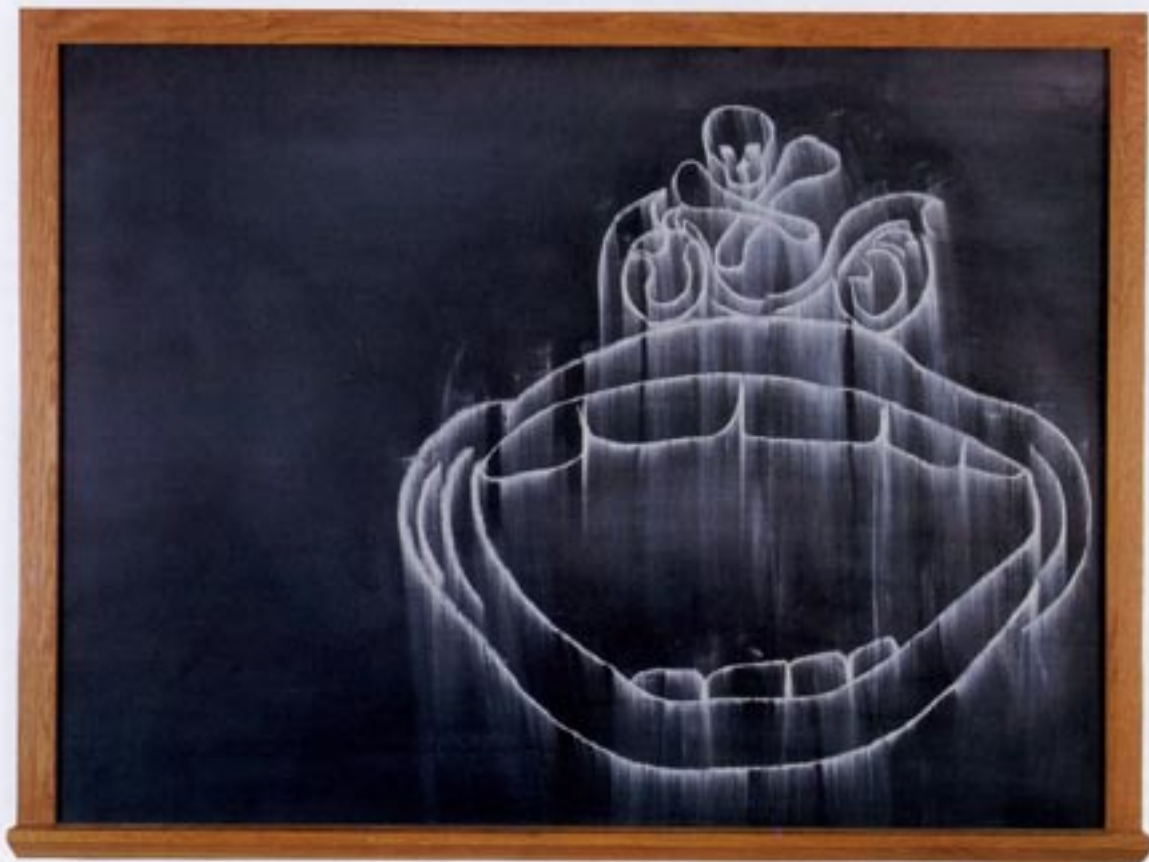


DIRECTIONS

GARY SIMMONS

NOVEMBER 17, 1994 – FEBRUARY 12, 1995



Black Chalkboard (Ye, He, Ho), 1993, from the "Erasure" series. Chalk and fixative on slate-painted fiberboard with oak frame. Courtesy the artist and Simon Watson, New York. Photo by D. James Dee.

ASSOCIATE CURATOR AMADA CRUZ MET with artist Gary Simmons in September 1994 to talk about his 1993 "Erasure" series, ten examples of which are featured in the Hirshhorn exhibition. The series numbers thirty works, each resembling an old-fashioned chalkboard (ten are black, ten green, and ten whitewashed) with partially erased chalk drawings derived from cartoons. At the Hirshhorn, Simmons also created a large-scale chalk drawing on the wall of the Directions Gallery. The following text is edited from the curator's discussion with the artist.

AC: Who are the characters in the "Erasure" works?

GS: The characters vary from those in Walt Disney cartoons like "Dumbo" [1941] to others from the 1930s and '40s—cartoons by Walter Lantz and Max Fleischer. There were a lot of cartoons portraying racial stereotypes at that time. My images come from those.

