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The ‘Haunting’ of Gary Simmons

In new shows in Chicago and London, the artist uses ghostly erasure lines to look at ideas about race — forcing us to confront the images before they slip away.

By Ted Loos
The writer reported from Los Angeles.

June 9, 2023

For someone whose signature move is using chalk or paint to create ghostly traces of images that seem to be disappearing before our eyes, Gary Simmons is emphatically present in the art world these days.

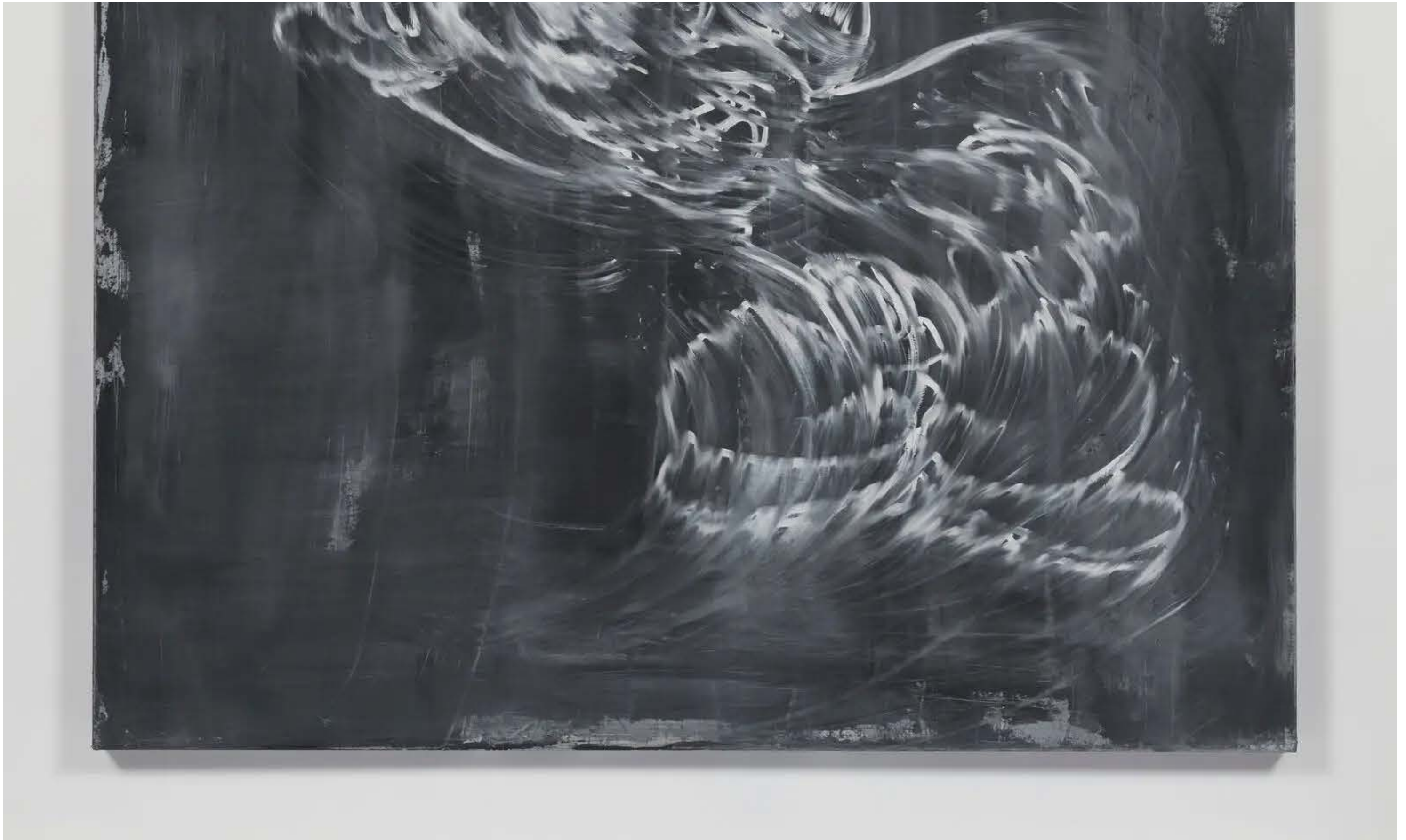
Simmons, a Conceptual artist known for looking at the ways racial ideas are disseminated, has his biggest and most comprehensive retrospective opening June 13 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, as well as a current show of new work at Hauser & Wirth in London.

