



Arthur Simms

by David Scott



Installation view of *I Am The Bush Doctor, One Halo*, at San Carlo Cremona, Italy, 2023. Photo by Form Group. Images courtesy of the artist, Martos Gallery, and Apalazzogallery unless otherwise noted.



Tall and dark and affably unassuming, Arthur Simms is an artist with profound depths of vision drawn from decades of obsessively granular attention to the vocation of making his work. Though he is not a religious man in any conventional sense, art is a kind of spiritual calling for Simms; his works, big and small, are animated by an aura, a generative interior light, that pervades and saturates them with an invisible but discernible energy. Like his art, Simms exudes an ample and beneficent presence, at once intensely engaged and serenely at ease.

Simms is perhaps best known for his sculptural assemblages produced out of found objects (bottles, bicycle wheels, toys) and repurposed materials (hemp rope, wood, wire, feathers), which he uses to build his little fraternal community of gnomonic figures. Whether joyful or restrained, playful or severe, these figures are a part of his wider family. He knows them with the same stubborn intimacy with which they seem to know him. They people his world with discordant voices. They are errant extensions of himself.

I am going to suggest that what moves in Simms is a reparative aesthetic ethos. He is a bush doctor, as he says of himself in the work that gives his recent exhibition in the San Carlo church in Cremona, Italy, its title: *I Am The Bush Doctor, One Halo*. (2023). In the creole cosmology of Jamaican culture into which he was born, and which provides him with an endless visual vocabulary, a bush doctor is a mystic man, a healer not only of the body but of the soul, an irreverent truth-teller without fear or favor. The allusion to Peter Tosh's great

1978 reggae work "Bush Doctor" is not accidental. But notice the conjugation between the bush doctor and the halo—the bringing together of disparate cultural references. The halo too, after all, is a sign of the miraculous, of revelation, of the oracular language of higher powers. The cultural juxtaposition at work is an index, I believe, of the richly textured vernacular cosmopolitanism of Simms's vision of artistic creation—his insouciant disregard of the philistinism of preconceived boundaries, his life-affirming insistence that no cultural resource, no path of beauty, of knowledge, of grace, is beyond the reach of his respectful visual intelligence. As he likes to say, it's all valid. And it is—at least, it should be.

I spoke with Arthur Simms in his studio on Staten Island, New York.

IL Santo Del Mare, 2023,
wire, rope, bamboo, wheel,
metal, stones, and glue,
81 × 76 × 37 inches. Photo
by Form Group.

DAVID SCOTT: Arthur, it's just a delight to be in this conversation with you.

ARTHUR SIMMS: I feel the same way.

DS: I want to begin with Jamaica, which I know you left in 1969.

AS: Yeah. May 17, 1969. I was seven.

DS: And your mother had already left Jamaica.

AS: Right. She came to the United States three years prior. Mostly because of my dad. The older you get, the more you get to know the story. My dad didn't just encourage her but pushed her to go to the States without us because he knew it was easier for a woman to get a job as a maid or au pair or nanny. Cousin Beck, my mom's niece who was around her age, had already moved to the US in the early 1960s. My dad knew that my mother would be able to live with her, because they were really close. My mom didn't want to go at all. But you know, it was best for the family.

DS: Where in Jamaica were you living?

AS: I lived in Kingston.

DS: And what did your father do?

AS: He did many things. He was a businessman; he used to sell pots, pans, and wares to hotels. He was a house painter. I think the last job he had in Jamaica was working in the Coca-Cola factory. It's all about timing, man. The Immigration Bill of '65 made it easier for us to come to the US because of white flight. White people were leaving the cities and moving to the suburbs, and they needed people to work in the factories. And that's what my dad did. When we came to Brooklyn, he went to Coca-Cola and got a job in the East New York factory. That's what sustained the whole family. At first, he worked in the daytime. But within a year or two, he started working at night, six days a week. He would leave home at about three o'clock in the afternoon and then come back in the middle of the night, so I really didn't see

him that much because he was working so hard to provide for the family. The only days that he had off were Sundays and his birthday.

