FORT GANSEVOORT

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Two Artists, Continents Apart, and a Shared Language of Struggle

The Australian painter Gordon Hookey and the Los Angeles artist Gary Simmons found they had many things in common. Sports is just one of them.

By Dawn Chan Jan. 22, 2021

The Aboriginal artist Gordon Hookey at his studio in Brisbane with his irreverent work, "Murriland! #2" (2018). Rhett Hammerton for The New York Times

In the small, sun-scorched town of Cloncurry, Australia, the artist Gordon Hookey grew up very much aware of Madison Square Garden. "It was in the psyche of most Aboriginal people, because of boxing," says Hookey, 59, who belongs to the Waanyi people. "In the early days, boxing was a means for young Aboriginal men — an opportunity for achievement against the background of racism and inequalities."

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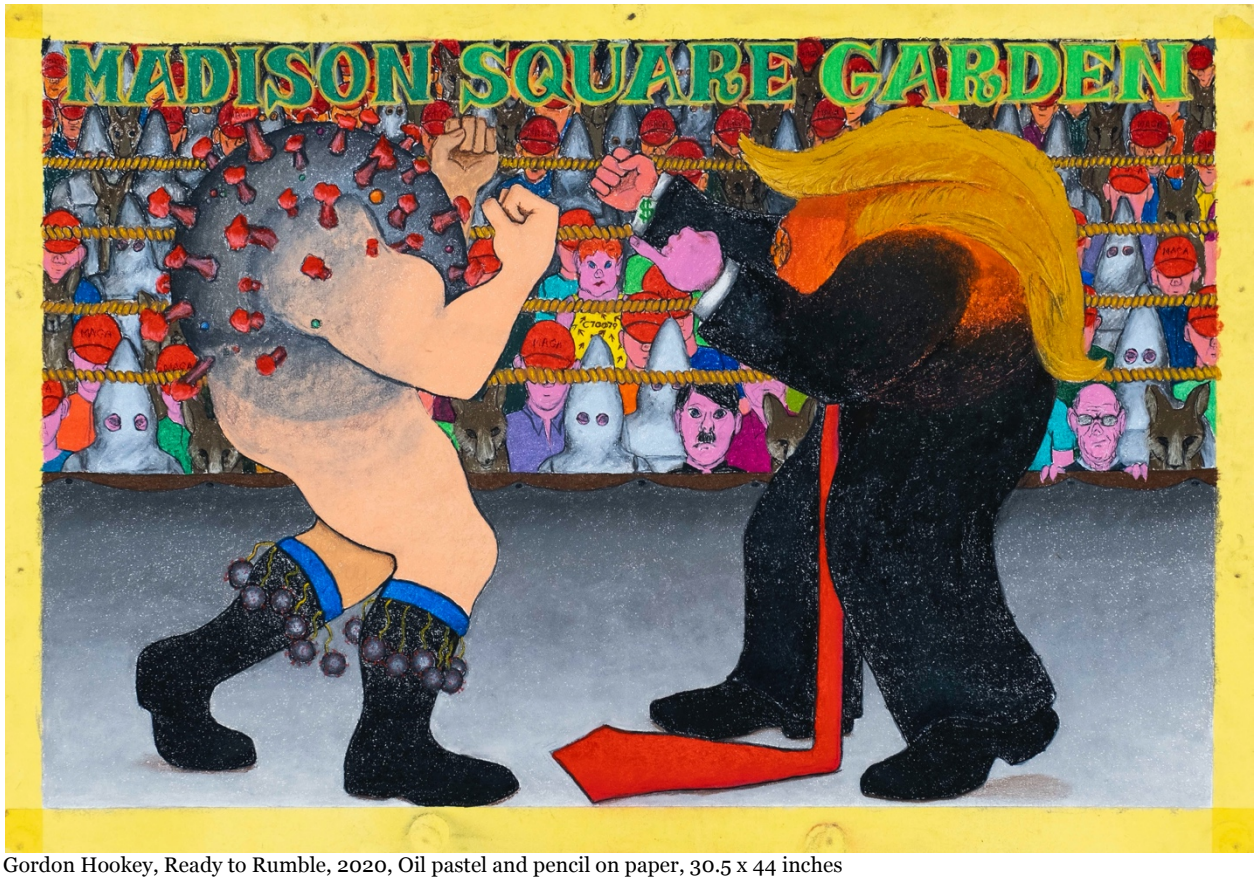
Nearly 10,000 miles away in New York, the artist Gary Simmons, 56, grew up as an avid athlete and sports fan, often attending games at Madison Square Garden. Simmons, who is Black, has frequently made art that explores sports as a form of choreography, but also as a cultural arena in which Black athletes faced racism and broke barriers. A 2014 painting by Simmons, "Fight Night," portrays the Garden's famous marquee, rendered in the half-erased, eerie white outlines that have become a signature element of his work.



