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The Buck Stopped Here: set sail from London to Bristol for this week's top shows including Elizabeth Peyton and John Akomfrah

by LOUISA BUCK | 28.01.2016



Michael Simpson, Bench Painting 67 [Bruno Resurrect] (reworked 2008). Courtesy of the artist and David Risley Gallery

Michael Simpson: Flat Surface Painting, Spike Island, Bristol (until 27 March)

One of the starting points for Michael Simpson's paintings is what the artist calls "the infamy of religious history". But there is a lot else going on in these striking and enigmatic paintings, which betray chinks and hints of hidden histories in their repeatedly over-painted surfaces. Most notably there is a deep engagement with the history of painting, especially the complex spatial situations and perspectival tropes of 15th-century Venetian and early Flemish work. This in turn is sideswiped by Simpson's evident

regard for the rigorous pragmatics of US Minimalism—the show's title is Flat Surface Painting, after all. Simpson studied painting at the Royal College of Art with the likes of David Hockney, Paul Caulfield and Derek Boshier, but it was politics, rather than Pop that caught his imagination. And he in turn has been an inspirational teacher to many generations of artists, whilst always developing his own paintings.

Simpson tends to work in long-standing series and the earliest works in the show are from his Bench Painting series (1989-2009), in which coffin-like benches float against a white background. The texts of the 16th-century free thinker Giordano Bruno and others accompany some of these benches as do ominous, shroud-like pieces of drapery. More recent works made over the past couple of years are redolent with an oblique sense of smothered repression and denial. A row of trompe l'oeil Leper Squint canvases depict repeated ladders leading up to what look like small blacked-out windows: these apertures apparently refer to viewing holes built into church walls to keep undesirables apart from congregations. Other new works offer suggestively vacant confessional boxes and an empty staircase based on the Islamic minbar, leading to nowhere. This is bold, original and haunting work that needs wider exposure.