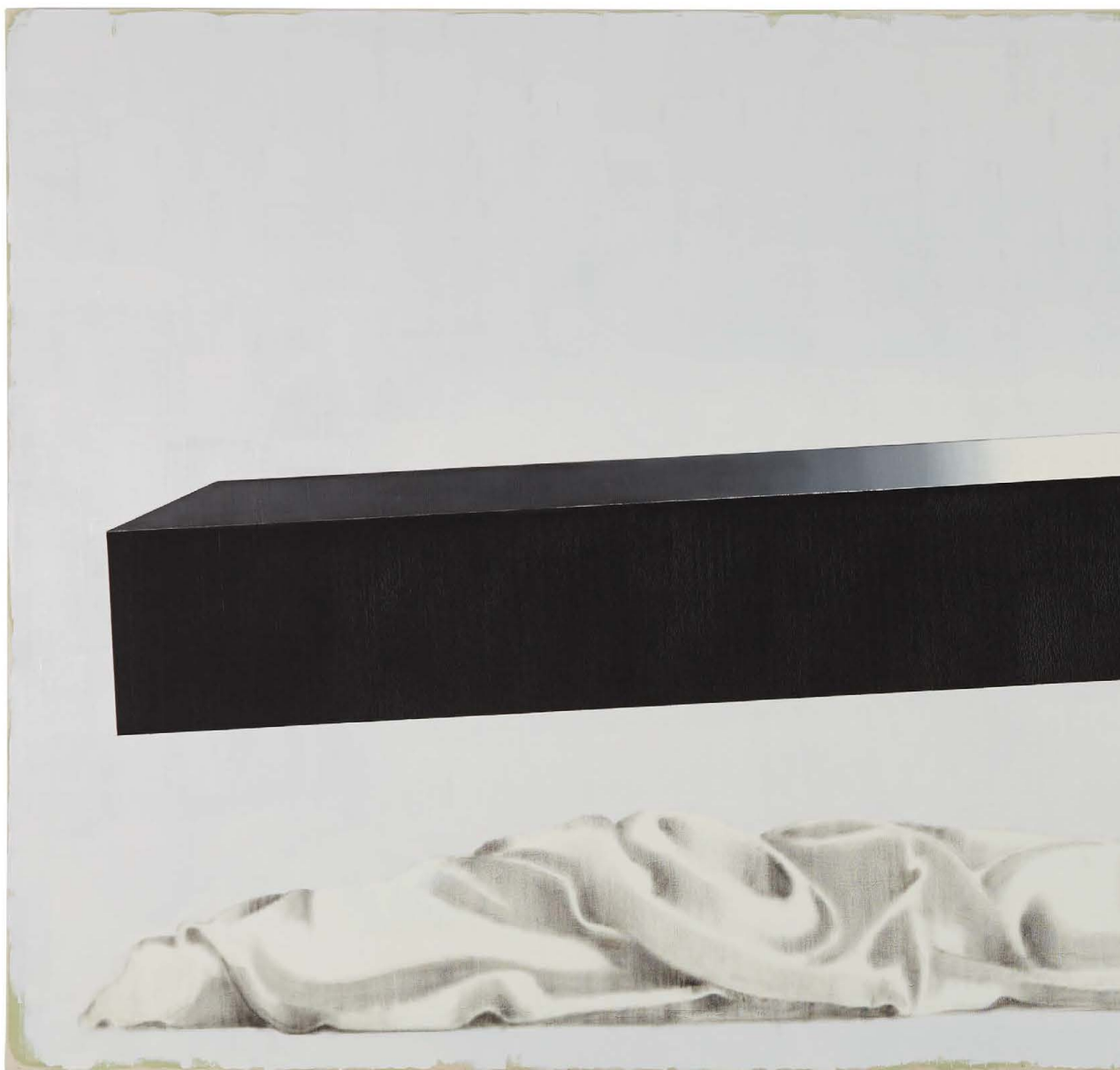


Michael Simpson

By Martin Herbert



“It’s compulsive”



Michael Simpson drives a Citroën DS, a curvy black beast from 1974. Picking me up from a train station near his Wiltshire home/studio, he mentions that its designer, Flaminio Bertoni, was also a sculptor – which shows – and that his previous car was also a Citroën DS. He does not say, though I'd wager he knows, that it's the model Alain Delon's existential contract-killer steals in Jean-Pierre Melville's stylish 1967 thriller *Le Samouraï*. In any case, considering the seventy-seven-year-old English painter's art, which for 37 years has revolved around what he calls, initially at least, "the infamy of religious history", the consistency and modernist cool of this car seem germane. In the studio, Simpson worries away at a handful of figurative subjects over and over, presented frontally: long benches, confessionals, a fictitious version of a device called a leper squint. He's only had a few vehicles, but he's chosen them carefully and they've served him well.