DS: And your mother worked as well?

AS: My mom worked as well. She took care of old folk until around 1973. My parents bought a house in Crown Heights in 1971, and by '73, my mom didn't have to work anymore, so she stayed home and took care of everything when my father left for work.

DS: What would you say is your strongest memory of Jamaica?

AS: I have so many memories of Jamaica. It's just embedded in my mind. Sometimes the memories are in the form of smell or sound. They aren't always tactile or visual, but they are still part of who I am. That's one of the good things about being an artist: you can translate certain senses into art, into an object.

DS: So your strongest memories of Jamaica aren't necessarily visual ones?

AS: No, they're visual ones, but they also encapsulate smell and sound. Music is everywhere in Jamaica. Here in the studio, I always play music. I mix the music myself and put together a nine-hour playlist of songs.

DS: In fact, the period when you were growing up in Jamaica is a significant moment in the history of Jamaican music—the shift from ska to rocksteady to the emergence of reggae in the late 1960s. So there must be a very sonic sensibility that you carry with you.

AS: I hear music all the time in my head. Actually, one of my dad's younger brothers—my dad had nineteen siblings—is Scully Simms, or Zoot Simms. He's one of the biggest percussionists in the history of the island. He's played on many seminal albums and records. In 1953, he and his musical partner, Bunny, created one of the first records in Jamaica that wasn't calypso.

Jamaican music influenced a lot of other music in different parts of the world. If you listen to Jamaican music, you know it's layered music.

Piume, 2023, feathers, thread, wire, muslin, bamboo, and thread, 85 x 49 x 3 inches.
Photo by Form Group.

You hear the bongos; you hear the guitar. Listen to jazz music or classical music. Any music, really. It's about layering, coming together to create beautiful sound. And in terms of how I approach art, it's the same thing, this layering and coming together to create this beautiful object. Certain things are universal—people from many parts of the world will always want to do similar things, and there's beauty in that. We each have our own voice, but our voice can be stronger and multilayered if you take a little bit of this, a little bit of that.

DS: One of the stories that you've told, perhaps on more than one occasion, is your encounter with the *idea* of being an artist when you started school in the US. That seems a very important moment for you.

AS: Yeah. I was around seven years old. In my new class in the States, I saw a fellow student drawing, and I thought, Hey, that's something that I used to do. Our teacher said, "He's an artist; he's drawing a spaceship; we're going to the moon." It was '69, so the Apollo was going to the moon. I said, "Oh, I can do that, too." So I started drawing, and it felt seamless because I had created things for as long as I can remember.

In Jamaica, I made things all the time. I used to make little toys, like soldiers and slingshots. I picked up on what people did around me—rather than buying a car, they'd make a car. This cultural aspect is where I grew my love for creating things.

DS: Did this experience in school give you a name for something that you were already doing, but wouldn't have had a name for in the context of Jamaica? And did giving it that name open a way of thinking about a creative activity?

AS: That's a very good way of putting it; it gave a name and structure to something that I could aspire to.

DS: At what point in school did you think that art was going to be your



future vocation, not just something that you did as a hobby or part-time?

AS: It's been a long road for me. I'd always done art. When I was in high school, I liked looking at art history on my own. I'd read about Rembrandt and Goya. And I would walk to the Brooklyn Museum from Crown Heights, which was about two miles from my home. Back then, Crown Heights had an art school and an art store. I bought my first art supplies there, and I started making paintings of myself in the clothing I had seen in a Goya or Rembrandt painting. I didn't buy many canvases; I'd repaint over them. I have a painting of my face in the body or guise of Goya's *Portrait of the Duke of Wellington* (1812–14). That's indicative of what I was doing back then.

