

METRO PICTURES

Corwin, William. "Gary Simmons: Screaming into the Ether," *TheBrooklynRail.org* (August 25, 2020).

BROOKLYN RAIL



Gary Simmons, *Screaming For Vengeance*, 2020. Oil and cold wax on canvas, 24 1/4 x 18 1/4 inches.

Gary Simmons's painted beings possess an uncanny quality of gesture that is most akin to the unnerving movement of the antagonists of some horror films, rather than cartoon characters they superficially resemble: the flesh-crawling choreography of the drowned little girl and the frozen terror of her victims in the Japanese movie *Ringu* (1998) (and its American remake, *The Ring* [2002]) comes to mind. In this unnatural movement of dread and looming disaster lies the artist's characterization of racial degradation lurking in the seemingly innocent faces of impish animations of the 1930s. The centerpiece of the exhibition, a cheerful, toothy cowpoke stroking the ivories in *Piano Man* (2020) dissolves in front of our eyes, slowly and painfully torn apart by the artist's dragging hand and inevitable vectors of force pulling in opposite directions. The cartoon characters from which Simmons draws his source material, the *Looney Tunes* characters Bosko "the Talk-Ink Kid," his sister, and the character Honey, are caricatures of Black people invented by Rudolf Ising and Hugh Harman. Despite their use of racist dog whistles, they have deceptively cutesy mannerisms: typically, oversized eyes and asexual and childlike proportions seem to render them sweet and harmless. But Simmons's characteristic approach of smudging the image creates a sort of evocative aura around the figures and implies a kind movement that lies outside the scope of a cartoon's typical zany capering. His methodology draws on tropes of cartooning but is simultaneously painterly as well: he utilizes the common visual signifier of speed lines—which usually indicate that the figure in question is moving at a comically fast (but not horrific) pace—but has combined them with smudging, blurring, and distortion. Rather than accelerate the implied motion of the various anthropoid cats and dogs and little girls which form his cast, he instead invents a sort of tortured and twisting gesture in his paintings, the frenzy of something neurotic, trapped, uncontrollable, and angry.



Gary Simmons, *Screaming Into The Ether*, 2020. Oil and cold wax on canvas, 96 1/4 x 72 1/4 inches.

Simmons lets the paint do much of the work for him, imbuing the thickly applied layers of glossy gray, black, and white (and occasionally a touch of another color) oil with an energy reminiscent of Joyce Pensato, who also mined cartoons for their psychological power using a semi-monochromatic palette. The surface of the paintings, a thick, lugubrious, mottled gray background applied with a palette knife in thick smears, lends itself perfectly to the process of smudging and distorting the carefully inscribed outlines of the cartoons in charcoal. Formally, these almost ritually destructive brush-through motions inhabit the interstitial space between the figure and its ground and recall Simmons's older chalk and text pieces. These, though, are more gestural and less about erasure. They suggest an aspect of narrative and biography to the characters in the image and bring a host of mostly pejorative implications. A figure with a wide open mouth, as in *Screaming For Vengeance* (2020), goes from an amusing cartoonish yowl into something gutting and painful, and in *Screaming Into The Ether* (2020), a similar mouth is appended to a full body, adding the thrashing motion of a wounded beast, its arms and four-fingered hands outstretched in desperation. A little feminine creature with a dress and a bow in her hair, in *Dance Little Sister* (2020), goes from innocently skipping to plunging, invoking that awful feeling of stomach-dropping when passing through turbulence. It's not all negative: in *Red Light, Green Light* (2020) we can't help but cheer for the girl who moves with an expansive sweeping motion, seemingly intent on pushing against the right side of the canvas with all her might; whether or not she succeeds seems irrelevant, she will never give up. Her sister, in the small study *Can't Bear to Look* (2020) is an identical image, but by virtue of the direction of the streaky blending strokes, she hides her face in fear or pain. A simple reorientation of the charcoal tracks through the slick background precipitates a completely different and deeply affecting response.



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

These characters have become unhinged from the celluloid or comic-book-paneled world in which they are comfortable. Let loose from the land of falling pianos and parody pain and injustices, they don't seem capable of processing the situations in which they find themselves. Cartoons in the hands of painters are always complex metaphors. They invoke a return to childhood that in some regard is nostalgic, but at the same time they function largely according to an algorithm predicated on innocence and the childlike inability to read deeper meaning into the situation at which one is looking. Simmons clearly enjoys fooling with this "suitable for children" smokescreen. The characters he chooses are superficially heteronormative as well as racist: they have bows in their hair, or cowboy hats. The males seem to yell or clown around while the females dance or laugh, but this system of signification only really works for kids. While they have arms and legs, wear clothes, and possess baleful eyes, these beings are very far from human. In *Anger Issues* (2020), where a screaming Bosko angrily swings his fist in a circular motion, and *Bracing For The Blast* (2020) where Honey plugs her ears with her fingers, Simmons points out that this cartoonish dehumanization is a means to make it okay for them to suffer these tribulations. We would not drop an anvil on the head of a Disney Princess or hit her on the head with an oversized mallet or sledgehammer; that would be seen as cruel and psychopathic. But we seem content to torture these wide-eyed stereotypes of those we deem subhuman. Simmons heightens that pain in these new paintings to an almost unbearable pitch and turns his lens on what we deem acceptable behavior, in life, or in the funny papers.