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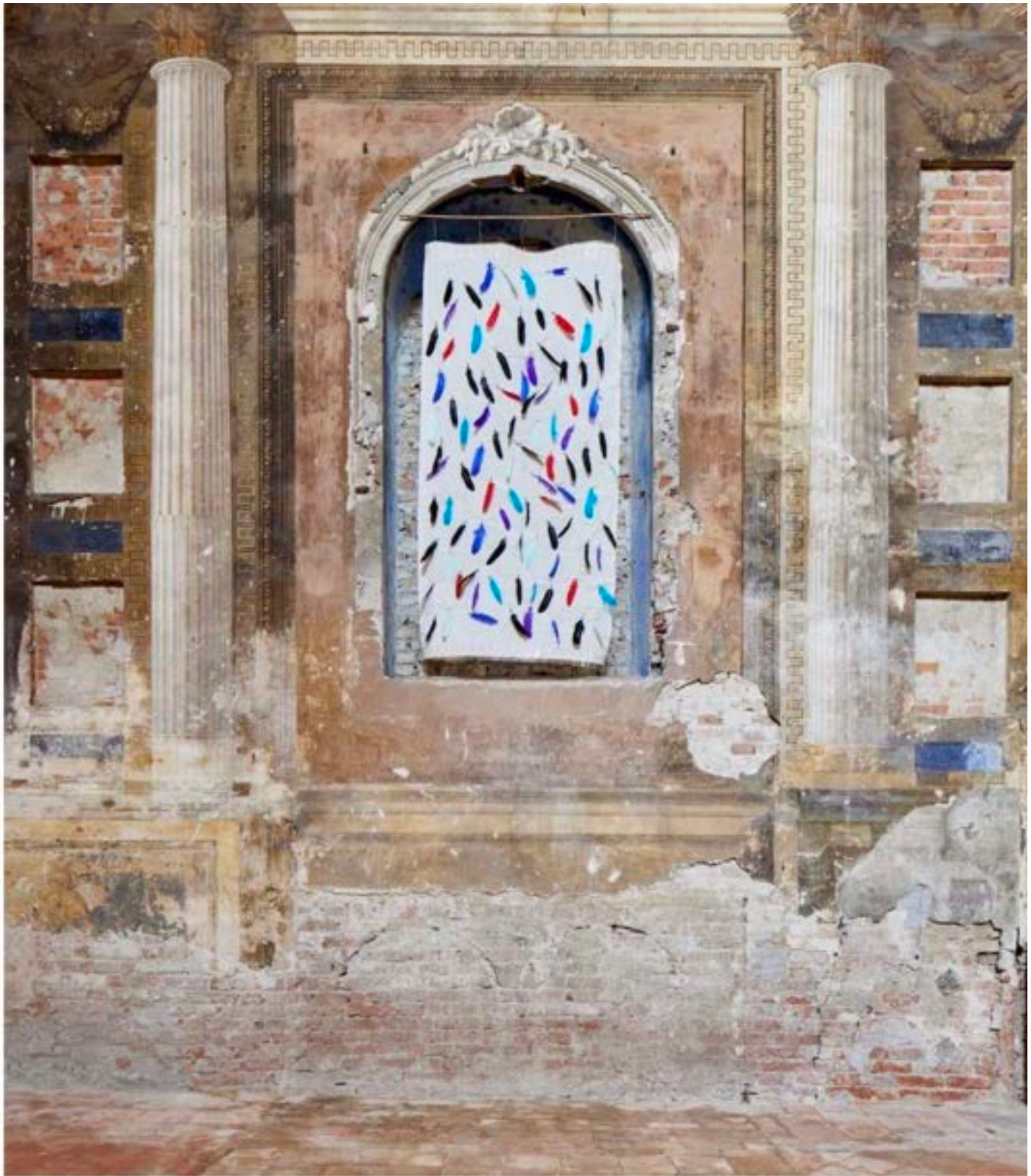
INTERVIEW

Arthur Simms

Following two large-scale exhibitions, the Jamaican-born artist reflects on his forty-year-plus art practice, what it means to make art a “part of the way you live,” and how his cultural upbringing interacts with his vast art historical knowledge.

SEPTEMBER 27, 2023

MARTOS GALLERY



Piume, 2023, feathers, thread, wire, muslin, bamboo, and thread, 85 x 49 x 3 inches.
Photo by Form Group. Image courtesy of the artist, Martos Gallery, and
Apalazzogallery unless otherwise noted.

Tall and dark and affably unassuming, Arthur Simms is an artist with profound depths of vision drawn from decades of obsessively granular attention to the vocation of making his work. Though he is not a religious man in any conventional sense, art is a kind of spiritual calling for Simms; his works, big and small, are animated by an aura, a generative interior light, that pervades and saturates them with an invisible but discernible energy. Like his art, Simms exudes an ample and beneficent presence, at once intensely engaged and serenely at ease.

Simms is perhaps best known for his sculptural assemblages produced out of found objects (bottles, bicycle wheels, toys) and repurposed materials (hemp rope, wood, wire, feathers), which he uses to build his little fraternal community of gnomonic figures. Whether joyful or restrained, playful or severe, these figures are a part of his wider family. He knows them with the same stubborn intimacy with which they seem to know him. They people his world with discordant voices. They are errant extensions of himself.

I am going to suggest that what moves in Simms is a reparative aesthetic ethos. He is a bush doctor, as he says of himself in the work that gives his recent exhibition in the San Carlo church in Cremona, Italy, its title: *I Am The Bush Doctor, One Halo*. (2023). In the creole cosmology of Jamaican culture into which he was born, and which provides him with an endless visual vocabulary, a bush doctor is a mystic man, a healer not only of the body but of the soul, an irreverent truth-teller without fear or favor. The allusion to Peter Tosh's great 1978 reggae work "Bush Doctor" is not accidental. But notice the conjugation between the bush doctor and the halo—the bringing together of disparate cultural references. The halo too,

after all, is a sign of the miraculous, of revelation, of the oracular language of higher powers. The cultural juxtaposition at work is an index, I believe, of the richly textured vernacular cosmopolitanism of Simms's vision of artistic creation—his insouciant disregard of the philistinism of preconceived boundaries, his life-affirming insistence that no cultural resource, no path of beauty, of knowledge, of grace, is beyond the reach of his respectful visual intelligence. As he likes to say, it's all valid. And it is—at least, it should be.

I spoke with Arthur Simms in his studio on Staten Island, New York.

David Scott

Arthur, it's just a delight to be in this conversation with you.

Arthur Simms

I feel the same way.

DS

I want to begin with Jamaica, which I know you left in 1969.

AS

Yeah. May 17, 1969. I was seven.

DS

And your mother had already left Jamaica.

AS

Right. She came to the United States three years prior. Mostly because of

AS

Right. She came to the United States three years prior. Mostly because of my dad. The older you get, the more you get to know the story. My dad didn't just encourage her but pushed her to go to the States without us because he knew it was easier for a woman to get a job as a maid or au pair or nanny. Cousin Beck, my mom's niece who was around her age, had already moved to the US in the early 1960s. My dad knew that my mother would be able to live with her, because they were really close. My mom didn't want to go at all. But you know, it was best for the family.

DS

Where in Jamaica were you living?

AS

I lived in Kingston.

DS

And what did your father do?

AS

He did many things. He was a businessman; he used to sell pots, pans, and wares to hotels. He was a house painter. I think the last job he had in Jamaica was working in the Coca-Cola factory. It's all about timing, man. The Immigration Bill of '65 made it easier for us to come to the US because of white flight. White people were leaving the cities and moving to the suburbs, and they needed people to work in the factories. And that's what my dad did. When we came to Brooklyn, he went to Coca-Cola and got a job in the East New York factory. That's what sustained the whole family. At

first, he worked in the daytime. But within a year or two, he started working at night, six days a week. He would leave home at about three o'clock in the afternoon and then come back in the middle of the night, so I really didn't see him that much because he was working so hard to provide for the family. The only days that he had off were Sundays and his birthday.

DS

And your mother worked as well?

AS

My mom worked as well. She took care of old folk until around 1973. My parents bought a house in Crown Heights in 1971, and by '73, my mom didn't have to work anymore, so she stayed home and took care of everything when my father left for work.

DS

What would you say is your strongest memory of Jamaica?

AS

I have so many memories of Jamaica. It's just embedded in my mind. Sometimes the memories are in the form of smell or sound. They aren't always tactile or visual, but they are still part of who I am. That's one of the good things about being an artist: you can translate certain senses into art, into an object.

DS

So your strongest memories of Jamaica aren't necessarily visual ones?

MARTOS GALLERY

AS

No, they're visual ones, but they also encapsulate smell and sound. Music is everywhere in Jamaica. Here in the studio, I always play music. I mix the music myself and put together a nine-hour playlist of songs.

DS

In fact, the period when you were growing up in Jamaica is a significant moment in the history of Jamaican music—the shift from ska to rocksteady to the emergence of reggae in the late 1960s. So there must be a very sonic sensibility that you carry with you.



Installation view of *The Miracle of Burano*, Karma, Los Angeles, 2023. Photo by Josh White Photography. Courtesy of the artist and Karma.

AS

I hear music all the time in my head. Actually, one of my dad's younger brothers—my dad had nine-teen siblings—is Scully Simms, or Zoot Simms. He's one of the biggest percussionists in the history of the island. He's played on many seminal albums and records. In 1953, he and his musical partner, Bunny, created one of the first records in Jamaica that wasn't calypso.

Jamaican music influenced a lot of other music in different parts of the world. If you listen to Jamaican music, you know it's layered music. You hear the bongos; you hear the guitar. Listen to jazz music or classical music. Any music, really. It's about layering, coming together to create beautiful sound. And in terms of how I approach art, it's the same thing, this layering and coming together to create this beautiful object. Certain things are universal—people from many parts of the world will always want to do similar things, and there's beauty in that. We each have our own voice, but our voice can be stronger and multilayered if you take a little bit of this, a little bit of that.

DS

One of the stories that you've told, perhaps on more than one occasion, is your encounter with the idea of being an artist when you started school in the US. That seems a very important moment for you.

AS

Yeah. I was around seven years old. In my new class in the States, I saw a fellow student drawing, and I thought, Hey, that's something that I used to do. Our teacher said, "He's an artist; he's drawing a spaceship; we're going to the moon." It was '69, so the Apollo was going to the moon. I said, "Oh, I can do that, too." So I started drawing, and it felt seamless because I had created things for as long as I can remember.

In Jamaica, I made things all the time. I used to make little toys, like soldiers and slingshots. I picked up on what people did around me—rather than buying a cart, they'd make a cart. This cultural aspect is where I grew my love for creating things.

DS

Did this experience in school give you a name for something that you were already doing, but wouldn't have had a name for in the context of Jamaica? And did giving it that name open a way of thinking about a creative activity?

AS

That's a very good way of putting it; it gave a name and structure to something that I could aspire to.

DS

At what point in school did you think that art was going to be your future vocation, not just something that you did as a hobby or part-time?

AS

It's been a long road for me. I'd always done art. When I was in high school, I liked looking at art history on my own. I'd read about Rembrandt and Goya. And I would walk to the Brooklyn Museum from Crown Heights, which was about two miles from my home. Back then, Crown Heights had an art school and an art store. I bought my first art supplies there, and I started making paintings of myself in the clothing I had seen in a Goya or Rembrandt painting. I didn't buy many canvases; I'd repaint over them. I have a painting of my face in the body or guise of Goya's *Portrait of the Duke of Wellington* (1812–14). That's indicative of what I was doing back then.

I spent the last two years of high school in a work-study program with the Irving Trust Company on Wall Street. I'd work there for a week, and the next week, I'd be in school. When I graduated and went to Brooklyn College, a counselor asked me what my interests were. At the time, I thought, Well, I'm working for an investment bank, so maybe I'm interested in being a banker, but I also love art. So he registered me for an economics class and an art class, in addition to three other classes. I probably lasted in the economics class for about three weeks and then was like, Okay, I'm an artist.

What really put me on the road to seeing art as my career was going to Brooklyn College. I had all these great teachers who were working artists in New York—Sylvia Stone, William T. Williams, Lee Bontecou, Lois Dodd, Ron Mehlman, Sam Gelber, and Allan D'Arcangelo. They really took me in; they were my mentors.

DS

What would you say they gave you? Is it something specific, like a technique? Or is it something broader, like a way of seeing yourself?



Sexual Tension, 1992, rope, wood, metal, glue, paper, charcoal, pastel, paint, pen, plastic, wire, drawings on paper, gesso, and screws, 77 x 73 x 34 inches. Photo by Arthur Simms.



Real Estate For Birds?, 2007, rope, wood, glue, screws, plastic rope, bird houses, and utility pole, 480 x 72 x 30 inches. Photo by Brian Pfister / Sculpture Milwaukee.

AS

I think it's the latter: a way of seeing myself. But they also gave me an overall picture of how to be an artist in New York City and in society. It's complicated and simple at the same time in that they taught me that you definitely need to make money, you need to have a job, you need to have time, and you need space. They gave me a lot of practical information about how to make a living as an artist. William T. Williams would tell me, "Some of the most successful artists I know teach. You should be teaching, because that's how you're going to sustain yourself and still have enough energy and time to do your work."

There's the practical aspect of being committed as an artist, too. I remember Sam Gelber would say, "You have to be committed. You can't just do one thing here and then six months later do something else. It's a practice that you do every day, and if not every day, every week."

DS

That's fascinating, Arthur, because what they're teaching you is that being an artist is not simply about some idea of genius. It's about making art a part of the way you live. And part of the way you live requires making a living to enable you to be an artist.

AS

Yeah. As a young artist or student, you don't think about stuff like that. You see Pablo Picasso, you see Jean-Michel Basquiat, you see all the lies, but these artists were also working artists. It's very important. I talk to young artists about this all the time—the biggest thing once you get out of school is to get a job where you can sustain yourself and still have the time and

these artists were also working artists. It's very important. I talk to young artists about this all the time—the biggest thing once you get out of school is to get a job where you can sustain yourself and still have the time and energy to do your artwork. What helps you actually do the art is how you situate yourself. And hopefully, you'll take care of the art.

DS

I want to turn toward the making of art and to the craft of your work. You draw and paint and so on, but there is something that came alive for you in the assembly of sculptural forms and the sculptural modalities that you discovered. Tell me about how you came to recognize your own voice in the forms that are now so distinctly yours.

AS

Like a lot of sculptors, I started as a painter. I still draw all the time; I probably do four times as many drawings as I do sculptures. But at Brooklyn College, I gradually started to make things that protruded from the wall. They were becoming more relief-like. Then in 1985, I won a scholarship to go to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in rural Maine. It's not really a school but more like a residency for artists. Usually, about sixty young artists get accepted to go there for nine weeks. While there, you can experiment with all kinds of things. If you're a painter, you could do video. If you're a sculptor, you could try a fresco. It was there that I started making my first sculptures.

At Skowhegan, I was reintroduced to my childhood. I realized that the first things I made as a child in Jamaica were sculptures, not drawings or paintings. I was making objects, just like the people around me. The more I

At Skowhegan, I was reintroduced to my childhood. I realized that the first things I made as a child in Jamaica were sculptures, not drawings or paintings. I was making objects, just like the people around me. The more I think about it, these objects I make are sometimes like children's toys. I'm reaching back into who I was, back into my history. But when I create my work, it's not only about my personal history—it's about art history, world history. Bits and pieces of various things come together to create my idea, to create my art. To me, that's very exciting.

DS

This is something that, again, I've heard you talk around and about—the simultaneous recovery of an earlier self through the discovery of assemblage and sculptural form.

AS

Yeah. The thing is, it just happens intuitively. In discussions like this, it comes to the fore and I can say, Yeah, that's what I've been doing my whole life. Back in the day, it might have been subconscious or unconscious, but now, as an adult, it's more of a conscious thing. I'm intellectually thinking about how these objects reflect on me and my interests all the time. I have a strong vision, for lack of a better term. I never have writer's block; it just flows, man. Sometimes I have to stop myself from making too much because I'll work myself out of the space.

We're sitting in the studio that I share with Lucy, my wife, and if you had come here three years ago, it would have been hard to walk because there were so many things. I've been fortunate to sell some work, but it was sad for me to see them leave because I'd been living with a lot of those works

We're sitting in the studio that I share with Lucy, my wife, and if you had come here three years ago, it would have been hard to walk because there were so many things. I've been fortunate to sell some work, but it was sad for me to see them leave because I'd been living with a lot of those works for thirty, even forty years. They are a part of who I am, my knowledge, my background, and my forward-thinking about how things should be, you know what I'm saying? But the flip side is that if they go, I have the opportunity to make more. The work is very close to me; it's all very personal.

DS

I think that one can see not just the personal dimension but the intimacy that you have with the work. At what point did you begin to discover and recover the poetics of your sculptural forms? Did you begin by experimenting with the materials—found objects, toys, bottles, bicycle wheels, chairs, wires, the very familiar hemp and rope work that appear and reappear? That is also a recovery, in terms of a Jamaican experience, right?

AS

That's right. I was making sculptures in the late eighties with various found objects, and I needed something to bind all of them together. First, I tried painting them. But then I went back to art history. As a student in the early to mid-eighties, I saw *Bound Square* (1972) by the post-minimalist artist Jackie Winsor at MoMA. It's basically four circular logs, and each corner is wrapped in rope. It leans against the wall. It always perplexed me. What is she trying to say? Is that really art? What is the artist trying to do with this piece?

MARTOS GALLERY



Installation view of *I Am The Bush Doctor, One Halo.* at San Carlo Cremona, Italy, 2023. Photo by Form Group.

DS

Is there something about the materiality of rope and the way it works with structures that makes it more somber, heavier, with a sense of depth and presence?

AS

That's what it is. Rope has a different kind of weight. When you think of rope, you might think of hemp and ganja. But people were hanged with rope too, especially Black people, African Americans in this country. So, there is that aspect to it. I try not to focus on the negative, but I couldn't be a person alive and not think about the negative.

I'm now owning this material that was thrust upon us and I'm taking it elsewhere. I was drawn to rope for a reason, and I want to explore all its possibilities to see what I could do with it because I'm an artist and that's what artists do. I'm creating a language and exploring that language.

DS

The reference to rope, death, and slavery is poignant. You've mentioned to me before the skin-like character of these rope figures. In a very important way, these rope figures are not monochromatic. There is a sense of Black skin and of tonalities and textures of skin.

AS

That's correct. The rope acts as skin. It's what you see at first glance. But as you get closer and look deeper at the works, you'll see varying shades of color and subtle tones. Sometimes the outer skin is obscured by light-reflecting elements that are embedded inside the sculptures. A case in

point is the sculpture *Crossroads, St. Andrew, Kingston, Jamaica* (1961–69), a rarely-shown piece of mine. It contains a big diamond-shaped yellow road sign, and if you shine a light on it, a bright yellow light will emanate from inside the work. It's like when you're driving on a road at night and your headlights shine on a sign. The sculpture is tonal; it has painterly qualities, though it might not initially appear that way.

DS

In your sculptural work, the figure is almost omnipresent. But what's striking to me is the figures' *facelessness*. It's as though their personality doesn't rest in the face but in other dimensions of embodiedness.

AS

I'm trying to capture the inner soul, basically. A friend of mine once said my sculptures look like ghosts, apparitions floating around in space. I thought that was a big compliment because a figure doesn't necessarily have to be recognizable.

When I teach, I show my students the different ways artists have articulated the "figure" over the centuries. It could be abstract or recognizable. The beautiful thing about art is that there are many ways to interpret it. There's no right or wrong way, and the figurative is like that too.

DS

I like the idea of the ghost because there is indeed something spectral about these rope figures. They have a kind of bodiedness, yet they can be armless or feetless or faceless and not demarcated like a human body in

any strict or formal sense.

I wanted to talk about your recent exhibition in Italy. Seeing images of your work at San Carlo Cremona was revelatory to me. I kept thinking of how that exhibition could be related to the work I selected for the 2022 Kingston Biennial. Something came alive to me in the exhibition title, *I Am The Bush Doctor, One Halo*. What's the relationship between the two parts of that title?