In his studio, where a glassed case of first editions and complete-set modernist periodicals reflects his former sideline as an antiquarian book dealer, Simpson – whose personality mixes deep civility, Eeyore-ish dejection, huge professional commitment and cultivated wit – offers an original Russian Constructivist stool, painted green, on which to perch. Then he ventures further back in time. "Two hundred fifty yards away, in a church over there," he says, "happens to be the largest leper squint in history, 17 feet long." A leper squint is a cut that, from the Middle Ages onward, when leprosy was rife in the southern counties, masons made into churches' facades: usually rectangular, facing the altar so that the sick might witness the service, albeit

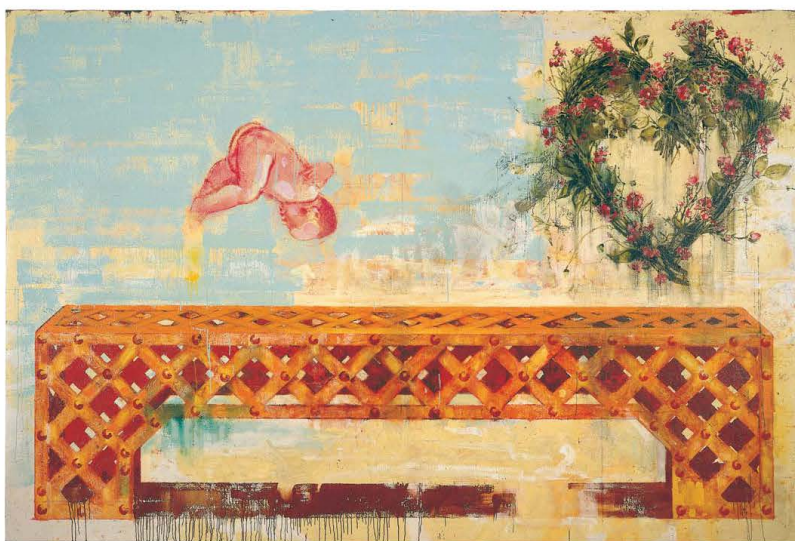
pointedly excluded. Another set of squints, painted, sits on Simpson's studio wall, one of around 55 diversified multipanel paintings he has made of the subject in a nuanced, graphic style. His squints, though, aren't exactly cuts, and the church is gone. They're usually apertures of a type, sometimes with a closable sliding panel; they look, in fact, like miniature modernist abstract paintings, and they're accompanied on the canvas by a kind of real-world geometry, objects as angles: leaning ladders, stepladders, steps. Stairways that don't lead to heaven, leaving us, like lepers, on the outside of – well, *something*.

Simpson has explored this unnerving subject, or condition if you will, with steady inventiveness and pointed repetition since the end of

the 1980s. Back then, the Dorset-born artist – who in the 1960s had studied at the Royal College of Art alongside the future greats of British Pop and had a successful early career himself, leading up to a solo show at London's Serpentine Gallery in 1985 – came to

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the end of 14 paintings featuring angels, "falling through a void", that he wasn't satisfied with. "They were called, despite my children being the centre of my life, *The Debris of the Fuck*. It was a really desperate time for me, painting. Well, I've had a lot of desperate times, even now is a desperate time; there's nothing like painting to underline your own inadequacy. Anyway, there was one image of falling putti: I saw something in it. I was very involved in reading Giordano Bruno" – the Italian philosopher and cosmologist who, in 1600, was burned at the stake for his heretical denial of Catholic doctrine – "and I had the idea that this could become the genesis of the first *Bench* painting.



preceding pages *Bench Painting 73*, 2009, oil on canvas, 245 × 518 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Blain/Southern, Berlin & London

above *Bench Painting 1 (Death of Giordano Bruno)*, 1989–90, oil on canvas,
240 × 385 cm. Courtesy the artist and Blain/Southern, Berlin & London

“The bench came in because in several of Bruno’s texts – they’re dialogues – he will occasionally talk about where people are sitting. This touched me, wanting to identify that. I was moved by it. And the bench is an object in history where so many things happen; it has this pathos. It also seemed a place where, thinking of Bruno’s end, justice is served.”

