

Star-Telegram

Modern opens two 'Focus' shows Jan. 13

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Focus: Gary Simmons
Sunday through March 14
Focus: Yinka Shonibare, MBE
Sunday through March 24
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 3200 Darnell St.
\$4-\$10
817-738-9215;
www.themodern.org
By Gaile Robinson
grobinson@star-telegram.com

The Modern upgraded its "Focus" shows for 2013 to exhibit work of midcareer artists.

Typically the museum has given the real estate to young comers, but an infusion of cash from the sales of KAWS merchandise and prints has given the director's council a boost; it now has the monies to buy a piece for the permanent collection from an established artist.

KAWS was the last Focus show artist of 2011, and he left a money-making legacy of prints at the Modern stipulating that the proceeds go to an acquisition budget.

Curator Andrea Karnes reeled in some heavyweight talent for the Focus exhibitions, and the council will eventually choose one work from the pieces exhibited for the Modern's collection.

First at bat was Gary Simmons, a New York City-based artist who had to postpone his show because of Superstorm Sandy. So now his show is running concurrently with that of Yinka Shonibare, MBE. It's a doubleheader of talents who are new to these parts but have a hefty history of solo exhibits in museums and international galleries.

Gary Simmons

Simmons has manipulated erasure drawings for more than a decade, using a dark chalkboardlike ground with top layers of what looks like smeared chalk; the images evoke memory, early education and altered communication.

The remains, made by physically swiping at the drawings while wearing golf gloves (they provide better adhesion for the chalk and to protect the artist's hands), have a ghostlike animation. In *Subtlety of a Train Wreck* (1998), the erasure drawing is of two locomotives an instant before collision. The frisson of calm before the crash and the powerful burst of energy of opposing forces play an orchestral moment of quiet rest before the crescendo.

Simmons uses the collision of imagery in his most recent work, *In This Corner* from his "Construction Site Series," where sheets of plywood, the visual barrier to construction sites, have been stacked against the gallery wall, papered with posters from times past or bearing his erasure paintings as a kind of graffiti.

This one is covered with flyers from the 1938 boxing match between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling. The winner was African-American Louis, the loser Aryan Schmeling, and they were advertised as the standard-bearers for the U.S. vs. Them conflict. An erasure painting of a large microphone, the kind that hung over old boxing arenas, swings from the sideline panel, the motion provided by Simmons' hands swiped across the white paint.

In another gallery, he has framed titles from blaxploitation films that insinuate their own colorful images. Just the words "Super Fly" and "Cleopatra Jones" provide a mental fashion show of '70s style that needs no accompanying posters or movie stills. The artist includes a large black-on-black painting of the Starlite Theatre, the first integrated drive-in movie theater. Simmons didn't remember where it was located, but the Starlite was in Dallas, at 5101 S. Lamar St.; it's long gone.

What is about to happen and what is behind the scene are triggers that Simmons uses to engage the visitor. Complicity is part of the experience.

Yinka Shonibare, MBE

Shonibare deals with cultural politics through dualities. He lives in the positive/negative, black/white world. Half of his body is paralyzed from a spinal virus he contracted as a teen. He is half able-bodied and half-compromised. He is an African who grew up in England. He speaks English and Yoruba, and the MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) that follows his name is an honorific bestowed by Queen Elizabeth II for his contribution to the arts. He always uses it, again, as part of his duality of identity.

He is known for his theatrical sets, and he brought a stunner to the Modern, *Scramble for Africa* (2003). A 16-foot dining table with a map of Africa as the centerpiece is surrounded by 14 chairs.

Sitting in the chairs are headless bodies dressed in 19th-century clothes made of batik fabrics. The brightly figured cloth is an immediate signifier of Africa, even though it is now made in Europe. The figures represent the Europeans who parceled out African territories for trading purposes in the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. The skin tone of the bodies is neither white nor black but milk chocolate, a color that only Crayola would consider "flesh."

The gestures and body language are tense and emphatic. Hands grip their neighbors' shoulders; one figure is rising from his chair as if in anger while his neighbor seems to be holding him back in a pacifying gesture. It is a tense moment among the Euro-powers, but the result is even more charged for the unrepresented African nations.

A video, *Odile and Odette*, from Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*, is enacted by two ballerinas. Typically one is dressed in black (the bad swan), the other white (the good swan). Shonibare dresses them the same in batik tutus, using white and black dancers.

They perform in mirror image, a large gilt frame breaking the space between them so that they always look like reflections of each other. Which is the good or bad swan is ambiguous, as the dancer who is reflected changes throughout the video.

Shonibare questions the accuracy of history, literature and theater in his productions, and his presentations cause the viewer to do likewise.

Gaile Robinson is the Star-Telegram art and design critic, 817-390-7113

Twitter: [@gailerobinson](https://twitter.com/gailerobinson)

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