AC: How did you get interested in working from cartoons?

GS: I was working with a filmmaker to develop a film based on childhood and children's education. I wanted to deal with film sources that had a large impact on how children were taught to think, and cartoons, as popular cultural sources, were the most immediately available. People sit their children in front of the television as a form of babysitting, so cartoons are the earliest visual constructions a child gets. I chose "Dumbo" because it is a classic cartoon presented as race-neutral, when in fact the crows that teach Dumbo how to fly are stereotypical Black figures. Whenever I thought about "Dumbo," I thought about those crows—those Stepin Fetchit! kind of Bojangles! people. When people see the crows in the drawings, they start to recall them from their childhood. The images work as a sort of subliminal rolodex. I isolate the images to reveal something of our early unconscious entrance into the world of racial ideas.

AC: They seem to act as ciphers, which work slowly on your memory. You gradually start to realize what the images are. I start to remember the movements of those crows.

GS: Right. When I use objects that trigger memory, the viewer has what is partly a collective, but also a unique, experience. As soon as anyone sees a chalkboard, they instantly draw on their own childhood memories. I wanted the drawings to make people think about how they took the cartoon images for granted, and also the power of film. I wanted to use some of that power to address education and other institutions. That's how the wall drawings came about. Working

directly on the surface of the institution implicates the context where the drawings appear—the gallery or museum.

AC: When did you do your first wall drawing, and where?

GS: The first one was in Los Angeles, either in '89 or '90. A gallery didn't want to ship a huge chalkboard I had made, so instead I painted directly on the gallery wall itself. What this did was set up a cinematic space—the kind of feeling you have while looking at a film in a theater. You weren't quite sure how it worked, or if it was a screen or a piece of paper on the wall. Since I had a live object in front of the drawing, a cockatoo on a podium, it seemed like animation. It was beautiful because you were drawn into the chalkboard surface before you realized it was actually the wall. Before that, I was working with the chalkboards as objects in themselves and hadn't used imagery on them. But the movement of the bird inspired the gesture of film, which became the source for all the future images.

AC: What about the chalkboards for this show—where do they come from?

GS: The chalkboards here came from combining older sculptural work with the wall drawings and turning the drawings back into object form. I was also referencing artists who used chalkboard surfaces and chalkboard objects—like Cy Twombly [b. 1929] and Joseph Beuys [1921–1986].



Black Chalkboard (Triple Eye Maestro), 1993, from the "Erasure" series. Chalk and fixative on slate-painted fiberboard with oak frame. Courtesy the artist and Simon Watson, New York. Photo by D. James Dee.

AC: What's the story you were telling me, about working in a former school?

GS: I had been doing process³ work in New York in an old school building, which still had many chalkboards. They were in my way, so I'd have to move them from one side of the studio to the other. At the time, I was really breaking away from the process work into more intimate history—my view of my own education and how ideas had been presented to me. It dawned on me one day when I was moving those damn chalkboards: Here's a perfect object, a surface you learn and teach on, a completely loaded object that I'd been moving for months. So I started cutting them up with a circular saw and making my own sort of abstracted, Minimalist-based⁴ chalkboards.

AC: How did you find the cartoon images? Were you actually doing research and looking, or was it something you remembered?

GS: Most of these are actually older cartoon sources, things I remembered vaguely from childhood but that aren't shown as much anymore. I was doing research for the film I mentioned, and I ran across them. A lot of the images in the show are of frogs. There was a spin-off of Mickey and Minnie Mouse in a character named Bosko. Bosko is a monkeylike character who has a girlfriend named Honey. A lot of the images in this show are from different versions of that cartoon.

AC: Are the frogs the ones with the big mouths?

GS: Yeah, those are the frogs, and they come from the Bosko cartoons as well. In the late thirties, MGM took over Bosko and made him into a little Black boy with exaggerated features reminiscent of the original. The cartoons had a common storyline: It started at Bosko's mother's house. She is sort of like Charlie Brown's teacher, the one you only hear but never see. Bosko's mother gives him cookies, and he takes a bag of cookies to his grandmother's house. Along the way he dances, sings, kicks stones and cans, and imagines he's on great adventures. The adventures are always about sinister frogs trying to get his cookies from him in different situations. There'll be Ali Baba and a magic-carpet motif, or pirates who try to make him walk the plank, and there's always a sort of Bojangles figure who taps his way out of trouble. Bosko's always dancing, and he always preserves his cookies. So, for me, the cookies became the object signifying desire. I started taking objects out of the films and creating my own sort of vocabulary with them, my own visual language abstracted from these cartoons. It has become more fragmented and more my own as I have done the drawings.

