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ARTHUR SIMMS'S INTRICATE ASSEMBLAGES MERGE AVANT-GARDE AND ANCESTRAL TRADITIONS

by Glenn Adamson



Arthur Simms, *Carnival*, 2005. PHOTO JEFF MCLANE

During my recent visit to Arthur Simms's Staten Island studio, he paused by a large-scale sculpture made years ago. Atop the massive, hemp-wrapped assemblage was a delicate web, woven by some unseen spider. "Ah," he said, with evident pleasure, reaching out to touch it gently. "Someone's collaborating with me." It struck me as a characteristic moment. In Simms's work, the aesthetic of the chance encounter—the look of a cluttered closet, a junk-filled garage, or a shoreline awash with debris—is infused with animating intelligence, much as a scattering of words can resolve into a concrete poem, or a cascade of noise into free jazz. "It's all valid," Simms said to me a few times as we walked around. The statement was riddling in its very simplicity. If that's true, what does validity even mean? His works provide an answer. Mostly bound with rope or wire, sometimes covered with glue, they seem to arrest his acts of arrangement in the very moment of their occurrence.

This overwhelming sense of immediacy is a little misleading, as Simms has been working in assemblage for a very long time, steadily incorporating the flotsam of everyday life into his sculpture. Born in Jamaica in 1961, he immigrated to New York at the age of seven. (His mother preceded him there by three years, working as a nanny to earn money before the rest of the family arrived.) For as long as he can remember, he's made things out of whatever he finds: toys out of corks, slingshots out of sticks and rubber. This obsessive creativity led him to study art

at Brooklyn College in the mid-1980s, under the mentorship of William T. Williams. After stints as an art handler at Paula Cooper Gallery and the Brooklyn Museum, Simms went on to lead the art program at La Guardia Community College, one of the campuses of the CUNY system, where he has taught for sixteen years. He's a veteran, then, who—like so many Black artists of his generation—is only now getting the widespread recognition he is due. His work has been shown steadily in the USA, the Caribbean and in Europe since the 1990s, and he even organized a Jamaican Pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 2001, but it wasn't until a well-received retrospective exhibition at Martos Gallery in New York in 2021 that his exhibition schedule began keeping pace with his prolific output. This year, he has a major solo show at Karma Gallery in Los Angeles, again including work from the past thirty years, as well as a powerful installation of new work at San Carlo Cremona, a deconsecrated seventeenth-century church outside of Milan. The deteriorated but still transcendent house of worship is the perfect setting for Simms, who has a longstanding fascination with that period of Italian art. (The paintings of Caravaggio, with their dramatic scenes illuminated by heavenly light, are a particular interest.) The ecclesiastical surroundings put into the ritualistic aspects of his sculpture into high relief, illuminating their strong implication of the sacred.

Like a baroque allegory, Simms's works are densely populated with emblems. The exhibition in Cremona is called "I am the Bush Doctor, One Halo," which is also the name of a large-scale drawing hanging vertically in the space. The title is taken from a song by Peter Tosh, and pays tribute to vernacular healers in Jamaica, among them the artist's own father, who treated his neighbors' everyday ailments with homemade concoctions. Here and there, the show does acknowledge conventional Christian iconography; some of Simms's sculptures suggest arks holding unknown covenants, for example. But the signals are reliably mixed. The proliferation of feathers in the installation could be taken from angels' wings, but they also refer to Native American and African spiritual traditions, as well as expressing the fundamental idea of vulnerability: "you could reach out and just snap them off," Simms notes. A bicycle wheel aslant the tip of a slender rod in *Il Santo del Mare* (2023) does indeed look like a pageant-costume halo, but also conjures the spirit of Marcel Duchamp, high priest of the avant garde. In another work, a motorcycle helmet emblazoned with the word SHARK is propped on top of a guitar, the instrument perhaps a nod to Cremona's most famous son, the luthier Antonio Stradivari (born in 1644), who could well have prayed at this very chapel.

These layered storylines criss-cross Simms's work, just like the twine and wire he so often uses. Normally disconnected cultural narratives are tied together into a tight knot of signification. To some extent, this is just what assemblage art does. He is participating in a grand tradition that extends back to the Surrealists, via Robert Rauschenberg's Combines and the wrapped sculptures of Jackie Winsor. Equally relevant are visionary artists like the Philadelphia Wire Man and Judith Scott, as well as African nkisi spirit containers and warding objects (*aale*), and vernacular forms like the "bottle trees" of Black communities in the American South, dedicated to the principle that "where light is, evil shall not pass." Simms acknowledges all of these precedents and peers, but in his case there is a special quality of inclusivity. In his work, as the art historian Robert Storr put it in a 2005 essay, "opposites attract,

difference accents difference, and multiplicity is the predicate for mutuality.”

Doubtless, this connective energy has much to do with Simms’s own life story. Diasporic migration, both brutally enforced (like the voyages that brought his ancestors to Jamaica) and freely chosen (like the move that his own family undertook when he was a child), is ever present as subject matter in his oeuvre. He has made several symbolic portraits of his mother that incorporate handwritten letters she has sent him over the years, thinking of the time they spent apart when he was young. Some of his sculptures actually can be rolled around—a practical feature, given their scale, as well as a symbolic one—and non-functional wheels, toy cars, and vehicle components make frequent appearances. He cites the improvised carts used by street sellers in Jamaica as an influence on these works, but they also clearly embody movement as an abstract principle. At the most fundamental level, his practice is all about getting from here to there, without leaving any part of himself behind.

One of Simms’s most affecting, and oft-repeated, gestures speaks to another, even more personal connection: his marriage to the painter Lucy Fradkin. The two artists (who share the studio in Staten Island) are an interracial couple. As a kind of signature, Simms represents their union with a little rectangular patch of their hair, his black, hers red, glued to the surface of many of his works, side-by-side. But even at his most autobiographical, Simms is an improviser at heart, and never sets out to control the narrative of his work. Its storyline remains perpetually open, to the extent that he treats his own past work as a quarry, disassembling pieces and reincorporating them continually into new creations.

This helps to account, perhaps, for the extraordinary animacy of Simms’s work. He chooses every scrap and stone, every bit of detritus, often for personal reasons. Yet in his studio, surrounded by the things he has made over the years, he commented that it is “important to make something outside of yourself,” something that can lead a life of its own. Even as Simms lashes his objects together, bundling them tightly, and places them into choreographies, instantly and insistently memorable, he grants them a kind of ultimate freedom. When he does send them out into the world, it’s in the spirit of pushing a bird out of its nest, certain that it knows how to fly.