AS

That title is the coming together of cultures, of the Jamaican and Italian influence. *I Am The Bush Doctor*, Peter Tosh—that's a Jamaican talking. And I've been to Italy many times. I lived in Rome for a year when I won the Rome Prize in 2002–03. I've studied medieval and Renaissance art, European halos, and halos in other cultures. When I first went to Italy, seeing Italian works in the places that they were created for in these various churches—it just blew me away. That's when I started referencing halos from medieval art in my work. Whenever I have a title that includes "one halo" or "two halos," there is a halo in the work itself. The piece with a halo that I made for that particular exhibition in Italy is a fourteen-foot drawing on acetate—the longest drawing I've ever made. It has several portraits of me in it, too.

DS

And some pieces of your and Lucy's hair.



Installation view of *I Am The Bush Doctor, One Halo* at San Carlo Cremona, Italy, 2023. Photo by Form Group.

AS

Right. I use my hair in drawings to indicate me, the Jamaican, Caribbean, and African American, and to also reference the African diaspora. The first major series that I used my hair in was my Black Caravaggio drawings, which I began as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. In drawings, whenever my hair is shaped in a ring, it references halos that I've seen in artworks from various cultures. In the last decade, I began combining my wife's hair with mine. I don't think I've ever seen cultures in art history where you have two different kinds of hair— Black hair, white hair—

coming together to create one halo. So, I'm dealing in terms of that, too.

DS

It's clear to me that *I Am The Bush Doctor* is not just a general reference to a Jamaican healing practice or even to the fact that your father was a practicing bush doctor. The immediate reference, as you say, is Peter Tosh's amazing song "Bush Doctor" from 1978. For Tosh, the bush doctor is not just a healer of physical ailments. The bush doctor is a healer of the soul. He's a spiritual healer and a critic of social injustice.

There's something very powerful in the juxtaposition of the imaginary of the bush doctor and the halo that comes out of medieval Italian art.

AS

That's true, man. To me, it was profound for a Jamaican to claim that he's the bush doctor and all that goes with that, and to have pictures of this Black man exhibited in this seventeenth century Italian church. Basically, I did that on purpose to say it's all valid, you know?

When I was at the Academy in Rome, I started using Caravaggio postcards as part of *Black Caravaggio*. In the series, I made the subjects Black. I'm Black, plus, my hair was in it. So again, it's a culture clash. This guy comes into my studio. He's dressed really nice. He's looking and he asks, "Why Caravaggio?" And I said, "Why not Caravaggio?" He says, "Interesting, interesting. You know, my family has a Caravaggio." It's important what he said though—why Caravaggio, and why you? This is what I tell my students. You can use Caravaggio. This Black man can use a Caravaggio as inspiration or use a postcard of a Caravaggio in the piece itself, even

though we're from different cultures.

If you study history, you'll see it's okay to have influences from outside of who you are if it's done with respect. I'm giving honor to these cultures when I borrow or use an aspect of them in my work. Language is always evolving, so you take bits and pieces and bring them together to help language evolve. I'm evolving as an artist as well, and I'm using these different aspects to help me evolve and create—to step forward, basically. I'm saying it again: it's all valid, man.

DS

The question that was put to you by this Italian man looking at your work need not necessarily have been, Who are you to do that, right?

AS

No, it wasn't like that. He was very respectful, just asking me an honest question.

DS

By the same token, your response was similarly not hostile. It's just a fact of the matter. Why not? I think one of the things your work is after is a sense of cultural *rapport*. This anecdote reminds me of the first time I encountered your work, in late 2007, at the *Infinite Island* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. I remember coming back to the work again and again, and being perplexed, moved, puzzled, and intrigued by *Globe, The Veld* (2004) and *Boy* (2007). Like your exhibition in Italy, the works are simultaneously rooted in where you come from and in ideas that have traveled with you and those that travel in larger worlds. Those ideas are

captured by the globe itself and by the sense of movement in *Boy* and his skating through the world. The works embody a kind of vernacular cosmopolitanism.

I say that because your work opens to the world. You're constantly quoting and referencing aspects of European art history, but nevertheless, the work runs through the materiality of Jamaican cultural life. The very texture of the work seeks to speak from Jamaica to the world with a refusal to be locked into a pigeonhole. The work has to live in the world; it has to speak to a multiplicity.

AS

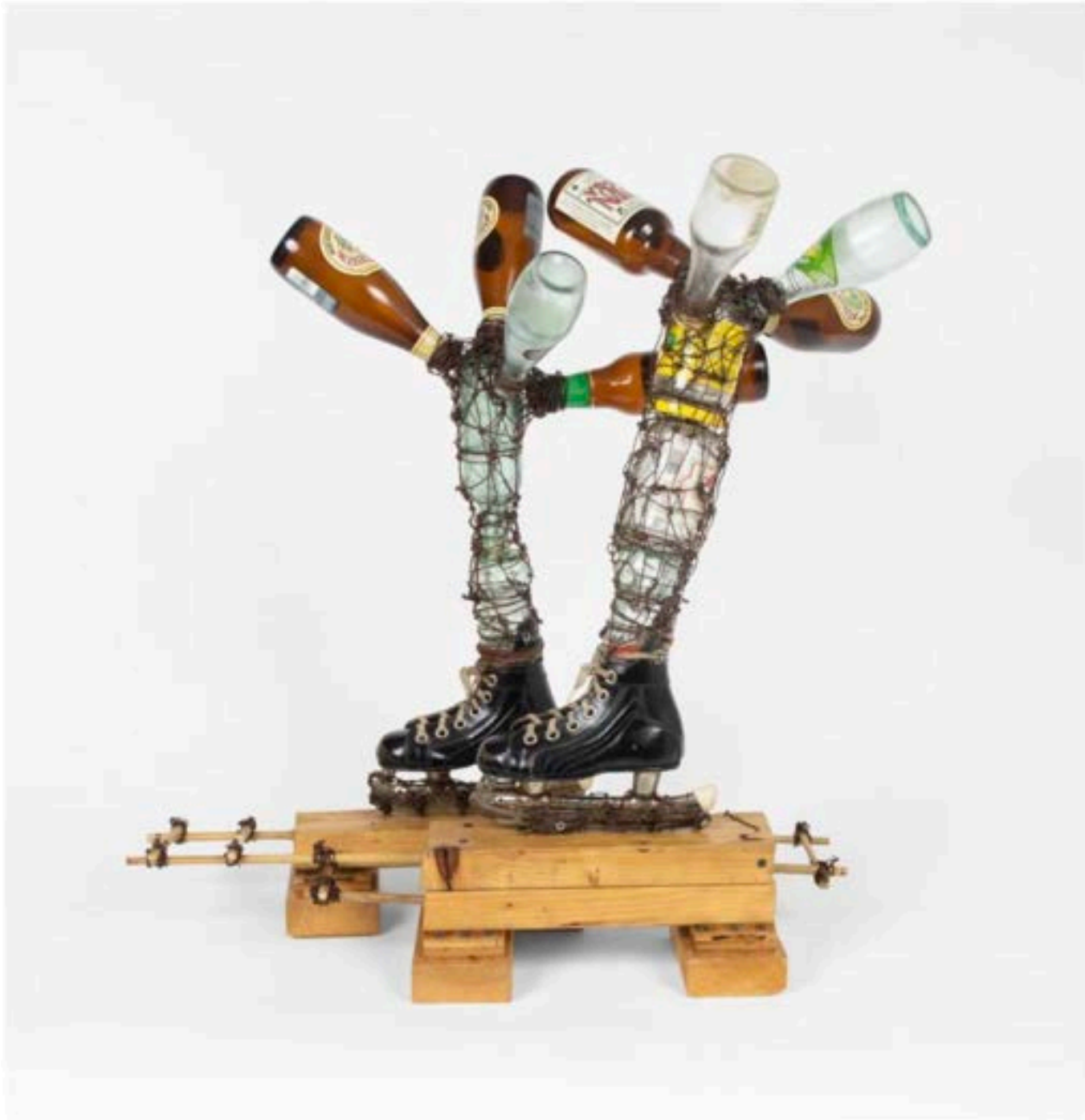
That's interesting, man. There are so many great things in the world, and I don't want to close myself off to anything. One has to be open in order to take something in. I'm not a religious person, but I'm a spiritual person. Artists are like my religion, and the spirit is everywhere. There's been some great stuff from the Renaissance, but also from Jamaica, from the backwoods. For me, an artist could be someone who doesn't think they're an artist but is creating something or perhaps has a calling from God. That's just as great as Renaissance art, and I get excited about them all.

DS

It's all valid.

AS

That's right. *(laughter)* It's all valid.



Boy, 2007, roller skates, wire, bottles, bamboo, wood, nails, and screws, 29 x 19 x 29 inches.
Photo by Jason Mandella.

DS

Part of what is inspiring to me is that your work has a reparative quality. The intervention here, like Peter Tosh's song, is not simply neutral. It is critical. It's an attempt to repair or heal wounds of the soul, of society, and of the body as well.

AS

I'm trying to repair myself, too! Being alive, so much is thrown at you. I'm healing myself by telling stories based on lives lived and aspirations in history. It's about me, my religion, my art as religion, my healing through my religion.

DS

In recent years, your work has had some attention, which is wonderful and long overdue. Is there something about the contemporary circumstances of art appreciation that has enabled the attention that your work is getting? How might one think about the spotlight that's been turned on your work?

AS

I've been saying this a lot, but it's taken me forty years to become an overnight sensation. I've been doing my work for a long time, and I guess the art world has just come around to looking at my stuff. It's nice if you have people selling your work. It's nice to be in a position where you're being recognized for what you have been doing over the past forty-five odd years or so. It's all timing, right?

So, you know, I take it for what it is. It's good. I'm very thankful. I'm happy

MARTOS GALLERY

So, you know, I take it for what it is. It's good. I'm very thankful. I'm happy and honored that people are interested in my work, and I truly mean it. This doesn't happen to every artist, so I do find myself lucky when I say that. Fellow artists and some friends say it's more than just luck. Yeah, but you can't discount that. There are so many great artists that are working, and they don't get their due recognition for whatever reason.

But even if I didn't get any of this attention, I'd still do my work, man. I'm here for many things, and doing this work is one of those things. I think it's important for me to do it and get it out there. And hopefully it's important for people to see it and respond to it too.

David Scott teaches at Columbia University, where he is the Ruth and William Lubic Professor in the Department of Anthropology. He is the author of a number of books, most recently, *Irreparable Evil: An Essay in Moral and Reparatory History* (2024), and is currently at work on a biography of Stuart Hall. He is the founding editor of *Small Axe*, director of the Small Axe Project, and was the lead curator of *Pressure*, the Kingston Biennial 2022.

Arthur Simms and the Skin of Disparate Objects

The artist transforms collections and inspirations into poetic assemblages wrapped in hemp at Karma Gallery in Los Angeles.

By Yinka Elujoba

March 17, 2023



MARTOS GALLERY

By Yinka Elujoba

March 17, 2023

When the artist Arthur Simms was barely four, in 1965, his mother left their home in Kingston, Jamaica, for the United States to support her family as an au pair. Arthur, his father and his three sisters trod on in Kingston until they could join her in New York a few years later. The in-between years of his childhood in the Caribbean were like a dream that Simms remembers fondly because they set the stage for what was to come.

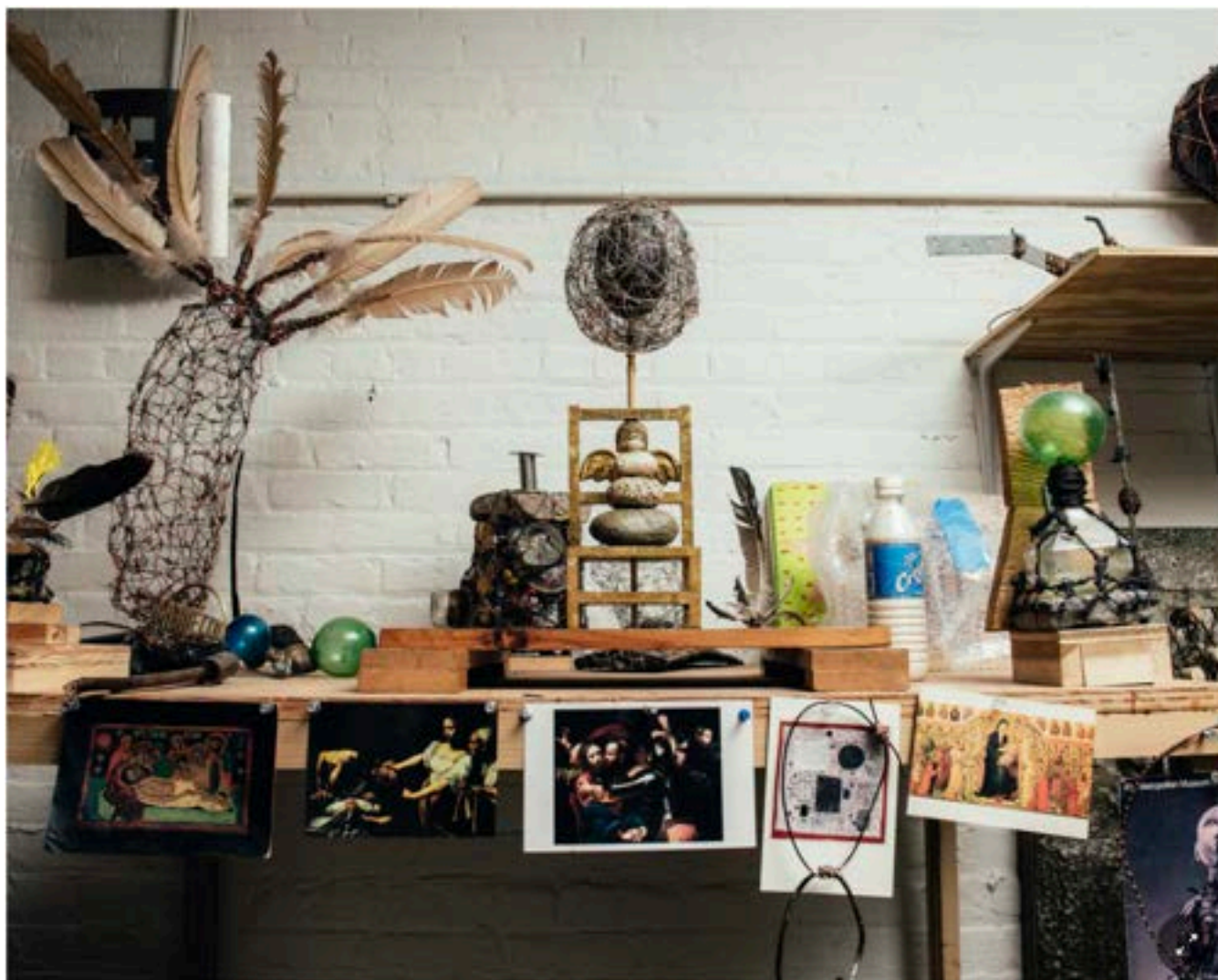
He was learning from Kingston's artisans who, rather than buy a cart to use in the market, fashioned ones from wheels and boxes. Simms began to make little objects out of found materials — wood, plastic, ropes, metals — he used as toys.

"Jamaica might not be a wealthy country," Simms, 61, said during a recent interview at his studio on Staten Island, where he lives and [works](#). "But the people, man, they've got soul. They made things with their hands."

Now, with two concurrent shows recently opened across two countries — a survey with work spanning more than three decades at [Karma Gallery in Los Angeles](#) and site-specific [installations at a deconsecrated church](#) in Cremona, Italy — it's finally clear how much Simms's enigmatic drawings and encompassing assemblages owe to his origins.

Simms said he thought of himself as an artist as early as second grade, in Brooklyn, where his mother's boss — who was also, by a stroke of luck, an immigration lawyer — helped the family relocate. It was the days of the Apollo mission, the race to the moon, and imaginations of space hovered above every conversation. A classmate had drawn a spaceship. "My teacher at the time said, 'this kid is an artist,'" Simms said. "And he handed him some pencils and crayons. I thought to myself, I can get with that — it

MARTOS GALLERY



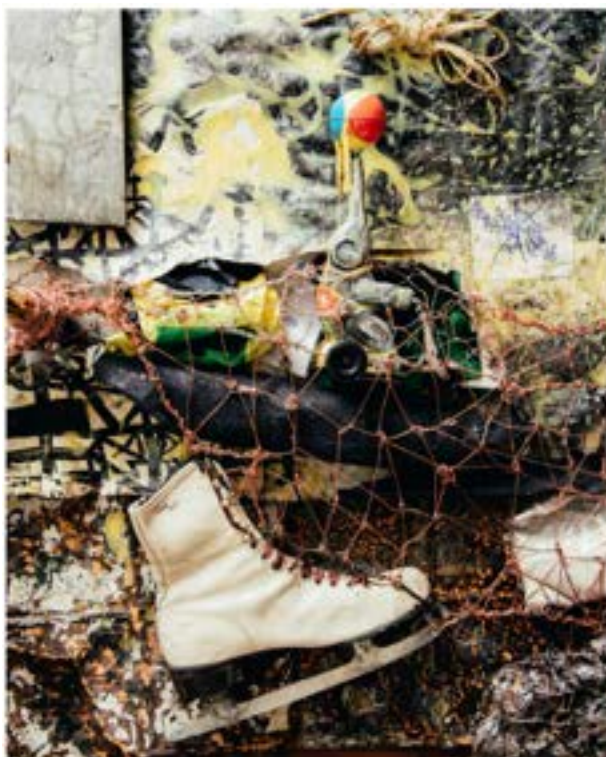
Arthur Simms's studio shelves are filled with work and other items that he has collected over the years, including mesh, feathers and angel set on pebbles. George Etheredge for The New York Times

By high school, he was taking long walks from his home in Crown Heights to the Brooklyn Museum, where he would purchase art supplies and reproduce portraits by the legendary artists on the walls — Rembrandt, Goya — replacing their faces with his own. While a student at Brooklyn College, he showed one of the paintings, based on Goya's ["Portrait of the Duke of Wellington,"](#) to the artist William T. Williams, his mentor, who taught him drawing and with whom he roamed SoHo galleries on field trips.

MARTOS GALLERY

“Williams was kind,” Simms remembered. “He said my painting reminded him of Haitian painting traditions.” Yet Simms was unsatisfied: His colors were spare, and the work didn’t appear original. In 1985, he won a scholarship to the [Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture](#) in Maine and began to experiment with objects again, as he had during childhood. “In Skowhegan I realized that it was sculptural ideas that came most easily to me,” he said. “So, I went with the flow.”

Yet form eluded him once again — until he decided to experiment with hemp rope. “And suddenly it made sense — it was like giving the sculpture a see-through skin,” he said. He showed these rope sculptures for the first time in his first solo show, and also his big break, in 1992, at the Philippe Briet Gallery in SoHo. It has become his signature, wrapped like mesh around the disparate objects he has collected for years, making his entire oeuvre appear to be the giant collection of a well-traveled fisherman, rescuing lost items from the sea.



Detail of "Ego Seen, Portrait of Arthur Simms as a Junk Collector," 1994, at his studio in Staten Island. George Etheridge for The New York Times



Detail of "Spirit Dreaming," 2020, by Arthur Simms, a sculpture with feathers, mesh and bulls. George Etheridge for The New York Times

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“When you’re from an island in the Caribbean, the only news you get is from the sea,” said José Martos, owner of the [Martos Gallery](#) in Manhattan, where Simms had a solo exhibition in 2021. They were introduced by Marquita Flowers who, in 2019, showed six works by Simms at [Shoot the Lobster](#), an intimate gallery on the Lower East Side, also belonging to Martos. “I was immediately hooked to his practice,” he recalled, “because it contained a clear understanding of art history balanced by a great sense of diplomacy, which is the only way you can have all these influences and still manage to keep things balanced.”

In “The Miracle of Burano,” the survey of Simms’s work at Karma, through April 29, many objects the artist collected are seen for the first time, most marvelously wound with hemp rope. There are pieces dealing with his personal experiences, like [“Chester, Alice, Marcia, Erica and Arthur Take a Ride,”](#) from 1993 — a sculpture in the form of a vessel, referencing his family’s journey from Jamaica to the U.S. His own interest in movement is accentuated by pieces in the show that have tires or wheels cleverly bound to them, or toy cars with wire, toy giraffes and brightly colored wood.



