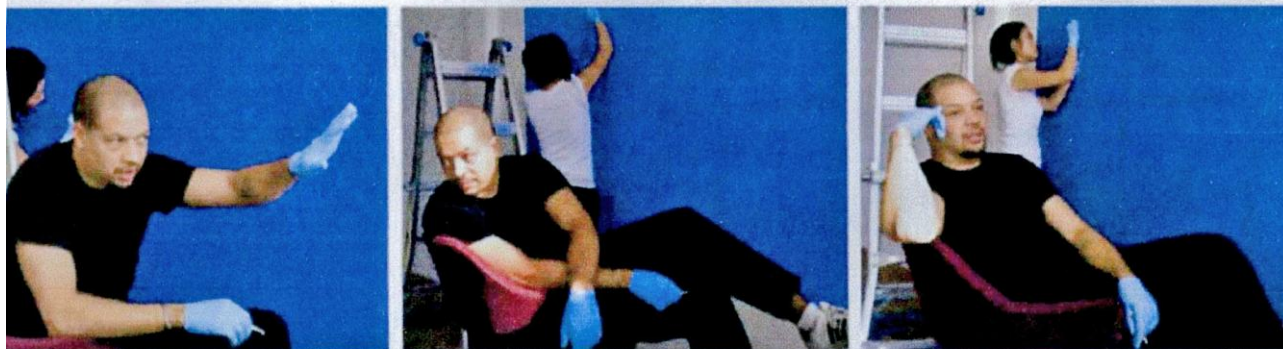




Gary Simmons in his Chelsea, N.Y., studio. Work in progress. *Breaking the Law*, behind him is from the *House of Pain* series.

GARY simmons THE ART OF ERASURE

Urban artist puts the rub on stereotypes



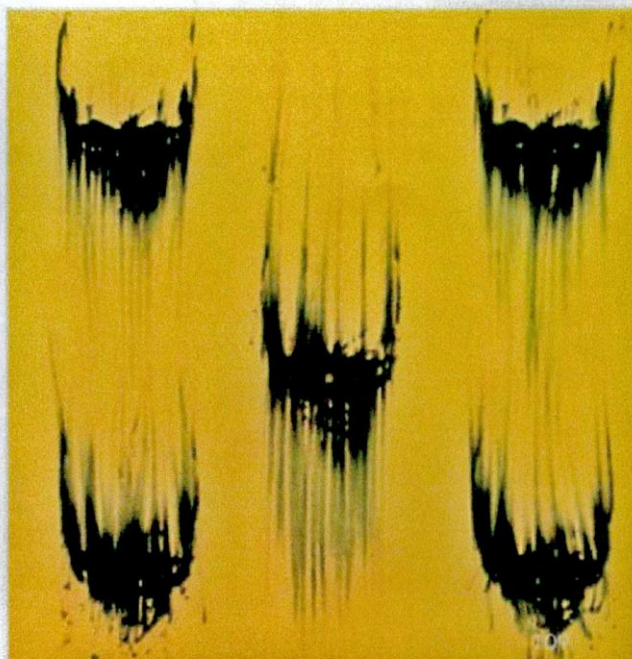
The artist and his assistant, Lea Oishi, are in the first phase of a work on paper for his next one-person show in London. Below, an untitled oil painting from Simmons' *House of Pain* series.

BY CHERYL R. RILEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN LEI

AS with most serious artists, Gary Simmons can remember drawing as early as the age of 3. His immigrant parents—mom from St. Kitts, dad from Barbados—took a benign approach to his obsession in their Brooklyn home. His mother persuaded him to stop drawing on the walls by providing him with lots of drawing materials and time alone. And his father, while pushing him toward athletics as a career, was—and is—a fine art printer for artists, including Winogrand and Ansel Adams, around whom Gary spent a great deal of his childhood.

After an injury cut short any sports ambitions, Gary happily pursued an undergraduate degree at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York, where many noted his California-like style. Taking that cue, he received his graduate degree at

Continued on Next Page



GARY SIMMONS *the art of erasure*

The tools of the artist's work include a color swatch series to find the perfect blue, an overhead projector and (below) an easy-to-find cache of supplies.



Cal Arts, and when he returned to New York, he left behind a comfortable teaching gig at USC. Now he is back at SVA teaching and mining his best students as his assistants. He currently has four assistants who help him produce his work.