“Seeing that much of your own work can have an odd effect — it can be paralyzing,” said Simmons, 59, who was warm and chatty as he talked about the MCA show in the smaller of his two studios here.

At the MCA, “Gary Simmons: Public Enemy,” with 70 works, will be on view through Oct. 1, and later travel to the Pérez Art Museum Miami, the co-organizer.

The pointed messages in Simmons’s work, combined with his facility in different media, have been influential. “His example has been very powerful for younger artists,” said Thelma Golden, the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem and the leading backer of Simmons’s career.

He gained early notice in the famously confrontational 1993 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art — which Golden co-curated — with “Wall of Eyes,” one of his “wall drawings” depicting a field of ghostly cartoon eyes.



Gary Simmons, "Let Me Introduce Myself" (2020), oil and cold wax on canvas. via Gary Simmons, photo by Jeff McLane

It helped establish what Simmons said was his "calling card" gesture: the smeared white lines of erasure.

His studio had a fresh one of these on hand, a painting featuring a ghostly image of the cartoon character Bosko, introduced in the 1920s and widely perceived to be a racial caricature. The smiling figure has made many appearances in Simmons's art, as have other cartoons (a legacy of his TV habits as a kid).

"As an artist, you develop a visual language," Simmons said. "That's the base of my language, the sense of disappearance and ghosting. It's a haunting."

The motif forces audiences to engage before the image threatens to slip away. "The viewer has to fill in those gaps," Simmons said.

Golden said that the motif has a lasting power. "It's an artistic gesture, but it's also an intellectual gesture," she said. "It's about how histories are erased. He makes that legible."

René Morales, the MCA's chief curator, said, "His work is about collective memory — what do we forget and why." He organized the show with Jadine Collingwood, an assistant curator at the museum.

The idea of racial erasure, famously crystallized by Ralph Ellison's novel "Invisible Man," has motivated many other visual artists, like Titus Kaphar, seeped into exhibitions like "Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and influenced contemporary playwrights such as James Ijames.

Simmons, for his part, is freshly recreating four works — three in paint and one in chalk — on the walls for the MCA show. The process of remaking them, which Simmons did in Chicago in mid-May, was an extra challenge, given that he had just recovered from his first bout of Covid.

Gary Simmons creating a wall drawing in progress at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Evan Jenkins for The New York Times

“It’s brutal,” he said of the process; two of the works are 40 feet long. “Doing four of them is a workout.” He had help with drawing from his production manager, and he had his team prepare the surfaces. If it’s too bumpy, he can cut his hands with the chalk.