From left, “Chester, Alice, Marcia, Erica and Arthur Take a Ride,” 1993; “Junkanoo,” 2022; “Chair,” 1995, at Karma Gallery. via Arthur Simms and Karma



"Roman Soldier," 2010. Skate, wood, wire, rope, nails, screws, metal, stones, putty, at Karma. via Arthur Simms and Karma

"He brought the memories of his upbringing with him," said [Phong H. Bui](#), the publisher and director of the Brooklyn Rail, who oversaw "[Come Together: Surviving Sandy](#)," a large-scale exhibition of 300 artists' reactions to the hurricane, a balm after the storm. Simms's work was one of the stars of the 2013 show. "He is able to translate viscerally how he feels not just about his own culture but about every culture he experiences," Bui added.

This is an artist on whom nothing is lost.

And in the same way Simms collects objects, he collects influences, evoking the market artisans back in Kingston and Robert Rauschenberg's "[First Landing Jump](#)," a 1961 assemblage (termed "Combine" at the time, to describe the merging of painting and sculpture) conceived from a rusty license plate, a man's shirt, a wheel and other items. Simms had seen it at the Museum of Modern Art, where it reminded him of what he had done as a child, and became a launching pad for assemblages of his own that drew from other cultures.

Similarly, in 2016, when Simms traveled to Tokyo, he returned with fresh ideas from the 20th-century Japanese calligraphy artist Toan Kobayashi. In his time, Kobayashi made his writings on a rectangular paper, bounded by a square line. Simms builds off Kobayashi in his own "Summer Moon" from 2021: He binds his own drawings in a square with a perimeter made out of thread. A huge ball densely filled with blue ink and a rectangle float between blocks of inscriptions. There is a small patch of hair — the artist's and his wife's, black and reddish — glued to the drawing. This strange association of items creates the sensation of beholding the remains of a scientific experiment, seen through a magnifying lens.

Taking a leaf from Indian American traditions, Simms began to use feathers in his work. In "[Arthur Simms, Fifteen Feathers](#)," a self-portrait from 2020, there are 15 feathers glued to the edge of the frame. "They break so easily, so brittle, yet they are beautiful and everlasting," he explained. Small statues of [Mangaaka power figures](#), or Nkisi, from central Africa, with nails stuck into them, inspired him to begin experimenting with using sharp objects in his work. "There is beauty in the danger," he said, pointing out knives and spearlike edges of some of the sculptural totems in his studio.

MARTOS GALLERY



Arthur Simms, "Summer Moon," 2021, was inspired by Toan Kobayashi's calligraphy. via Arthur Simms, Karma and Martos



Arthur Simms, "Fifteen Posters," 2021. via Arthur Simms, Karma and Martos

MARTOS GALLERY

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Simms’s body of work may suggest the assemblage artists Lonnie Holley and Thornton Dial, but his formal art education (he obtained an M.F.A. in 1993 from Brooklyn College) and his mentoring by masters like Williams and [Lee Bontecou](#), make him very much the insider. He worked for the gallerist Paula Cooper for two years. Simms is currently the director of the Fine Arts program at the City University of New York, where he is a professor. He is represented by three galleries, and collected by the Hirshhorn Museum at the Smithsonian, the Neuberger Museum of Art, Museum Brandhorst in Munich, and the Yale University Art Gallery.

Yet being an insider never insulated him. An American citizen since he turned 18, Simms said he still feels caught in the middle: “Sometimes I don’t feel completely American. And when I go to Jamaica, I don’t feel completely Jamaican.” He recalls acting on this feeling, his intense love of lineage, in 2001, when it spurred him to pursue Jamaica’s first — and only — representation at the Venice Biennale.

“I was working as an art handler for the Museum of Modern Art at the time, when the idea came to me,” he said. “I was lucky, I won a Guggenheim grant and Agnes Gund wrote us a check, so we were able to pull it off.” Simms enlisted fellow Jamaican artists — the painter Keith Morrison and the photographer Albert Chong — to show alongside him.



Arthur Simms, "I Am the Bush Doctor, One Halo," 2023, installation view, at San Carlo Church, Cremona, Italy. via Arthur Simms, Martos Gallery and Apolazzo Gallery; Photo by Form Group

His ability to transform experiences from his past is evident in an ongoing project at the church of San Carlo, in the medieval town of Cremona, in Italy's Po valley. In 2002, as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome, Simms became interested in Caravaggio's innovations using contrasting effects of light and shadows. Recently, Simms applied his own experiments with light to San Carlo's 60-foot high ceiling. The show, "[I Am the Bush Doctor, One Halo](#)" features hanging drawings that absorb, transmit and reflect light, returning, for a time, the aura the church once had.



The artist in his studio in Staten Island, amid his collected objects. Postcards of Caravaggio paintings are tacked to a shelf, with feathers at left. Bicycle tires reflect his childhood love of wheels and movement. George Elberholz for The New York Times

Today, in his large studio on Staten Island, postcards of Caravaggio paintings are tacked to a shelf alongside stones, shells, feathers, ceramic balls, metallic strips, and hemp wires. The next thing a visitor sees are paintings by his wife, the artist Lucy Fradkin. The couple moved here in 2011 to find more space, and because it reminded Simms of Brooklyn in the '70s, a happy time for him. There is a giant board filled with letters from his mother, her wavy, irresistible handwriting flowing across the white stack of paper. Her sentences shower him daily as he works on his new installation, "Icena," composed of 15 different pieces that together form a single portrait of his mother, for whom it is named.

The studio is like a ship with an anchor — his compendium of memories stored in found objects and in words on the walls. "I've been creating my language for 40 years now," the artist said, reading one of his mother's letters from the pile. "And I must continue, because it is the only way I can survive."

Inside Art Basel's Unlimited 2023

Nel-Olivia Waga Contributor 

Jun 15, 2023, 06:33pm EDT

I write about conscious luxury, focusing on travel, well-being & art.

Unlimited is Art Basel's pioneering exhibition platform for projects that transcend the classical art fair stand, including large-scale sculptures and paintings, video projections, installations, and live performances. This year, 76 projects have been selected by the Art Basel Selection Committee, and curated by Giovanni Carmine, who has done excellent work and has given space to works that not only represent messages of meaningful topics like climate change and sustainability but also diversity, fun, lightheartedness which we all want more of in recent times. For the most part, these projects are being shown for the first time at Art Basel.

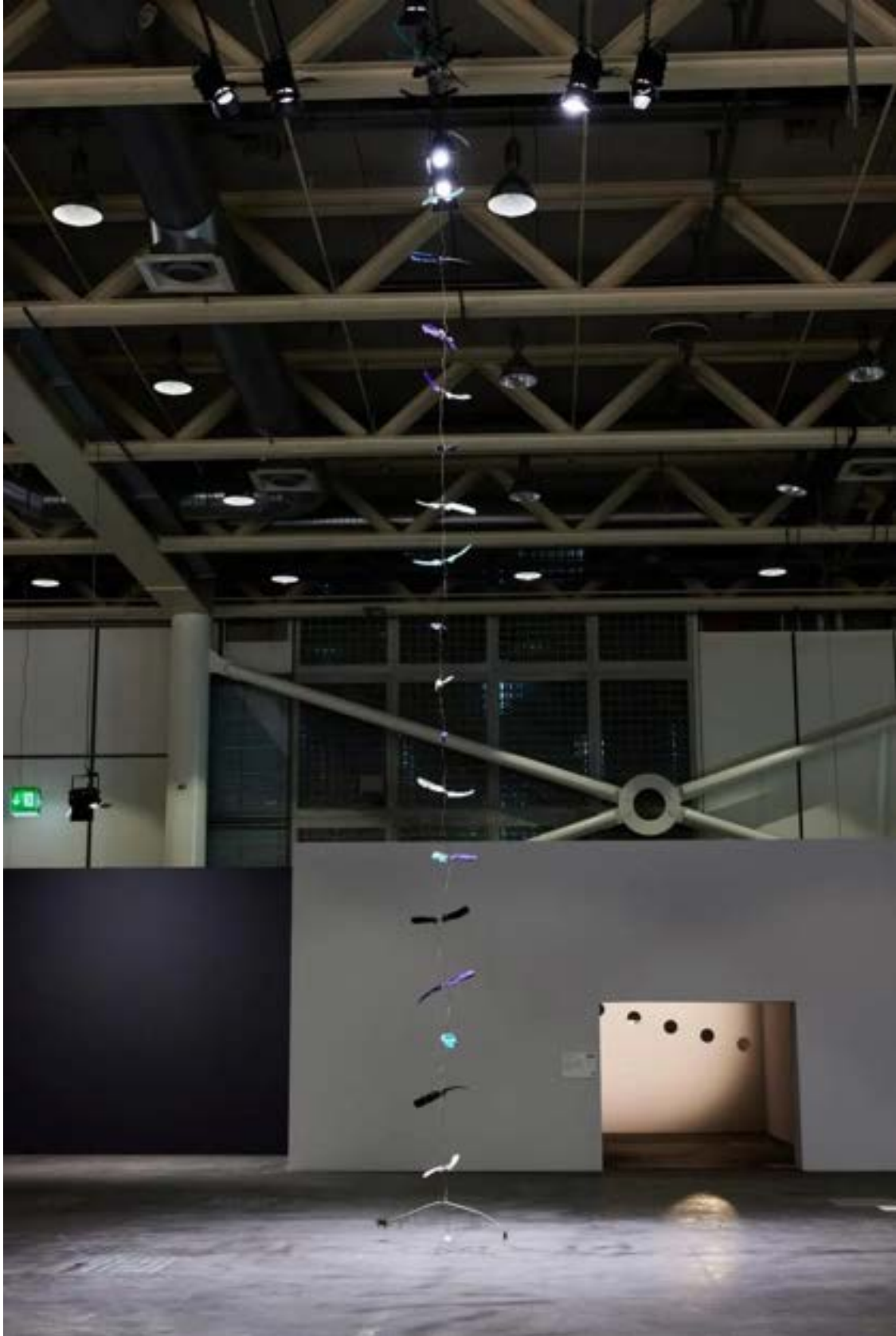
Here are some highlights:

Line, 2023, Arthur Simms

‘Redemption, both material and spiritual, is a central theme in my artistic practice. My sculptures are an amalgam of ideas, histories lived and studied, memories lost and imagined, and the physical presence of objects that confront the spectator in their space, asking to be recognized. The proposed sculpture *Line* references my unique journey as an artist. My improvisational works incorporate the by-products of our consumer culture – thrown-away furniture, tossed bottles, worn-out clothing, scrap metal, discarded junk mail – essentially, other people’s trash. In my process of transforming lowly materials into works that belie their humble origins, I perform a personal and unique kind of alchemy.’
- Arthur Simms (in collaboration with Karma)

Jamaican artist Arthur Simms (1961) creates assemblages of found and natural materials that combine art history with personal cosmologies. His practice often incorporates wheels, bottles, and binding techniques in order to communicate Simms’s ongoing interest in wideranging traditions.

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Line, 2023, Arthur Simms, Represented by Martos Gallery, Thomas Dane Gallery ART BASEL

Arthur Simms's Intricate Assemblages Merge Avant-Garde and Ancestral Traditions

By Glenn Adamson

April 19, 2023 12:32pm



Arthur Simms, *Carnival*, 2005
PHOTO JEFF MCLANE

During my recent visit to [Arthur Simms \(https://www.artnews.com/t/arthur-simms/\)](https://www.artnews.com/t/arthur-simms/)'s Staten Island studio, he paused by a large-scale sculpture made years ago. Atop the massive, hemp-wrapped assemblage was a delicate web, woven by some unseen spider.

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“Ah,” he said, with evident pleasure, reaching out to touch it gently. “Someone’s collaborating with me.” It struck me as a characteristic moment. In Simms’s work, the aesthetic of the chance encounter—the look of a cluttered closet, a junk-filled garage, or a shoreline awash with debris—is infused with animating intelligence, much as a scattering of words can resolve into a concrete poem, or a cascade of noise into free jazz. “It’s all valid,” Simms said to me a few times as we walked around. The statement was riddling in its very simplicity. If that’s true, what does validity even mean? His works provide an answer. Mostly bound with rope or wire, sometimes covered with glue, they seem to arrest his acts of arrangement in the very moment of their occurrence.

This overwhelming sense of immediacy is a little misleading, as Simms has been working in assemblage for a very long time, steadily incorporating the flotsam of everyday life into his sculpture. Born in Jamaica in 1961, he immigrated to New York at the age of seven. (His mother preceded him there by three years, working as a nanny to earn money before the rest of the family arrived.) For as long as he can remember, he’s made things out of whatever he finds: toys out of corks, slingshots out of sticks and rubber. This obsessive creativity led him to study art at Brooklyn College in the mid-1980s, under the mentorship of William T. Williams. After stints as an art handler at Paula Cooper Gallery and the Brooklyn Museum, Simms went on to lead the art program at La Guardia Community College, one of the campuses of the CUNY system, where he has taught for sixteen years. He’s a veteran, then, who—like so many Black artists of his generation—is only now getting the widespread recognition he is due. His work has been shown steadily in the USA, the Caribbean and in Europe since the 1990s, and he even organized a Jamaican Pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 2001, but it wasn’t until a well-received retrospective exhibition at Martos Gallery in New York in 2021 that his exhibition schedule began keeping pace with his prolific output. This year, he has a major solo show at Karma Gallery in Los Angeles, again including work from the past thirty years, as well as a powerful installation of new work at San Carlo Cremona, a deconsecrated seventeenth-century church outside of Milan. The deteriorated but still transcendent house of worship is the perfect setting for Simms, who has a longstanding fascination with that period of Italian art. (The paintings of Caravaggio, with their dramatic scenes illuminated by heavenly light, are a particular interest.) The ecclesiastical surroundings put into the ritualistic aspects of his sculpture into high relief, illuminating their strong implication of the sacred.

MARTOS GALLERY



View of Arthur Simms's exhibition "I Am the Bush Doctor, One Halo" at San Carlo Cremona

Like a baroque allegory, Simms's works are densely populated with emblems. The exhibition in Cremona is called "I am the Bush Doctor, One Halo," which is also the name of a large-scale drawing hanging vertically in the space. The title is taken from a song by Peter Tosh, and pays tribute to vernacular healers in Jamaica, among them the artist's own father, who treated his neighbors' everyday ailments with homemade concoctions. Here and there, the show does acknowledge conventional Christian iconography; some of Simms's sculptures suggest arks holding unknown covenants, for example. But the signals are reliably mixed. The proliferation of feathers in the installation could be taken from angels' wings, but they also refer to Native American and African spiritual traditions, as well as expressing the fundamental idea of vulnerability: "you could reach out and just snap them off," Simms notes. A bicycle wheel aslant the tip of a slender rod in *Il Santo del Mare* (2023) does indeed look like a pageant-costume halo, but also conjures the spirit of Marcel Duchamp, high priest of the avant garde. In another work, a motorcycle helmet emblazoned with the word SHARK is propped on top of a guitar, the instrument perhaps a nod to Cremona's most famous son, the luthier Antonio Stradivari (born in 1644), who could well have prayed at this very chapel.

These layered storylines criss-cross Simms's work, just like the twine and wire he so often uses. Normally disconnected cultural narratives are tied together into a tight knot of signification. To some extent, this is just what assemblage art does. He is participating in a grand tradition that extends back to the Surrealists, via Robert Rauschenberg's Combines and the wrapped sculptures of Jackie Winsor. Equally relevant are visionary artists like the Philadelphia Wire Man and Judith Scott, as well as African *nkisi* spirit containers and warding objects (*aale*), and vernacular forms like the "bottle trees" of Black communities in the American South, dedicated to the principle that "where light is, evil shall not pass."

MARTOS GALLERY

Simms acknowledges all of these precedents and peers, but in his case there is a special quality of inclusivity. In his work, as the art historian Robert Storr put it in a 2005 essay, “opposites attract, difference accents difference, and multiplicity is the predicate for mutuality.”



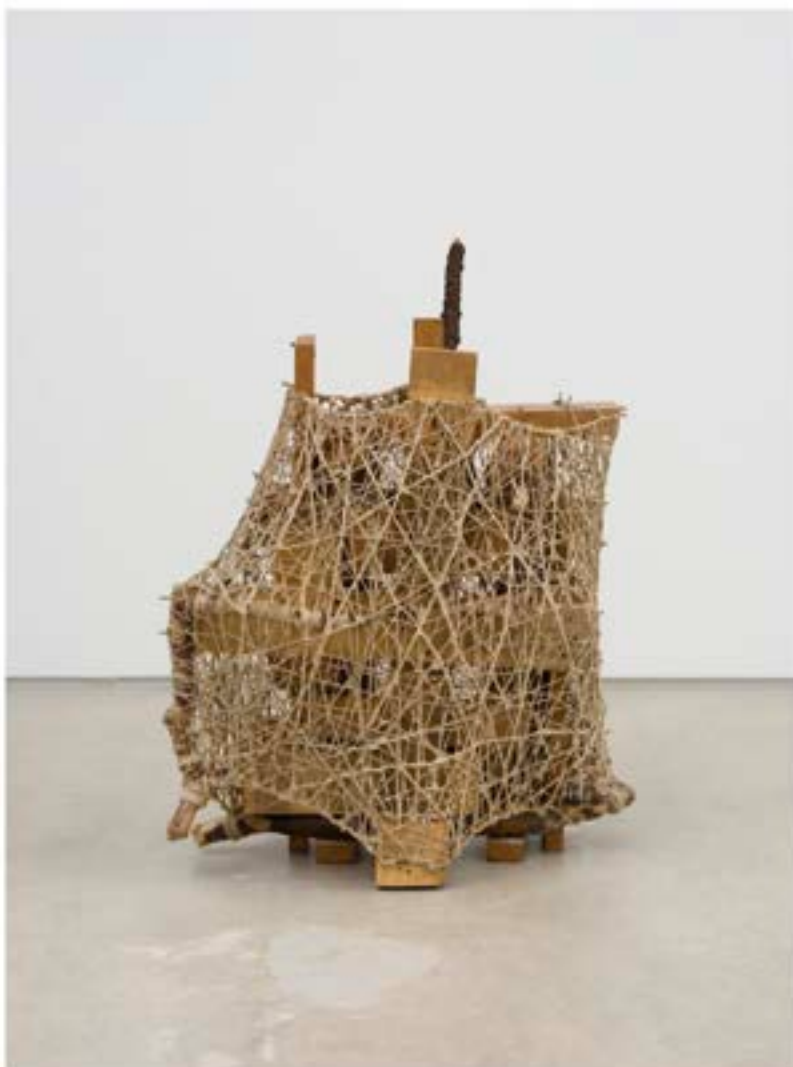
Arthur Simms, *Bolt*, 2021
PHOTO JEFF MCLANE

Doubtless, this connective energy has much to do with Simms’s own life story. Diasporic migration, both brutally enforced (like the voyages that brought his ancestors to Jamaica) and freely chosen (like the move that his own family undertook when he was a child), is ever present as subject matter in his oeuvre. He has made several symbolic portraits of his mother that incorporate handwritten letters she has sent him over the years, thinking of the time they spent apart when he was young. Some of his sculptures actually can be rolled around—a practical feature, given their scale, as well as a symbolic one—and non-functional wheels, toy cars, and vehicle components make frequent appearances. He cites the improvised carts used by street sellers in Jamaica as an influence on these works, but they also clearly embody movement as an abstract principle. At the most fundamental level, his practice is all about getting from here to there, without leaving any part of himself behind.

One of Simms’s most affecting, and oft-repeated, gestures speaks to another, even more personal connection: his marriage to the painter Lucy Fradkin. The two artists (who share the studio in Staten Island) are an interracial couple. As a kind of signature, Simms represents their union with a little rectangular patch of their hair, his black, hers red, glued to the surface of many of his works, side-by-side. But even at his most autobiographical,

MARTOS GALLERY

Simms is an improviser at heart, and never sets out to control the narrative of his work. Its storyline remains perpetually open, to the extent that he treats his own past work as a quarry, disassembling pieces and reincorporating them continually into new creations.