I spent the last two years of high school in a work-study program with the Irving Trust Company on Wall Street. I'd work there for a week, and the next week, I'd be in school. When I graduated and went to Brooklyn College, a counselor asked me what my interests were. At the time, I thought, Well, I'm working for an investment bank, so maybe I'm interested in being a banker, but I also love art. So he registered me for an economics class and an art class, in addition to three other classes. I probably lasted in the economics class for about three weeks and then was like, Okay, I'm an artist.

What really put me on the road to seeing art as my career was going to Brooklyn College. I had all these great teachers who were working artists in New York—Sylvia Stone, William T. Williams, Lee Bontecou, Lois Dodd,

Ron Mehlman, Sam Gelber, and Allan D'Arcangelo. They really took me in; they were my mentors.

DS: What would you say they gave you? Is it something specific, like a technique? Or is it something broader, like a way of seeing yourself?

AS: I think it's the latter: a way of seeing myself. But they also gave me an overall picture of how to be an artist in New York City and in society. It's complicated and simple at the same time in that they taught me that you definitely need to make money, you need to have a job, you need to have time, and you need space. They gave me a lot of practical information about how to make a living as an artist. William T. Williams would tell me, "Some of the most successful artists



I know teach. You should be teaching, because that's how you're going to sustain yourself and still have enough energy and time to do your work."

There's the practical aspect of being committed as an artist, too. I remember Sam Gelber would say, "You have to be committed. You can't just do one thing here and then six months later do something else. It's a practice that you do every day, and if not every day, every week."

DS: That's fascinating, Arthur, because what they're teaching you is that being an artist is not simply about some idea of genius. It's about making art a part of the way you live. And part of the way you live requires making a living to enable you to be an artist.

AS: Yeah. As a young artist or student,

you don't think about stuff like that. You see Pablo Picasso, you see Jean-Michel Basquiat, you see all the lies, but these artists were also working artists. It's very important. I talk to young artists about this all the time—the biggest thing once you get out of school is to get a job where you can sustain yourself and still have the time and energy to do your artwork. What helps you actually do the art is how you situate yourself. And hopefully, you'll take care of the art.

DS: I want to turn toward the making of art and to the craft of your work. You draw and paint and so on, but there is something that came alive for you in the assembly of sculptural forms and the sculptural modalities that you discovered. Tell me about how you came to recognize your own voice in the forms that are now so distinctly yours.

AS: Like a lot of sculptors, I started as a painter. I still draw all the time; I probably do four times as many drawings as I do sculptures. But at Brooklyn College, I gradually started to make things that protruded from the wall. They were becoming more relief-like. Then in 1985, I won a scholarship to go to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in rural Maine. It's not really a school but more like a residency for artists. Usually, about sixty young artists get accepted to go there for nine weeks. While there, you can experiment with all kinds of things. If you're a painter, you could do video. If you're a sculptor, you could try a fresco. It was there that I started making my first sculptures.

At Skowhegan, I was reintroduced to my childhood. I realized that the first things I made as a child in Jamaica



Installation view of *The Miracle of Burano*, Karma, Los Angeles, 2023. Photo by Josh White Photography. Courtesy of the artist and Karma.



were sculptures, not drawings or paintings. I was making objects, just like the people around me. The more I think about it, these objects I make are sometimes like children's toys. I'm reaching back into who I was, back into my history. But when I create my work, it's not only about my personal history—it's about art history, world history. Bits and pieces of various things come together to create my idea, to create my art. To me, that's very exciting.

DS: This is something that, again, I've heard you talk around and about—the simultaneous recovery of an earlier self through the discovery of assemblage and sculptural form.

AS: Yeah. The thing is, it just happens intuitively. In discussions like this, it comes to the fore and I can say, Yeah, that's what I've been doing my whole life. Back in the day, it might have been subconscious or unconscious, but now, as an adult, it's more of a conscious thing. I'm intellectually thinking about how these objects reflect on me and my interests all the time. I have a strong vision, for lack of a better term. I never have writer's block; it just flows, man. Sometimes I have to stop myself from making too much because I'll work myself out of the space.