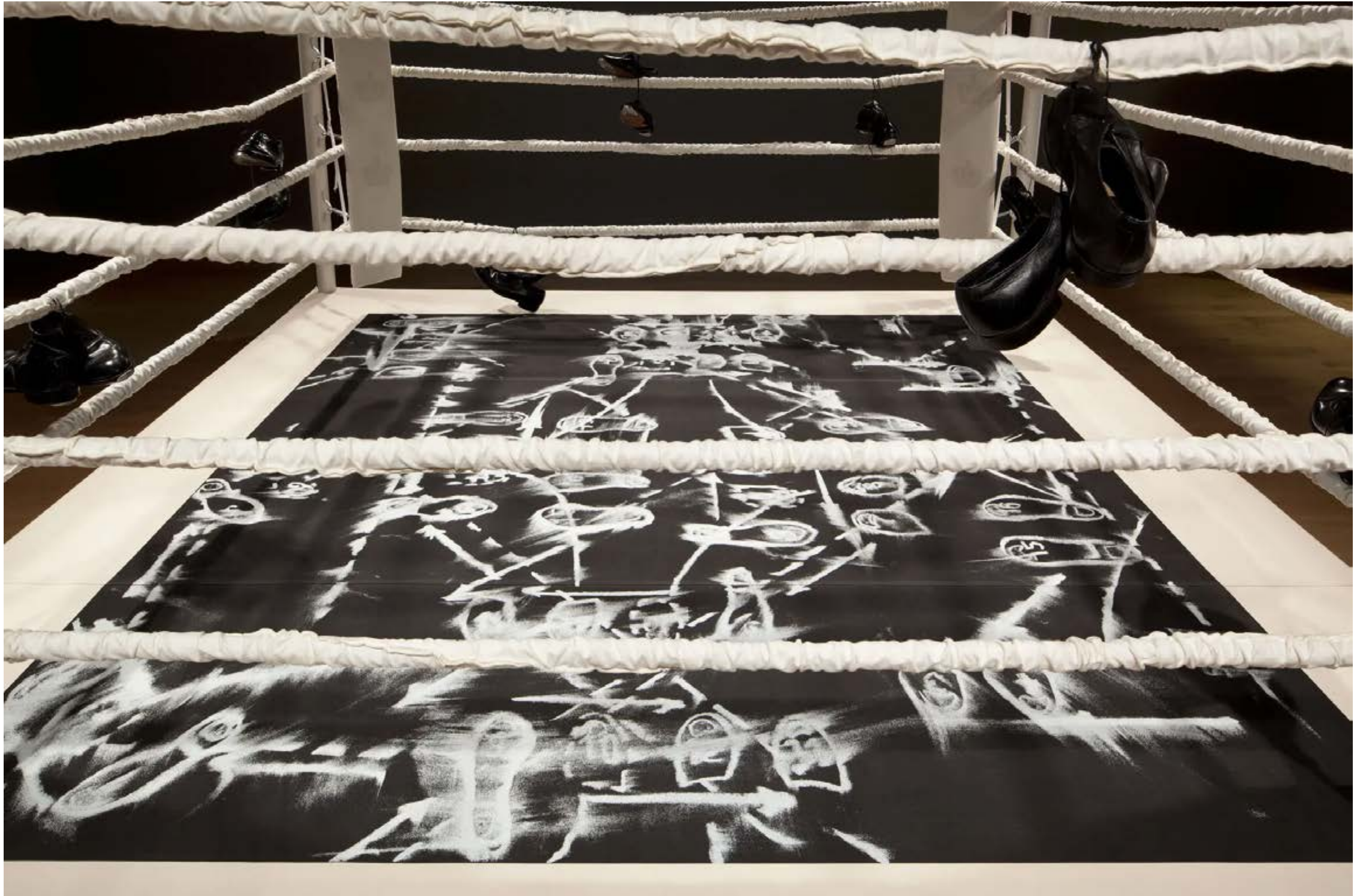
By working directly on walls, Simmons gets another layer of meaning.

“I love that when the show is done, you have to paint them over,” he said. “They become embedded in the architecture and the history of the space. They implicate and indict the museum.”

The mere fact of his draftsmanship impresses his friend and fellow artist Glenn Ligon, part of the same generation of Black artists that Golden said “redefined the space of the contemporary art world.”

As Ligon put it, “He can actually draw — I can’t. I’m always impressed that at the bottom of his practice is that facility. That’s one of the ways he’s expanded the idea of what Conceptual art is.”

Franklin Sirmans, the director of the Pérez Museum and a longtime friend of Simmons, said that the wall drawings are “the Conceptual bridge between graffiti art and the mural tradition on one side, and what fits in a gallery or museum.”



Detail from “Step into the Arena (The Essentialist Trap)” from 1994. Simmons moves fluidly between paintings and elaborate sculptures like the boxing ring in the MCA show — part of the reason that Franklin Sirmans called him a “real poet of material.” via Gary Simmons and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; photo by Sheldan C. Collins

Simmons’s ability to move between paintings and elaborate sculptures — like the boxing ring of “Step Into the Arena (The Essentialist Trap)” (1994) in the MCA show — is part of the reason that Sirmans called him a “real poet of material.”

