



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

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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 rejeamenta 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