We're sitting in the studio that I share with Lucy, my wife, and if you had come here three years ago, it would have been hard to walk because there were so many things. I've been fortunate to sell some work, but it was sad for me to see them leave because I'd been living with a lot of those works for thirty, even forty years. They are a part of who I am, my knowledge, my background, and my forward-thinking about how things should be, you know what I'm saying? But the flip side is that if they go, I have the opportunity to make more. The work is very close to me; it's all very personal.

DS: I think that one can see not just the personal dimension but the intimacy that you have with the work. At what point did you begin to discover and recover the poetics of your sculptural forms? Did you begin by experimenting with the materials—found objects, toys, bottles, bicycle

opposite: *Sexual Tension*, 1992, rope, wood, metal, glue, paper, charcoal, pastel, paint, pen, plastic, wire, drawings on paper, gesso, and screws, 77 x 73 x 34 inches. Photo by Arthur Simms.

below: *Real Estate For Birds?*, 2007, rope, wood, glue, screws, plastic rope, bird houses, and utility pole, 480 x 72 x 30 inches. Photo by Brian Pfister / Sculpture Milwaukee.



wheels, chairs, wires, the very familiar hemp and rope work that appear and reappear? That is also a recovery, in terms of a Jamaican experience, right?

AS: That's right. I was making sculptures in the late eighties with various found objects, and I needed something to bind all of them together. First, I tried painting them. But then I went back to art history. As a student in the early to mid-eighties, I saw *Bound Square* (1972) by the post-minimalist artist Jackie Winsor at MoMA. It's basically four circular logs, and each corner is wrapped in rope. It leans against the wall. It always perplexed me. What is she trying to say? Is that really art? What is the artist trying to do with this piece?

When I started creating these sculptures with all these objects, I thought of *Bound Square* and the rope, and I started using hemp rope, which, again, refers back to Jamaica. The hemp, the ganja—it's a cultural aspect, so it had multiple meanings for me. A lot of my work has multiple meanings tied together to create the idea.

DS: Is there something about the materiality of rope and the way it works with structures that makes it more somber, heavier, with a sense of depth and presence?

AS: That's what it is. Rope has a different kind of weight. When you think of rope, you might think of hemp and ganja. But people were hanged with rope too, especially Black people, African Americans in this country. So, there is that aspect to it. I try not to focus on the negative, but I couldn't be a person alive and not think about the negative.

I'm now owning this material that was thrust upon us and I'm taking it elsewhere. I was drawn to rope for a reason, and I want to explore all its possibilities to see what I could do with it because I'm an artist and that's what artists do. I'm creating a language and exploring that language.

DS: The reference to rope, death, and slavery is poignant. You've mentioned to me before the skin-like character of these rope figures. In a very important way, these rope figures are not

monochromatic. There is a sense of Black skin and of tonalities and textures of skin.

AS: That's correct. The rope acts as skin. It's what you see at first glance. But as you get closer and look deeper at the works, you'll see varying shades of color and subtle tones. Sometimes the outer skin is obscured by light-reflecting elements that are embedded inside the sculptures. A case in point is the sculpture *Crossroads, St. Andrew, Kingston, Jamaica* (1961–69), a rarely-shown piece of mine. It contains a big diamond-shaped yellow road sign, and if you shine a light on it, a bright yellow light will emanate from inside the work. It's like when you're driving on a road at night and your headlights shine on a sign. The sculpture is tonal; it has painterly qualities, though it might not initially appear that way.

DS: In your sculptural work, the figure is almost omnipresent. But what's striking to me is the figures' *facelessness*. It's as though their personality doesn't rest in the face but in other dimensions of embodiedness.

