

Michael Simpson

David Risley Gallery



For some reason, English artists whose work has seemed scarce in recent years have begun showing again lately—John Stezaker and Marc Camille Chaimowicz are two who come to mind; Michael Simpson is another. Simpson's last solo show in London was at the Serpentine Gallery in 1985, when he exhibited very large paintings, some depicting totemic figures, others seeming to show a hurricane of books hurtling through the void.

Since 1989 Simpson has been making a series of paintings, also quite large and now numbering sixty-six (although the artist has destroyed more than twenty), which bear the self-explanatory designation "Bench Paintings." They are horizontally oriented canvases, typically more than seven feet high and more than sixteen feet long, depicting benches of various kinds, usually together with one or two other objects (a stool, a wreath, a window grate) whose relation to the benches, both compositionally and in their significance, is enigmatic. In earlier installments of the series, the benches were depicted in realistically rendered—although often mysteriously anonymous—settings: in front of a whitewashed brick wall, pigeons pecking at the ground below (*Bench Number Forty-Two*, 1994–95), or facing a row of numbered lockers (*Bench Number Fifty-One*, 1997–2001), for example. The four paintings in this show have much more abstract settings; they float in nearly monochromatic fields of color, lightly textured, which fade out at all four edges in a manner reminiscent of the lower edges of Brice Marden's early monochromes.

At a rate of about three surviving “Bench Paintings” a year, Simpson’s has not been a vast production, even considering the scale of the individual works, but this oeuvre evidences a patient, obdurate effort all the more notable for being so puzzling: Why would someone spend nearly two decades painting portraits of benches? The artist himself has stated that the series began with a work intended as an homage to Giordano Bruno, the Neapolitan philosopher who was burned alive for heresy in the Campo dei Fiori in Rome in 1600, following eight years of torture. “Since then,” he explains, “I have persisted with the bench for many reasons, not least because of its value as a fixed coherent form.” Simpson associates the symbol of the bench with “confinement, alienation, restraint, and industrial death. It is also a place where justice and injustice are administered.”

Not all viewers will share Simpson’s associations, of course; sometimes a bench is just a bench. Nonetheless, the heavy, solemn, mute physical presence of these forms—reminiscent of the sepulchral minimalism of Jan Verduyck—certainly evokes feelings of estrangement and doom, as does the airless, deadpan manner of their depiction, like that of de Chirico’s “metaphysical” piazzas. In some of the new paintings the bench is reduced to nothing more than a great black beam, almost a battering ram, or perhaps something like an elongated casket, inscribed with the date of Bruno’s execution. The stillness of these works entombs an enormous force. They speak of something oppressive, and some might say they assume that oppressiveness themselves. But that’s not quite true. Simpson’s canvases are as quiet as they are implacable. They are very deliberate, right down to those edges where they let themselves fray; one might as easily call them well constructed as well painted. They allow you your space, though their emptiness keeps watch over you.

—*Barry Schwabsky*