

Arthur Simms

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Martos Gallery



Arthur Simms, *Ark*, 1989–92. Rope, wood, glue, paint, metal, and objects, 80 x 72 x 46 in. Photo: Courtesy Martos Gallery

Arthur Simms's recent mini-retrospective, "And I Say, Brother Had A Very Good Day, One Halo," featured a survey of works dating to the late 1980s and early '90s. Most of his early large-scale pieces are made through a labor-intensive process of wrapping and knotting that entangles all that lies within in an almost impenetrable web of rope or hemp. The thickly woven mesh hints at and sometimes reveals embedded items, including (among other things) an unfinished painting, tires, a ladder, signs, mirrors, tools, bottles, bells, and personal mementos. Placed on dollies, planks of wood, or wheels, these works imply a portability thwarted by their sheer bulk. With so much contained, some of the pieces function as reliquaries: *Icema and Chester* (1989–92), its nubby wrapped extensions moving out from a cruciform core, stands in for Simms's parents; *And He Passes* (1993), a tall, tightly knotted box-like sculpture, becomes a memorial to a friend who died from AIDS. *Ark* (1989–92) and *If I Could Fly, I Would Be a Boat* (1994) articulate themes of migration and journey.

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Simms's repetitive binding brings to mind the work of Jackie Winsor and Eva Hesse, and he shares with them an embrace of process and industrial materials. Likewise, many of Simms's pieces go against the grain, offsetting and contradicting sculptural traditions with other narratives, practices, and rituals. *To Explain, Expound And Extort, To See, Foresee And Prophecy, To the Few Who Could Or Would Listen* (1995), a work inspired by the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, leans against the wall supported by a single piece of wood. Resembling a head or mask encircled by an ominous halo of rusty knives and cleavers, this piece serves, like Du Bois's predictions, as a warning while also serving up a sly reference to the illegal trade in objects from other cultures. Similarly, *Spinning Knife, Jack Mandora Me Na Choose Nun* (1998), a see-through metal gate with wine corks, tree limbs, chair, and stones fastened to it, alludes to commemoration, ritual, and the passage of time, even as access is challenged by a spinning knife mounted on a motor.

Simms, who was born in Jamaica and lived in Kingston until his family moved to New York when he was seven, draws inspiration from homegrown improvisational practices of the street, where found objects and carts fashioned from whatever is at hand are recycled into practical, visually engaging objects. Nodding perhaps to Duchamp's readymades, Simms's make-do aesthetic takes a different route, one that interrogates and astutely remakes Modernist models using alternative cultural practices and means. *Bicycle* (1996), which joins two bikes together into a jerry-rigged construction with several license plates and other objects, reworks Willem de Kooning's *Woman and Bicycle* (1952–53). Although dysfunctional as transportation, Simms's bikes, encircled by a complex netting of knotted wire, celebrate the poetry of the everyday in their lively arrangement of shapes, colors, and rhythms.

More recent sculptures expand on the use of knotted wire, revealing materials and process. Many of these works refer to play, enactment, and change. Some employ toys—for instance, in *Tricycle* (2006), a bike pulls a miniature crane sitting atop a skateboard, its act of recuperation represented by bottles held in wire sacks below. *Boy* (2007) and *Left Foot, Right Foot* (2007) combine roller skates with bottles and feathers, overlaying the temporal and tremulous act of skating with associations of spiritual renewal and the idea of moving forward. Simms's most recent works balance the quest for spiritual meaning and resonance with the reality of injustice and inequality. *Police Line, Brother Looks* (2020) transforms a wooden police barrier into a spirit tree. In *Dreamcatcher VI* and *Spirit Dreaming* (both 2020), bottles, feathers, wire armatures, and mannequins embody Simms's offering of a soulful, expansive, and cajoling counter-discourse focused on healing and renewal.