

Gwen Allen, "Gary Simmons," *Artforum*, February 2011, p. 235

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### Gary Simmons

ANTHONY MEIER FINE ARTS

The so-called blaxploitation film genre courted controversy during its meteoric rise (and equally precipitous disappearance) in the 1970s. Marketed specifically to black audiences and defined by unprecedented depictions of black heroes fighting a villainous white establishment, these films were, on the one hand, hailed for offering revolutionary representations of black power, and, on the other, condemned for perpetuating racial stereotypes and glamorizing violence, drugs, and extramarital sex. Though Gary Simmons made no attempt to resolve the paradoxes of blaxploitation in his exhibition "Black Marquee," the show offered an engaging reflection on the pleasures, limitations, and transgressions of the genre in light of the institutional conditions and representational possibilities of commercial cinema—both then and now.

The show comprised two pieces. For *Credit Roll*, 2010, the artist painted the walls of the gallery's front room and hallway dark brown, then stenciled (in white) the titles of more than sixty blaxploitation films (the sheer proliferation of which is something of a revelation in itself)—not just classics such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, *Shaft*, and *Super Fly*, but many more obscure ones too, including *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Super Soul Brother*. He then blurred the still-wet words so that they appeared to drift, like credits down a screen. Countering the visuality of film, the work thus foregrounded the role



View of "Gary Simmons," 2010.  
Foreground:  
*Greetings and Salutations*, 2010  
Background:  
*Credit Roll*, 2010.

of language in the collective processes of representing identity, racial or otherwise. If such operations depend on the threshold of linguistic legibility for forming expressions of solidarity and community, it is at this same point that signifiers of identity are at risk of hardening into essentialist concepts and stereotypes (the latter originally referred to the technique for fixing movable type onto a single metal plate). But Simmons insists on the discursive nature of identity, interrupting its tendency toward ossification. Indeed, by blurring the film titles, he suggested here the contingency of perception—its limitations and relativity, whether individual or historical—and the ultimately indeterminate nature of the categories race, class, and gender.

Language was also highlighted in *Greetings and Salutations*, 2010, the show's other work, an audio collage of dialogue excerpted from blaxploitation sound tracks, which was broadcast from three waist-high white fibreglass replicas of drive-in movie speakers. As the disembodied voices greeted one another in formulaic slang, the particularity of individual accents and intonations became pronounced, further severing the idioms of race from any essentialist notion. Moreover, by drawing attention to the role of the drive-in theater in the marketing and distribution of these films—along with other kinds of exploitation and B movies—the piece underscored the institutional and economic conditions that shaped their production and reception. (Simmons had investigated this theme earlier this year in a series of works based on abandoned drive-ins and horror movies, shown at New York's Metro Pictures.) However, while the work reminded one of the ways in which the culture industry regulates consumers through demographic groupings, it also raised the possibility that the notoriously unruly and heterogeneous social space of drive-ins ("passion pits") might yield viewing practices other than the ones prescribed.

By investigating the complexities of representing identity in blaxploitation films of the '70s, Simmons's show probed (implicitly and via its site-specific nature) the contested status of such explorations within the art world today. Indeed, as art historian Darby English argued in his book *How to See a Work in Total Darkness* (2007), we must critically question the coherence of racial categories as they shape assumptions about the production and reception of art. Moving beyond the identity politics of the 1990s (the context in which Simmons first gained recognition; he was included in both the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1993 Biennial and its "Black Male" exhibition of 1994), terms such as "post-black" and "postracial" signal exciting changes. Yet, far from suggesting that we are beyond race, "Black Marquee" insisted on the term's unresolved nature, encouraging us to think critically and expansively about the way race informs both our current reality and the state toward which we're striving.

—Gwen Allen