

METRO PICTURES

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Gary Simmons

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Honey's back for a return engagement in Gary Simmons's new paintings, this time with her boyfriend, Bosko; both characters hail from the Looney Tunes animated cartoons that captivated audiences in the 1930s. As stereotypical caricatures of black people, Bosko and Honey, who were neither fully human nor entirely animal, starred in more than twenty musical-film shorts as singing, dancing simpletons who were as happy as they were oblivious to the debased racism they emblemized. Directly related to the minstrel stage, they were second only to Porky Pig and Daffy Duck in popularity. Even when scripted to speak in catchphrases of Southern black dialect—or in *Congo Jazz* (1930), where Bosko appears between a chimp and a gorilla, the faces of all three virtually identical—the characters are portrayed as perpetually happy and innocent. Despite their serial misadventures, the gang lived on-screen in a world where harm comes to no one and everything always turns out all right.

In Simmons's art, they are doomed—and they know it. In *Here's . . . Honey*, his 1992 installation of erased chalk drawings on a wall, the eponymous figure, with her signature gigantic polka-dot bow flopping on top of her, crouches behind a curtain of nooses. In the series of twenty

paintings at Metro Pictures, her fate, and those of the others, is equally bleak. These characters might go through the motions of entertaining us and taking their bows, but Simmons makes them perform a counternarrative that reduces humor to mockery and dehumanization. See *Running Away* (all works 2020), in which Honey is frantically looking for an exit, or *Bracing for the Blast*, where she plugs her ears and grits her teeth in anticipation of an explosion. Bosko suffers from crushing fatigue in *Survival Tactics*, while he's livid and snarling with rage in *Anger Issues*, *More to the Point*, and *Screaming for Vengeance*.

The deeply abject dimension of Simmons's work is fueled by the critical affect of blur or erasure, which serve to destabilize the images. Two such strategies are deployed here. One somewhat mannered technique involves

picking at and smearing the characters' outlines at regular intervals, but leaving them substantially intact and legible. *Let Me Introduce Myself* and *Piano Man* feature this form of polite besmirching, as if dematerialization were just a part of the act. Another method, a much more violent form of obliteration, robs the characters of their identities and renders them mutilated beyond recognition. Simmons's murderous effacements rank with those of Andy Warhol, whose silk-screen "mistakes" demolish his images, and Francis Bacon, who ghosts his subjects into oblivion.

In the early '90s, Simmons's chalkboard works shared the discursive space of nascent identity politics with Kara Walker's silhouettes, purloined from the era of American slavery. Along with legions of artists

of color, Simmons and Walker were bent on exposing discrimination and challenging the art world's racism, which stood ready to enforce their marginalization. How much has changed today? NOTHING AT ALL! THINGS HAVE ONLY GOTTEN WORSE! WE ARE FOAMING AT THE MOUTH AS WE WITNESS OUR CRIMES AGAINST EACH OTHER, AGAINST OUR OWN HUMANITY, AGAINST THE EARTH!

(Let me take a deep breath.) Walker's monumental fountain, *Fons Americanus*, 2019, is a withering attack on the colonialist agenda of the British Empire and all those who continue to buy into their own superiority. Simmons's new paintings roar with vengeance at the frightening, widespread resurgence of white supremacy, which is all too alive and well. It is noteworthy that, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, his exhibition is only available for viewing on the gallery's website. In these extraordinarily dark times, as the death toll skyrockets daily, when it seems we are virtually helpless to remedy the suffering of so many, the rage and misery that Simmons mobilizes in his paintings feels painfully familiar. We have failed!

—Jan Avgikos



Gary Simmons, *Anger Issues*, 2020, oil and cold wax on canvas, 24 1/4 x 18 1/4".