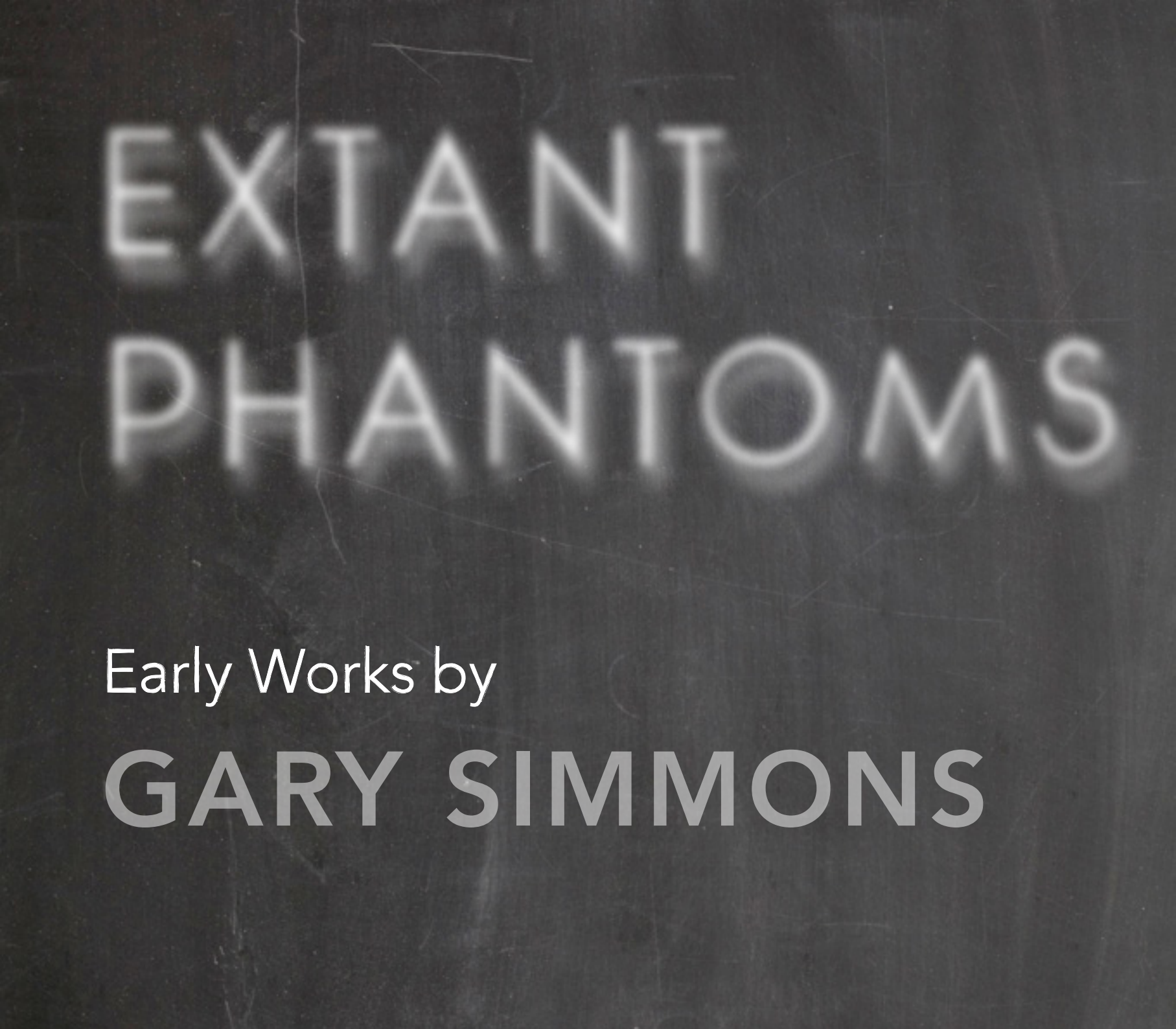