Now, instead of the whole frog, it's just the mouth. Instead of Bosko, it's just his cookies. In the drawings, I've placed markers of the violence done to Black people both in the creation of these images and in life as I manipulate this language: The cookies hang from a noose; I only draw the mouths or eyes.

AC: So the images you depict are actually fragments from films?

GS: Yes, and because of the way Bosko is always trying to protect the cookie bags, and the frogs are always after them in a charged racial atmosphere, the bags came to have a sexual connotation as well. They look like sacks of genitals.

AC: The nooses you depict are also from a cartoon?

GS: Yes, the nooses are from "Bosko and the Pirates" [1937]. In the cartoon, a sort of happy Stepin Fetchit frog is actually being lynched, and he's dancing as he walks the plank and gets hung. He's still giggling—like a happy, smiling Negro. So I started using the plank, the noose, etcetera. When I link these images to the cookie bags, they become about the history of lynching. Black men were sometimes castrated before being lynched and at times their genitals were even placed in their mouths. It was about the threat of their sexuality, about slaves having sex with slave owners' wives and daughters, and what that would do to the slave economy since the children of free (white) women would also be legally free.

AC: What about the color? You're dealing with racial issues, and you use the white chalk on a black surface. Did you think about that choice?

GS: The symbolism of the color is not intentional. If I were to use colored chalk, the work wouldn't quite have that diagrammatic, go-to-the-board-with-the-chalk kind of feel to it. Basically, the image itself is really static until the erasure starts to happen.

AC: The process of drawing the images seems important to you, but you take that a step further and start erasing it.

GS: There's a lot of physicality involved. It's like a performance—what you see is the residue of a performance that you don't see.

AC: But the evidence of that gesture is important.

GS: Right. With each piece it's different. In some of the work, there's an almost loving touch in the way the drawings are erased, and in others it's almost violent. There's the activity of trying to get rid of the image. I get absorbed in the activity when I'm doing it, so it becomes a psychological mark-making as well as a literal "unmark"-making.

AC: For the Hirshhorn exhibition, you're going to execute a large-scale drawing with chalk on a painted black wall, similar to the chalkboard objects. Do you want to talk about the imagery you're planning to use?

GS: It's hard to discuss at this point because I'm not sure what it will be. I tend to respond spontaneously to the room. The drawing will react to the "mood" of the other work in the show. But I think it will be interesting to play with the architecture of the space. Since the gallery is curved, it has, again, a cinematic feel to it. When you walk in, it looks like a giant screen. It's very theatrical. My urge is to play with curtains and the pageantry of the space.

AC: At the 1993 Whitney Museum Biennial exhibition, you drew a wall of eyes coming out of the darkness. Where did the eyes come from?

GS: That was a collection of the eyes from all the images I had been using up to that point. I was thinking about two expressions: "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes," and "Open your eyes or smile." You know, the old racial joke: "Smile, so I can see you in the dark."

AC: You like making installations that combine different media.

GS: Yes, it comes from being unhappy with just the flat surface. I like to play on people's senses—your visual sense, your taste, your sense of smell. At the Whitney, I did a piece with flowers—it saturated the senses. I think that kind of work is really effective. The more interesting work for me plays with the power of a space. Speaking to the institution and to the architecture brings everything into the dialogue. It's not just about isolated objects on the wall.

AC: You don't really use dominant kinds of sculptural form. You talk about the power of a room, but you use delicate media like flowers and drawings. A curious gender element comes up. A feminine association is evoked by the chalkboard drawings because teachers are traditionally women. You've also used towels—that kind of domestic object.

GS: That's intentional—I use materials like flowers because they draw on a collective history of associations, on memory, and on our ideas about our families. I like to use things that some of us pass by or take for granted, things that exist domestically. I tend to play with gender roles in my use of activities and materials—like ironing or sewing and embroidery—that we connect to women. Instead of placing myself, or other male or female figures, directly within the work, I use an abstracted language of gender as part of the process

and as part of the content of the images.