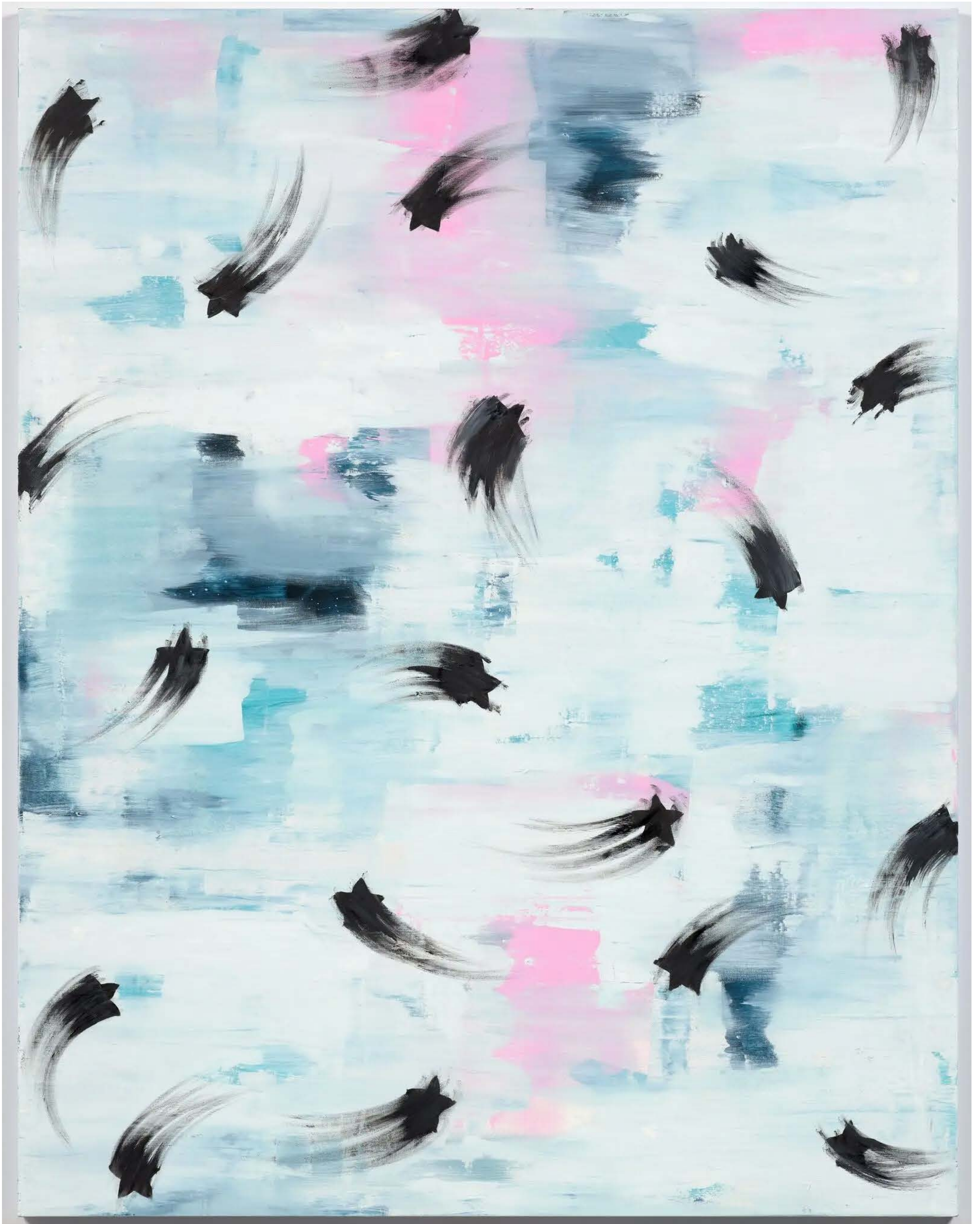
That the show will move to the Pérez in Florida, a state that has moved to ban certain books in public schools and to bar schools from teaching a College Board AP course in African American studies, struck Simmons as apt.

“It’s the perfect moment for a show like this to happen,” he said. “It’s disappointing that some of the issues I was dealing with 30 years ago are just as fresh and as relevant today.”

Education and school references have long peppered his work, as in 1989’s “Big Dunce,” the earliest work in the MCA show, a sculpture of a tall white hood, meant to evoke the Ku Klux Klan, on top of a stool in a corner.