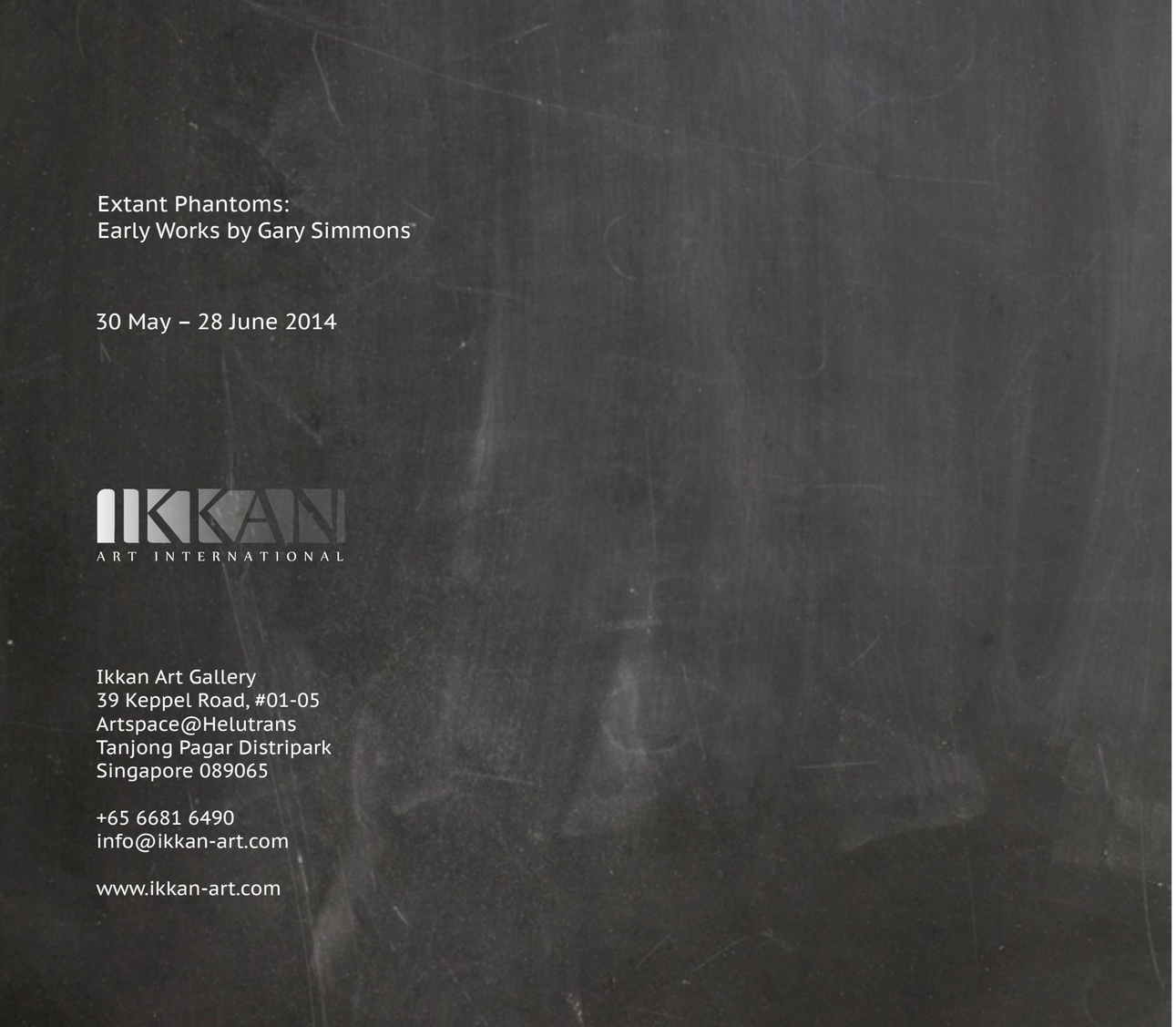

