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DIFFERENT ROADS – SAME DESTINATION

ARTHUR SIMMS & RANDY WRAY

Curated by John Alexander

May 8 – July 10, 2016

Opening reception: Sunday, May 8, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

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The first thing one notices about a sculpture by **Arthur Simms** or **Randy Wray** is its resolute materiality.

Using an array of found objects and common materials drawn from everyday life, Simms and Wray both make highly tactile constructions. Their improvisational works incorporate the byproducts of our consumer culture—thrown-away furniture, tossed bottles, worn-out clothing, scrap metal, the discarded waste paper of junk mail—essentially, other people's trash. By transforming lowly materials into works that belie their humble origins, each artist performs his own, unique kind of alchemy. Redemption, both material and spiritual, is a central theme found in both of their practices.

Simms and Wray had each been living and working in New York City for more than two decades, unaware of the other's art before meeting in 2011. Both artists had developed highly personal styles and were surprised to discover some uncanny similarities in their work.

Bearing in mind these men began their lives in different cultures—Simms was born in Jamaica and Wray was raised in North Carolina—their art has tracked parallel paths. The correlations in the way they work are interesting, as are the salient differences in the results that make the side-by-side display of their work so compelling.

Simms draws strongly from his Caribbean heritage, but the influence of the larger, non-Western Aboriginal and African cultures can also be seen in his works. The pieces are poetic, nostalgic and steeped in identity. His sculptures might first seem like an array of junk to an undiscerning viewer, but careful observation reveals them to be elaborate and considered works resulting from the acute intuition of the artist.

Traces of Wray's Southern heritage can be found in his complex, mixed-media sculptures. His use of readily available materials is an approach commonly seen in the work of self-taught and folk artists of the South. He favors materials considered to be of little value, and in some of his works he even uses the red clay dirt so prevalent in his native state.

Salvaged wood collected from building sites, landfills or nature, is common to the work of both artists. Simms



Arthur Simms *Ego Sum, Portrait of Arthur Simms as a Junk Collector*, 1994, 2014-15



Randy Wray *Accelerator*, 2011

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Arthur Simms *Face Mon*, 2014



Arthur Simms *Roman Soldier*, 2010

leaves the wood exposed in his rough, tangled constructions that typically incorporate nails, rope and wire. Wray usually uses the wood to fashion armatures that become substructures buried beneath multiple layers of foam and papier-mâché.

Simms and Wray often use similar construction methods. Wire, cord, rope and twine are frequently employed to join together other materials. Simms wraps his constructions repeatedly, creating strong nets that encapsulate his bundles, such as in the work *Ego Sum, Portrait of Arthur Simms as a Junk Collector*, 1994, 2014-15. Wray, too, uses wire or cord for structural purposes, but more often as linear devices, “drawing” webs to visually unite elements. In *Accelerator*, 2011, handmade wire chains cascade from the top of the form down to the base and support dangling test tubes. These methods allow the artists to bind disparate elements, not only physically, but also symbolically. By joining a variety of incongruous materials and seemingly contradictory ideas and sensibilities, the artists create multiple paths of connection.

Movement, both implied and actual, has been an important theme in the work of both men. Wheels and shoes are recurring motifs that appear frequently in their work. Over the years, Simms has incorporated bicycle wheels and skates in his assemblages while Wray has included wagon wheels and sneakers.

In *Roman Soldier*, 2010, Simms mounts a precarious looking contraption on an old metal roller skate. Hanging off the front end is a Calder-esque mobile of wire wrapped rocks. *Face Mon*, 2014, employs feathers representing flight and wheels reflecting the artist's profound interest in development, evolution and action, not only of the physical sort, but also of deeper, more lyrical transformations. Simms' sculptures, while heavy in weight, often contain a sense of energy and nimbleness. There is a distinct feeling of a kinetic continuum in which the artist is telling multiple stories. The tightly bound wood structure in *The Blue House*, 2011, 2015,

can be seen as a substrate for the evocation of memory and materiality. The sense of the embedded coupled with the labor-intensive binding of bottles at the extreme ends bring to mind an attempt at retention and quantifying of experience.