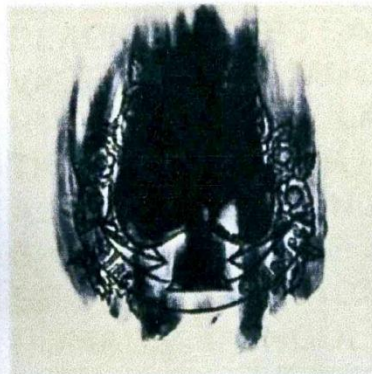
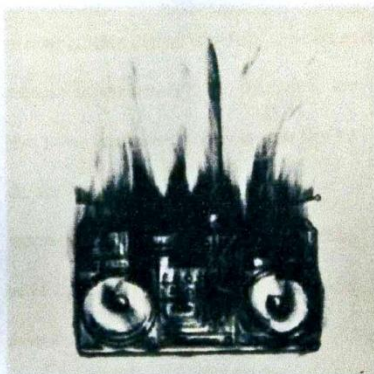
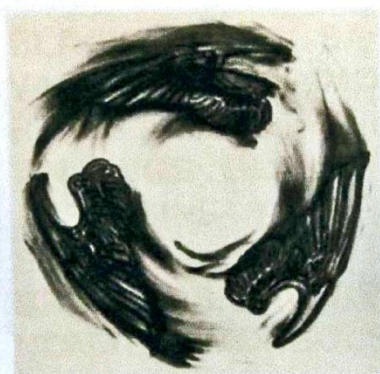
Gary knew he was an artist when, as a child, he saw the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy leaves the black-and-white world of her tornado-tossed cabin and emerges into the Technicolor world of Munchkin Land. That sense of wonder, coupled with childlike references, appeared from the start in his work. But Gary adds a twist—erasures. With large expanses of wall being covered in chalkboard paint, he projects images overhead that he has created beforehand (such as buck-eyes or stars that he draws on surfaces in chalk). The final stage brings his strength and physicality into play when, with sweeping-yet-controlled gestures, he erases, blurs and smears the images.

When speaking about the solo show he is currently creating, *House of Pain*, that will open in London in May, Gary describes basing his collection on an old movie, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, a story of a mad scientist who attempted to create a master race of half-animals and half-humans. "I liked the idea of this created race," Gary says, "and further, the politics of the early anthropologists' theories about intelligence and the size of Black folks' skulls in relation to that, somehow saying we aren't really human." So Gary has collected skulls from all walks of life and compared them anonymously in his art. He says, "I liked how those two manias came together—of creating a new race and one skull validating the validity of a race over another—and then taking that away. The erasure of it."

It is the erasure of stereotypes that Gary Simmons explores through his three-dimensional work—paintings, chalk drawings, projections, photographs, video and even art applied directly to walls. (Perhaps the great irony from his growing up is that Gary now pulls in a healthy six figures for art on wall—the very practice that once prompted his mother's reprimands!)

The evolution of Simmons' work finds its roots in historical cultural self-reflection. While he is a man who loves hip-hop culture and the juxtaposed imagery that its music brings together, Gary also draws inspiration from many race films and cartoons, where he noticed bulging eyes, large lips and other stereotypical references. He began to think about memory and how experiences are not actually remembered clearly. Gary says, "We abstract the memory and fill in the rest. We Blacks are a people of an invented past having lost

Continued on Page 112

GARY SIMMONS *the art of erasure*

While Gary Simmons' art sells for as much as six figures, he also has a limited supply of fine-art prints available for \$900. Above (left to right) are *Tri-Dash Wing Spin*, *Flaming Boombox* and *Spade*.

connection to our actual tribes, names, customs and languages from Africa." This was the genesis for his technique of smearing chalked images on blackboards that he found in his original studio, which happened to be located in an old school building. These erased images, whether chalk on boards or chalk-painted walls that are painted out eventually, or charcoal on paper that become studies for oils on canvas, all are about ghosts of the painful past.

Simmons' personal past isn't haunted. He says being an artist is being who he is. "I took a gamble on myself," he reveals. "When I got out of school, I didn't take a 9-to-5." As he developed his craft, he did pay attention to the business of art as well as the artists who inspired him.

Fresh out of school he lived in his studio and worked nonstop. "I was like a mad man," he says. "I made small art that filled my studio." Word got out that there was a brilliant artist doing innovative work there, and Gary received an invitation from a gallery to come under its wing. But he offers this warning: "Young guys need to wait. You need to have a grip on your business side too. The longer you wait, the

better the gallery." Well, Gary picked his moment and has successfully worked with Metro Pictures Gallery since 1993.

While the artist admits that his first sale of a small drawing, in 1988, went for \$200—\$100 of which he put in his pocket—his gallery now sells art for five and six figures. "I'm fortunate," the humble artist says.

In more ways than one, Gary recently became a father, which has already had an impact on how he practices as an artist. His father, because of his experience working with successful artists, warned him that if he pursued a career in art, he would need to be very serious and focused on what is a difficult profession in which to thrive. Gary agrees. "This is the most important thing for me, and anyone else who is around me has to understand that," he says. "This is my focal love affair." Fortunately his wife is an artist who gets it—that "art is it, the beginning and end of the story."

Cheryl R. Riley is an artist and furniture designer whose award-winning work has been commissioned by cities, museums, corporations and celebrity collectors throughout the United States for more than 25 years.

UPCOMING
GARY SIMMONS
SHOWS

March 4-June 11, 2007
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NYC
Comic Abstraction—group show
www.moma.org

May-June 2007
SIMON LEE GALLERY
One-person show in London
www.simonleegallery.com

September-October 2007
ANTHONY MEIER GALLERY
One-person show in San Francisco
www.anthonymeierfinearts.com

For limited edition prints:
TAMARIND INSTITUTE
Arif Khan, Gallery Director
108 Cornell Dr. S.E.
Albuquerque, NM 87106
505-277-3901

For original art and commissions:
METRO PICTURES GALLERY
Manuela Mozo
www.metropicturesgallery.com

MARGO LEVIN GALLERY, L.A.
mail@margolevingallery.com