EXTANT
PHANTOMS
Early Works by
GARY SIMMONS



Extant Phantoms:
Early Works by Gary Simmons

30 May – 28 June 2014

IKKAN
ART INTERNATIONAL

Ikkan Art Gallery
39 Keppel Road, #01-05
Artspace@Helutrans
Tanjong Pagar Distripark
Singapore 089065

+65 6681 6490
info@ikkan-art.com

www.ikkan-art.com

EXTANT PHANTOMS

Extant Phantoms features some of Simmons's first chalk drawings on blackboards done in the artist's "erasure" technique, not seen since its presentation at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC in 1994. The chalkboard and its history as a tool for disseminating knowledge become an investigative site into how ideas about race are deeply embedded in the structures of our academic and cultural institutions.

Addressing personal and collective histories of race and class, "Disinformation Supremacy Board" interrogates educational hegemony and prevailing notions of white supremacy in pedagogy while Simmons's early "Erasure" drawings appropriate from vintage cartoons and mass culture to highlight the role of televised media in perpetuating racial stereotypes. From the crows of Disney's "Dumbo" to Honey in Looney Tunes' "Bosko", Simmons explains that he wanted to show "how we can attempt to erase the stereotype, but the image won't easily go away, it persists".

The inherent performative nature of the "Erasure" drawings and its ghostly gestural marks maintain visual allure that seduces while challenging the viewer, eliciting personal childhood memories and summoning it to the realm of the political:

> "We are all haunted by the past and by longing. A ghost is a presence you feel but cannot see. It's the hidden element in the room, the mental traces that are always with us: personal experiences, fantasies, perceptions or world events. My work, in general, comes from the memories of events and images that I, and I imagine others, are haunted by." **Gary Simmons in Conversation with Okwui Enwezor, Gary Simmons: Paradise, 2012, Damiani Press**

Disinformation Supremacy Board, 1989, Installation with 10 white boards, 5 chair-desks, 264 x 391 x 127 cm

GARY SIMMONS:

Interview with Amanda Cruz

Transcribed and republished in full from *Directions: Gary Simmons* brochure, 1994, with permission from Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

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 these crows - these 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 realise 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 a 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?

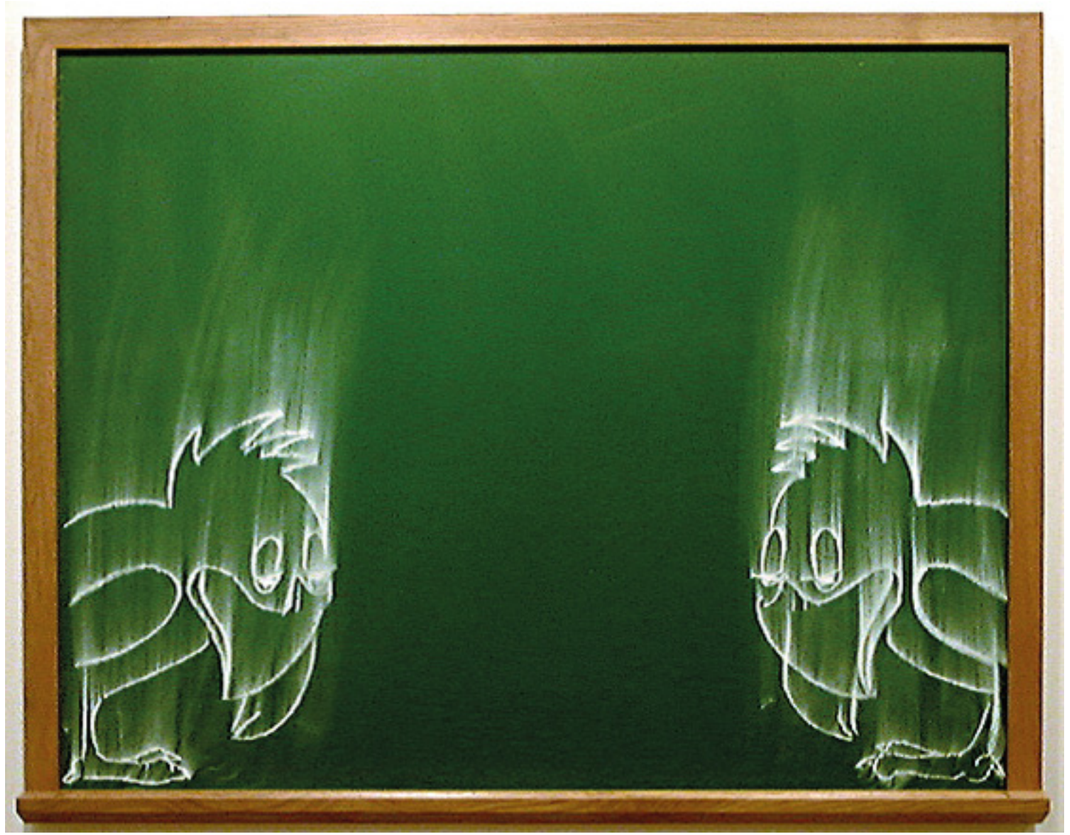
GS: The first one was in Los Angeles, either in ’89 or ’90. A gallery didn’t want to ship a huge chalkboard I had made, so instead I painted directly on the gallery wall itself. What this did was set up a cinematic space— the kind of feeling you have while looking at a film in a theatre. You weren’t quite sure 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 realised 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].

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

GS: I had been doing process 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



Green Chalkboard (Bal'head, Bal'head), 1993, Slate paint with chalk on masonite with oak, 121.9 x 152.4 cm

sort of abstracted, Minimalist-based 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 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 cookers 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 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 plan 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 slave 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.