Concepts of movement abound in Wray's work as well. *Accelerator*, 2011, gets its title from the high-speed



Arthur Simms *The Blue House*, 2011, 2015



Randy Wray *Limb*, 2011

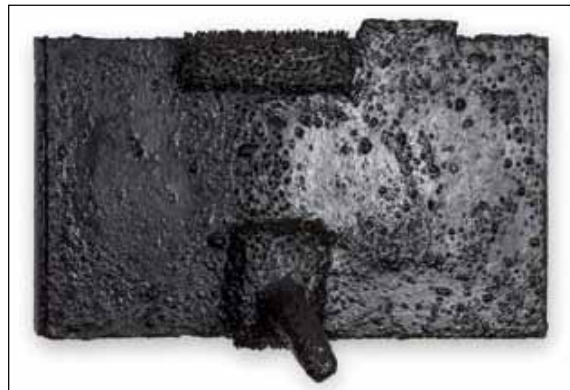
particle smashers used in physics experiments. The work is mounted on actual casters to facilitate easy rolling. Many of his sculptures appear top heavy and lean to one side as if in the act of falling or rising. Multi-colored shredded paper often covers surfaces creating a vibratory optical sensation of motion. Old Converse sneakers allude not only to the artist's literal movement but also to his agility in his artistic explorations. At times his abstract forms evoke vehicles such as trains, ships and horses. In Wray's work, transportation serves as a metaphor for transformation.

The sculptures of Arthur Simms are an amalgam of ideas, histories lived and studied, memories lost and imagined and the physical presence of objects that confronts the spectator in his or her space and asks to be recognized. The works articulate stories that speak of Simms trying to rationalize his world. Often times, color, reflection, scale and the thought process of how the viewer inhabits the same space and looks upon his work play a major role in the development of his sculpture.

The touch of the artist is also paramount to Simms. The entire body of his *oeuvre* is all conceived by, created and brought to a completion by Simms himself. He feels it to be a vital component of his practice. "One has to feel the energy and essence of the objects that go into the makeup of the work. I believe my sculptures to be living creatures that I interact with on a daily basis. Sometimes



Randy Wray *Hero*, 2016



Arthur Simms *Black Penis*, 1989

I speak to them as if they were people... Sometimes, they answer me back."

The five works of the current exhibition date from the 1980s to the present. They include Simms's early experimentation with paint in his 1989 sculpture titled *Black Penis* which was influenced by Robert Gober's penis wallpaper that Simms installed while employed as an art handler at the Paula Cooper Gallery in the late 1980s.

Black Penis is the culmination of the painterly wall sculptures begun by Simms in 1985. The work uses a more traditional painterly technique in a full and thick cover of black pigment over a concrete base while still utilizing the favored materials of wood, nails and screws. The employment of a horn as a conjuring of the male

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anatomy is a tribute to the protrusion, a symbol of power and strength be it overtly sexual or referencing weaponry and authority. The color and patina also refers the reliquary figures created by the Fang peoples in the Gabon region of West Africa.

Wray, also a painter, sometimes makes collages that fuse his skills in the two-dimensional realm with his sculptures. These works are made from the same materials used in the sculptures, but they hang on the wall. The artist builds up many layers of pasted papers, and then excises portions, to achieve a rich, painterly effect. Although the works are on conventional wooden painting panels, Wray breaks the picture plane, allowing objects to protrude and extend beyond the edges of the rectangular support. In *Limb*, 2011, bottles, a sneaker and a three-dimensional fiberglass form jut out toward the viewer, disrupting the surface.

Wray's sculptural conglomerations are covered in a material of his own formulation, a type of cellulose clay comprised of various shredded papers and binders. He collects discarded papers, sorting them by color before shredding so he can mix colors as he would pigments. Wray rarely uses actual paint in his sculptures, preferring instead to work with the material's inherent hues. The tiny shreds often contain fragments of printed text and photographs, so the modeling material is literally comprised of densely packed bits of information (weaponized nano-collage!) This adds to the sense of compression in the works.