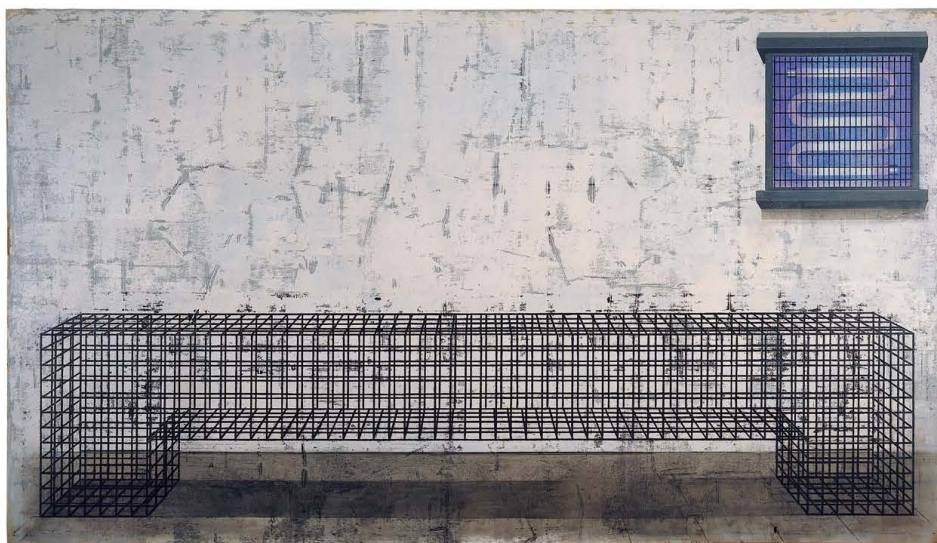
The bench in *Bench Painting 1 (Death of Giordano Bruno)* (1989–90) appears to consist of rusty iron, latticed like a Meccano construction, the angel tumbling towards it. Simpson would make some 80 more bench paintings, half of which he’d destroy, until 2009, the iconography gently mutating yet the broad consistency suggesting a painter unable to outrun his subject. Always a long empty bench, sometimes wood, sometimes metal, in a tiled cell or a blank greyish space, accompanied by an electric fly-killer, or a board showing the order of hymns to be sung, or a gnomic text – ‘The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast’, ‘The Fastenings of Kind’ – or with an interrogatory lamp floating midair, or an equally free-floating grille (the formal antecedent, one assumes, of the leper squints), or other accessories. There is a bone-dry absurdist humour about them. At another point in our conversation, talking more generally, Simpson notes that Samuel Beckett, with whom he briefly corresponded, has been a huge influence on him, especially his short 1965 play *Come and Go*. Simpson included a video of one performance in his 2014 show at David Roberts Art Foundation, London:

“I’m really disturbed by gravity. My mother told me that when I was a child, I spent hours in the garden, throwing things up and becoming enraged that they came down. I’m still as bewildered by physical life now, and it bleeds into the paintings”

it’s circular if slowly changing, in the classic Beckettian style – three characters come, they repeat phrases to each other and they go. Meanwhile, they sit on a bench.

In the *Bench* paintings circa 2006, the bench starts to leave the ground, as if inhabiting the same void as the falling angels. “Yes, well,” says Simpson, “I’m really disturbed by gravity. My mother told me that when I was a child, I spent hours in the garden, throwing things up and becoming enraged that they came down. I’m still as bewildered by physical life now, and it bleeds into the paintings. You know: levitating ladders,” referring here to the *Leper Squint* works that began after the *Bench* series ended, where ladders propped against the wall sometimes hover off the ground, or sit on the ground but, shadows suggest, also stand somehow upright; or the shadows contradict our conception of space, like retooled metaphysical painting. (Talking of shadows, Simpson points to John Donne’s 1635 poem ‘Lecture Upon the Shadow’ as an oblique influence.) In a work like the four-panel *Leper Squint 16* (2014), where ladders rise towards a square-ish hole in a wall, the shadow moves rightward across the wall, as if tracking the passage of time: time passing while the artist, or the viewer, is stuck in a room – there are never any figures in Simpson’s art; we’re always the proxy – contemplating the unknowable behind that black square.

We are held too, thanks to Simpson’s devices. “I have rules. One of them is that the principal object exists in a kind of island.



Bench Painting 31, 1994–5, oil on canvas, 244 × 534 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Blain/Southern, Berlin & London







preceding pages *Squint 44*, 2015–17, oil on canvas
in four panels, 381 × 732 cm (overall).
Courtesy the artist and Blain/Southern, Berlin & London

above *Squint 51*, 2017, oil on canvas,
282 × 160 cm. Courtesy the artist and Blain/Southern,
Berlin & London

I also, in the Léger sense, paint the image up to the frontal plane of the canvas, so it has a formal strength. Another element is the economy of the palette..." Within this, though, there's much subtlety. The grey 'wall' he regularly paints as a background, for instance, is appropriately at once worldly and not. The paint is rolled on, mundanely, as a decorator would do it, but loosely and drily enough that, studded with irregular gaps revealing the underpainting, it recalls fresco and religious painting per se: it's stranded between the earthly and heavenly, and on a practical level offers a variegated surface that snags the eye. The grey is for a reason, meanwhile, pointing to Simpson's acute engagement with the mechanics of painting, the detail factored in when you have fewer decisions to make. "Grey is very beautiful, undervalued, like brown. It's also a critical choice: if I'd painted that" – gestures at a painting – "cherry red, it would be utterly meaningless. It could also, in a more obscure way, be construed as the colour of timelessness. It has something to do with disappearance, this particular grey: just an empty shell. I wanted to depict an inert, dead space. Without any sense of succour, without any sense of love."