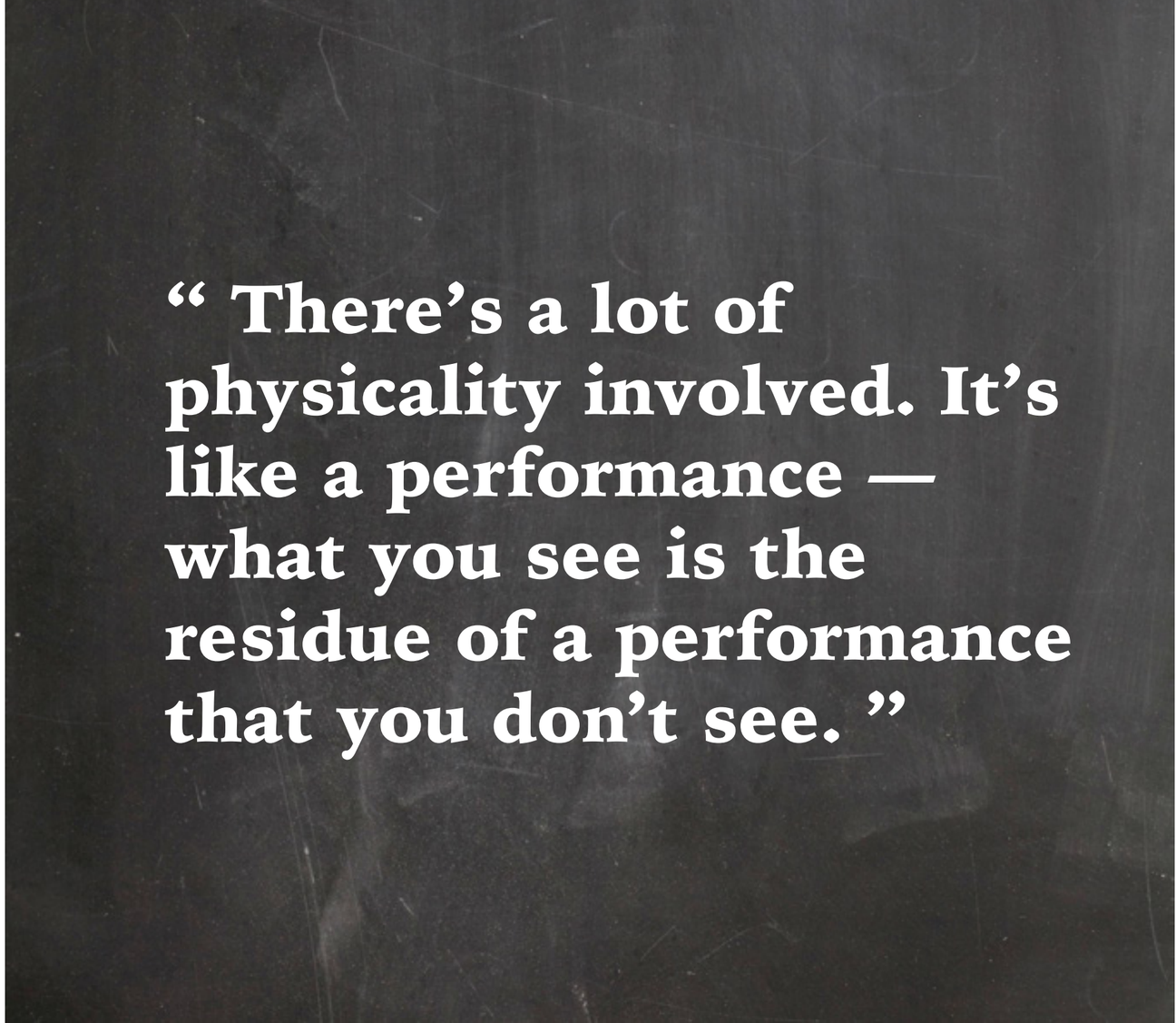
AC: The process of drawing the images seems important to you, but you take a step further and start erasing it.

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," "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 rings 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 realising 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 realise 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.

Notes

Directions: Gary Simmons brochure published on occasion of Simmons's solo exhibition at Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., November 17, 1994 to February 12, 1995: http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Gary-Simmons-Brochure-Directions.pdf

Green Chalkboard Drawing (Untitled #1)
1993
Slate paint with chalk on paper
86.4 x 68.6 cm; 34 x 27 in

GARY SIMMONS

Gary Simmons (b. 1964), lives and works in New York City. He graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York, and completed an MFA at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California. He was recently awarded the Studio Museum's Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize in 2013. Simmons' work has been included in exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Studio Museum of Harlem, New York; Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis; the Rubell Family Collection, Miami; the Kunsthaus Zürich, Zürich; the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington DC; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

http://garysimmonsstudio.com/

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Text and catalogue design: Kenneth Loe

Back cover: Black Chalkboard Drawing, Untitled #1 (detail), 1993, slate paint with chalk on paper, 86.4 x 68.6 cm