



Erase and Rewind

Gary Simmons's art exposes and critiques racism in film and American pop culture.

BY JACQUELINE LEWIS
PORTRAIT BY JEFF VESPA

ALTHOUGH A NEW YORK CITY native, artist Gary Simmons is completely at home in his new studio in an industrial building in Los Angeles' Montecito Heights. The sprawling space is very accommodating of the large-scale projects he has in progress hanging on the walls. Simmons, who is best known for his haunting chalkboard "erasure drawings," has long had roots on both coasts—having trained at both the School of Visual Arts in New York City as well as California Institute of the Arts.

The cultural critique and political activism of the New York art world of the 1980s, as well as minimalist and conceptual art training at CalArts, greatly impacted his creative development—many of his provocative sculptural installations address issues of race and class in America. After his formal training, Simmons taught briefly at USC before returning to his hometown following the 9/11 attacks.

Now that he is back in L.A., the artist realizes the timeless appeal of the city for him. "One thing that has been a constant in L.A. is that artists are interested in what your work is about," he says. "I missed that a lot—that exchange, that dialogue with other artists." While a lot of factors led to the timing of his cross-country move a year and a half ago, the literal, and mental, space has freed him up. "In L.A., there is a feeling that you can pretty much make anything," he says. "There is a bit of a more relaxed approach. Things get done, and on a big scale."

This scale can immediately be observed inside his studio, which is filled with expansive new paintings to be included in his eponymous fall show opening November 11 at Regen Projects. These multilayered canvases are extensions of "Gary Simmons: Fade to Black," which is on view through next July at the California African American Museum at Exposition Park.

For CAAM, he created unique and powerful site-specific monumental paintings depicting the titles of African American films throughout the five walls of the museum's grand lobby. The newer paintings feature film titles too, along with names of actors in the foreground. They also incorporate some of his older cartoon drawings of characters based on imagery of negative racial stereotypes, such as the crows in Disney's "Dumbo."

The cartoons haven't appeared in Simmons's paintings in 25 years. They hover in the background and remind us of the ambiguous and impermanent nature of chalk on boards, and the fallibility of memory, which he has been reflecting on. "I really liked those chalkboards so I wanted to bring them back," Simmons says. "I wanted to create a sense of depth. There is that space that happens in a chalkboard where the past is still present."

The paintings for his show at Regen Projects and the CAAM installation are rooted in his expansive wall drawing practice and his "erasure drawing" technique, which involves an act of confrontation that Simmons describes to be "almost like a boxing match," where he presses down and pushes thick oil sticks through perforated stencils with his hands, leaving remnants that have a ghostly affect. The impact of California light and space on his practice is seen in the depth of surface layering on the canvases. They are sanded down and spray painted with color that peeps through, before being painted over again and then stenciled with cartoons that are partially erased with the rhythmic stroke of a white erasure brush.

For "Fade to Black," Simmons's approach began with piecing together his research of historical silent films by African Americans with thoughtful analysis of the space. "I would really love to replicate the way old film rolls through a camera," he says. "I really like credits. In L.A., that moment is pretty important."

By painting the film titles on the walls of CAAM, Simmons has slowed down the speed of the credit roll to acknowledge and honor the contributions of African Americans to the early 20th century development of film. As temporary, site-specific paintings commissioned for the museum's walls, the murals will eventually be painted over; however the work will essentially remain under fresh layers of paint and become part of the museum site. "The space becomes part of the discourse," he says. "That's intentional."

The core of Simmons's art practice is the ideology of appearance and disappearance, which allows the viewer to explore universal issues of personal and collective memory. "For me, my work is all about memory, fragmentation and the space between representation and abstraction," he says, "and they are all kind of stitched together."



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Simmons in his new Montecito Heights studio.