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ARTHUR SIMMS AND THE SKIN OF DISPARATE OBJECTS

by Yinka Elujoba



Arthur Simms in his Staten Island studio with sculptures bound in hemp. Far left, “Hemp Or If I Were A Bird”; “You Must be a Warrior” (pitchfork). Painting at far right is by his wife, Lucy Fradkin. Credit: George Etheredge for The New York Times

When the artist Arthur Simms was barely four, in 1966, his mother left their home in Kingston, Jamaica, for the United States to support her family as an au pair. Arthur, his father and his three sisters trod on in Kingston until they could join her in New York a few years later. The in-between years of his childhood in the Caribbean were like a dream that Simms remembers fondly because they set the stage for what was to come.

He was learning from Kingston’s artisans who, rather than buy a cart to use in the market, fashioned ones from wheels and boxes. Simms began to make little objects out of found materials — wood, plastic, ropes, metals — he used as toys.

“Jamaica might not be a wealthy country,” Simms, 61, said during a recent interview at his studio on Staten Island, where he lives and works. “But the people, man, they’ve got soul. They made things with their hands.”

Now, with two concurrent shows recently opened across two countries — a survey with work spanning more than three decades at Karma Gallery in Los Angeles and site-specific installations at a deconsecrated church in Cremona, Italy — it’s finally

clear how much Simms's enigmatic drawings and encompassing assemblages owe to his origins.

Simms said he thought of himself as an artist as early as second grade, in Brooklyn, where his mother's boss — who was also, by a stroke of luck, an immigration lawyer — helped the family relocate. It was the days of the Apollo mission, the race to the moon, and imaginations of space hovered above every conversation. A classmate had drawn a spaceship. "My teacher at the time said, 'this kid is an artist,'" Simms said. "And he handed him some pencils and crayons. I thought to myself, I can get with that — it looks like something I can do."

By high school, he was taking long walks from his home in Crown Heights to the Brooklyn Museum, where he would purchase art supplies and reproduce portraits by the legendary artists on the walls — Rembrandt, Goya — replacing their faces with his own. While a student at Brooklyn College, he showed one of the paintings, based on Goya's "Portrait of the Duke of Wellington," to the artist William T. Williams, his mentor, who taught him drawing and with whom he roamed SoHo galleries on field trips.

"Williams was kind," Simms remembered. "He said my painting reminded him of Haitian painting traditions." Yet Simms was unsatisfied: His colors were spare, and the work didn't appear original. In 1985, he won a scholarship to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine and began to experiment with objects again, as he had during childhood. "In Skowhegan I realized that it was sculptural ideas that came most easily to me," he said. "So, I went with the flow."

Yet form eluded him once again — until he decided to experiment with hemp rope. "And suddenly it made sense — it was like giving the sculpture a see-through skin," he said. He showed these rope sculptures for the first time in his first solo show, and also his big break, in 1992, at the Philippe Briet Gallery in SoHo. It has become his signature, wrapped like mesh around the disparate objects he has collected for years, making his entire oeuvre appear to be the giant collection of a well-traveled fisherman, rescuing lost items from the sea.

"When you're from an island in the Caribbean, the only news you get is from the sea," said José Martos, owner of the Martos Gallery in Manhattan, where Simms had a solo exhibition in 2021. They were introduced by Marquita Flowers who, in 2019, showed six works by Simms at Shoot the Lobster, an intimate gallery on the Lower East Side, also belonging to Martos. "I was immediately hooked to his practice," he recalled, "because it contained a clear understanding of art history balanced by a great sense of diplomacy, which is the only way you can have all these influences and still manage to keep things balanced."

In "The Miracle of Burano," the survey of Simms's work at Karma, through April 29, many objects the artist collected are seen for the first time, most marvelously wound with hemp rope. There are pieces dealing with his personal experiences, like "Chester, Alice, Marcia, Erica and Arthur Take a Ride," from 1993 — a sculpture in the form of a vessel, referencing his family's journey from Jamaica to the U.S. His

own interest in movement is accentuated by pieces in the show that have tires or wheels cleverly bound to them, or toy cars with wire, toy giraffes and brightly colored wood.

“He brought the memories of his upbringing with him,” said Phong H. Bui, the publisher and director of the Brooklyn Rail, who oversaw “Come Together: Surviving Sandy,” a large-scale exhibition of 300 artists’ reactions to the hurricane, a balm after the storm. Simms’s work was one of the stars of the 2013 show. “He is able to translate viscerally how he feels not just about his own culture but about every culture he experiences,” Bui added.