Gordon Hookey, Ready to Rumble, 2020, Oil pastel and pencil on paper, 30.5 x 44 inches

The two artists recently came together to work on "Sacred Nation, Scared Nation," at Fort Gansevoort in Manhattan — a solo exhibition of 13 paintings by Hookey, organized in collaboration with Simmons and on view through Feb. 20. They were introduced by Adam Shopkorn, an owner of Fort Gansevoort, in part because he noticed that Madison Square Garden was just one of many interests the two artists had in common. Just last year, Hookey made his own painting set in the Garden. Titled "Ready to Rumble," it depicts a cartoonlike coronavirus and an orange with a blond Trumpian mane, their fists raised, in a boxing ring.

Now based in Los Angeles, Simmons remembers thinking, "Wow, this is incredible how two guys on two different continents can have these similar interests and approach."

Though Hookey's work is only beginning to be shown more widely in the United States, it has been included in venues like Documenta 14 in Kassel, Germany and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. His irreverent paintings pull no punches, whether he's exploring contemporary politics or the global legacy of colonialism.

The Los Angeles-based artist Gary Simmons, left, helped organize Gordon Hookey's exhibition "Sacred Nation, Scared Nation." Clifford Prince King for The New York Times; Rhett Hammerton for The New York Times.

At first glance, Hookey's bold palette and his paintings' raucous, overlapping elements might seem to share little with the haunting, pared-down approach in a painting like Simmons's "Fight Night." But the two men's work both feature disarming humor, prominently placed words and phrases and an understanding that sports can be unifying and divisive: a venue in which spectators might form quick bonds with fellow fans, and yet hurl all sorts of racist abuse at athletes on an opposing team.

Charged imagery doesn't deter Hookey. Over a Zoom conversation with him, Simmons and Shopkorn, the three discussed the hooded Klan members in Hookey's paintings, rendered as athletes or spectators at games.

Simmons deploys Klan imagery as well. He spoke of the dangers of using such symbolism, noting that "it can become almost heavy-handed at times." But he recalled the American painter Philip Guston's own hooded figures — a focus of recent controversy — pointing out, "I think that Guston's a master at that, and I think Gordon is the same."

Hookey's "sense of satire allows people to not feel indicted, but part of the conversation," Simmons added.

Thought bubbles extending from some of Hookey's soccer players contain racial slurs directed at Aboriginal athletes. Such slurs, he explained are "very similar to the N-word in many ways." But in these paintings, Hookey spells out these epithets in full. He even renders the bodies of athletes (like a children's TV show might) in the shape of the slurs' first letters.

When Hookey and Simmons converse, their exchanges seem permeated by a broader awareness of the bridges connecting Aboriginal Australians' and Black Americans' ongoing struggle for equality and social justice.

These are bridges that have been built and maintained by two communities over decades. According to the historian Rhonda Y. Williams in her book "Concrete Demands: The Search for Black Power in the 20th Century," Black American servicemen, in the 1960s, passed on music and political information to Aboriginal people. In 1970, a group of Aboriginal activists spent time in the United States studying race relations The following year, still others established the Brisbane chapter of the Black Panther Party.

