

METRO PICTURES

Schwendener, Martha. "2 Art Gallery Shows to Explore From Home," *The New York Times* (July 10, 2020): C12.

The New York Times



Gary Simmons's "Screaming for Vengeance" (2020), oil and cold wax on canvas.

The current confrontation with our nation's racist history was driven by gruesome, indelible images of Black people dying in police custody. The artist Gary Simmons has for decades depicted how racism is expressed and reinforced in all manner of images or pictures, making his point in blurred chalkboard drawings that suggest how images and histories can be erased or altered. In the 1990s, Mr. Simmons gained fame with his smudged chalk-drawn pictures; now he achieves a similar visual effect with oil and cold wax on canvas, as you can see in his current show, "Screaming Into the Ether" at Metro Pictures.

Here, in 20 new pieces drawn in hazy white outline against a gray background are Looney Tunes cartoon characters: Bosko, his girlfriend Honey, and Bosko's "Little Sister." These images appeared for the first time in movie theaters in 1930 and were based on racist caricatures of African-Americans couched in the tradition of minstrelsy.

Seen out of context, the blurred Looney Tunes figures might seem harmless or even cute. Canvases like "Anger Issues" (2020) and "Screaming for Vengeance" (2020), however, remind you of what's at stake in using images in every area of life to bolster white supremacy. Using his hands to smear the outline drawings and the backgrounds, Mr. Simmons symbolically enacts the idea of erasure. These emblems, however, remain part of a potent history — and artists like Mr. Simmons who might have felt he was "screaming into the ether," are looking particularly prescient.