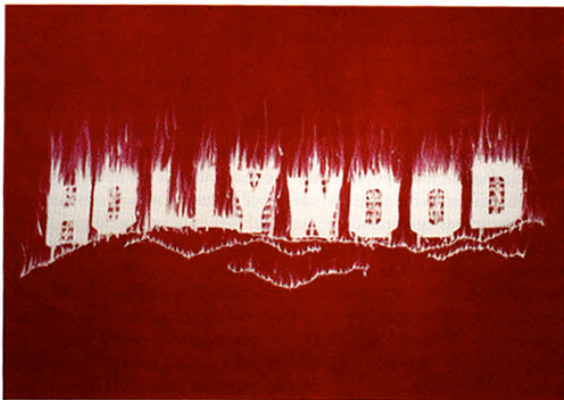


Joshua Decter, "Gary Simmons: Metro Pictures," *Artforum*, December 2008, pp. 297-298

Gary Simmons

METRO PICTURES

In this exhibition, titled "Night of the Fires," Gary Simmons evokes a period in which Los Angeles was burning, in the racial, social, and economic fires that culminated in the Watts riots in 1965: a watershed



Gary Simmons, *Hollywood, 2008*. pigment, oil, and wax on canvas, 84 x 120".

gorilla rebels to refrain from killing the fascistic human politicians. Caesar proclaims a temporary shift away from violent revenge to a more calculated strategy of political and social domination over humans. Perhaps Simmons is aware that the original version of the movie ended with the murder of the humans, and that the studio recut it with the more conciliatory finale for fear of reigniting racial tensions. This show's "message," so to speak, may have been ambiguous, but its timing was auspicious, coming as it did when the United States was poised to elect its first African-American president—a politician who seeks to ignite a progressive, inclusive social movement fueled by a *postracial* political discourse, one that far surpasses "burn, baby, burn."

—Joshua Decter

moment that came to emblemize urban strife throughout the nation, and whose reverberations eclipse perhaps even the Rodney King paroxysms of 1992. Simmons stages real history through the looking glass of pop history (and vice versa), having culled the works' iconography from a lowbrow cultural source: *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*, the 1972 sci-fi B movie whose account of enslaved apes revolting against their human masters was immediately understood as a not-too-disguised allegory of race relations. The movie, filmed on location in the modernist corporate environments of LA's Century City and Downtown, utilized these putatively visionary business centers as backdrops for the apes' emancipation through violent rebellion, leading to an annihilated capitalist cityscape.

Such scenes are evoked by paintings including *Century City Burn 3, 2008*, and *Bonaventure Burn, 2007*, wherein Simmons renders, in pigment, oil, and wax, edifices engulfed in flames, landmark structures that dissolve into smudgy wisps of ghostlike smoke against gorgeously saturated red backdrops. These works clearly refer to Ed Ruscha's 1968 *Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Fire* (apparently begun in 1965, the year of the Watts Riots), setting up clever if somewhat gratuitous (art-)historical interconnections and, more trenchantly, showing the paradoxical interpenetration of aesthetics and violence, wherein urban catastrophe is imaged as a conflation of the real, the imagined, and the desired. Simmons throws in a burning Hollywood sign for good measure.

Two wall drawings (both 2008) from "The Ghost Sign Series," 2007–2008, composed of phrases in black charcoal and dry pigment smudged elegantly onto the pristine white wall, suggesting the burnt residue of history, apparently utilize quotes from *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*. *Property Damage* (which reads MARKED INCREASE IN PROPERTY DAMAGE) might also be considered an indictment of a bursting housing bubble and subprime mortgage crisis that has hit folks in California especially hard, or perhaps an allusion to the demographic impact on the black population of New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina. *Armed . . . And Organized* (which reads THEY'RE ARMED . . . AND ORGANIZED AND CITY OF WATTS) effectively conflates the historical realities of place with the dystopian fantasy of the movie.

A number of works on paper fuse quotations from the movie with Watts-era colloquialisms and visual codes: In *It's a Madhouse (yellow)*, 2008, the phrase IT'S A MADHOUSE is written in black over an area of yellow abutted by one of green, creating a color scheme suggestive of black liberation motifs. Inscribed on the bloodred background of *Put Away Our Hatred, 2008*, is NOW WE WILL PUT AWAY OUR HATRED: the line spoken by Caesar, the leader of the ape rebellion, at the end of the movie, as he instructs his leather-clad