

Arthur Simms: *Icema's World*  
Lucy Fradkin: *Good Morning Alice and Other Stories*

April 25 - June 15, 2024

In Arthur Simms' *Icema's World* and Lucy Fradkin's *Good Morning Alice and Other Stories*, two artists reflect on the legacies they have come to share as a married couple. These exhibitions are each grounded in tribute to Simms' mother, Icema Erica Simms (1924–2015), but also emanate into broader examinations of identity, and how it is informed both by those who came before us and those with whom we share our lives. Icema immigrated to New York in the 1960s, leaving her husband and children behind in Kingston, Jamaica, while she worked to facilitate their reunion, caring for an American family in Westchester. Icema is foundational to these two solo exhibitions—had she not endured her first lonely years in New York, Simms and Fradkin may never have met—however, the two artists reciprocate homage and elegy to one another's families across the works on view. Simms' work regularly alludes to his wife, her family, and their traditions, and among Fradkin's most consistent subjects are her husband and his kin. In *Ten, Ten, Icema as a Bird* (2016), for instance, Simms memorializes his mother with the careful placement of a single stone, a Jewish tradition of remembrance he first encountered through the Fradkins. Fradkin's *Ginger Ridge* (2001) is a portrait of Icema, titled for her hometown. Icema holds a cane in *Ginger Ridge*, an ambulatory signifier of her expatriation, and is enveloped in a nimbus of collaged birds—a species known to migrate.

The shows are not cleanly bifurcated in the gallery space. Rather, two discrete bodies of work occasionally imbricate, just as the constituents of a romantic couple lead lives both autonomous and shared. Fradkin's and Simms' oeuvres are fundamentally distinct. Simms is a sculptor known for large-scale assemblages enveloped in skeins of hemp rope. Fradkin is a figurative painter who tends toward the intimate in both content and scale. But these differences are not total, and subtle commonalities recur between the bodies of work. Each artist engages craft techniques such as sewing and weaving; readymade components including found objects and collage elements; and quotations of diverse artistic conventions that reflect, with reverence, the vast plurality of visual culture. Since the 1990s, Simms and Fradkin have shared various studio spaces, both local and abroad, permanent and temporary. Their visual lexicons have incubated in tandem, not only in common workspaces but in shared travels—to Italy, Uruguay, Guatemala, Japan, and more. Together, *Icema's World* and *Good Morning Alice and Other Stories* describe how one couple's union threads together more extensive histories, and how identity is not monolithic but a composite of loved ones' influences.

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Arthur Simms' *Icema's World* (2013–2023) is a suite of seventeen sculptures and drawings. In *Icema's World*, a trove of the matriarch's ephemera mingles with objects and documents of Simms' own, united by the artist's signature method of bound assemblage. Like her son, Icema threw little away. She became a prolific writer of letters during her initial separation from her family, a practice she maintained throughout her life. Simms, always mindful of the personal provenance of his found objects, portrays his mother metonymically through these missives and other of her belongings. In *Icema's Chair*, Simms uses wire to fasten a stack of items which, together and in sequence, narrate Icema's immigration story. As is frequent in Simms' sculpture, wheels form the foundation for this vertical assemblage, defying the site specificity of the pedestal (and with it, the vestigial insinuations of property that sculpture inherited from the monument). Particularly in *Icema's Chair*, however, wheels also telegraph the itineracy of expatriation. Atop this precarious base is Icema's suitcase, which in turn supports a child's chair fastened by a rigorous network of wires. Implicit in this arrangement is Icema's endurance of uncertainty to ensure her family's stability. Simms crowns the sculpture with a regal arrangement of feathers, a tribute to her sacrifice and acknowledgement of her departure from earthly life.