Arthur Simms, *Spanish Town*, 2003
PHOTO JEFF MCLANE

This helps to account, perhaps, for the extraordinary animacy of Simms's work. He chooses every scrap and stone, every bit of detritus, often for personal reasons. Yet in his studio, surrounded by the things he has made over the years, he commented that it is "important to make something outside of yourself," something that can lead a life of its own. Even as Simms lashes his objects together, bundling them tightly, and places them into choreographies, instantly and insistently memorable, he grants them a kind of ultimate freedom. When he does send them out into the world, it's in the spirit of pushing a bird out of its nest, certain that it knows how to fly.

July 11th 2022

The Curator Archiving Gun Violence Through Art

Seven years after Susanne Slavick's exhibition *Unloaded*, the curator continues to update a Facebook page dedicated to artworks and texts that examine the impact and proliferation of firearms.

Jasmine Liu

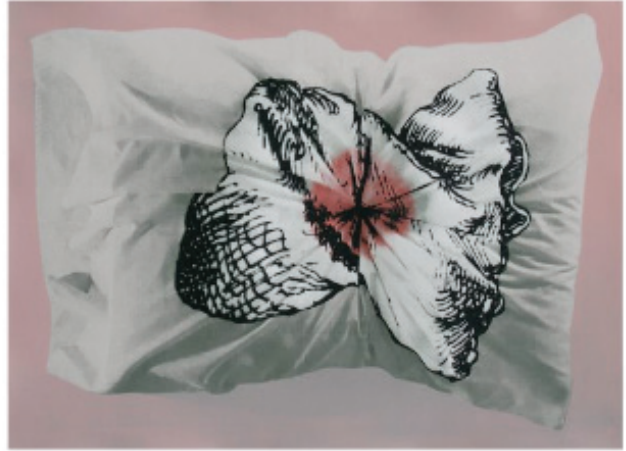


Floyd D. Tinsley, "Hearts and Minds" (1993-1995) (Image courtesy the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center at Colorado College)

In 2015, Susanne Slavick, an artist, curator, and professor of art at Carnegie Mellon University, organized *Unloaded*, a group show of over 22 artists. The purpose of the exhibition was to probe the culture of widespread access to guns and its consequences. Some of the works were explicit about their subject matter: Everest Pipkin's "162 Free Guns," for instance, was a book aggregating every free "gun" that could be downloaded from the creative commons online in May 2017, including a model gun that could be 3D-printed and a laser gun from a video game. Nina Berman photographed the "Come and Take It" rally in San Antonio in 2013, where hundreds of gun owners protested a local ordinance that banned guns in public parks by proudly and openly displaying their weapons in patriotic gear. Mel Chin arranged eight AK-47s into the shape of a Maltese cross in a 2002 piece entitled "Cross for the Unforgiven."

Other works in the show were more abstract. Jennifer Nagle Myers's "[A City Without Guns](#)" (2015–ongoing) was an arrangement of found sticks, each of which appeared vaguely reminiscent of a gun. Slavick's own "Romantic Resistance" was an installation of 15 circular panels, each adorned with a bead from a pearl necklace and pierced by a bullet hole. The show ultimately toured 12 cities and collaborated with organizations such as [CeaseFirePA](#), [Moms Now](#), seven years later and as gun violence soars in America, Slavick continues to update a [Facebook page](#) she created at the culmination of that touring exhibition, where she posts artwork, poetry, plays, and op-eds that are relevant to the themes she explored in *Unloaded*.

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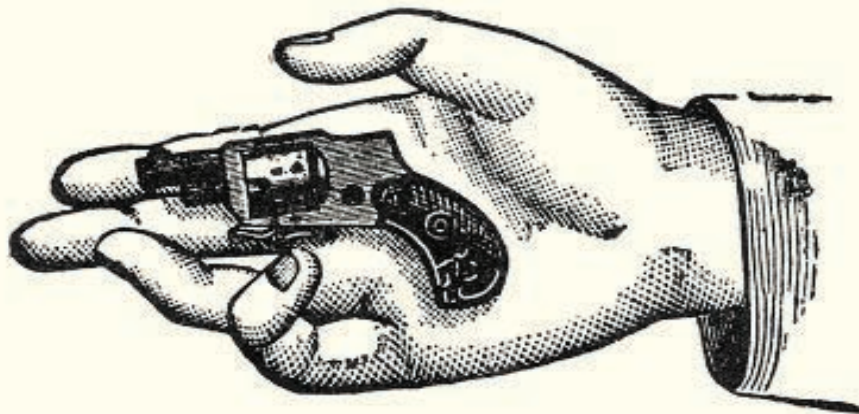
Susanne Slavick, "(Re)Setting Sights" (2002), screen prints on Stonehenge, 22 x 30 inches each (image courtesy the artist)

“I don’t know what else it takes to move us. Yes, these recent shootings have moved bipartisan legislation,” Slavick told Hyperallergic, referencing the passage of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act on June 23. Among other things, that law will require more rigorous background checks for younger gun buyers and allocate funding for school safety. But it stops short of enacting gun control measures that many reform advocates have been demanding for decades.

“The measures that have been approved, while welcome, are just so inadequate, and so relatively indirect to the scale and nature of the problem, which is just generally that access to guns is too easy,” Slavick said.

A NEW MODEST
PROPOSAL
For preventing the
CHILDREN
O F
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From being a burden to
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For making them defend themselves
with their own
G U N S.

By the Grand Old Party.



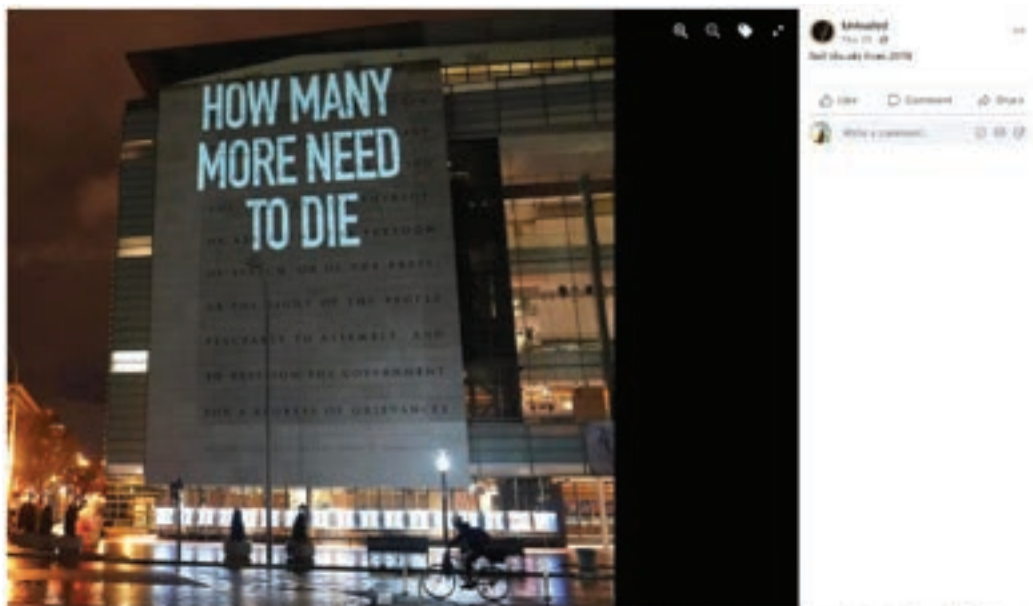
Detroit, Printed by R. Standfest
MMXXII

Ryan Standfest, *The Sleep of America Produces Monsters* no. 1: "A New Modest Proposal" (2022), letterpress, 8 x 5 inches, edition of 50 (image courtesy the artist)

MARTOS GALLERY

One recent image Slavick posted in late June comes from Ryan Standfest's series *The Sleep of America Produces Monsters*. The title is a play on both Francisco Goya's 1799 print "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" and the observation that "they call it the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it," attributed to George Carlin. Printed by letterpress, the off-white pamphlet modernizes Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, an unrelenting satire of austere and dehumanizing attitudes toward the Irish poor published in 1728. In Standfest's version, it is a "modest proposal" not for "preventing the children of poor people from being a burden to their parents or country and for making them beneficial to the public," as Swift had it, but rather "for preventing the children of Americans from being a burden to the gun lobby or the republic and for making them defend themselves with their own guns."

A graphic shows a trigger-ready hand cradling a palm-sized pistol. Standfest's print suggests that Republicans and the gun lobby hold a malicious disregard for the lives of the American children comparable to English colonizers' indifference to rampant poverty and hunger in Ireland in the early 18th century — an indictment of a status quo in which the people come second to corporate interests and party politics.



A post on the Unloaded Facebook archive (screenshot Valentina Di Liscia/Hyperallergic via Facebook)

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A grainier, almost spectral image on the page is an installation shot of Floyd D. Tunson's "Hearts and Minds," a monumental, multi-panel work made over multiple years in response to the police killing of the artist's youngest brother. The multi-media collage includes two Jasper Johns-esque targets at the center, buttressed by tondos of Black men and \$50 bills behind bars. After developing the central panel and showing it at a gallery in Denver, Tunson decided that he wasn't quite done with the piece. "I realized I felt like I had more to say," he recounted. Eventually, "Hearts and Minds" would grow to three times its original size, with more paintings and cutouts of skulls; bone, fabric, and cardboard bricolage; photographs; and renderings of the faces of Black men.

"Sadly, this is still relevant," Tunson said. "I could still add more parts to it. What's going on in society in relationship to this has not come to an end."



Mimi Smith, "Bang Bang" (1990) (image courtesy the artist)

Mimi Smith's "Bang Bang," finished in 1990, is a visual representation of the statistic that someone in the United States dies at gunpoint every 16 minutes (the frequency has only risen since then). It's a clock face decorated with Art Deco-style gun barrels and Pop Art-yellow strips that mark the passage of every quarter-hour with the factual, serif pronouncement: "Bang, Bang, You're Dead." The work seems to have a Tarantino-like attitude to gun violence: It's rampant, it's a matter of fact, and it can even be made to look cool. But the ironic distance of "Bang, Bang" is an expression of Smith's revulsion to this contemporary social reality. "Guns are an awful horrible thing in this country. It makes me sick every time I hear of another incident," she wrote in an email.



One post shows artist Paula Crown's billboard for For Freedoms. (screenshot Valentina Di Liscia/Hyperallergic via [Facebook](#))

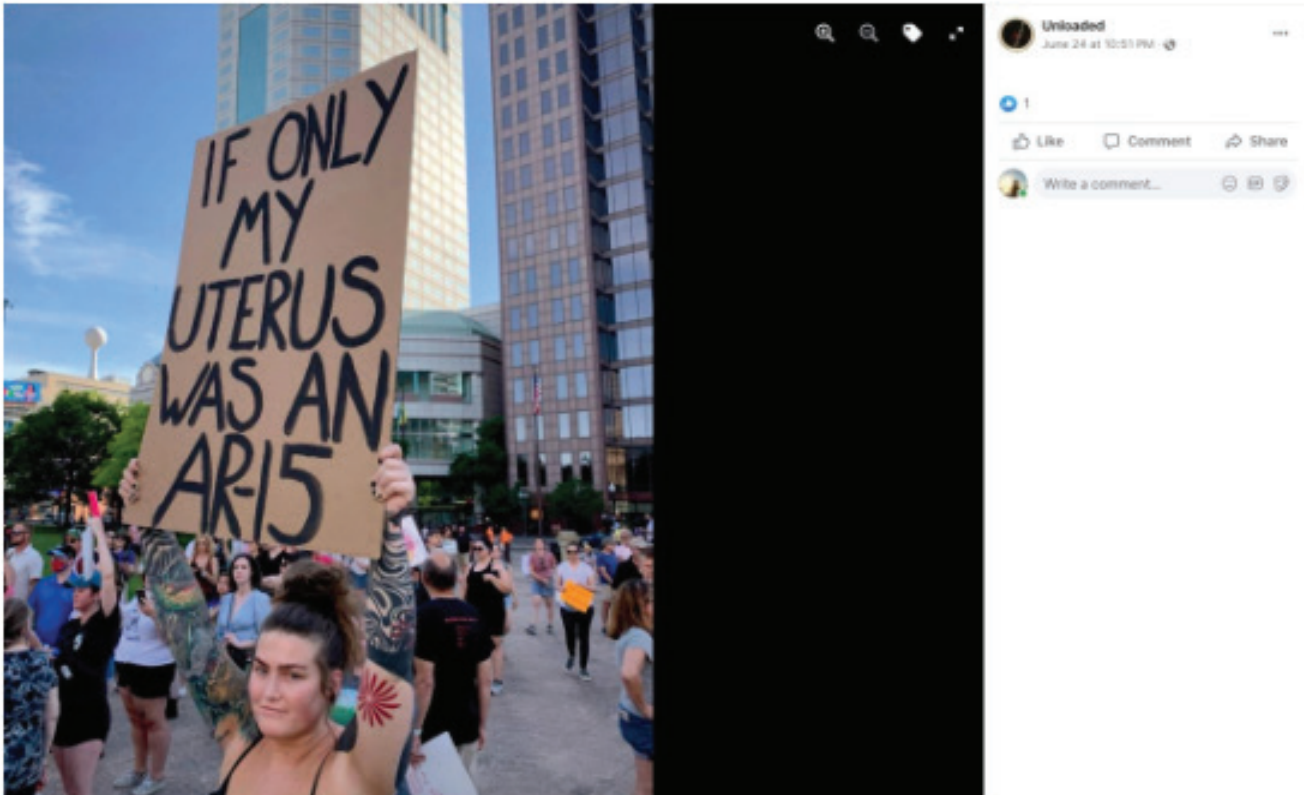


Arthur Simms, "Portrait Of An Angry Man With A Gun" (1992), rope, wood, glue, screws (photograph by Charles Benton, courtesy the artist)

Slavick also posts news articles, op-eds, and poems that touch on the alternatively banal and spectacular reality of gun violence in American life. An article from [Rolling Stone](#) marked 1.15 million deaths since the assassination of John Lennon in December 2019. "Enough of the gun, / the drama, and the acquaintance's suicide, the long-lost / letter on the dresser, enough of the longing and / the ego and the obliteration of ego," read a few lines from Ada Limón's "The End of Poetry" — originally published in the [New Yorker](#) and reposted by Slavick.

MARTOS GALLERY

On the day the Supreme Court officially delivered its *Dobbs* ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*, Slavick [posted a photo](#) of a protester carrying a plain cardboard sign reading, “If only my uterus was an AR-15.”



A post from the day of the Supreme Court's ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade* (screenshot Valentina Di Liscia/Hyperallergic via [Facebook](#))

Another recent repost Slavick made was of Kim Phuc Phan Thi's opinion piece for the *New York Times*, "[It's Been 50 Years. I Am Not 'Napalm Girl' Anymore.](#)" Thi, who was iconically captured fleeing a napalm attack in South Vietnam in 1972 by Associated Press photographer Nick Ut at the age of nine, wrote about the dual trauma and empowerment that photograph brought her. She also proposed, in the aftermath of the mass shooting at Uvalde, that it was perhaps time to take, and show the American public, more explicit photographs of the consequences of the ready availability of guns. Slavick says she has been thinking about this question a lot lately, as “horrible” as it is.

MARTOS GALLERY

“I want the show to last beyond its physical space and dates,” Slavick said of her growing digital archive. “It’s a way of extending the show to artists and ideas beyond what I can include as a freelance curator in a particular time and place. It’s a way of growing the community around the idea.”



View of "Arthur Simms," 2021–22. Photo: Charles Benton.

Arthur Simms

MARTOS GALLERY | NEW YORK

Fresh Kills, a mountain of noxious garbage off the western coast of Staten Island and once the largest dump in the country, was finally shut down in March 2001; about ten years ago, the area was slowly being resurrected into a scenic wetlands park. I found my thoughts drifting to the infamous landfill when looking at Arthur Simms's art: A resident of the borough, the sculptor transforms cast-off material, much of it trash, into unstable sites of memory and improbable splendor. He scours the junkyard of art history, too, devising from its rusted vanguards—Surrealist automatism, the ready-made, Arte Povera, post-Minimalism—ritual objects to keep the dead close. Despite being featured in the Venice Biennale's first and only Jamaican pavilion in 2001, Simms has stayed under the radar, though this ought to change following this survey of his work at Martos Gallery, where the spoils of his nearly four-decade career were crowded into a presentation marked by obsessive devotion and tensile lyricism.

Simms was born in Kingston in 1961, one year before Jamaica declared independence from Britain. Inspired early on by makeshift carts built by people who couldn't afford the assembly-line version, he soon began to craft his own things: wagons, slingshots, bows and arrows. When

MARTOS GALLERY

he was seven, he and his family left the island for New York, where he eventually enrolled at Brooklyn College alongside Nari Ward, a compatriot with whom Simms is often compared (both artists found a mentor in abstract painter and professor William T. Williams). But it was an encounter in the early 1980s with Jackie Winsor's iconic *Bound Square*, 1972, a wooden frame wrapped with thousands of feet of twine, that inspired Simms's best-known inventions: unwieldy clusters of rejectamenta cocooned in hemp rope and often put on wheels. If Winsor's sculptures "impose a 'thereness,'" as late curator Kynaston McShine wrote in the catalogue for the artist's 1979 survey at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Simms's bound works—each one a jerry-rigged monument to mobility and dislocation—do the opposite. The hulking vessel of *Ark*, 1989–92, its cargo webbed with skeins of meticulously knotted cordage, proved only the most overt evocation of the Black Atlantic, to use a term developed by Paul Gilroy to explore counternarratives to modernity in the cultural exchanges between Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States.

Most of Simms's art seems in conversation with those who will never see it. *Boy*, 2007, a pair of ice skates festooned with glass bottles, partly shares its roots with the bottle trees first made in ninth-century Congo to fend off evil spirits, a form later adopted by David Hammons in Harlem during the 1970s. Requiems abound. The rope work *And He Passes*, 1993, honors David Fisch, a muralist who died of AIDS in the year of its making; *Icema and Chester*, 1989–92, names Simms's late parents. *To Explain, Expound and Exhort, to See, Foresee and Prophecy, to the Few Who Could or Would Listen*, 1995, an unhygienic accretion swaddled in string and fixed to a stick, quotes an aggrieved W. E. B. Du Bois, the grimy blades along its edges an homage to Congolese throwing knives. Leaned against the wall, the sculpture is equal parts bindle, processional cross, and soul-rattling protest sign.

Rather than draw out tensions between material and spiritual worlds through accrual and concealment, the artist's newer assemblages report life's subtractions through an economy of means and deceptive transparency. The show's title piece, *And I Say, Brother Had a Very Good Day, One Halo*, 2021, elegizes the artist's sister and her son, convening a family photograph and old-master postcards within a minimal blueprint design. In another work from 2021, a photograph of the moon hangs above a maplike grid on paper laminated in acetate, where a small clump of hair belonging to Simms and his wife, artist Lucy Fradkin, becomes a sort of wayfinding marker. Next to it, in lieu of YOU ARE HERE, are the blue blocky words YOU SEE: apt for an exhibition whose visitors were encouraged to lose themselves in Simms's unyielding and wasteless vision.

— Zack Hatfield

Arthur Simms

September 14, 2022 by Susan Canning

New York
Martos Gallery



Arthur Simms, *AA*, 1989–92. Rope, wood, glass, paint, metal, and objects, 60 x 72 x 48 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.

MARTOS GALLERY

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.

December 17, 2021

The Best New York Art Shows of 2021 The art world has changed forever. But New York galleries still rule.

By Jerry Saltz

Special Mention

In this time of accelerated, limelite artistic careers (many seeming to last only a couple years), a massive hat tip to artists who continue their work for decades at high levels — those with the lives-lived-in-art that we all hope for. Among others of this ilk standing out this year: Karla Knight, Olive Ayhens, Keith Mayerson, Mira Schor, Joan Semmel, Arthur Simms, Loren Munk, Catherine Murphy, and Vera Girivi.

