

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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ARTHUR SIMMS: THE BIG PICTURE, ONE HALO, SCULPTURES AND DRAWINGS

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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.

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, 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.

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.

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.