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KILLER TEXT ON ART

Rapid Fire Reviews

LOS ANGELES

Gary Simmons at Margo Leavin Gallery

Gary Simmons infiltrates the national narrative with "Smoke," an exhibition of burning buildings rendered in pigments and oils that materialize the otherwise ghostly presence of his early hand-smeared chalk drawings, also monochromatic and monumental. The scene unfolding in what might be a New York City skyscraper or a low Los Angeles apartment complex imparts an urgent immediacy. "Smoke" takes architecture as social metaphor but exposes the trap of such a structural analysis. The buildings, seen below from a street view, are more personal, narrative and traumatic. They gesture toward the enormous loss — of safety, security, possessions, community, independence — suffered in whole or part by the African-American community over time. Accompanying volatilized text works like "By tomorrow it will be too late" and "When we hate you, we're hating the dark side of ourselves" suggest the root cause of these fires is nothing as disorganized or organic as a riot, or as singularly preconceived as arson; it's a spark. Here smoke from the metaphorical building, a powder keg that emanates blackness, will soon envelop the city. The mood of the nation pre-election seems to rise upward on Simmons' chalkboard-black canvases into an expansive sky. Derrida would have appreciated this portrait of hope under erasure.

—Carrie Paterson