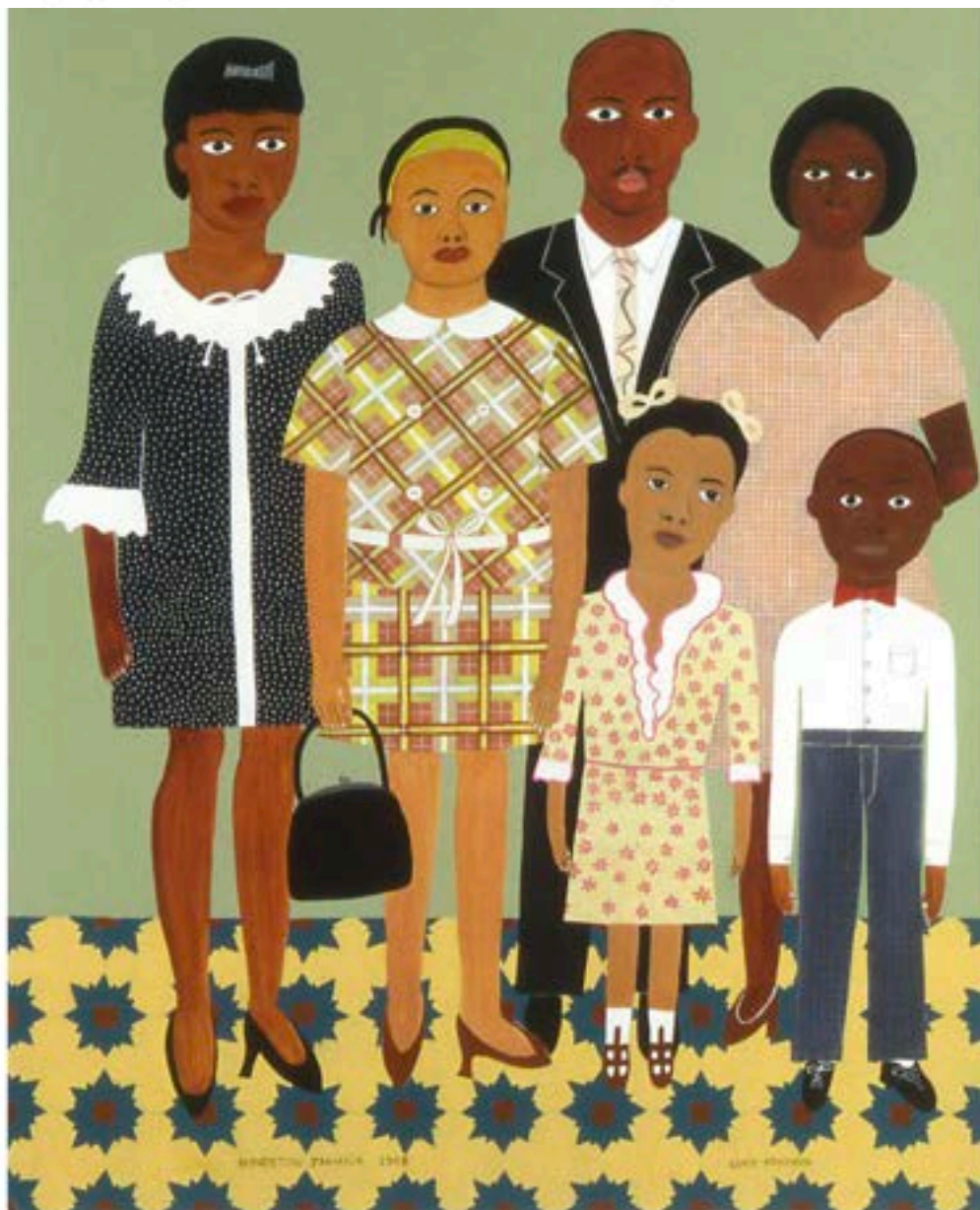
Artists Quarantine With Their Art Collections

"Since the start of the pandemic I've hung onto fleeting moments of beauty."



Stephen Maine January 30, 2021

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Trauma changes our view of the world, down to some of its finest details. The density of meaning we value in artworks sets them up for reinterpretation as our context shifts and, with it, the mind that each of us perceives with. In this series of articles, I've been asking artists these questions: In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, do you look at your personal collection differently now, and which works in particular? Is there one that especially resonates with you in this weird, frightening time? And does it take on new meaning?



Lucy Fradkin, "Kingston, Jamaica 1968" (2000), oil on paper, 50 x 39 inches (image courtesy Arthur Simms)

MARTOS GALLERY

Arthur Simms (Staten Island, New York): This large oil painting on paper by my wife, Lucy Fradkin, is titled "Kingston, Jamaica 1968." It is a portrait of my family based on a photograph that was taken at that time and place. The painting and the photograph are on opposite walls in my living room, where I now spend a great deal of time. The portraits are of my mom, dad, three older sisters and me, the little guy with the red bowtie. Lucy spent a year working on the painting, which was completed in 2000. Consequently, I have lived with this work for more than two decades.

The photograph is a treasure with lots of meaning from our past in Jamaica. I grew up with this photograph. Lucy's painting based on the photograph is like a member of the family.

The painting itself is a delightful make-up of colors, patterns and familiar faces. It touches on a history of Matisse, Japanese painting, medieval painting, Greek icon painting, and Haitian and outsider art.



Photograph of Simms family, photographer unknown (image courtesy Arthur Simms)

MARTOS GALLERY

After the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 was enacted, my mom was able to immigrate to the US by herself. My parents decided that it was more practical for my mom to come by herself to set up a base in Brooklyn and then sponsor the rest of the family.

We had not seen her for almost three years when she came back to Kingston in 1968 for a wedding. The photograph that inspired Lucy's painting was taken a day before my mom was to return to the States by herself. This is why everyone in the photo is sad. One year later, the family was able to immigrate to New York to re-connect with my mother.

In May of this year, my middle sister, Grace, passed away from cancer. She was 64. Her death was a collateral death of COVID-19. She could not go to her needed therapy because of the pandemic. In November, her husband Douglas passed away. He was 63. I had known him since I was 11 years old.

I look at the painting quite often while sitting on my couch. I reflect on my sister, her husband, our past together, and life during this time of the pandemic. The work evokes melancholy feelings for me. But overall, it makes me happy.

Arthur Simms with Phong H. Bui



The Brooklyn Rail
2.57K subscribers

Artist Arthur Simms joins Rail Publisher & Artistic Director Phong H. Bui for a conversation on his exhibition at Martos Gallery. We conclude with a poetry reading by Tyhe Cooper.

A native of Kingston, Jamaica, Arthur Simms lives and works in Staten Island, New York. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, including representing the country of Jamaica in the 49th Venice Biennial in 2001. Other venues include Musée International des Arts Modestes, The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Brooklyn Museum, Neuberger Museum, American Academy of Arts and Letters, MoMA P.S.1, American Academy in Rome, and the Queens Museum. Numerous awards include the Rome Prize and Guggenheim Fellowship.

Artist, writer, and independent curator Phong H. Bui is Publisher and Artistic Director of the Brooklyn Rail, the River Rail, Rail Editions, and Rail Curatorial Projects. From 2007 to 2010 he served as Curatorial Advisor at MoMA PS1.

 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdhqH97kEBs>

Lost & Found

By Hovey Brock



Kayode Ojo, *Ice Queen*, 2020. Zara Sequin Knit Dresses, Voarge Set of 20 Keyrings with Stainless Steel Key Rings, Carabiner Hooks with Key Fob 25 mm (Silver), Ikea Tobias Chairs, Clear Amac Boxes, Glacier Bay Beveled Edge Bath Mirrors, Victorinox Swiss Army Knives silvertech, 48 x 72 x 30 inches. Courtesy Martos Gallery.

The title *Lost & Found* brings to mind a miscellany brought together by chance, and at first it is hard to find a thread that connects the works in this show. The differences between the artists' practices make for a study in contrasts: Kayode Ojo's elegant readymades referencing fashion and consumer culture versus Arthur Simms's ramshackle assemblages of twine, wire, tinfoil, discarded bottles, and other trash; Alexandria Smith's dark, erotically charged images versus Arnold Kemp's abstract canvases and works on paper. A total non sequitur to the rest, Jessica Diamond's wall piece, *Is That All There Is?* (1984/2010), eschews object status altogether. It is a wall painting of a world map, with the ironic title hand lettered above. The map has no political markings or natural details, apart from the outlines of the land masses. Looking at it, the viewer has no place to home in on, a feeling that—at first blush—could apply to the entire show. But, that feeling of being at loose ends has its uses. *Lost & Found* is an invitation to stop, take a breath, and engage with these artworks sans an agenda, perhaps to discover the unexpected.

MARTOS GALLERY



Installation view: *Lost & Found*, Martos Gallery, New York, 2021. Courtesy Martos Gallery.

Ojo's and Simms's works, superficially so different, engage in a deep conversation on class, particularly in their choice of found objects and materials. *Ice Queen* (2020) gives a laundry list of materials loaded with well-known brand names: Zara, Victorinox, Ikea. Everything is white, metallic, or clear—chilly indeed. The Victorinox Swiss Army Knife, blades out, hangs like a pendant on a chain linking two armchairs that, covered with sequin dresses, look like two fierce divas air kissing. *Overdressed (Blush)* (2018), looks like a hilarious fashion scarecrow in a blond wig, waving one arm, and dressed in a pale pink faux fur coat. In addition to the wig and dress, there are gold and crystal necklaces. As noted above, Simms's materials are the opposite of glamorous. A towering, totemic construction, *Ego Sum, Portrait of Arthur Simms as a Junk Collector* (1994), lists humble, workmanlike materials such as rope, glue, and wire, as well as art materials such as charcoal, markers, pen, and pencil. Rope, wood, glue, and screws come together in *Portrait of an Angry Man with a Gun* (1992), which resembles both a sailboat and a recumbent human figure. Whereas Ojo animates his work by placing the right objects in just the right way, the power of Simms's pieces comes out of his obsessive winding of rope, or in the case of *Stupa* (2008), wire, around and around their armatures. As extensions of his will, his works are invested with a life force.

MARTOS GALLERY



Arnold J. Kemp, *NUT-FREE I*, 2021. Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 69 x 69 inches. Courtesy Martos Gallery.

MARTOS GALLERY

Ojo's and Simms's works, superficially so different, engage in a deep conversation on class, particularly in their choice of found objects and materials. *Ice Queen* (2020) gives a laundry list of materials loaded with well-known brand names: Zara, Victorinox, Ikea. Everything is white, metallic, or clear—chilly indeed. The Victorinox Swiss Army Knife, blades out, hangs like a pendant on a chain linking two armchairs that, covered with sequin dresses, look like two fierce divas air kissing. *Overdressed (Blush)* (2018), looks like a hilarious fashion scarecrow in a blond wig, waving one arm, and dressed in a pale pink faux fur coat. In addition to the wig and dress, there are gold and crystal necklaces. As noted above, Simms's materials are the opposite of glamorous. A towering, totemic construction, *Ego Sum, Portrait of Arthur Simms as a Junk Collector* (1994), lists humble, workmanlike materials such as rope, glue, and wire, as well as art materials such as charcoal, markers, pen, and pencil. Rope, wood, glue, and screws come together in *Portrait of an Angry Man with a Gun* (1992), which resembles both a sailboat and a recumbent human figure. Whereas Ojo animates his work by placing the right objects in just the right way, the power of Simms's pieces comes out of his obsessive winding of rope, or in the case of *Stupa* (2008), wire, around and around their armatures. As extensions of his will, his works are invested with a life force.

December 1, 2021

Your Concise New York Art Guide for December 2021

Cassie Packard

Your list of must-see, fun, insightful, and very New York art events this month.

Arthur Simms: And I Say, Brother Had A Very Good Day, One Halo



Installation view, *Arthur Simms: And I Say, Brother Had A Very Good Day, One Halo*, Martos Gallery, New York, 2021 (courtesy of the artist and Martos Gallery; photo by Charles Benton)

When: through December 23

Where: Martos Gallery (41 Elizabeth Street, Chinatown, Manhattan)

Jamaica-born, New York-based artist Arthur Simms presents three decades' worth of drawing and sculpture engaging with his longstanding exploration of his diasporic identity as well as his work at the intersection of folk art, craft, and art history. Found object assemblages feature twine or wire lattices that wrap and bind disparate items including roller skates, rocking horses, feathers, and, in the case of one piece inspired by Willem de Kooning and Marcel Duchamp, two bicycles with a vintage toilet; relatively two-dimensional works cobble together materials including tinfoil, photographs, hair, and acetate.

MARTOS GALLERY

The New York Times

Dec. 16, 2021.

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

CHINATOWN

Arthur Simms

Through Jan. 15. Martos Gallery, 41 Elizabeth Street, Manhattan. 212-560-0670;
martosgallery.com.



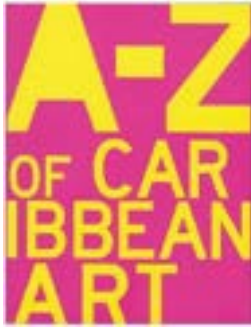
Installation view of Arthur Simms's "And I Say, Brother Had a Very Good Day, One Halo Friday." Arthur Simms and Martos Gallery

MARTOS GALLERY

A vast world of energies and ideas are packed into Arthur Simms's show "[And I Say, Brother Had a Very Good Day, One Halo](#)," which surveys more than 30 years of his work. References to his native Jamaica, the African diaspora and Aboriginal art are integrated here into sculptures that include glass bottles, human hair, toys, tools and knives. His technique of wrapping with rope is also uncannily similar to so-called folk and outsider artists like the [Philadelphia Wireman](#) or [Judith Scott](#), but it is self-consciously meticulous and masterly: Simms even embedded syllabuses from his university art courses in several works.

Some of the sculptures here look like fantastical weapons; others, supernatural vehicles of transport. Knives poke from the edges of "To Explain, Expound and Exhort, To See, Foresee and Prophecy, To the Few Who Could or Would Listen" (1995), while "Left Foot, Right Foot" (2007) is a pair of black roller skates with a halo of feathers. Skateboards, bicycles and tricycles also appear in several works.

If defense or flight seem highlighted in this show, so is the healing potential of sculpture, corresponding with current exhibitions of Milford Graves at Artists Space in Manhattan and Guadalupe Maravilla at the Museum of Modern Art. In Simms's work, carefully placed swatches of hair and nails driven into surfaces, as in the [Central African nkisi](#) (power figures), remind us that objects are not just aesthetic, but bearers of energy, and discarded objects collected and repurposed by artists just might serve ameliorative ends. *MARTHA SCHWENDENER*



S 257

**Arthur
Simms**

Born: Jamaica, 1961
Lives and works: New York, USA

Caged Bottle (2006)
Rope, wire, bottles, wood, skateboards,
bicycles, screws, glue, plastic
50 x 36 x 62 inches

Photograph: Arthur Simms

Arthur Simms emigrated to the USA as a child in 1969, and was educated at Brooklyn College, New York, and at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. Simms is known primarily for his sculptural assemblages and installations of found materials, mainly human-sized in scale. Often these forms are tightly bound or completely wrapped within rope or wire. He also produces mixed media drawings and collages.

Simms traces his affinity with found materials back to his childhood in Jamaica, where he observed that poor people made great use of scrap material to make a variety of needed items, including push-carts for transport. A Jamaican ambassador in his own right, he sees his practice, including his Jamaican upbringing, his American experience and Western art movements, as an amalgamation of cultural thought and participation. *Hemp Or If I Were A Bird* (1991) reflects the irony of Modernist movements like Minimalism, by assembling a conglomeration of objects, then tightly binding and wrapping them into a simplified restrained cuboid, which formally contrasts with the desire for movement implied in the work's title. Other works like *Dream Catcher* (2000) and *Caged Bottle* (2006) also utilise wheels from bicycles and castors as metaphors for movement, for instance, in the transnational travels of people of the African diaspora, such as himself.

ARTHUR SIMMS

Posted by [Fintan Boyle](#) and [Jennie Nichols](#) on Tuesday, June 26, 2018

Citizen Simms: Unpacking Arthur Simms' Studio

As [Citizen Kane](#) draws to a close –I am thinking of the penultimate scene, the scene before the “Rosebud scene”– the camera pulls back to allow the frame to become filled with the fillings of the vast storage at Kane’s Xanadu. Kane’s scavenging come hoarding slowly fills the frame –fills all the space there is– squeezing out the presence of art and history, squeezing out the tiny little actors at the bottom of the frame. Abundance, it seems, squeezes out the particular. For those trapped within the diegetic space of the film the “Rosebud” enigma will remain unsolved, unseen as the credits roll (And thereon for an eternity of re-screenings). But for the attentive spectator much will soon be explained.

In a way, if you squint, (or if you crave cinematic similes) the opening ‘shot’ one gets on entering Arthur Simms’ studio bookends that penultimate shot in [Citizen Kane](#). Round the first corner in the studio and close to forty years of Simms’ work crowds toward the visitor. In “Kane” the plundered antiquities and art are boxed, crated, unseen, unknowable. And we as viewers are retreating from them along with the craning camera. With Simms we are moving in toward them. Moving in for the close up, engulfing ourselves with each step we take. In Simms’ studio there is a dearth of crates but there has nonetheless been much swathing and wrapping. For Simms the wrapping of objects is both an essential technique and a prevailing figurative device- It has evolved, over many years and many sculptures, to be a mainstay of his studio practice. For Simms wrapping is part of what transitions objects into sculpture. Thus he wraps these objects, sometimes tenderly, sometimes brusquely, with wire, or with rope, or string, or sheets of glassine, scraps of lumber, stretches of aluminum foil or newspaper.



MARTOS GALLERY

In the studio



At Xanadu someone has presumably catalogued and recorded what is in all those crates. Or they could be empty; they are just props. Still and all the spectators will never know. And it is not very important anyway. The kitsch revelation in the final scene will do the emotional heavy lifting. Contrarily, in Simms' studio it feels clear that this is wrapping and not, say, just the surface or patina of his sculpture. And it is very, very certain that this all has nothing to do with the pragmatics of crating to ship or store. It feels clear that there is an inside to the sculpture. Some *thing* has been wrapped. But more than that, the action and presence of the artist is embalmed within the wrapping of the object. In this sculpture there is an object but there is also the history of an act. There is a yesterday, and an unconscious. In this way the work is loud with an occulted presence.

Simms' first began wrapping sculpture around the late 1980s. *Left Foot* (1989–1990) is the first he recalls. That there is no extant image of this piece illustrates one of those tales that chart the long haul of many artists' lives. Simms had to vacate his studio of the time. The sculpture, too bulky and cumbersome to move with him, was defenestrated by, well, as he puts it . . .

"I paid a couple of strong young men who lived upstairs from me to help me take the window frame out and then we pushed it (the sculpture) out the window into the back yard."

Voilà the work occulted into the gloomy history of New York artists' struggles with real estate. The literarily, and evocatively titled, *Crossroads, St. Andrew, Kingston, Jamaica, 1961–69*, (1992) is the work that Simms identifies as "based on the *Left Foot* sculpture" Standing ten feet high and five feet wide it is only half the width of the original. (Try to imagine the original exiting that window.) Between the capacious scale and the evocative literary title there is much territory there for an artist to hide a great deal.

MARTOS GALLERY



Crossroads, St. Andrew, Kingston, Jamaica, 1961-69, (1992)



MARTOS GALLERY

Simms confidently points toward Jackie Windsor's *Bound Square* from 1972 as an important landmark in terms of wrapping objects. But, like many artists who have been in the studio for the long haul, Simms is dialoging with multiple strands of art history and these pop up hither and thither as one walks the studio. Jackie Windsor's particular post-minimalist trajectory, with its self-aware knowledge of recent art history, which it both mines and pushes back against, seems important. As do her eschewing of the hardness and industrial metaphors of minimalism and her embrace of process. Likewise the mark of the hand and the history of the actions carried out by the artist are all crucial in Simms' work.

Yet the history of wrapping is not just Windsor. Wrapping is the decisive overdetermined device of Simms' daily practice. In speaking of the wrapping Simms invokes, alongside Windsor, Minkisi figural objects or sculptures originally found in cultures along the Congo Basin. More oblique than Windsor's wrapped corners the contents of the Minkisi are not merely enigmatic, or concealed they are also powerful materials or spiritually charged substances. So if Windsor is wrapping something, putting it out of sight (a certain version of masculinity perhaps?) Minkisi are wrapping materials and objects that offer a cadence of occult power. For Simms, an intellectual and cultural see-sawing back and forth allows him to coax a studio dialogue out of post minimalist sculpture and traditional Kongolese artifacts. On top of all this there are also abundant references to cultures of native America and an ongoing scrutiny of certain Italian Renaissance figures and traditions.