AS: I'm trying to capture the inner soul, basically. A friend of mine once said my sculptures look like ghosts, apparitions floating around in space. I thought that was a big compliment because a figure doesn't necessarily have to be recognizable.

When I teach, I show my students the different ways artists have articulated the "figure" over the centuries. It could be abstract or recognizable. The beautiful thing about art is that there are many ways to interpret it. There's no right or wrong way, and the figurative is like that too.

DS: I like the idea of the ghost because there is indeed something spectral about these rope figures. They have a kind of bodiedness, yet they can be armless or feetless or faceless and not demarcated like a human body in any strict or formal sense.

I wanted to talk about your recent exhibition in Italy. Seeing images of your work at San Carlo Cremona was revelatory to me. I kept thinking of how that exhibition could be related to the work I selected for the 2022 Kingston

Biennial. Something came alive to me in the exhibition title, *I Am The Bush Doctor, One Halo*. What's the relationship between the two parts of that title?

AS: That title is the coming together of cultures, of the Jamaican and Italian influence. *I Am The Bush Doctor*, Peter Tosh—that's a Jamaican talking. And I've been to Italy many times. I lived in Rome for a year when I won the Rome Prize in 2002–03. I've studied medieval and Renaissance art, European halos, and halos in other cultures. When I first went to Italy, seeing Italian works in the places that they were created for in these various churches—it just blew me away. That's when I started referencing halos from medieval art in my work. Whenever I have a title that includes "one halo" or "two halos," there is a halo in the work itself. The piece with a halo that I made for that particular exhibition in Italy is a fourteen-foot drawing on acetate—the longest drawing I've ever made. It has several portraits of me in it, too.

DS: And some pieces of your and Lucy's hair.

AS: Right. I use my hair in drawings to indicate me, the Jamaican, Caribbean, and African American, and to also reference the African diaspora. The first major series that I used my hair in was my *Black Caravaggio* drawings, which I began as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. In drawings, whenever my hair is shaped in a ring, it references halos that I've seen in artworks from various cultures. In the last decade, I began combining my wife's hair with mine. I don't think I've ever seen cultures in art history where you have two different kinds of hair—Black hair, white hair—coming together to create one halo. So, I'm dealing in terms of that, too.

DS: It's clear to me that *I Am The Bush Doctor* is not just a general reference to a Jamaican healing practice or even to the fact that your father was a practicing bush doctor. The immediate reference, as you say, is Peter Tosh's amazing song "Bush Doctor" from 1978. For Tosh, the bush doctor is not just a healer of physical ailments. The

Installation view of *I Am The Bush Doctor, One Halo.* at San Carlo Cremona, Italy, 2023. Photo by Form Group.



bush doctor is a healer of the *soul*. He's a spiritual healer and a critic of social injustice.

There's something very powerful in the juxtaposition of the imaginary of the bush doctor and the halo that comes out of medieval Italian art.

AS: That's true, man. To me, it was profound for a Jamaican to claim that he's the bush doctor and all that goes with that, and to have pictures of this Black man exhibited in this seventeenth century Italian church. Basically, I did that on purpose to say it's all valid, you know?

When I was at the Academy in Rome, I started using Caravaggio postcards as part of *Black Caravaggio*. In the series, I made the subjects Black. I'm Black, plus, my hair was in it. So again, it's a culture clash. This guy comes into my studio. He's dressed really nice. He's looking and he asks, "Why Caravaggio?" And I said, "Why not Caravaggio?" He says, "Interesting, interesting. You know, my family has a Caravaggio." It's important what he said though—why Caravaggio, and why you? This is what I tell my students. You can use Caravaggio. This Black man can use a Caravaggio as inspiration or use a postcard of a Caravaggio in the piece itself, even though we're from different cultures.

If you study history, you'll see it's okay to have influences from outside of who you are if it's done with respect. I'm giving honor to these cultures when I borrow or use an aspect of them in my work. Language is always evolving, so you take bits and pieces and bring them together to help language evolve. I'm evolving as an artist as well, and I'm using these different aspects to help me evolve and create—to step forward, basically. I'm saying it again: it's all valid, man.

