

“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."

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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.

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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