Diaspora

However, around about here, in the studio conversation, Simms does invoke the importance of diasporic African culture. His own Jamaican birth, ancestry and emigration to the United States are all a piece of this. (As is the vigorous presence of a large Skatalites poster in one sculpture —more later.) And in the studio there are sculptures that excavate the imagery of African-American traditions, bottle sculptures being one example. These evoke cultural wisdom and habit but also work formally to bring subdued local color to a frequently monochrome body of work. Such formal tribulations and historical, thematic concerns interpolate throughout the work.



Dreamcatcher III, (2017)

MARTOS GALLERY



The Blue House, (2015) photo: Graham Haber

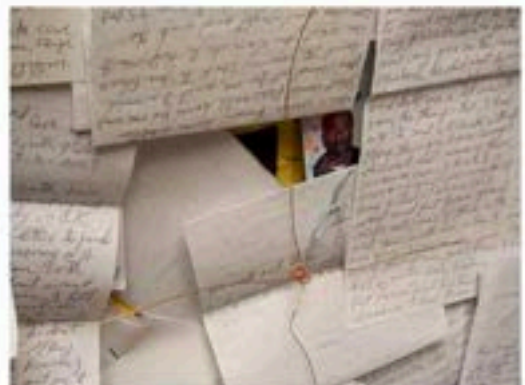
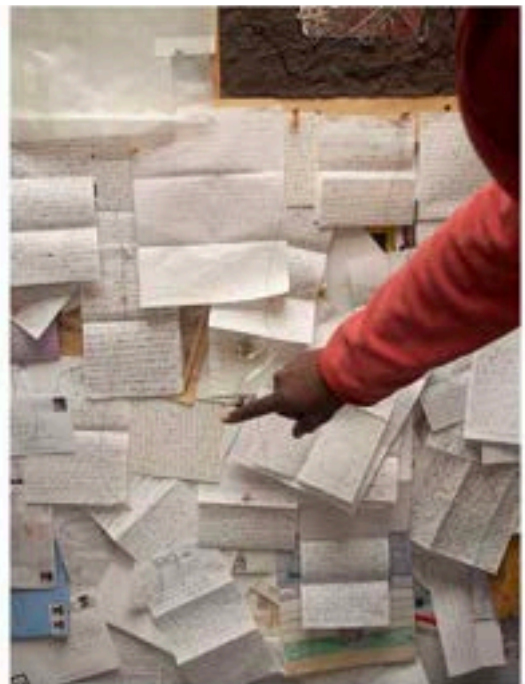


In as much as any diasporic community is founded in the experience of loss, thus grief, there is a thread of the mourning ritual in the experience of Simms' sculpture. Etymologically the word diaspora roots itself in dispersal and scattering. Collectively remembering—perhaps even lone remembering—proposes a reparative narrative which is, in turn, a means of binding together the scattered. But the diasporic narrative is also a shroud. It stands in for the missing, the lost home itself. It stands for something usually not attainable, perhaps not even known or imageable. Or something that is, for reasons various, difficult to talk about.

Wrapping in Simms is, perhaps, kin to the use of the blur in some post-war history painting. Richter is the obvious touchstone here, the blur as hazy memory, uncertain history, obscured or hidden history. Because Simms' wrapped objects peek out, bulge revealingly or are visible from canted points of view there is a lack of clarity—vision is hazy and blurred. There is, then, something about the provisional and the contingent knowledge put before us by Simms in the act of wrapping and the enigma it enshrouds that hits the right note. Simms shies away from certainty as both a studio process and perhaps as a political necessity. We are never quite sure what or why the hidden is so. A scramble of affect accompanies the act of hiding. Shame, guile, aggression, retribution and much more are all there. The narrative—if that is the right word—of loss, dispersal and mourning is never complete and encircled. Loose ends, like frayed lengths of rope and string, abound in the studio.

MARTOS GALLERY

By way of example, there is a synecdochic parable of loss that Simms articulates across a series of recent works. The work is composed of *ten* pieces that Simms has completed as, in part, a mourning dirge to his deceased mother who was born 10/10/1924. The tens all resound with one another as if to invoke the rhythmic occultism of numerology. The pieces themselves feel votive. Very little is fully hidden. It is a public display. Simms shows us the letters written to him from his mother, the old I.D. cards of his and hers, that Skatalites poster. He includes patches of his own hair to affect an autobiographical brew. And while the arrangement of these objects creates —akin to theatrical blocking— site lines and blind spots, it is nonetheless the case that within the corpus of the artist's work these ten pieces constitute a movement of revelation, even a secular annunciation. He makes himself, his personal grief, very visible. Makes his immigrant family's connection across time and geography deeply important. And the travels, the movement of the artist's mother from Jamaica to New York when Simms himself was merely 7 years old is, of course, a thread of the diasporic narrative. Personal history plays out as a representation of global history; the two wrap and re-wrap one another.



MARTOS GALLERY



Formally Simms favors a textured surface. Lengths of twine or rope wrapped and spread into contours of texture by what they enclose. A fluffy, furry surface emerges that is not, in fact, entirely opaque. The impression could be of grisaille that paradoxically obscures. Thus, as already noted, in the sculpture you can sometimes make out what is hidden and sometimes not. In many cases part of the sculpture is not wrapped at all. In plain site a giant egg, beneath it a tightly wrapped form, a box, that may, or may not, hide *something*.



Egg Overhead, (2014)

MARTOS GALLERY

With Simms the act of making disappear, of hiding, is a horizon for the possibilities of knowing and telling. Secrecy is itself, a horizon for who gets to say—who gets to have a voice. In *Citizen Kane* if the viewer pays attention to the very end Welles tips his hand, reveals —'Rosebud.' Even for the boy wonder of Hollywood, the system of classical narrative pleasure demands this be so. Simms is painted into no such industrial-cultural corner. He tenaciously clings to the obscuring of knowledge, to the almost, but not quite said. In this way Simms controls the knowledge dial; who knows what and when. There is no spectacular entertainment to this, no abracadabra moment where the lady vanishes, as with Welles. Rather, the relationship of the viewer to the knowledge dial is pushed into the fore; we know we are not knowing everything. As viewers we are planted before the object, aware of enigma, of hiding and ambivalence, but also we are beguiled and seduced by the available surfaces and objects—eggs, knives, roller skates, toys—all of which shift and change with angle and point of view. For Welles there is no horizon, no enigma, Rita Hayworth is either in the box or not.*

So wrapping what?



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Lucy Fradkin Meets John Delapa Or Gregor, (1992), in the studio

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How do we move from the memorably decentered subject of European modernism to the destroyed subjectivity and history of dispersed peoples? I have not been able to find any etymological connection between disappear and diaspora. But they surely sound like they have to be cousins. To disappear, disperse, go away, be gone. Surely? There are many reasons why one might see less than clearly; reasons why one might hide something, not know something —like Gregor and his identity. We see unclearly perhaps because history is unendurable (or that, and too shameful; Richter's dilemma), or perhaps because knowledge is painful, because identity has for too long been used to oppress one.

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Studio-time is the practice of musing upon —becoming lost to?— the work of others, the work of art history and, per Brancusi's studio stroll, the affective history of one's own daily practice. It is a species of affective movement that oscillates between the centrifugal and the centripetal. Can we think of studio-time, very optimistically, as a regrouping of subjectivity and one's place in history? Think again of Richter nursing German history through those blurs and forgettings to become, what, more visible, somehow more say-able or forever un-say-able?

For Simms movement and wrapping collide loudly in a series of works from the early 2000s. In these pieces toy cars and trucks stand in for big cars and trucks as well as being toy cars and trucks. In *Red Truck*, 2006, the toy is vintage, rusted, dinged and wheelless. In *Mini Cooper*, 2002, it is a yellow eponymous car; in *Red Mini*, 2003, a red one; while in *Red Cooper*, 2004, another red version of the car is crushed by a single huge stone (to scale, a boulder) with a child's play ball attached above it all.



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MARTOS GALLERY



Like all scavengers, Simms's libidinous attention is drawn to the abandoned, to the flotsam, seeing in it unmet potential, unnoticed use value. The enigma of what it is that is wrapped, bleeds out and makes the wrapping itself enigmatic. A seemingly ritual act of concealment births a seemingly ritual object. In the foregoing a model—a toy car—becomes the vehicle of history, and wouldn't you know it, it is rather difficult to maintain or track its movement. The train of history is derailed by Monty Python: perfect.

Where does that leave us?

So we all know things disappear. History disappears. Identity disappears. Simms dances a foxtrot around remembering and forgetting, around things being lost or even stolen and found. His things are hidden and disappear—almost. You could think of his sculpture as displaying a deliberately clumsy sleight of hand as a gesture to say, "I made something disappear, but reappear on my terms."

History has no shape until we describe or write it (or sculpt it). Simms's history of migration, scavenging, traveling, finding, losing, making is written into his corpus. "The hysteric suffers mainly from reminiscences," said Freud (and Breuer). The collector is perhaps not sure what he remembers or forgets, not sure what is present, past or hidden, over there behind that other thing. But he knows he *must* collect.

MARTOS GALLERY



Ego Sum, Portrait of Arthur Simms as a Junk Collector, (1994)



sides 1 and 2, photos: Graham Haber



MARTOS GALLERY



[www.https://arthursimms.com/home.html](https://arthursimms.com/home.html)

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ArtSeen

Arthur Simms: *The Big Picture, One Halo, Sculptures and Drawings*

By **Hovey Brock**



SLAG GALLERY | NOVEMBER 16 – DECEMBER 26, 2018



Arthur Simms, *The Big Picture, One Halo, Sculptures and Drawings*, installation view, Slag Gallery, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Slag Gallery. Photo: JSP Art Photography.

MARTOS GALLERY

Arthur Simms's work at Slag Gallery comes in two parts: drawings and sculpture. Simms's reputation rests on his sculptures, which typically include discarded objects. In this show we get six works from across a range of dates from 1992 to the present. They are all DIY affairs that appear highly improvisational, ranging in scale from the size of a smart car to the proverbial breadbox. The drawings all date from the last two years. While they share in the improvisational feel of the sculptures, they also include diaristic material from Simms's personal life, hints that help us to better grasp the concerns that animate his sculptures. These include his Caribbean-American identity, which brings so many layers of cultural exchanges, and a stubborn willfulness to wrest meaning out of chaos by bringing the overlooked and discarded to life.

Simms accomplishes this Herculean task through a process he calls "binding," which we see throughout his work. *A Ride for the Massive*, (1992) is a hulking structure of wooden slats tightly laced and knotted together with courses of rope. The slats and rope form an intricate lattice that encloses pieces of pressed tin and a green metal box with handles. Simms acknowledged in a 2009 interview in these pages that when he obsessively covers an object with rope or some other binding agent he is effectively creating a "skin," which is to say endowing the object with life. The wheels that peek out at the bottom of *Ride for the Massive* give it the capacity for movement, as well as referring to the wagons and carts Simms made when he was a child in Jamaica. Like an Nkisi—one of those central African figures studded with nails—the ensemble has what Simms has termed "an aggressive ugliness" brimming with vitality.

When we move to the drawings, Simms's binding takes on both a graphic and a metaphorical dimension. *Stand Up Straight and Burn*, (2018) has four 8.5 by 11 inch pages arrayed two by two glued onto a larger sheet. The upper left page is a close up of a wood-and-rope lattice sculpture featuring a buoy, again suggesting travel, this time by sea instead of land. The other three pages are taken from a syllabus for a drawing course Simms has taught. The subject matter of the three pages effectively binds them together,

MARTOS GALLERY

and to “drawing” itself, while the forms Simms has drawn in ball-point pen tie them to the bulbous shape of the buoy in the photograph. The forms consist of tightly crosshatched lines, which create a shiny skin for each shape.



Arthur Simms, *A Ride for the Massive*, 1993. Rope, Wood, Glue, Metal, Screws, Wheel Cart, Plastic, 77 1/2 x 65 x 39 inches. Photo: JSP Art Photography

MARTOS GALLERY

These shapes appear across all the drawings, an alphabet of sorts. Just as Robert Storr referred to the objects in Simms's sculptures as parts of speech in his 2005 essay "Arthur Simms: Part to Whole," so the shapes in these drawings read as glyphs from some as-yet-to-be deciphered writing. *The Big Squeeze, Arthur Seated*, (2018) has a photograph of the artist, looking very much at rest in his pajamas, seated in a room in the lower left corner. Around the photograph are more syllabus pages, each covered with the same family of tightly nested biomorphic shapes. In the bottom right corner, another syllabus page bears at the top a large circle two to three inches in diameter made from Simms's hair, while hanging below that is a small plastic bag with a dried cicada inside it. It is hard not to read this drawing as some kind of rebus or collection of rebuses, in the fashion of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Here, however, the symbols, ideographs, letters, or whatever take on different meanings depending on whether they are actual things, representations of actual things, or simply marks on a page.

Following Storr, Simms's work carries a system that, mirroring language, shuttles between concept, object, and image. However, Simms's sculptures are not just messages, as is the case with the drawings, but entities that, Nkisi-like, have bodies that speak. As is typical of his earlier work, *A Ride for the Massive*, with its heft and grit, speaks prose. *The Lamentation of Christ*, (2018) by contrast, speaks poetry. It is a comparatively small work, made of a piece of wood, sitting in a tray, decorated with feathers and wire. In an adjacent tray, there is a rock and ball. Simms's tropes abound here—the binding element, this time with wire, and the alchemical transformation of junk into precious objects—but we also see an unexpected restraint and elegance. In *The Lamentation of Christ*, (2018) biblical reference aside, we feel Simms channeling not Africa or the Caribbean, but Asia, in particular the refinement of Japanese art. Amplifying that association, several of the drawings have *Arthur in Japan* as part of their titles, and all feature a photograph of the artist's long shadow.

MARTOS GALLERY



Arthur Simms, *Stand up Straight and Burn*, 2018. Photograph, Pen, Pencil, Marker, Glue, Paper, 30 x 22 ½ inches. Courtesy the artist and Slag Gallery. Photo: JSP Art Photography.

His other recent sculptures feel equally poetic. They also look to other continents, such as *Burst*, (2017 – 2018) a hanging sculpture of cascading feathers, which suggests Native American or maybe Polynesian influence. Simms, due perhaps to his Caribbean origins and New York City upbringing, has a visceral feel for the points of contact where cultures rub against each other. His sculptures, as metaphorical bodies, are witnesses to that exchange. What is exciting about this show is that Simms appears to have developed a lighter touch that signals a new phase in his development.



ARTHUR SIMMS

Posted by [Fintan Boyle](#) and [Jennie Nichols](#) on Tuesday, June 26, 2018

Citizen Simms: Unpacking Arthur Simms' Studio

As [Citizen Kane](#) draws to a close –I am thinking of the penultimate scene, the scene before the "Rosebud scene"– the camera pulls back to allow the frame to become filled with the fillings of the vast storage at Kane's Xanadu. Kane's scavenging come hoarding slowly fills the frame –fills all the space there is– squeezing out the presence of art and history, squeezing out the tiny little actors at the bottom of the frame. Abundance, it seems, squeezes out the particular. For those trapped within the diegetic space of the film the "Rosebud" enigma will remain unsolved, unseen as the credits roll (And thereon for an eternity of re-screenings). But for the attentive spectator much will soon be explained.

In a way, if you squint, (or if you crave cinematic similes) the opening 'shot' one gets on entering Arthur Simms' studio bookends that penultimate shot in [Citizen Kane](#). Round the first corner in the studio and close to forty years of Simms' work crowds toward the visitor. In "Kane" the plundered antiquities and art are boxed, crated, unseen, unknowable. And we as viewers are retreating from them along with the craning camera. With Simms we are moving in toward them. Moving in for the close up, engulfing ourselves with each step we take. In Simms' studio there is a dearth of crates but there has nonetheless been much swathing and wrapping. For Simms the wrapping of objects is both an essential technique and a prevailing figurative device. It has evolved, over many years and many sculptures, to be a mainstay of his studio practice. For Simms wrapping is part of what transitions objects into sculpture. Thus he wraps these objects, sometimes tenderly, sometimes brusquely, with wire, or with rope, or string, or sheets of glassine, scraps of lumber, stretches of aluminum foil or newspaper.



Arthur Simms studio

MARTOS GALLERY



Arthur Simms studio

At Xanadu someone has presumably catalogued and recorded what is in all those crates. Or they could be empty; they are just props. Still and all the spectators will never know. And it is not very important anyway. The kitsch revelation in the final scene will do the emotional heavy lifting. Contrarily, in Simms' studio it feels clear that this is wrapping and not, say, just the surface or patina of his sculpture. And it is very, very certain that this all has nothing to do with the pragmatics of crating to ship or store. It feels clear that there is an inside to the sculpture. Some *thing* has been wrapped. But more than that, the action and presence of the artist is embalmed within the wrapping of the object. In this sculpture there is an object but there is also the history of an act. There is a yesterday, and an unconscious. In this way the work is loud with an occulted presence.

Simms' first began wrapping sculpture around the late 1980s. *Left Foot* (1989–1990) is the first he recalls. That there is no extant image of this piece illustrates one of those tales that chart the long haul of many artists' lives. Simms had to vacate his studio of the time. The sculpture, too bulky and cumbersome to move with him, was defenestrated by, well, as he puts it . . .

"I paid a couple of strong young men who lived upstairs from me to help me take the window frame out and then we pushed it (the sculpture) out the window into the back yard."

Voila the work occulted into the gloomy history of New York artists' struggles with real estate. The literarily, and evocatively titled, *Crossroads, St. Andrew, Kingston, Jamaica, 1961–69*, (1992) is the work that Simms identifies as "based on the *Left Foot* sculpture" Standing ten feet high and five feet wide it is only half the width of the original. (Try to imagine the original exiting that window.) Between the capacious scale and the evocative literary title there is much territory there for an artist to hide a great deal.

MARTOS GALLERY



Crossroads, St. Andrew, Kingston, Jamaica, 1961–69, (1992)

Simms confidently points toward Jackie Windsor's *Bound Square* from 1972 as an important landmark in terms of wrapping objects. But, like many artists who have been in the studio for the long haul, Simms is dialoging with multiple strands of art history and these pop up hither and thither as one walks the studio. Jackie Windsor's particular post-minimalist trajectory, with its self-aware knowledge of recent art history, which it both mines and pushes back against, seems important. As do her eschewing of the hardness and industrial metaphors of minimalism and her embrace of process. Likewise the mark of the hand and the history of the actions carried out by the artist are all crucial in Simms' work.

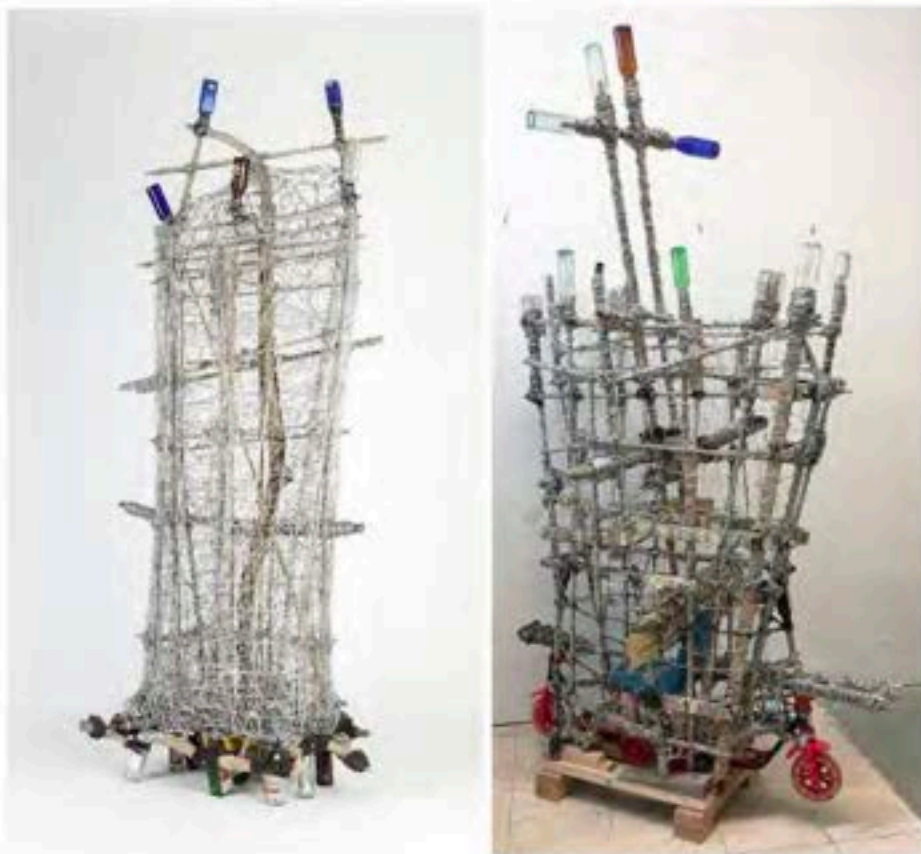
Yet the history of wrapping is not just Windsor. Wrapping is the decisive overdetermined device of Simms' daily practice. In speaking of the wrapping Simms invokes, alongside Windsor, Minkisi figural objects or sculptures originally found in cultures along the Congo Basin. More oblique than Windsor's wrapped corners the contents of the Minkisi are not merely enigmatic, or concealed they are also powerful materials or spiritually charged substances. So if Windsor is wrapping something, putting it out of sight (a certain version of masculinity perhaps?) Minkisi are wrapping materials and objects that offer a cadence of occult power. For Simms, an intellectual and cultural see-sawing back and forth allows him to coax a studio dialogue out of post minimalist sculpture and traditional Kongolese artifacts. On top of all this there are also abundant references to cultures of native America and an ongoing scrutiny of certain Italian Renaissance figures and traditions.