His approach is highly improvisational and fluid as he interacts with his sculpture. He responds to



Randy Wray *The Musician*, 2014



Randy Wray *Plume*, 2016

the characteristics of the materials, allowing for unexpected developments and change along the way. He spends much time looking at his sculpture, adding, subtracting and rearranging elements until he arrives at something he finds interesting, something that feels essential. Guided by experience and instinct, he processes his materials until they seem transformed, even transmuted.

Wray's sculptures are very specific but not over determined. A single work, *Hero*, 2016, for example, might evoke a figure on a horse, a floral bouquet or a geological formation (animal, vegetable, mineral). *The Musician*, 2014, is a man playing a horn, a potato, a colorful turd, or perhaps music itself made tangible. These readings change from person to person and depend on a viewer's personal history and inclinations. In that way, they are very user friendly. But while a sculpture might conjure infinite associations, it is first and foremost itself.

And herein lies the synthesis that binds both artist's sculptures: a relentless, unflinching loyalty and devotion to the object; not only in its inherent materiality but to the process of creation. While each man naturally bears his own derived significance to these works of art, they both know they are rendering finished objects to the viewers in which everyone will apply their own subjective meaning. It is the depth and nuance of such interpretation that engenders a compelling experience of seeing these sculptures—both coupled and alone. ■

— John Alexander
New York, NY, 2016

BIOGRAPHY

John Alexander is a New York-based arts administrator. Having worked at the Museum of Modern Art and the Morgan Library & Museum, he is a tireless advocate on the behalf of artists in bringing their work to the public. He has lectured and taught classes on museum practices at conferences and symposiums in New York, Boston, Houston and Valladolid, Spain. He holds an undergraduate degree in art history from the University of Texas, Austin and attended graduate school at the City University of New York, Hunter College.

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CHECKLIST

ARTHUR SIMMS

BLACK PENIS, 1989

Wood, paint, screws, nails, horn

29 x 43 x 13 inches

Courtesy of the artist

FACE MON, 2014

Feathers, mule deer head, blue stone, sticks,

bone, wire

28 1/2 x 36 x 36 inches

Courtesy of the artist

EGO SUM, PORTRAIT OF ARTHUR SIMMS AS A

JUNK COLLECTOR, 1994, 2014-2015

Mixed media

115 x 56 x 50 inches

Courtesy of the artist

THE BLUE HOUSE, 2011, 2015

Bamboo, wood, bottles, wire, toy truck, screws

98 x 42 x 29 inches

Courtesy of the artist

ROMAN SOLDIER, 2010

Skate, wood, rope, nails, screws, metal,

stones, putty

23 x 17 x 37 inches

Courtesy of the artist

RANDY WRAY

ACCELERATOR, 2011

Wood, papier-mâché, denim jeans, test tubes, quartz crystals, wire, coins, buttons, acrylic paint, oil paint, glitter, resin

64 x 34 x 25 inches

Courtesy of the artist

HERO, 2016

Wood, extruded polystyrene foam, papier mâché, resin

94 x 37 x 47 inches

Courtesy of the artist

THE MUSICIAN, 2014

Wood, extruded polystyrene foam, papier-mâché, resin

87 x 27 x 28 inches

Courtesy of the artist

LIMB, 2011

Paper, wood, fiberglass, bottles, extruded polystyrene foam, sneaker fabric, buttons, acrylic, glitter, resin on panel

40 x 30 x 21 inches

Courtesy of the artist

PLUME, 2016

Wood, extruded polystyrene foam, polyurethane foam, papier-mâché, resin

96 x 48 x 48 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Cover: **Arthur Simms**, *Ego Sum, Portrait of Arthur Simms as a Junk Collector*, 1994, 2014-15
Randy Wray, *The Musician*, 2014

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Most importantly, I would like to thank Arthur Simms and Randy Wray for being such amazingly talented artists. They are the core of the exhibition and collaborating with them has been a pleasure. I would also like to thank Lucy Fradkin who played a key role in the development of this show and for her continued support and encouragement. Also I am grateful to Graham Haber for his expert photography. Further gratitude is extended to the staff of Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs: Noah, David and Karen Dorsky and Chelsea Cooksey, who have been incredibly helpful in the planning and realization of the exhibition.



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