

## Michael Simpson

Spike Island, Bristol, UK



Michael Simpson, left: *Squint 20*, 2015, oil on canvas, 2.2 × 1.2 m; centre: *Squint 27*, 2015, oil on canvas, 2.3 × 1.1 m; right: *Squint 18*, 2015, oil on canvas, 2.1 × 1.2 m. Courtesy the artist and Spike Island, Bristol; photographer: Stuart Whipps

Michael Simpson is, unusually, an atheist who foregrounds serious thinking about religion. However, though he's known for the intensity of that engagement, the 21 mainly recent works in 'Flat Surface Painting' at Spike Island, Simpson's largest exhibition to date, highlight another engagement: with painting itself.

Five of the 'Bench Paintings', which obsessively occupied Simpson from 1989–2009, serve to contextualize his subsequent work. These huge canvases (typically 2.4 × 5.3 m) depict blocky, uncomfortable-looking seats that suggest the powerlessness of those kept waiting by officialdom, even before you know they are a tribute to the free-thinking 16th-century philosopher and cosmologist Giordano Bruno, who was imprisoned, tortured and burned as a heretic by the Inquisition. The benches, in that light, are shaped all the more like coffins; the places of waiting that come to mind are prisons, courts and Purgatory.

The horizontal 'Bench Paintings' have now given way to the vertically aligned 'Leper Squint' series (2012–ongoing). The dozen here show viewing holes built into medieval church walls to allow undesirables to take in sermons while remaining outside. They speak of exclusion and inequality and, while the benches propose a human presence without showing it, the squints suggest both those who would have been looking and listening from without, and the mystery of what lies beyond. How can the relatively highly-placed hole be accessed? There's a certain humour to the solutions that Simpson proposes, which include several formations of steps and ladders propped against the wall, consistent with a rather precarious viewing position. A much smaller work, *Squint* (2016), shows just the hole, hung inaccessibly five metres up the gallery wall.

The exhibition also introduces two new motifs. The first is the pulpit, represented in the largest painting on display, the 5.35-metre-tall *Minbar (Pulpit)* (2015) – another expression of ideas of ascension and of being at the mercy of religious authority. Its colossal steps emphasize hierarchical power, and the use of an Islamic term makes explicit the potential to read Simpson's work in the current context of Daesh, the certainty and excesses of which stand comparison with the Catholic church in 1600. Second, the depiction of confessionals ramps up the secrecy and potential voyeurism suggested by the squints, especially where a curtain is included.

Simpson, then, portrays the scenography for what he sees as the iniquities of religious institutions. In so doing, he evokes the inevitability of life's passages through a new twist on the vanitas still life. So, why is the show called 'Flat Surface Painting'? Partly, I would suggest, to deny any transcendental realm. But also because, in spite of his superficially austere commitment to repeated, emblematic depictions of simple objects, Simpson's subject is the history of painting as much as the history of the church. He fuses a suitably Renaissance concern with how to depict three dimensions on two with the inspiration of early Flemish and Dutch interior painting and Fernand Léger's way of (in Simpson's words) 'painting his images right on the surface of the painted plane'. He also combines the seriality, clarity and geometry of minimalism with detailed surface effects that engage with abstract expressionism. The show's title, of course, calls to mind Clement Greenberg's assertion of the primacy of flatness.

There is very little colour but, in the natural light from Spike Island's high windows, the predominance of whites and greys serves both to emphasize their subtle variety and to make what colour there is stand out. It often looks as if Simpson has failed to cover some traces of underpainting, but that's just part of the artfully unfinished appearance that he contrives. Seen up close, there are all sorts of scuffs, marks, incomplete layers and failures of background to go quite to the edge of the canvas. Just recently, an intense yellow has started to appear, making it more likely that we might interpret the submerged flickers of colour as hope behind the bleakness, humanity behind the institutions or – in terms of Simpson's painting practice – flourish disguised by rigour.