

*Michael Simpson: Drawing towards Painting*

American Art Catalogues presents *Drawing towards Painting*, a presentation of ten drawings by British artist Michael Simpson, to coincide with the release of *101 Drawings: Selected Works 1974 - 2024*, copublished by Modern Art & American Art Catalogues.

“Throughout his career Simpson has destroyed many paintings, particularly works from the *Bench Paintings* and earlier series such as *The Debris of the Fuck* and *The Burial of the Books*. They were obliterated, painted over with new images, or, when the canvas became too laden with paint to be reworked any further, cut off the stretcher and scrapped. The only evidence of these lost works are the drawings, ghosts of ideas. Those drawings are now grave markers, tombstones to dead paintings to be grieved over, lamented. Others offer hope, they are seeds, buds, fledglings of paintings yet to be realised. The germination period from drawing to painting could be, as with the *Leper Squints*, thirty years or more, while others were made retrospectively.

The repetition of the images in the drawings is akin to an athlete practising a movement or a musician playing scales. Building muscle memory, embodying the idea, becoming immersed in its physicality. Trying a different tilt to the angle of a floating bench, a slightly narrower ladder, a darker shadow. Tweaking every element of the constituent parts of the image and how they can be combined. The drawings aren't preparatory for the paintings to be scaled up from, they are questions, not solutions.”

– Excerpt from David Risley's text, published in *101 Drawings: Selected Works 1974 - 2024*

Painting almost daily for over six decades, Michael Simpson is renowned for his large-scale paintings that repeatedly work through a limited number of motifs. Influenced by fifteenth century Venetian and early Flemish painting, Simpson's visual vocabulary returns again and again to a belief in “the infamy of religious history”, in his words. These motifs that potently address faith, existentialism and authority - benches, steps and ladders, pulpits, Islamic minbars, and confessional boxes - are the foundational forms of his precise pared down compositions. These structures are rendered with a forensic level of detail, but in such a way that they also become pure forms: benches levitate on an empty plane; ladders lead to nowhere. Simpson's paintings are characterised by his potent economy and austerity, as well as a marked depth in spatial perspective; their subjects painted on a flat painted surface. But despite their austerity and simplicity, each of Simpson's paintings contains an elaborate consideration of a specific history. In his *Leper Squint* series, for example, what might first appear to be a recurring reference to the black square of Kazimir Malevich, is in fact a poignant depiction of a hagnioscope, or a 'squint'; a small hole positioned in the exterior walls of medieval churches for the purpose of allowing lepers to see and hear the sacraments without contaminating the congregation. In another example, Simpson's ongoing bench paintings, which he started painting in 1989, are an homage to the Italian Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno, who was burnt alive in 1600 for heresy.

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.

Biography courtesy of Modern Art, London.

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