“I wanted to bring an understanding of politics and education to the coolness of the aesthetics of the Minimalists and the Conceptualists — and bash them together,” Simmons said. “That’s where the wall drawings and the early sculptures, like ‘Big Dunce,’ came from.”

Simmons is comfortable characterizing himself.



Gary Simmons, “How Soon Is Now” (2023). Oil paint and cold wax on canvas. via Gary Simmons and Hauser & Wirth, photo by Keith Lubow

“My work hovers between abstraction and representation,” he said. “That’s a thread that goes from the early work to now.”

The only topic that Simmons wavers about discussing at first is his childhood, first in Queens and then in the Rockland County town of Suffern, N.Y., where he lived during high school. (He considers himself a New Yorker who just happens to live in Los Angeles at present, with his artist wife, Ellen Ross, and their daughter.)

“I don’t usually talk too openly about it,” he said of his upbringing. “It’s not a period of time I liked very much.”

His father was a Barbados-born printer for fine art photographers, and his mother, from St. Kitts, worked various jobs including as a secretary.

“I got to meet Ansel Adams and Garry Winogrand,” Simmons said of his father’s famous associates. “They were just kind older guys who talked to my dad.”

As the MCA show’s title indicates, with its reference to the hip-hop group Public Enemy, music has deeply influenced Simmons from the beginning. As a child, Simmons would draw and redraw album covers.

“Music has always been a big thing for me, being first-generation West Indian,” Simmons said. “My dad had quite a volatile temper, and if he started to lose his temper, my sister and I would put on Johnny Nash or some Calypso music and he’d forget why he was angry with us.”

Moving to Suffern was a shock. “There was a lot of friction, and a lot of race issues,” he said finally. “I hated every minute of being there.”

Simple things like dating were a minefield. “Falling for a [white] girl and her parents not allowing her to go to a dance with me, because of who I am and what I looked like,” Simmons said. “That was extremely painful.”

Part of the Conceptual tradition entails putting some distance between the maker and the art, which is why he has been reticent to speak on the topic. But his “miserable” time in school “definitely found its way into my work,” he added.

Simmons was happier attending the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. After graduating, he got an MFA from CalArts in the Los Angeles area. Key mentoring came from two older Black artists, Jack Whitten at SVA and Charles Gaines at CalArts.

Both Whitten, who died in 2017, and Gaines, who is still making art, were late to getting a full measure of art world recognition.

“We had doors open for us that they didn’t have,” Simmons said.

For 1991’s “Pollywanna” — which featured a live cockatoo on a podium — a Los Angeles dealer couldn’t afford to ship a backboard that was part of the piece, so Simmons painted directly on the wall behind the bird.

“She would flap her wings from time to time,” Simmons recalled. “Against this matte black background, the white feathers created a kind of acid trail and I thought, ‘That’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.’”

