

METRO PICTURES

Sargent, Antwaun. "Chalk Film Titles 'Fade to Black,' Challenging Erasure in America," *Vice.com* (August 9, 2017).

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Gary Simmons at work at the California African American Museum.

Covering five walls in the lobby of the California African American Museum (CAAM) are titles of classic American films like *Law of the Jungle*, *Juke Joint*, *Moon Over Harlem*, *Go Down Death!*, and *Soul of Sin*, among others. They harken to a time when cinema was America's greatest pastime and a primary form of representation. Families would gather and go to the movies to see their communities, histories, desires, and fantasies—which is to say, themselves—move across the silver screen.

During that golden age of American cinema, black folks were hardly seen on screen. Black audiences might identify with the help, but more likely they pushed those demeaned characters out of their minds, silently imagining themselves as the white hero or leading lady, living freely in a world full of human complications.

The film titles printed in smudged, white chalk on black walls at CAAM are part of artist Gary Simmons's large-scale installation entitled *Fade to Black*. Taking its title from the traditional film technique, the work employs Simmons' signature use of white chalk as a way to speak to the ways in which filmic and national memory often blur or erase black American life.

"I actually sat with the space for quite a while, watched how people moved through it and dealt with the architecture," Simmons tells *Vice*. "It's a challenging location to work with, because it's not your standard white box," he says of mounting the work in CAAM's lobby. "I was thinking of the way the walls felt, that they almost grew out of the ground, reaching a kind of continuum that expands beyond the building itself. It led to a notion of how film credits run, and that was the genesis."



Gary Simmons: *Fade to Black* at the California African American Museum.

Simmons has spent his career mining overlooked territories; he gravitates to film, because it is one of the most powerful mediums of the past century. “Black actors and actresses had a place in the foundation of film that’s almost forgotten. When people think of the great films like *Gone with the Wind*, they think of the main characters, but then there’s Hattie McDaniel.”

The movies included in *Fade to Black* are mostly silent films, with several more contemporary works. Through his research, Simmons unearthed films that cast black actors and actresses in both minor and major roles. Simmons’s text installation, both in scale and composition, recalls an endless film reel rolling across an old-fashioned silver screen, creating a kind of history of early black Hollywood, much of which has been forgotten.

“A lot of the great actors and actresses of color we have now are a part of a history,” he says. “For every Halle Berry, there’s a Hattie McDaniel; for every Denzel Washington, there’s a Paul Robeson. For me, it’s those forgotten figures I’m engaged in, hovering between representation and abstraction.”

The placement of the film titles in the installation summons competing images. On one wall, *The Birth of a Nation*, the controversial 2016 film about Nat Turner’s historic slave rebellion, lies above *Juke Joint*, the 1947 race film. The films portray distinctly different representations of black and white characters, creating tension that speaks to the stories Hollywood tells about race then and now. “*The Birth of a Nation* sets a tone, then you look across the wall and see you something like *Gang War* or *Juke Joint*, and they embody other kinds of experiences that you can conjure in your own head,” Simmons says.

For many viewers, the inclusion of *Hi De Ho* recalls Cab Calloway’s signature call and response. “There’s this play that happens for the viewer that allows them to move around in the work, and I think that’s essential to the experience. One of my favorite things about film is you and I can both see a film together and come away with different perceptions.”

“I really wanted to create a work that didn’t push the viewer away,” says Simmons. “My hope for those titles is that they might ignite an interest in the viewer to go and see some of those films and get to know some of those actors and actresses.” In this way, understanding the trajectory of representation in cinema can perhaps slow down the erasure of the history of black Hollywood. “There’s a history, and there are folks who shaped the way we enter the theater. Let’s just remember some of those people.”