This is an artist on whom nothing is lost.

And in the same way Simms collects objects, he collects influences, evoking the market artisans back in Kingston and Robert Rauschenberg’s “First Landing Jump,” a 1961 assemblage (termed “Combine” at the time, to describe the merging of painting and sculpture) conceived from a rusty license plate, a man’s shirt, a wheel and other items. Simms had seen it at the Museum of Modern Art, where it reminded him of what he had done as a child, and became a launching pad for assemblages of his own that drew from other cultures.

Similarly, in 2016, when Simms traveled to Tokyo, he returned with fresh ideas from the 20th-century Japanese calligraphy artist Toan Kobayashi. In his time, Kobayashi made his writings on a rectangular paper, bounded by a square line. Simms builds off Kobayashi in his own “Summer Moon” from 2021: He binds his own drawings in a square with a perimeter made out of thread. A huge ball densely filled with blue ink and a rectangle float between blocks of inscriptions. There is a small patch of hair — the artist’s and his wife’s, black and reddish — glued to the drawing. This strange association of items creates the sensation of beholding the remains of a scientific experiment, seen through a magnifying lens.

Taking a leaf from Indian American traditions, Simms began to use feathers in his work. In “Arthur Simms, Fifteen Feathers,” a self-portrait from 2020, there are 15 feathers glued to the edge of the frame. “They break so easily, so brittle, yet they are beautiful and everlasting,” he explained. Small statues of Mungaaka power figures, or Nkisi, from central Africa, with nails stuck into them, inspired him to begin experimenting with using sharp objects in his work. “There is beauty in the danger,” he said, pointing out knives and spearlike edges of some of the sculptural totems in his studio.

Simms’s body of work may suggest the assemblage artists Lonnie Holley and Thornton Dial, but his formal art education (he obtained an M.F.A. in 1993 from Brooklyn College) and his mentoring by masters like Williams and Lee Bontecou, make him very much the insider. He worked for the gallerist Paula Cooper for two years. Simms is currently the director of the Fine Arts program at LaGuardia Community College, part of the City University of New York, where he is a professor. He is represented by three galleries, and collected by the Hirshhorn Museum at the Smithsonian, the Neuberger Museum of Art, Museum Brandhorst in Munich, and

the Yale University Art Gallery.

Yet being an insider never insulated him. An American citizen since he turned 18, Simms said he still feels caught in the middle: “Sometimes I don’t feel completely American. And when I go to Jamaica, I don’t feel completely Jamaican.” He recalls acting on this feeling, his intense love of lineage, in 2001, when it spurred him to pursue Jamaica’s first — and only — representation at the Venice Biennale.

“I was working as an art handler for the Museum of Modern Art at the time, when the idea came to me,” he said. “I was lucky, I won a Guggenheim grant and Agnes Gund wrote us a check, so we were able to pull it off.” Simms enlisted fellow Jamaican artists — the painter Keith Morrison and the photographer Albert Chong — to show alongside him.

His ability to transform experiences from his past is evident in an ongoing project at the church of San Carlo, in the medieval town of Cremona, in Italy’s Po valley. In 2002, as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome, Simms became interested in Caravaggio’s innovations using contrasting effects of light and shadows. Recently, Simms applied his own experiments with light to San Carlo’s 60-foot high ceiling. The show, “I Am the Bush Doctor, One Halo” features hanging drawings that absorb, transmit and reflect light, returning, for a time, the aura the church once had.

Today, in his large studio on Staten Island, postcards of Caravaggio paintings are tacked to a shelf alongside stones, shells, feathers, ceramic balls, metallic strips, and hemp wires. The next thing a visitor sees are paintings by his wife, the artist Lucy Fradkin. The couple moved here in 2011 to find more space, and because it reminded Simms of Brooklyn in the ’70s, a happy time for him. There is a giant board filled with letters from his mother, her wavy, irresistible handwriting flowing across the white stack of paper. Her sentences shower him daily as he works on his new installation, “Icema,” composed of 15 different pieces that together form a single portrait of his mother, for whom it is named.

The studio is like a ship with an anchor — his compendium of memories stored in found objects and in words on the walls. “I’ve been creating my language for 40 years now,” the artist said, reading one of his mother’s letters from the pile. “And I must continue, because it is the only way I can survive.”