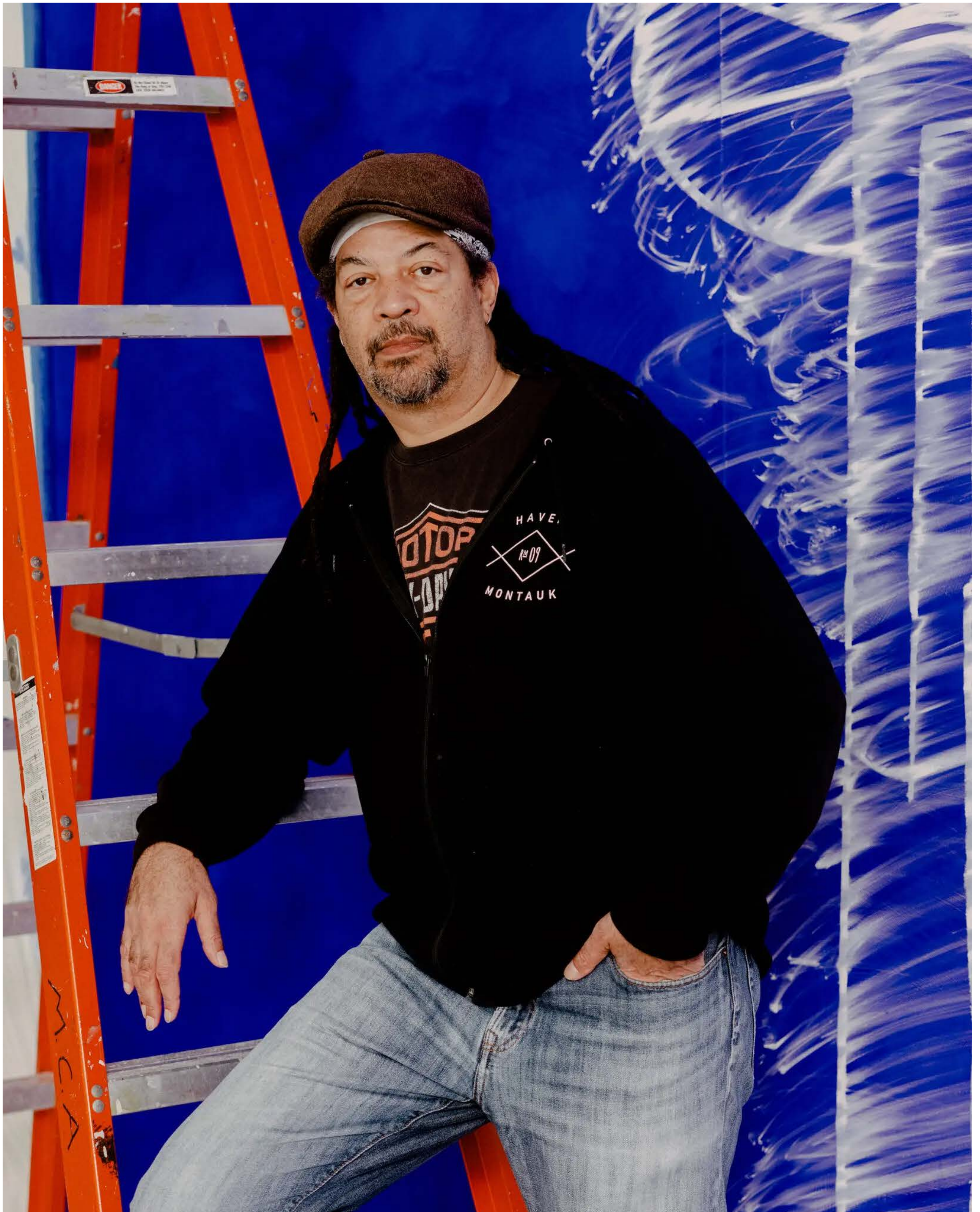
Simmons’s career was jump-started in New York by the 1992 project “Garden of Hate,” curated by Golden at the former Philip Morris branch of the Whitney when she worked at the museum.

Using red and white azaleas, he planted a garden in the shape of a KKK cross emblem, centered on a flagless flagpole.

“I really didn’t know what I was doing,” Simmons said. “I learned along the way and charmed my way into doing it. I was a cocky ambitious kid.”

He added, “Thelma took a big risk on me. She let a lot of unproven artists be really ambitious.”

Simmons joined the gallery Metro Pictures the following year, and stayed with it for nearly three decades; the gallery shuttered in 2021.



Gary Simmons says his art hovers between abstraction and representation. Evan Jenkins for The New York Times

“We were some of the first Black artists to be in the galleries who were representing us at the time,” Ligon said of the early ’90s. “It was a community, but we had to figure it out as we went along.”

The latest fruits of Simmons’s move to Hauser & Wirth are the six works in the London show, “This Must Be the Place.”

It includes two bronzes of crows, which Simmons said referred to Jim Crow laws in the South as well as Hitchcock’s “The Birds” and the way crows once stood in for Black characters in cartoons.

Among the paintings, Simmons said that “How Soon is Now” represented a fresh direction — it reverses his usual technique of painting on a black background, in this case putting fading black stars on a background that includes areas of light pink and blue.

Shooting stars, with their ephemeral nature and make-a-wish potential, have long been a part of his work, but color has not.

Working on it made him “so uncomfortable,” Simmons said. But he added that he wanted that feeling at this stage of his career.

“I still have so much to do,” he said.

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