

Michael Simpson
New Paintings

13 January–17 February 2024
Helmet Row, EC1

"I believe a painting must move beyond its subject and in my own work, formal considerations are paramount. I try to 'build' a painting, and by putting its elements together in a certain way, I hope to find those critical relationships which will give the object its brevity, its coherence. This challenging process, like an unpredictable marriage, between abstract principles and the subliminal forces of the subject, remain for me, the very essence of the practice." – Michael Simpson, November 2023

Modern Art is delighted to present 'New Paintings', Michael Simpson's first exhibition with the gallery, and first in London for five years. Painting almost daily for over six decades, Simpson is renowned for probing both the formal mechanics of painting and in his own words, "the infamy of religious history". He is best known for large paintings that repeat a small number of rigorously worked images, inspired by fifteenth century Venetian and early Flemish painting. In Simpson's work, ladders, benches, and confessional boxes are reduced to geometric forms. Some of these objects levitate, others are rooted to the ground – all are depicted in a shallow space on a flat painted surface. His use of architectural objects, such as pulpits and Islamic minbars, confronts existential and political themes – uninhabited objects rendered potent symbols of authority.

The *Bench Painting* series (1989-ongoing) is an homage to Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno (1548–1600). Bruno espoused Copernican and Cosmic pluralism theory, despite the Catholic Church's condemnation. After seven years of inquisition and torture, he was burnt alive for heresy. Shown for the first time, a new bench painting depicts the object on fire. It functions as a reminder of the extreme cruelty Bruno endured, as well as a *vanitas* – reflecting on the fragility of life.

As a child, Michael Simpson would throw objects into the air, hoping they would remain suspended in space. In his *Leper Squint* series, a hagnoscope or 'squint' is rendered as if floating. These small architectural details were historically positioned on the exterior of medieval churches to allow lepers to witness the sacraments without contaminating the congregation. The painting 'Greccio' is a transcription painting based on Giotto's 'Crib at Greccio', 1297-1300. Simpson's painting contains an inverted cross seen with the verso scaffolding taken from the original painting. A unique image in early Italian painting.

Simpson's paintings of confessionals are austere yet tangible objects. Like his squint paintings, his confessionals invite the viewer in, yet hold them at a distance – bordering on the functional, they become quixotic follies. Simpson frequently adds unoccupied chairs, and insufficient spacing to his confessionals; likewise, to his squint paintings he adds steps which are too small and tall ladders which are perhaps too precarious to safely use. These additions are comedic fictions inserted by Simpson to skewer the notion of ascension.

Michael Simpson was born in Dorset in 1940 and lives and works in Wiltshire. Simpson has presented solo exhibitions at Holburne Museum, Bath (2023); giant, Bournemouth (2022); Minsheng Museum of Art, Shanghai (2018); Spike Island, Bristol (2016); David Roberts Arts Foundation, London (2014); Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol (1996 and 1983); and Serpentine Gallery, London (1985). He has participated in group exhibitions at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek (2021); Hayward Gallery, London (2019); Museum Moderner, Kunst, Stiftung, Ludwig, Wein, Vienna (2018); Limerick City Gallery of Art (2017); Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania (both 2016); Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (1999); and Serpentine Gallery, London (1987). In 2016, he was awarded the John Moores Painting Prize, having first been nominated for the prize in 1991. His works feature in prominent institutional collections including British Council, London; Roberts Institute of Art, London; Long Museum, Shanghai; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek; Tate, London; and Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

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