Several large-scale panels are among the works in *Icema's World*, in which Simms' method of wrapping and binding finds two-dimensional expression. Sheets of semi-transparent construction plastic overlap across surfaces to create gradients of opacity, selectively revealing a constellation of ephemera beneath: Icema's letters, Simms' lesson plans, expired ID cards, a campaign sticker for Hilary Clinton, a napkin from the Obama White House (Icema was proud to vote for each). In Simms' freestanding sculpture, objects enveloped in twine recall the guarded contents of interior life. In the panels, a plastic haze reveals and obscures as memory might: some episodes exist in a fog but can be resolved through intense focus, others are far too buried under the film of accreted experiences. *And She Said, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1924, Beware, The Earth is Shaking*, is among these works. The work's title assigns seismic might to the date of Icema's birth: from one matriarch springs myriad biographies, her impact rippling across generations. Dominating the panel's upper half is a drawing Simms made in the early 1990s. Burnished by the repeated application of graphite pencil, the drawing indexes labor and grit, extending the athleticism of Simms' large-scale sculptures. A pair of enclosed circles in the drawing read like a head and halo, corresponding to two stones that ground the sculpture like feet, and confirming the work as a portrait—of Icema and all that came after her.

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Lucy Fradkin's *Good Morning Alice and Other Stories*, refers to the name Icema adopted temporarily during her first years in New York—a more common name in the States, but also the name of her oldest daughter. Every morning at work, Icema was greeted by this loaded pseudonym, a reminder of her estrangement not only from her family but also from her sense of identity. In *Good Morning Alice*, Fradkin exhibits a selection of paintings depicting herself and Simms, Icema and the Simms family, and a series of mixed-race couples dedicated to Richard and Mildred Loving, the couple whose legal ordeals decriminalized interracial marriage in the United States. While *Icema's World* pays homage to the woman whose perseverance facilitated the Simms' life in New York, *Good Morning Alice* highlights as well the legislative legacy that allowed Fradkin and Simms to share the life they do now.

Influenced by art historical traditions such as Indian and Persian miniatures, Fradkin's paintings compress depth, minimize contour, and embrace decoration. Her frontally oriented figures frequently occupy domestic spaces, standing on floors that are flush with the picture plane, privileging pattern over perspective. The artist regularly integrates collage into her paintings, culling mid-century domestic objects from sources contemporary to their production: department store catalogues depicting their wares in sepia tones, field guides illustrating and taxonomizing species in intricate detail. Fradkin maintains not only the vintage of these applied elements, but also the scale in which they were originally printed, charting her domestic spaces through their placement regardless of perspectival verisimilitude. Within these parameters, Fradkin elasticizes space just as she flattens it, rendering depth elusive and contingent.

Excepting herself and her husband, the couples portrayed in *The Loving Series* (2019–2022) are anonymous and imagined. They span not only racial identities but sexual orientations—the Lovings' case was a significant precedent for the legalization of same sex marriage. By opting for genre painting over portraiture, Fradkin refers to the millions of marriages validated by the Lovings' dedication to one another and tenacity against injustice. Fradkin's portrayal of marriage, however, is not a strictly quixotic one. In *You Catch More Flies With Honey Than With Vinegar* and *Topsy Turvy*, two 2020 works depicting herself and Simms during the pandemic, the artists orient away from one another and from the household, their faces each streaked with tears. Like many couples, Simms and Fradkin endured and survived the strain of inseparability during the pandemic, their usual autonomy blunted. Paintings like *Arthur Goes To Antigua* and *Lucy Goes To Guatemala* (both 2019) depict the artists shared love of travel, interrupted by COVID restrictions. Both paintings maintain Fradkin's use of domestic imagery, suggesting that home is formed not by a site but by the loved ones who occupy it.



Simms was four years old when Icema left for New York. For three years she was unable to visit him, apart from a brief trip to finalize the family's paperwork and cement their eventual reunion in New York. On this occasion, a family portrait was taken. This black and white photograph hangs at Martos alongside Fradkin's rendition in oil. Fradkin enlivens the image with the color and pattern signature to her practice, but maintains the family's solemn facial expressions, which impart the transience of Icema's return. These images typically greet visitors to the artists' home in Staten Island, hanging, respectively, at the bottom of the staircase and in the living room. Decades after Icema's passage to New York, their current installation at Martos demonstrates that, in the titular words of Fradkin's 2001 portrait of Simms, perseverance brings good fortune.

—*Katherine Siboni*