DS: The question that was put to you by this Italian man looking at your work need not necessarily have been, Who are you to do that, right?

AS: No, it wasn't like that. He was very respectful, just asking me an honest question.

DS: By the same token, your response was similarly not hostile. It's just a

fact of the matter. Why not? I think one of the things your work is after is a sense of cultural *rapport*. This anecdote reminds me of the first time I encountered your work, in late 2007, at the *Infinite Island* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. I remember coming back to the work again and again, and being perplexed, moved, puzzled, and intrigued by *Globe, The Veld* (2004) and *Boy* (2007). Like your exhibition in Italy, the works are simultaneously rooted in where you come from and in ideas that have traveled with you and those that travel in larger worlds. Those ideas are captured by the globe itself and by the sense of movement in *Boy* and his skating through the world. The works embody a kind of vernacular cosmopolitanism.

I say that because your work opens to the world. You're constantly quoting and referencing aspects of European art history, but nevertheless, the work runs through the materiality of Jamaican cultural life. The very texture of the work seeks to speak from Jamaica *to* the world with a refusal to be locked into a pigeonhole. The work has to live in the world; it has to speak to a multiplicity.

AS: That's interesting, man. There are so many great things in the world, and I don't want to close myself off to anything. One has to be open in order to take something in. I'm not a religious person, but I'm a spiritual person. Artists are like my religion, and the spirit is everywhere. There's been some great stuff from the Renaissance, but also from Jamaica, from the backwoods. For me, an artist could be someone who doesn't think they're an artist but is creating something or perhaps has a calling from God. That's just as great as Renaissance art, and I get excited about them all.

DS: It's all valid.

AS: That's right. (*laughter*) It's all valid.

DS: Part of what is inspiring to me is that your work has a reparative quality. The intervention here, like Peter Tosh's song, is not simply neutral. It is critical. It's an attempt to repair or heal wounds of the soul, of society, and of the body as well.

AS: I'm trying to repair myself, too! Being alive, so much is thrown at you. I'm healing myself by telling stories based on lives lived and aspirations in history. It's about me, my religion, my art as religion, my healing through my religion.

DS: In recent years, your work has had some attention, which is wonderful and long overdue. Is there something about the contemporary circumstances of art appreciation that has enabled the attention that your work is getting? How might one think about the spotlight that's been turned on your work?

AS: I've been saying this a lot, but it's taken me forty years to become an overnight sensation. I've been doing my work for a long time, and I guess the art world has just come around to looking at my stuff. It's nice if you have people selling your work. It's nice to be in a position where you're being recognized for what you have been doing over the past forty-five odd years or so. It's all timing, right?

So, you know, I take it for what it is. It's good. I'm very thankful. I'm happy and honored that people are interested in my work, and I truly mean it. This doesn't happen to every artist, so I do find myself lucky when I say that. Fellow artists and some friends say it's more than just luck. Yeah, but you can't discount that. There are so many great artists that are working, and they don't get their due recognition for whatever reason.

But even if I didn't get any of this attention, I'd still do my work, man. I'm here for many things, and doing this work is one of those things. I think it's important for me to do it and get it out there. And hopefully it's important for people to see it and respond to it too.



Drawing, 2015, artist's hair, earth, charcoal, graphite, paper, wood, screws, wire, and stones, 7.25 x 25 x 18 inches. Photo by Arthur Simms.

Boy, 2007, roller skates, wire, bottles, bamboo, wood, nails, and screws, 29 x 19 x 29 inches. Photo by Jason Mandella.



Globe, The Veld, 2004, metal, wire, plastic, artist's nails, wood, and various objects, and text by the writer Peter Orner, 17 x 14 x 14 inches. Photo by Arthur Simms.