

Michael Simpson

Modern Art



Michael Simpson, *Confessional No.21*, 2023, oil on canvas, 90 1/2 × 118 1/8".

Given all the conflicts in the world today, the need for Michael Simpson's cool, even impassive, though foreboding paintings seems all the more urgent. The octogenarian British artist's most recent show featured eight paintings, most of which depict large blocklike objects. Yet, despite their spareness, the works walk a narrow path along painting's many dichotomies: abstraction and representation, language and image, subtlety and graphic impact.

The first painting in the show, and the only small one, announced Simpson's themes, both intellectual and visual: *Dead Cross 1*, 2020, a diptych, with the words of the title written in Russian on the top panel, and a horizontal, yellowish, isometric cross depicted against a gray background on the lower one. Simpson is not just an avowed atheist, but one whose impetus over the years has been to condemn religion, or at least its authority. Over the decades, he has developed an iconography whose salient motifs include confession booths and leper squints—apertures made in church walls allowing services to be seen by people forbidden contact with the rest of the congregation—as well as ladders and benches. The bench, for Simpson, stands in for Giordano Bruno, the Renaissance philosopher and cosmologist who was tortured and burned alive for heresy in 1600. The long rectangular shape of *Bench Painting 79*, 2022–23, for instance, seems more like a floating coffin than a place of repose. The underlying red, orange, and black paint, mostly covered by a thick layer of white, suggests an atmosphere of smoke and flames. This sense of a heated atmosphere partly covered over is to be found in most of these paintings, as if something lively had been smothered. The heavy white, gray, or cream shrouding these backgrounds also recalls institutional paint jobs.

While the central form of *Bench Painting 79* is perhaps intended to convey a sense of pathos, Simpson's large shapes usually emanate a bold, solid opacity that feels threatening. Flanked by the silhouettes of two office chairs, the squarish notched rectangle composed of brownish vertical bands in *Confessional No.21, 2023*, takes up the bulk of this nearly ten-foot-wide work. Although the central motif is an abstract form, the chairs suggest we should see it as a representation. As with the *Bench* painting, it is the title that explains the object's function. It could be a jail, a guardhouse—one might even think of Peter Halley's cells—or even, with its rust-orange and gray patina, a block of old iron. In two other depictions of confessionals, the central motif resembles a letter D rendered with long slabs of rough white paint that has been then gently rolled over with black, creating a sequence of gray bands such as one might see in a piece of Brutalist architecture—a style whose very name has authoritarian overtones.

These large paintings are confrontational, or, better yet, I should say, they confront us. There are no acts of violence, no imprisonments, no tortures to be seen, but the works' spareness of representation, almost to the point of abstraction, somehow suggests a world void of humanity, as if its protagonists had been reduced to mere furniture. This is where Simpson's art lies: in his ability to create a sense of foreboding without representing it. The paintings are eerily dehumanized, and that, perhaps, is Simpson's point about organized religion or any institutional bureaucracy: We are forgotten.