AC: The most overtly political work you've done is the installation you presented in 1989 at Roy Boyd Gallery with the Ku Klux Klan robes in children's sizes.

GS: That was a very important piece for me. It worked in a lot of different ways that I still hold onto when making things. It had a multilevel attack. A lot of people approached that piece and immediately felt the need to laugh. They thought it was a joke. They'd walk away from it, and the effect would hit them after the fact. It's sort of like the delay before realizing you just got smacked in the face. And I like the way that works because it also connects to my use of flowers. There's a type of comfort, a casualness, that people have when they approach an object that seduces them. You know, you always start off a speech with a joke so you have the room's attention. I tend to like to present an object in the same way. Nobody wants to hear somebody yelling at them, so it's much better for me to visually seduce you into the room and make you feel comfortable. Then you can get to the other layers behind the work and realize the issues it deals with. Since I made the Klan piece, the directness of my work has toned down some. At that time, a lot of the work was also shocking and raw. Now I think other things come into play. I think that's just typical of the way artists build their own vocabulary as they go along.



Green Chalkboard (Toothy Grin), 1993, from the "Erasmus" series. Chalk and fixative on slate-painted fiberboard with oak frame. Courtesy the artist and Simon Watson, New York. Photo by D. James Dee.



BIOGRAPHY

Born in New York, April 14, 1964. Attended School of Visual Arts, New York, 1984-87 (B.F.A. 1988); School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine, 1988; and The California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, 1989-90. Received Penny McCall Foundation Grant, 1991. Lives and works in New York.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1989 Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa Monica, California (also 1991, 1992).
1990 White Columns, New York.
1991 Simon Watson Gallery, New York.
1992 *The Garden of Hate: Gary Simmons*, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York.
Jason Rubell, Miami Beach, Florida.
1993 Galerie Philippe Rizzo, Paris.
Metro Pictures, New York.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 *All Quiet on the Western Front?*, Espace de Dieu, Paris.
Earth, Krygiel/Landau Contemporary Art, Santa Monica, California.
Membership Has Its Privileges, Lang and O'Hara, New York.
Spool: Currency, Security, and Art on Deposit, The New Museum of Contemporary Art at Marine Midland Bank, New York.
Official Language, San Francisco Art Institute Galleries.
Total Metal, Simon Watson Gallery, New York.
1991 *Interrogating Identity: The Question of Black Art*, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, and tour.
The Subversive Stitch, Simon Watson Gallery, New York.
Schwarze Kunst: Konzepte zu Politik und Identität, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin.
Someone or Somebody, Meyers/Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica, California.
1992 *Structural Damage*, BlumHelman Warehouse, New York.
A Paper Trail, Berland/Hall, New York.
The Politics of Difference: Artists Explore Issues of Identity, University of California, Riverside.
The Big Nothing, or Le Presque Rien, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and French Cultural Services, New York.
How It Is, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York.
Back Talk, Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago.
Songs of Innocence/Songs of Experience, Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, New York, and tour.
Dissent, Difference, and the Body Politic, Portland Art Museum, Oregon, and tour.
Wall Drawings, The Drawing Center, New York.
1993 *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine.
Contacts Proofs, Jersey City Museum, New Jersey.

1994 *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

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Smith, Roberta. "The Subversive Stitch." *New York Times*, July 12, 1991, p. C23.
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CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Unless otherwise noted, all works are from the "Erasure" series, 1993; chalk and fixative on slate-painted fiberboard with oak frame, 48 x 60 in. (121.92 x 152.4 cm). Courtesy the artist and Simon Watson, New York.

Black Chalkboard (Ahh, Please)

Black Chalkboard (Flute Player). Collection of Edgar and Tina House.

Black Chalkboard (Triple Eye Maestro)

Black Chalkboard (Two Grinning Faces with Cookie Bag). Collection of Susan and Michael Hort.

Black Chalkboard (Yo, Ho, Ho)

Green Chalkboard (Bal'head, Bal'head). Collection of Hideyuki Osawa, Tokyo.

Green Chalkboard (King of the Mountain)

Green Chalkboard (Soft Shoe). Collection of Michael Harris Spector and Dr. Joan Spector.

Green Chalkboard (Toothy Grin)

Green Chalkboard (Triple 'X')

Untitled, 1994, chalk and fixative on slate-painted wall. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

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