MARTOS GALLERY

Diaspora

However, around about here, in the studio conversation, Simms does invoke the importance of diasporic African culture. His own Jamaican birth, ancestry and emigration to the United States are all a piece of this. (As is the vigorous presence of a large Skatalites poster in one sculpture —more later.) And in the studio there are sculptures that excavate the imagery of African-American traditions, bottle sculptures being one example. These evoke cultural wisdom and habit but also work formally to bring subdued local color to a frequently monochrome body of work. Such formal tribulations and historical, thematic concerns interpolate throughout the work.



The Blue House, (2015) photo: Graham Haber | *Dreamcatcher III*, (2017)



In as much as any diasporic community is founded in the experience of loss, thus grief, there is a thread of the mourning ritual in the experience of Simms' sculpture. Etymologically the word diaspora roots itself in dispersal and scattering. Collectively remembering —perhaps even lone remembering— proposes a reparative narrative which is, in turn, a means of binding together the scattered. But the diasporic narrative is also a shroud. It stands in for the missing, the lost home itself. It stands for something usually not attainable, perhaps not even known or imageable. Or something that is, for reasons various, difficult to talk about.

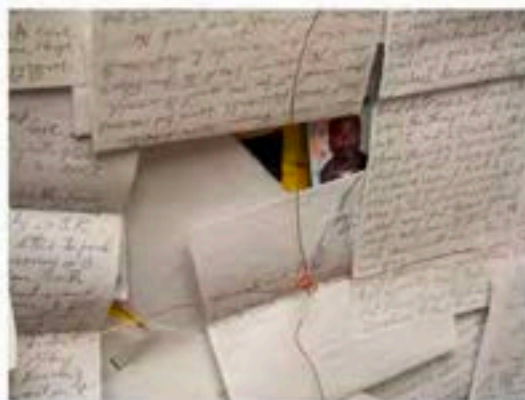
MARTOS GALLERY

Wrapping in Simms is, perhaps, kin to the use of the blur in some post-war history painting. Richter is the obvious touchstone here, the blur as hazy memory, uncertain history, obscured or hidden history. Because Simms' wrapped objects peek out, bulge revealingly or are visible from canted points of view there is a lack of clarity—vision is hazy and blurred. There is, then, something about the provisional and the contingent knowledge put before us by Simms in the act of wrapping and the enigma it enshrouds that hits the right note. Simms shies away from certainty as both a studio process and perhaps as a political necessity. We are never quite sure what or why the hidden is so. A scramble of affect accompanies the act of hiding. Shame, guile, aggression, retribution and much more are all there. The narrative—if that is the right word—of loss, dispersal and mourning is never complete and encircled. Loose ends, like frayed lengths of rope and string, abound in the studio.

By way of example, there is a synecdochic parable of loss that Simms articulates across a series of recent works. The work is composed of *ten* pieces that Simms has completed as, in part, a mourning dirge to his deceased mother who was born 10/10/1924. The tens all resound with one another as if to invoke the rhythmic occultism of numerology. The pieces themselves feel votive. Very little is fully hidden. It is a public display. Simms shows us the letters written to him from his mother, the old I.D. cards of his and hers, that Skatalites poster. He includes patches of his own hair to affect an autobiographical brew. And while the arrangement of these objects creates—akin to theatrical blocking—site lines and blind spots, it is nonetheless the case that within the corpus of the artist's work these ten pieces constitute a movement of revelation, even a secular annunciation. He makes himself, his personal grief, very visible. Makes his immigrant family's connection across time and geography deeply important. And the travels, the movement of the artist's mother from Jamaica to New York when Simms himself was merely 7 years old is, of course, a thread of the diasporic narrative. Personal history plays out as a representation of global history; the two wrap and re-wrap one another.



MARTOS GALLERY



Formally Simms favors a textured surface. Lengths of twine or rope wrapped and spread into contours of texture by what they enclose. A fluffy, furry surface emerges that is not, in fact, entirely opaque. The impression could be of grisaille that paradoxically obscures. Thus, as already noted, in the sculpture you can sometimes make out what is hidden and sometimes not. In many cases part of the sculpture is not wrapped at all. In plain site a giant egg, beneath it a tightly wrapped form, a box, that may, or may not, hide *something*.

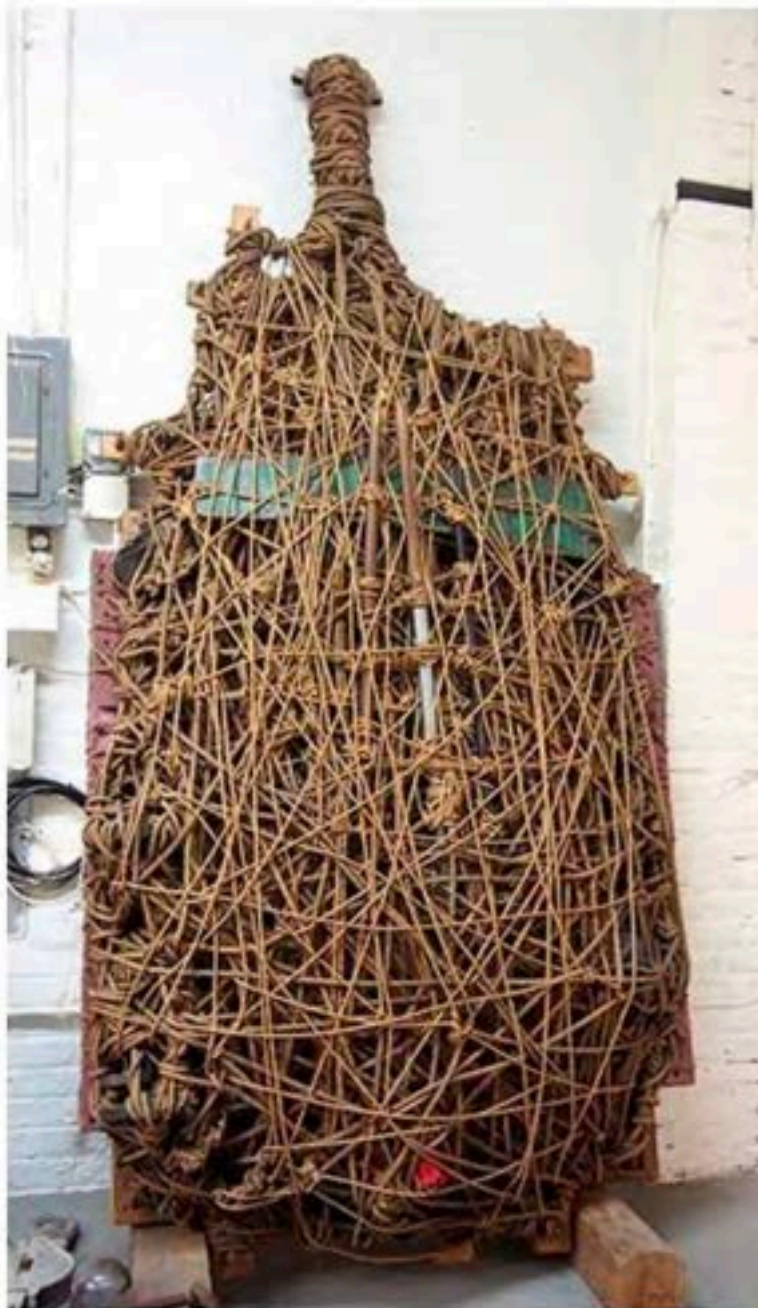
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Egg Overhead, (2014)

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MARTOS GALLERY

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(C) ARTHUR SINHE



MARTOS GALLERY



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MARTOS GALLERY

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Ego Sum, Portrait of Arthur Simms as a Junk Collector, (1994) | sides 1 and 2, photos: Graham Haber

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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.

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

MARTOS GALLERY



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

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.

MARTOS GALLERY

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

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Art, a Balm After the Storm

By Roberta Smith

Come Together: Surviving Sandy Works by 300 artists at Industry City

This exhibition offers a chance to catch up with artists whose works have been intermittently visible, among them Martha Diamond, Suzanne Joelson, Gary Stephan and Margaret Lewczuk, all working in abstract or quasi-abstract styles in (or related to) painting, all looking especially strong.

Other demonstrations of strength include the expressionistic paintings of Ms. Ackermann, the pattern-oriented ones of Tamara Gonzales and Katherine Bradford's slightly goofy paintings of ocean liners. Michael Joo's six works showcase his impressive sculpture and site-specific work. Another high point is formed by Arthur Simms's [assemblage sculptures](#) of wire and found objects and materials. A 1995 piece, "To Explain, Expand and Exhort, to See, Foresee and Prophecy, to the Few Who Could or Would Listen" should be in a museum collection by now.

Sète unveils the creation of young Caribbean artists

The International Museum of Modest Arts of the Languedocian city confronts works with a series of so-called popular objects and images.

By [Philippe Dagen](#) and Philippe Dagen

In Sète, the International Museum of Modest Arts (MIAM) likes to ask unexpected questions. *"Is there an art related to the world of drug traffickers?"*, he wondered a few years ago, before wondering about the mythologies of surfing. And this summer: what is happening in the Caribbean? The answer is in an exhibit - actually two in one - that was once shown at the Little Haiti Cultural Center in Miami last winter.

We write two in one because the curator of "Global Caraïbes", the Haitian artist Edouard Duval-Carrié, has added, to a selection of current artists born in these islands, part of the collection he has devoted to objects and images said to be popular and mostly related to voodoo. There are close links with cultural or magical instruments and works which bear witness to the knowledge that their authors have of contemporary anonymous creations.

The gaze is on the windows where Duval-Carrié has arranged bottles and calabashes adorned with fabrics, small reliquaries adorned with pearls and dolls transformed into divinities by the addition of sequins. When he gets up, he sees, a floor below, the three gigantic figures that Hew Locke, from British Guyana, has made by accumulating toys and plastic flowers.

Up close, we admire Locke's dexterity: he places scale models of dinosaurs so that their tails become the horns of his statues. From afar, we perceive the abundance of colors, and what these fantastic creatures have of protective geniuses.

A little earlier, entering the exhibition, we walked along the wall that the Haitian André Eugène lined with figures cut out of tires. Retorts, forked, clawed, howling, they are the sisters of those that blacksmiths cut up and welded in iron to be used for ceremonies.

DIY RELIQUARIES

It is one of the strengths of the exhibition to allow us to perceive these proximities between learned art and popular art. Both Martinique, David Damoison photography religious murals that have the simplicity and the presence of Romanesque frescoes and Alex Burke aligns dolls made from reclaimed fabrics, close to what ethnologists of the XIXth century called it contemptuously fetishes.

Jamaican Arthur Simms assembles debris of all kinds - skateboards, bicycles, jerry cans, glass jars - by weaving a net of crossed and knotted strings around them. So he in turn obtains DIY reliquaries, reliquaries for the present time made in an archaic way. The match between the process, the materials and the references is perfect.

However, it would be oversimplifying to define Caribbean creation by relics or religious references. The exhibition does not fall into this trap. If she opens up on André Eugène's black demons, she juxtaposes them the sweet and icy acrylics of the Haitian American painter Vickie Pierre, who, under a false air of floral decorations, develops to nausea and on a pink background the ambiguities of a sinuous line which can draw organs, islands, plants or draperies as well.

From a pop culture, the combinations of images of Nicole Awai or Gustavo Peña remind us that neither Trinidad nor Dominica - their native islands - were spared by the flow of advertising, comics and televisions north -american. More cruelly, -Joscelyn Gardner lithographs the diagrams of the instruments of torture in use in the plantations - snares, shackles, chains. They served in the XVIIth century in a property in Jamaica, Egypt Estate. However, the artist's Creole family has been living in Barbados since that same century - and we assume the autobiographical implications of such drawings, printed on a white plastic material which accentuates their coldness.

Unexpectedly and in a completely different form - assemblies of cut, painted, glued or nailed wood - we find this same memory of pain and this same irony which arouse unease in the four high polychrome reliefs of Hervé Télémaque, which were aptly added to the original version of the exhibition. Télémaque, born in Haiti, has never failed to recall the first relations between Europe and the Caribbean: trafficking and slavery.

INCONVERSATION

Arthur Simms with Phong Bui

by Phong Bui



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

On a Sunday afternoon in mid June, the sculptor Arthur Simms paid a visit to the *Rail* headquarters to talk to Publisher Phong Bui about his life and work.

Phong Bui (Rail): I know that you were born in 1961, in St. Andrew, but could you tell us, first of all, a bit about your upbringing?

Arthur Simms: I came from a middle class family, and although I was born in St. Andrew, I grew up in Kingston. One of the first major impacts of my life occurred when I was four years old, it was when my mother left to come to the States, the reason being that it was easier for a woman than a man to immigrate to the U.S. and look for work. She shared an apartment with two other friends from Jamaica. They worked full-time as au pairs and when they came home at nighttime, they would cry because they were away

MARTOS GALLERY

from their home and country. Of course at the time I did not know my mother was crying in Brooklyn, but I felt a great loss in Jamaica.



Arthur Simms, "Black Caravaggio, Dublin 2008 #2." Artist's Hair, Charcoal, Buttons, Thread, Graphite, Postcard, Glue, 15" by 24".
Courtesy of the artist.

Rail: So when did the rest of the family manage to come to the U.S. to join your mother, and where did you all end up living?

Simms: It was in 1969, and we moved into a three-family building on Pacific Street, on the cusp of Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights. The building has since been demolished. In 1971, they bought a house in Crown Heights, and that's basically where I grew up.

Rail: What did your father do?

Simms: He once owned his own business as a hotel supplier in Jamaica, but, at a certain point, it was too tough to keep it up so he got a job working for Coca-Cola, which was what he continued to do when we came to the U.S. until his retirement in 1990.

Rail: Was there a specific moment, if you can remember, that compelled you to think that one day you would be an artist?

Simms: I think back to Jamaica when I was a kid, and seeing all these things that people did. As you well know, Jamaica is a poor country, so rather than buying a little cart to take to the market to sell your wares, you would make your own cart, you would make the wheels, too, out of wooden sticks. I picked up on that as a child and so I would make these little objects. I would make all sorts of toys out of found materials: bows and arrows, sling-shots, kites, and so on. When I was in high school, in Brooklyn, I was in a work-study program where I would go to school one week and then the alternate week I worked for ITC, Irving Trust Company, an investment bank located at 1 Wall Street. I did that for my last two years of high school. It was in my last semester of high school when the counselor, who was in charge of the work/study program, asked "Since you've completed all your required classes, is there a class that you're interested in taking?" I said, "I love art." He was surprised to hear that I was into art and enrolled me in the only art class I ever took in high school. I continued in the work/study program the next year

MARTOS GALLERY

during my first semester at Brooklyn College. A freshman advisor asked me what my interests were. I said, "Banking and art."

So he said, "Okay, I'll give you one economics class and one art class. I guess you'll have to figure it out yourself from there." Needless to say, it only took me about three weeks to figure out that I didn't want to be a banker and art became the passion of my life.



Arthur Simms, "To Explain, Expound And Exhort, To See, Foresee And Prophecy, To The Few. Who Could Or Would Listen." Rope, Wood, Glue, Knives, Plastic, Metal, Objects, 111" by 67" by 21" 1995, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

Rail: At which point did you know that sculpture was closest to your calling?

Simms: Other than those objects that I'd created as a kid in Jamaica, my experiences in visual art were focused on drawing and painting. Then in 1985, I won a scholarship to go to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. It was an incredible opportunity to concentrate on art on a full-time basis. The whole environment was so conducive to making works and sharing ideas with fellow artists. It was there that I was able to experiment with making objects again for the first time since my childhood in Jamaica. Things just naturally began to get more relief-like and more sculptural, which made me realize that I was more of an object maker than a painter. That experience certainly changed my life, and I am quite grateful for it.

MARTOS GALLERY

Rail: So after the Skowhegan experience, you came back, finished your undergraduate in the following year as a sculptor, but did you take any time off before going back to the same school for your MFA?

Simms: I did. I took some time off after having graduated in 1986. I really needed it because I just wanted to see what the world was like on my own. Actually, I got jobs as an art preparator. I worked for Sylvia Stone, who was married to Al Held. She became my mentor, and was very supportive of my work. Through her, I learned a lot about the art world while maintaining a studio in my parents' basement. Also, I worked for Paula Cooper for two years. I worked for the art dealer Herbert Arnot where I met Vik Muniz and one of my best friends, Costa Vavagiakis, who is an amazing painter. All of this was a great resource for my experience as a young artist.

Rail: Did you see the epic exhibit that William Rubin organized at MoMA, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* in 1984?

Simms: Yes, I loved that show.

Rail: I did too, in spite of all of the negative reviews. It was great to see all of the chosen masterpieces of the tribal arts from various cultures paired with Modern and Contemporary works. And there's no need, really, to redefine the usage of the word "primitive," which now is less common and no longer has those derogatory implications. But, in thinking back, I remember reading Robert Goldwater, Louise Bourgeois's late husband, who did pioneering research in primitive art and its impact on modern art, especially his Gauguin scholarship; it was he who thought of tribal art as equally ranked with the finest achievements of the so-called highest cultures, both aesthetically and culturally. The truth is, its undercurrent is perpetual and still a wellspring for contemporary artists today. For instance, the two exhibits in the last two years: *Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art* in 2007, which included your work. The show was actually more identified with identity politics that generate the tendency towards a certain form of hybridization in all different fields, including architecture designs rather than just painting, sculpture, photography, installation, and video which was what made the show too broad stylistically, and inconsistent in terms of quality of the works. And then, Franklin Sirman's *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith* at P.S.1 last year, which I thought you should have been included. Though as far as how the religious ritual, that out of necessity has survived by the means of mediating between the African and indigenous practices inherited from their own ancestors, combined with European culture, I felt that the selection of thirty-three artists from David Hammons, Jimmie Durham, James Lee Byars, Terry Adkins, Pepon Osório, and several others, was first rate, don't you think so?

MARTOS GALLERY



Arthur Simms, "Buddha" (2008). 81" by 50" by 52" Wire, Bottles, Bamboo, Wood, Metal, Ice skates, Wheels. Courtesy of the artist.

Simms: I didn't see the exhibit, but I am familiar with works by those artists, as well as the content of Sirman's curatorial effort. I thought the Brooklyn Museum exhibition was good and I was very pleased to be included.

Rail: The other aspect which I identify with your work is that, even though they're made out of all kinds of found objects from contemporary, technological culture, they evoke this visceral connection to made objects from an earlier time.

