

# THE BROOKLYN RAIL

## JULY-AUGUST 2009

### ARTHUR SIMMS WITH 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 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.

**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 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.

**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.

**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?

**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.

**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.

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

**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 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 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.

**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.

**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 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.