More recently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activists staged Black Lives Matter protests in Australia in solidarity with the U.S. movement. For many, George Floyd's death last year was also a painful reminder of injustices closer to home: At least 434 Indigenous Australians have died in police custody since 1991, according to data released last summer.

"I could go through a whole list of things like that that connect and tie us together," Hookey says. "There's a group of people in New South Wales that were influenced by the freedom rides of the Deep South. We've enacted certain things like that, just so that Aboriginal people could go and swim in local swimming pools."

Gordon Hookey, *I am a man*, 2007, Oil on canvas, 78 x 78 inches.

Hookey is by no means the only Aboriginal artist to make work about being Black and to contemplate what blackness might mean in an Australian historical context. ProppaNow, a collective of Aboriginal artists to which Hookey belongs, staged an art show in 2014 called "The Black Line." Its title referred to a nearly 200-mile human chain formed in 1830 by white soldiers and settlers that moved slowly south through Tasmanian terrain to force Aboriginal people off their land.

Hookey makes it clear that he uses words and wordplay in his paintings as a form of resistance. “One of my clichés is that English is my second language,” he said. “I don’t know my first because the invaders, the colonizers, had taken my first language away from me, therefore the only language that I have access to is the colonizers’ language.”

He continued: “I largely see that I have a license to use this English language any which way I like. I often make up my own words, misspell the words, or break it up into syllables,” Sometimes that turns up as a twist on a pop-culture icon’s name, as with “Pelvis Deadly” (2005), which Hookey says is his rendering of a Black Elvis. At other times he seems to fixate on single letters of the alphabet — like the letter Z in “The re re rediscovery of Aotearoa” (2006). The painting plays with the words New Zealand, proclaiming: “A NEW LAND FULL OF ZEES/A LAND THAT HAS A ZEAL THAT IS NEW.”

“The English language, especially in Australia, was part of that system to kind of assimilate people in that apparatus of colonial oppression,” said Hendrik Folkerts, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Art Institute of Chicago. “So Gordon changing that language and making it his own, in many ways, is also claiming a position of agency and autonomy.”

Gary Simmons’s “Fight Night” (2014) depicts Madison Square Garden’s famous marquee in half-erased, eerie white outlines. Gary Simmons and Metro Pictures.

Though Simmons’s role in Hookey’s current show underscores affinities that emerged with ease between them, it is also evident that Hookey is serious about bridging connections to people in various communities worldwide. Hookey speaks of drawing inspiration from “Native American movements,” saying he feels that “with Native Americans there is an understanding that does not have to be explained,” because of similarities in their cultural experiences. He has also spent time meeting with Palestinians at the Shufat

refugee camp in Jerusalem, later creating the canvas “Victor, Solidarity, Peace and Freedom” (2017). On view at Fort Gansevoort, the artwork imagines the Palestinian soccer team winning the World Cup.

“Murriland!” (2017), an ongoing series of paintings that includes work he exhibited at Documenta 14, was inspired by the painter Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu’s epic depictions of Congolese history. A painting from that series, “Murriland! #2,” even explores the cultural bridges between Aboriginal and Chinese people. (He has Cantonese ancestry on his great-grandfather’s side). Here, his punning sense of humor emerges yet again: He depicts Chinese and Aboriginal delegates engaged in “cordial” relations — by drinking cordial together.

“He’s not pious,” said Vivian Ziherl, a curator and founder of art and research group Frontier Imaginaries.“He’s always been an artist that never compromised, never censored himself,” Ziherl said, adding that he brings a “particular excoriating black humor” to his work.

Hookey says he sometimes watches people looking at his art. “If I see a little wry smile on their face, or a chuckle, I know that the work has done its job.”

“I’m trying to show this ugly, horrible, terrible reality in maybe a beautiful or a funny way,” he continued. “Humor for me has been a device to seduce people into the harsh political realities of my people.”