Simms: Yeah, I've heard people say that some of my pieces look like ghosts or dreams from another era. The truth is, when I work on them, the images tend to come to me through memory and I can see it in my mind's eye, which is difficult to put in words because often times it has to do with a particular feeling of touch or with a smell. So that's the major challenge for me, how can I, through my study of art history, of world history, through my traveling to various cultures, piece everything together as a whole. You know, I do get a lot from looking at African sculptures, particularly the power of Nkondi male figures. Actually, I went to the Met a few days ago to see the special exhibition, *Africa and Oceanic Art* from the Barbier-Mueller Museum in Geneva inside the Michael Rockefeller wing, and they have two great male figures: one is a Nkondi from Congo, and the other is a Tangata from Rapa Nui (Easter Island). They are so ferocious, aggressive, ugly, and yet so beautiful at the same time. They have all these various adjectives.

MARTOS GALLERY

Rail: Which reminds me of two things that Robert Storr wrote of your work in his insightful essay. One is how the found objects and images become the nouns, verbs, and adjectives with which you created sentences, paragraphs, chapters of your so-called junk fiction. The other thing is the subject of scale, which relates to the human body. Both of which are what make your work so distinctly different from many artists of your peer group such as Nari Ward, for example, whose work is often more ambitious in scale and has more of a social and political overtone.



Arthur Simms, "Caged Bottle" (2006).

Rope, Wood, Glue, Bicycles, Metal, Bottles, Wire, 50 by 62" by 36". Courtesy of the artist.

Simms: That's true. Although Nari and I came from the same background, went to the same school, Brooklyn College, had William T. Williams as our mentor, and share, to some extent, a similar love for African art, I always wanted my work, in addition to whether it is small or large, to relate to the human scale, to insist on the fact that it is made by my hands. To me, that's the only way in which I can function as an artist.

Rail: It's your identification with the materials, therefore allowing the alchemical process to take place. This is a strong belief that Martin Puryear has always insisted on, even at the expense of what comes and goes in the art world.

Simms: Yeah, I love his work man. His retrospective at the MoMA in 2007 was an important experience for me. In fact my piece, "Hemp Or If I Were A Bird," (1991) is an homage to both Martin Puryear and Constantine Brancusi, whose work he admires for the

MARTOS GALLERY

same reason we are talking about. Like them, it's the transformation that excites me most. People have asked me, "Why do you choose certain objects?" and I have said, "well, maybe because it's shiny, rusted, has a certain color or patina," and so on, or maybe it references my background and a million other things. Whatever the reasons may be, once they're chosen and find their ways into the work, they take on into another life. So, as you had just said, it's about alchemy.

Rail: Where and how did the urge to collect found objects come about? I mean besides the time you were making objects as a child and your previous experience at Skowhegan...

Simms: I could say that after seeing works at the MoMA in the early 1980s, Robert Rauschenberg's "First Landing Jump" (1961), Jackie Winsor's "Bound Square" (1972), and Cy Twombly's "The Italians" (1961), I felt they presented me with endless possibilities and various materials to create my own work. While combining the two former pieces generates the idea of "combines" and conceptual art, the latter relates to my love of drawings. Anyway, it was after that experience, in which I began to re-assemble different objects, and in thinking back to Winsor's "Bound Square," I started to use rope to tie things together.

Rail: That was when you made your first breakthrough?

Simms: Yes. "Lucy Fradkin meets John Delapa or Gregor," "Arc," and "Hemp, or If I Were a Bird" were all made at around the same time, between 1989 and 1992. Actually, my first rope piece, which I never gave a title, was so big that I couldn't get it out of the building. [*Laughter.*] You actually may have seen it when you came to visit me and Ezra [Kohn] in our second floor apartment in Prospect Heights.

Rail: Yeah. I remember. We got stoned and were looking at this enormous 9' by 7' piece sitting on the floor in the backroom. [*Laughter.*]

Simms: Remember, I never got stoned. Some people find it hard to believe that I never did since I am Jamaican. I couldn't get the sculpture out the door. I even tried cutting it in several pieces, but it was too dense. [*Laughter.*] I ended up paying my upstairs neighbors to push it through the large windows into the back yard, and I basically left it there when I left the apartment a week later.

Rail: Yeah, that's so funny. [*Laughter.*] I used to take the S train which was then seriously hairy, from Bed-Stuy, where I was living in those days to visit you and Ezra in Prospect Heights. It all came together—the way you tie things together is essentially a form of wrapping, which is interesting in that it is similar to the way in which, let's say, polite language wraps social interaction, architecture wraps space, or how people in Asia, particularly in Japan, take extreme care in wrapping objects, whether it's groceries or gifts. Or how the dead bodies, depending on their socio-political-religious ranking, are wrapped as part of the process of mummification, which was considered a passage to the after-life, as in Ancient Egypt, for example. Do you see your work as a wrapping ritual

MARTOS GALLERY

that transcends the mundane, in this case, found and used objects, to some form of transcendence?



Arthur Simms, "Globe, The Veld" (2004).

Metal, Wire, Plastic, Artist's Nails, Wood, Objects, 17" by 14" by 14". Text by Peter Orner. Courtesy of the artist.

Simms: Yes, I do. It's like a skin that has energy. To me, the rope is like lines as in drawing, an activity that I do more than sculptures. I'm drawing with the rope obsessively until it becomes a sort of skin over all these various things that are on the inside, which you can barely see. Later on I started using wire as a different kind of skin.

Rail: Which is more open.

Simms: And light reflective, where there are reflections, evil cannot pass—an old black fable. It's another way of dealing with different character of lines, which deal with encasement and glimpses of things simultaneously. Some of my sculptures are so packed that I don't even remember what is in there. [*Laughter.*]

Rail: Like a painting that has been painted over so many layers that you can see its accumulated history on the surface but you can't see what has been buried underneath. At any rate, in citing the found materials that you use in your work, which are basically everything from milk crates, plumbing parts, old shoes, rags, bottles, and cans to various objects such as hand tools and so on, it reminds me of the bower bird, especially the male, which, to attract its mate, often builds a bower with a variety of materials such as feathers, stones, broken shells, and leaves, mixing them with discarded plastic items, coins, nails, pieces of glass, and so on. And this selection of various materials is what

MARTOS GALLERY

makes up the bower, and one is never identical to the next. This is what some ornithologists called the “transfer effect.” In other words, do you have a general idea that relies mostly on a spontaneous process in which the image is gradually formed? Or do you make drawings beforehand?

Simms: No, I never make a drawing beforehand. I always consider my drawing as something in and of itself. I don’t make sketches or little maquettes of the sculpture mostly because I enjoy the improvisational aspect by keeping the two activities of drawing and sculpture independent. But as far as your reference to the bower bird, I had looked at and admired many birds’ nests at the Museum of Natural History like I do with other natural occurrences, things that are made by different creatures and insects. It’s all open and all there for any one of us to take and use accordingly in to our works.

Rail: In observing the large body of work that you produced in the last two decades or more, I felt that there are two pronounced motives that tend to regenerate themselves in different and subtle ways. On one hand, there are the works that often include the variety of wheels, bicycle wheels, skateboards, and dollies, which often serve as a base, and appear in a transitory state. We can see that in a number of works, for instance, “Bicycle” (1995-96), “Chariot” (2006), or “Buddha” (2008). On the other hand, other works, including “Real Estate For Birds?” (2007)

Simms: Which was a commission for the fortieth anniversary of Art in the Parks.

Rail: In its strong verticality and free standing position, it resembles a totem pole while “To Explain, Expound. And Exhort. To See, Foresee And Prophecy, To The Few Who Could Or Would Listen” (1995-2008).

Simms: Which derived from a statement made by W. E. B. Dubois as he was trying to educate the masses. In addition it had to do with my encounters with African throwing knives when I was a preparator at the Brooklyn Museum in the early 90s. While I was handling these objects, I was taken by their beauty and potential for harm. Also, the piece is made with the long and narrow vertical stem, as if you can carry it in a parade, which is evocative of the homemade floats I witnessed as a child growing up both in Jamaica and Brooklyn.

Rail: And the fact that it, like “Prisoner of the Earth” (1992-93), rests against the wall for support, which suggest their somewhat stationary positions. That said, both of the transitory and stationary elements do, from time to time, overlap and infuse one to another. “Dream Catcher” (2000) or “Caged Bottle” (2006) are both good examples. Is that a legitimate observation?

Simms: It is. Some of them are about actual movement, where I’d question the nature of the base. Can a wheel be a base? It’s also about being practical: my work is so heavy, so having wheels on the bottom could make it easier to move around. In addition, it’s about the African Diaspora; the movement of Black people throughout history and personal metaphors for my departure from Jamaica. So the wheels have a deeper meaning in that

MARTOS GALLERY

they carry a heavy load, which sometimes can't move because they are embedded. And that's a different kind of attention—a potential that cannot be reached because it's being held back. So yes, that is about a lot of different metaphors, and I am playing with various metaphors about movement.



Arthur Simms, "Hemp Or If I Were A Bird" (1991). 95" by 48" by 27" Rope, Wood Glue, Paint, Ladder. Objects. Courtesy of the artist.

Rail: Could you talk about the other two pieces, for instance, "Globe, the Veld" (2004) and "The Prisoner of the Earth"; the two pieces that have stronger figural references than your other work?

Simms: Actually, the "Globe" piece is a collaboration with Peter Orner, a writer, who I met while I was a Fellow at the Academy in Rome in 2002-2003. Peter would write his manuscript longhand on scraps of paper, and I would, subsequently, use these as collage materials in my work. Later when I went to visit him in San Francisco in 2004, he had found the globe, and like the papers, he had obsessively written on it. I just came up with creating the rest of it. As for "Prisoner of the Earth," the figural or creature-like elements refer both to Gregor Samsa in Kafka's "Metamorphosis," and how it, like my other work, relates to me as a physical person in terms of scale.

MARTOS GALLERY

Rail: Could you talk about your inclusion in the 49th Venice Biennale, along with the Jamaican pavilion in 2001, which I believe was the only time that Jamaica had a pavilion?

Simms: I started out thinking two years earlier, in 1999, that Jamaica had never been in the Biennale, so I approached the Biennale committee and they said that I had to get the culture minister from Jamaica to write the letter requesting the country's inclusion, which was what I did. I contacted the minister of culture from Jamaica, and he said he would be willing to do it, but would take no responsibility for the Pavilion. So it did not happen that year. Then in 2000, I applied for a Guggenheim grant with the proposal of trying to get Jamaica into the 2001 biennale, and I got the grant. I then wrote a letter to Margaret Bernal who, besides being a champion of the arts not only in Jamaica, but throughout the Caribbean, is also the wife of Richard Bernal, who at the time was the Jamaican ambassador to the U.S. in Washington D.C. She was able to act as a liaison to the Jamaican minister of culture, and that's how it got started. But the whole thing wouldn't have happened without Agnes Gund's strong support of my work, which goes far beyond the Biennale.

Rail: What would artists do, or the cultural life in our city be, without her? I don't know.

Simms: She is a saint, man.

Rail: Could you talk more about your collages or drawings?

Simms: The collages are just as obsessive as my sculptures. In a glance, you'll find references to the minimalist's use of graphite and charcoal, especially Brice Marden when he was making those beautiful pieces, in which he would collage a postcard of a Goya painting right next to a drawn graphite within a grid. But if you look at them close up, there's a lot of obsession in how the application is done.

Rail: Which has some painterly qualities.

Simms: Definitely. Like a lot of sculptors, I started out as a painter, so that trained my eyes and hands, which is evident in both my sculptures and drawings.

Rail: Is there a reason why the reference of Caravaggio seems to reappear in most of your collages?

Simms: It came from my previous experience in Rome, where I saw a great deal of Caravaggios. Besides, I use the postcards as a cultural reference: from the Roman, Gothic, Renaissance, Mannerist, Baroque, all the periods of Italian art, and then there's me. Actually in a lot of these drawings there are degrees of grays and blacks that refer to some of my early drawings. In some cases I have pieces of my hair included as my homage to David Hammons who also uses hair in his works, as did Africans before him. In other cases I include metal and aluminum foil, which reflect light and wherever there's

MARTOS GALLERY

light, evil cannot get in. So, there are all of these various references that also go into the making, not only of my drawings, but my sculpture, too. But Caravaggio, he's the king.

Rail: Is there a slight trace of healing aspects in your work, as in Joseph Beuys attraction to Shamanism?

Simms: I would say yes. It's the ritual aspect of man that goes back to the prehistoric time of the caveman, which still persists today: How do we get at the essence of our beings? What is religion and what does it mean to be religious?

Rail: There was once a lecture that was given by Paul Tillich sometime in the late 40s (who taught at the Union Theological Seminary), on the subject, and somebody from the audience asked him, "Would Babe Ruth's ultimate aim, to hit as many home runs as he possibly can, be considered a religious act?" And Tillich responded, "Yes, if a person's ultimate commitment is to do the best he or she can in their field, it would become their religion."

Simms: Yeah, I agree, that's what we do as artists. Art is our religion.

Arthur Simms is an Assistant Professor at La Guardia Community College, CUNY. He will be a Resident Artist at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in summer of 2010.

Art in America

View of Arthur Simms's exhibition of sculptures and drawings from 1989-2005; at Five Myles.

Arthur Simms at Five Myles

Best known for his found-object sculptures reminiscent of the piles of belongings that homeless people often transport in carts, Arthur Simms recently mounted an exhibition of sculptures and drawings made between 1989 and 2005. Relying on precarious placement and balance, these works activate their quotidian materials through visual tension, rendering the mundane magical.

In *Crossroads, St. Andrews, Kingston, Jamaica, 1961-69* (1992), an imposing accumulation of old clothes, road signs, discarded metal and other detritus, tightly bound in twine, is built on a small wheeled platform that almost inconceivably holds up the mass. *Blue Chair* (2002), its small titular component wrapped in bright copper wire, is topped by a curved branch with a sharp knife attached to one end and a heavy stone to the other.

Simms, who calls himself a "constructivist" in the literal sense, sometimes joins collected leavings into conceptual portraits. Named for the artist's mother and father, *Icema and Chester* (1989-92) features burlap bags, scrap lumber and highway caution signs set within interlaced wood frames fastened together with knotted rope and reinforced with glue. The sculpture assumes a contrapposto stance, twisting on its vertical axis.

Other works are rife with cul-

tural references. *To Explain, Expound and Exhort, to See, Foresee and Prophesy, to the Few Who Could or Would Not Listen* (1995) is made in the shape of an Ethiopian cross. The nails piercing fabric and shoes affixed to the beams recall Nkisi sculptures from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where nails are driven into the works in rituals intended to cure illness. The drawings on view, produced when Simms won a Prix de Rome in 2002-03, juxtapose reminders of the African Diaspora—bits of African-American hair or images of iconic figures such as Frederick Douglass—with reproductions of works by historical European painters like Caravaggio.

Evoking the African-American saying "Where there's light, evil will not pass," Simms frequently uses reflective materials in his sculptures and rubs highlights into the charcoal of his drawings to suggest auras of light. Salvaging community discards, he transforms them into artworks that won't let you pass them by.

—Sarah Lewis

June 24, 2005

***THE LISTINGS: JUNE 24-JULY 1;
ARTHUR SIMMS***

By Ken Johnson

Some homeless people contrive the illusion of owning property by bundling found and mostly useless material into great aggregates that they load onto shopping carts or other wheeled vehicles. The sculptures of Arthur Simms, a Brooklyn resident who represented his homeland of Jamaica in the 2001 Venice Biennale, call to mind this sort of roving, often mentally eccentric pack rat. The earlier pieces in his show of works dating from 1989 to the present consist of quantities of junk -- rags, old shoes, milk crates, tools, plumbing parts and so on -- wrapped in dense cocoons of rope. These massive, bulging constructions, some standing on wheels, exude an uncanny power in proportion to the urban poverty that they evoke. In recent works, like "Blue Chair" or "Carnival" (above), the found constituents are more discernible: the frames of a blue metal chair and an old wooden one wrapped in a delicate net of copper wire in the one instance; the gold-foil wrapped skateboard, the clear bottle, the wooden shoe form and the bird cage all pulled together by twine webbing and looking a bit like a small dog in the second case. The tradition of the Surrealist assemblage lies behind these works, but they are not so self-congratulatingly witty as such objects can be; Mr. Simms's works are sophisticatedly absurd, but there is a touching pathos about them, too. His is a tender reclamation project; he is a saver of lost souls. (Five Myles, 558 St. Johns Place, Crown Heights, Brooklyn, (718)783-4438, through July 10.) KEN JOHNSON

“Lost & Found”

MARTOS GALLERY | NEW YORK



Arthur Simms, *Ego Sum, Portrait of Arthur Simms as a Junk Collector*, 1994, mixed media, 115 × 56 × 50". From "Lost & Found."

MARTOS GALLERY

Imagine a room in which all the things you've ever left behind—lovers, friends, cheap thrills, expensive sunglasses, and even parts of yourself—were languishing together. What would it look like? Or, more important, how would it feel to wander the aisles of this personal lost and found? Reliably shrewd curator Bob Nickas took up these questions of absence, ownership, and the voids that shape us in this five-artist exhibition at Martos Gallery. Some of the disparate works—a prescient wall drawing by Jessica Diamond, abstract canvases by Arnold J. Kemp, characteristically chilling sculptures by Kayode Ojo, found-object assemblages by Arthur Simms, and quasi-surreal paintings by Alexandria Smith—spoke to the theme more explicitly than others. None, however, felt idle or out of place. As Nickas observed in a statement accompanying the exhibition, the entire world is emerging from a lost year. What we might find as a result, collectively and in ourselves, remains to be seen. Born out of a curiosity regarding the nature of possession and belonging, the works on view seemed poised to guide our own interrogations.

Visceral and tender mixed-media pieces by Simms, whose work often contends with diasporic migration and heritage, provided the most intimate points of entry. Nearly ten feet tall, *Ego Sum, Portrait of Arthur Simms as a Junk Collector*, 1994, confronted viewers like a closed door. One face of the wooden barricade was swaddled in taut, densely layered nets of knotted rope, but the other side was an exercise in self-exposure. Personal artifacts—an ID card from an artist residency in Ireland, ballpoint-pen sketches of snowflakes made on scraps of paper, tattered shreds of tin ceilings, sand collected from a Mexican beach, and children's ice skates—were among the many objects held together by a connective tissue of encaustic splatters, nails, wire, and glue. Clippings of the artist's fingernails contributed to the sense of the work as ritual object—a shrine consecrated to the ephemeral chapters that compose a life, or a totem imbued with the power of various migrations. A grainy Xerox of a formal family photograph hovered at the heart of *Balm of Gilead*, 1999, a more modestly scaled collage. Simms is six years old in the image, standing beside his three sisters, arrayed in front of their parents in Jamaica. They are all wearing their Sunday best—a bow tie for Simms, white-collared frocks for the girls—but the occasion is far from festive. The children had not seen their mother in three years (she had emigrated alone to the United States to establish a life for them in New York), and they appear visibly haunted by her loss and sudden temporary reappearance. The family was finally able to follow her a year later, but the photo captures the grief of that single day and the larger narratives of sacrifice that attend leaving one home for another. The photo floats among tinfoil spheres, some sewn on like buttons—frozen planets in a lonely cosmos.

MARTOS GALLERY

The tone of other pieces was more aloof but no less mesmerizing. Fluid skeins of black acrylic wove spidery webs back and forth across *cc* and *NUT-FREE I*, both 2021, two large, sixty-nine-inch-square canvases by Kemp. They hung side by side just a few inches apart, inviting us to decipher them in tandem, as though they were the butterflyed halves of a Rorschach test. In previous works, the artist had painted similar lattices only to cover most of the composition in black, leaving the nets of pigment exposed along two opposite borders flanking a central impenetrable monochrome. By disrupting his own methods of effacement, Simms reminded us of how many hidden selves lurk beneath the visible surfaces of paintings and of people. Kemp's interest in what's lost and found through concealment and exposure found further expression in his mask prints—ink impressions of crumpled tinfoil sheets with three holes for mouth and eyes that resemble swirling clouds of smoke. Actual lost-and-found rooms, those public archives of forgotten objects, often serve as inadvertent memorials to human migration—to an evening out or an expedition overseas. The works in this show reminded us, though, that we are all travelers, losing things and gaining others along the way, even when we're not in motion.

—Zoë Lescaze