And yet, I suggest – recognising that I haven't wanted to look away from these coolly hieratic canvases, with their distant echoes

of the Egyptian art that, alongside Vermeer, Simpson most reveres – doesn't the painting give you something else: some austere pleasures of structure and harmony? "Hugely. I really pursue this idea of austerity, paintings having elegance and austere nature." Here's a paradox, then. Simpson's paintings are of an inescapable existentialist chamber, but we want to linger in it. The eye slows, appreciates small modulations, suspended strangeness. And, in the process, the paintings' 'about', eg the cruelty of religion, falls away. I ask what the squint means to him. "I'm glad you asked. I really don't think any more that the squint is even historically linked to its origin. For me it's a metaphor for something far more universal and bewildering: this idea of a hole in one's consciousness that you can never really be sure of. It's this general sense of a great mystery, of what we are and who we are. It's a very common statement to make, but that's what I think it's all about. [Lucio] Fontana – it's very interesting that he was interested in science fiction. That slit, I think it's a similar thing – the beyond, the beyond of death, the beyond of consciousness." Still though, why stay in this space, then, in front of these frightening questions; or, for him, why paint at all? He considers it. "To pass time. Which is what we all do, whatever it is we're doing."

Simpson, clearly, is deeply marked by the mid-century questioning of existentialism, and this makes him a rarity in today's artistic landscape, even for a painter in his seventies. Waves of artists after the 1950s – with the exception of outliers like Bruce Nauman – didn't engage these bloodcurdling fundamentals, seemingly because, the collapse of avant-gardism aside, art is expected to discover new concerns, and art turned cooler during the 1960s. Simpson,

born in 1940, was the right age to straddle two eras, and his art cross-splices the graphic punch of Pop, the austerity of Conceptualism and the propulsive angst of art made in the wake of the Second World War's atrocities. For him, focusing on other concerns than the absence of a meaning to life, and the violence of earthly explanations, would be brushing the unanswerable under the carpet. And, perfectly, his doggedness reflects the fact that he's addressing questions that *can't* be moved on from. He pulls another *Leper Squint* from the racks – an insidious, tautly painted thing in which the leper squint has become a kind of freefloating, open-lidded metal case, hanging like the sword of Damocles – and clarifies that the enigma also drives him. "This one, I'm really not sure what to make of it at all – so many times I've nearly painted the whole thing out, but I've kept going, on and off. I don't know what it's about; I had some idea that it would be just a mystifying floating box. Just a threat." It hangs in the air, waiting to be understood, powered by its gaps.

Unease aside, you'd rather look than leave; fundamentally Simpson is in the business of making paintings, and painting is a kind of animist category, bigger than its subjects and the language clustering around it, though not extinguishing them. Simpson, as

we speak, is completing paintings towards a show, opening this month in Berlin, composed entirely of *Leper Squint* works in all their refined variety; he's also planning, he says, to revisit a shortlived series of works featuring confessionals. One thing connecting all the paintings, I suggest to him, and despite the anxiety that undergirds them, is a condition of desire, the obscurity of which lends itself to universal concerns (why are we here?) and the painter's (why do I keep painting?): art, here, speaks of an endless search, the endless search leads back to art.

"I don't even particularly *like* painting," says Simpson. "I've never regarded it as a pleasure. But it's compulsive. That demonstration constant in Beckett, the heroism of failure, is with me. I think, in a sense, the paintings are all about one thing: the bewilderment of not understanding, and when you see them all together, the possibility might come to mind that this psychological thing is going on, about yearning, and maybe that contributes to an atmosphere, the presence of the work – which is paramount, like the presence of a human being." In the studio, we watch the angled shadows on the quartet of *Leper Squint* canvases, not moving but marking time, confusing space, enlaced by their own logic. "I think that in most of the work I've produced there exist physical impossibilities," says Simpson. "But I still believe paintings contain their own truths. If they look right, as paintings, then they are right." **ar**

Michael Simpson: *SQUINT* is on view at Blain/Southern, Berlin, 16 September – 28 October



Publications and archival material from Michael Simpson's collection (installation view, *Study #6*, Michael Simpson, 2014, DRAF, London). Photo: Matthew Booth. Courtesy the artist

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