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An Artist Makes His Name In Boxing

BY JESSICA DAWSON

IN AN ART WORLD where stats are often tallied in terms of USD, GBP and EUR, artist Gary Simmons prefers to talk about RBIs and TKOs.

The artist, 50, has channeled a passion for sports into a 25-year career mining recurring motifs—text, architecture and athletics among them—to weigh in on race and inequality in America. This fall, Mr. Simmons, who lives in Sag Harbor, N.Y., is participating in the Prospect New Orleans art biennial and will open two exhibitions dedicated to the sweet science—boxing.

Mr. Simmons recalls listening as a child to bouts on the radio with his father. He admired heavyweights such as Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali, whose influence reached beyond the ring. "They were able to make certain statements culturally or socially that went outside the sport, that people felt very close to," he says.

Mr. Simmons made a splash in the mid-1990s when he installed a 100-square-foot boxing ring in the controversial show "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art" at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. Now in the museum's permanent collection, the piece features men's tap shoes hung from ringside ropes and a series of choreographed dance steps that imply stereotyped expectations of race. Today Mr. Simmons continues to draw on pro sports as a mode of expression. He'll use cricket in a work in next

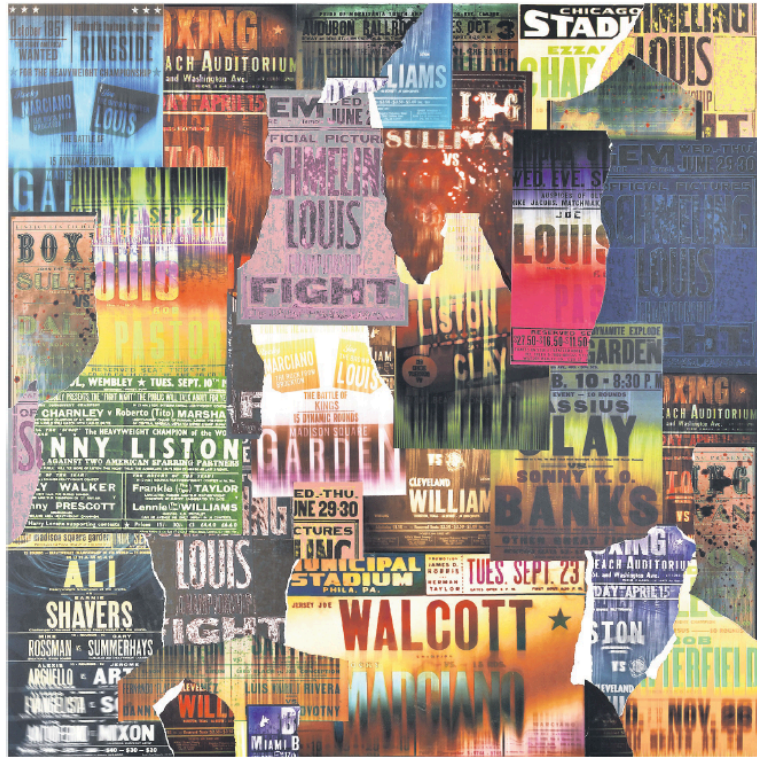
year's Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates.

Prizefighting's jabs and hooks are also near-universal images. "Pretty much everybody knows of or has seen a boxing match," Mr. Simmons says. "I found that it was important for everybody to have an avenue into my work."

"Boxing—the physical act, the sport itself—provides a visual context" for Mr. Simmons's themes, says Thelma Golden, organizer of the "Black Male" exhibition in 1994 and now director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem. Last year, the museum awarded him its \$50,000 Joyce Alexander Wein Prize.

Mr. Simmons's signature images are wall-size paintings called erasures. After laying a matte black ground, the artist paints or draws in chalk, smudging as he goes, as if working on a partly wiped off blackboard. Early pictures borrowed from vintage black caricatures; later ones included icons of Americana, from the Hollywood sign to the Coney Island Cyclone. The smudging technique implied both a threat of violence—some subjects looked like they were on fire—and a hazy, almost nostalgic recollection.

On Nov. 14, Mr. Simmons will unveil a massive mural he will paint for the Pérez Art Museum Miami. He plans to inflect a 900-square-foot expanse of black with spare white text spelling



GARY SIMMONS'S "Down With the Kings" will be on view at New York's Metro Pictures gallery.

out the aliases of seven African-American fighters, "Boston Tar Baby" and "Mahogany Mauler" among them, using his erasure technique.

"One of the striking things about his work is how compressed, how condensed, the historical and cultural content feels," says René Morales, the curator at the Pérez who invited Mr. Simmons to create the mural. "A lot of his work raises issues without neces-

sarily delving into them," Mr. Morales adds. "He leaves it up to the viewer" to fill in the rest.

Mr. Simmons has long collected old boxing posters announcing major bouts involving African-American fighters from the 1930s through the 1970s. On Thursday, New York's Metro Pictures gallery will unveil an almost 42-foot-wide wall collaged with vintage flyers that the artist has altered

from the originals. Here and there, bits of text or image are dropped out, either by hand drawing or on the computer. The resulting images will hover between representation and abstraction.

"There's a beauty to watching someone like Muhammad Ali or Sugar Ray Leonard move around a ring," Mr. Simmons said. "They had a real dance quality to them. They were showmen."