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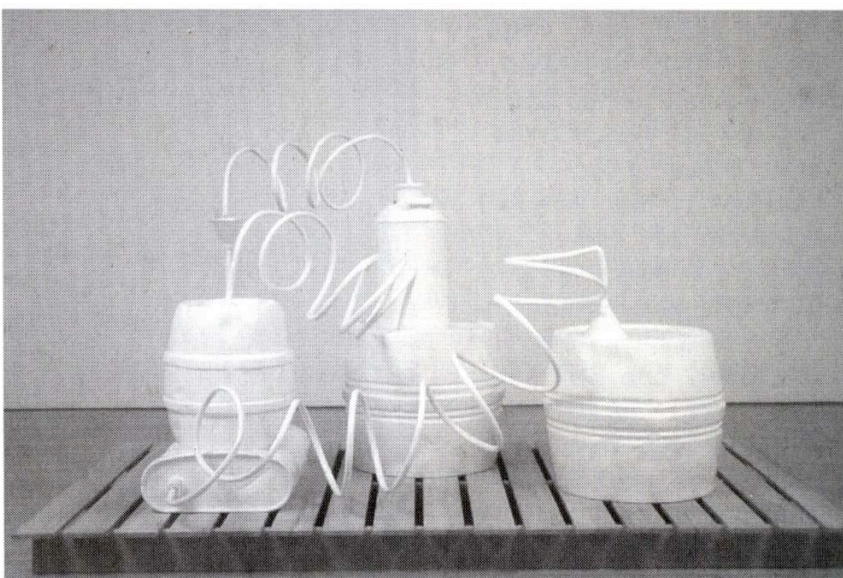
LOS ANGELES

"Country Grammar" is an exhibition of drawings and a sculpture by New York artist **GARY SIMMONS** (*Margo Leavin Gallery, November 25—December 22*). Well known for his series of erasure drawings in which he drew with chalk and then partially erased cartoon images that expressed racial stereotypes, in these new large-scale drawings he uses words relating to the various slang expressions to describe moonshine and those who might have made it. In the center of the gallery Simmons has created a life-sized model *Still*. This pristine white sculpture set upon a wooden platform initiates the uninformed to the context of the work. We ask ourselves—who made moonshine? When? Who drank it? Was it a product of the city or of the country? Were its distributors and creators black or white? Simmons locates this exhibition in the country by titling it "Country Grammar." But within this title he is also alluding to the system of rules for speaking and writing a given language—in this case the language used to describe moonshine, its effects on people as well as derogatory terms against African-Americans. Simmons' work begins with the invitation to the exhibition. The card displays an uncredited and undated black and white photograph (probably from the 1920s) that depicts

a pig hanging from a tree near two African-American men. One stands in the foreground with a knife, the other stands still in the background near a black pot. Both seem ready for the eventual disembowelment of the animal.

Each of Simmons' large drawings is a visual and poetic play on language, the compositions spare. Each drawing supports an image or series of words that have been smeared and blurred so they are hardly recognizable. Most of the drawings are black pastel on vellum, the others are white chalk on a gray ground (black chalkboard paint on paper that has been rubbed with chalk and then erased creating a gray surface). To create the word drawings Simmons carefully positioned the stenciled words on the page. usually there are a few phrases per drawing—for example in *Panther's Breath*, the phrases "Panther's Breath" and "Tiger's Sweat" are positioned just above the bottom edge of the page. Each word is hand rubbed with vertical or horizontal strokes, or both, animating as well as obscuring the text suggesting the effects of moonshine. In addition to the word drawings—most of which are synonyms for moonshine or slang for being drunk—Simmons also presents a number of drawings of blurred cartoon-like objects. In Simmons' earlier series, the "Erasure Drawings" he chalked scenes drawn from animated cartoons (usually depicting some kind of racial stereotype) on the wall, and partially erased them. Simmons continues these investigations in drawings such as *Log Roll*, and *Ma & Pa*. *Log Roll* is a blurred charcoal drawing that depicts a lone log, moving in an undefined space, blurred lines coming out of it in all directions; whereas *Ma & Pa* is a drawing of two outhouse-like structures (his and hers) that look quite similar to the cabin in the announcement card. Other recognizable objects in these drawings include the flaming gas pump in *Tex-a-flame*, and the two sets of windmill blades in *The Space Between*.

In all of Simmons' work, there is a lesson to be learned. Although the works are not didactic, they are always instructional. Simmons' interests in race, education and popular culture come together in his elegantly crafted works. Often drawing from historical sources he reinterprets the past, suggesting that what might have then been seen as fun, childlike or innocent was indeed racist and mean spirited.



Gary Simmons, *Still*, 2000, mixed media, 56 by 85 by 60 inches (photo courtesy of Margo Leavin Gallery).

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