

Charles Simonds's *Dwellings*

ON LOAN FROM THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Sculptor Charles Simonds has been a major figure in the contemporary art world for more than fifty years. His prolific career began in the 1970s, most notably with his creation of *Dwellings* on the streets of Manhattan's Lower East Side. In 1981, the Whitney Museum of American Art commissioned a permanent sculpture from Simonds for its Marcel Breuer-designed building at 945 Madison Avenue, currently the home of Frick Madison. Visible from the stairwell landing between the museum's first and second floors, *Dwellings* (opposite page) is complemented by two additional clusters of small buildings by the artist located across the street on the second-story windowsill and chimney of 940 Madison. Here, Xavier F. Salomon, Deputy Director and Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator, speaks with Simonds about the sculptures and his practice.

Xavier F. Salomon: What is the origin of the Dwellings?

After graduate school, I asked myself what the essentials of my creative behavior were. I meditated on the question—in a manner sort of like the Frick's *St. Francis in the Desert* by Bellini—and tried to forget everything I had learned, everything that had clouded my being. The elements that remained important to me were very simple: the earth, my body, and time. All my work comes from those early thoughts and

to this day is an extrapolation and re-application of relationships between them. Living on Chrystie Street on the Lower East Side, I wanted to share my art with the community. I made one of the first *Dwellings* in the 1970s on a friend's window ledge on Greene Street, followed by others in gutters, in niches, and unexpected places around the neighborhood. These sculptures are essentially the ruins, abandoned homes, and ritual places of the "Little People," an imaginary civilization. You never see the Little People, but my work is invested with their mythology.

As more and more people, including other artists, took note of my work, there was an explosion of interest and hospitality. Neighbors and passersby would hang out to watch me work; some would bring me coffee, others joined in and made their own *Dwellings*. I even heard about *Dwellings* on streets I had never built on. This excited me, since my work was accomplishing what I was hoping it would, which was to create a sense of another reality separate from our own.

XS: Is there a particular philosophy behind your creations?

CS: I don't usually divulge the full fantasy of my works, because it prejudices people's reactions and imaginations. The *Dwellings* were always intended to invite people to project onto them whatever they think might be happening. That said, I'm

interested in how people exist in time and space, and how the architecture they make reflects how they live and what they believe. Conceptually, the history of the Little People boils down to three peoples: First, people who live in a line, leaving their past behind—like the abandoned street *Dwellings*—as they wander the earth. A second group lives in a circle, coming back around again to rebuild the past into the present. And still a third group lives in an ascending spiral, burying the past to see how high they can go. It's kind of a Swiftian critique and philosophical meditation on some of our own social histories. I have written these down as a fictive ethnography called *Three Peoples* (1976).

XS: You've created Dwellings all around the world. Can you share some of those experiences?

CS: Over the years I have been invited to participate in various exhibitions and projects; for example, I created work in China just after the Cultural Revolution and at a rural school in southern India. I made *Dwellings* in Genoa, Jerusalem, Zurich, and many other places abroad and around the United States, including the American Museum of Natural History in New York for its first Earth Day festival, in 1976.

Children, in particular, immediately understood what I was creating. I worked with kids in Bonn, Germany, where



each made their own *Dwelling* as part of a larger town and installed them in a rented department store window. In 2016, I devised *Dwelling Munich*, where I brought together groups of children from wealthy, working-class, and immigrant neighborhoods from around the city to create *Dwellings* as a group and to break down the barriers keeping them apart in their daily lives.

Being the son of two psychoanalysts, I've visited mental hospitals in many countries, working with both children and adults. At one, a young girl started to speak about her *Dwelling* after not talking for an entire summer. At the Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne in Paris, we

ABOVE Charles Simonds (b. 1945), *Dwellings*, 1981, clay, sand, sticks, stones, wood, plaster, cloth, and chicken wire, Whitney Museum of American Art, on view at Frick Madison

made a collective *Dwelling*, which broke down a lot of the confines of individual treatment and traditional art therapy. Many of the metaphors with which I understand my art—excavating the past, rebuilding the present—resonate with people in all kinds of circumstances.

XS: What do you think about your Dwellings being preserved in a museum, particularly the Frick?

CS: Truthfully, while the preservation of my work within a museum context is ideologically opposed to the ephemeral nature of the *Dwellings*, I still find the experience remarkable. It's wonderfully peculiar to me that it now finds itself in the care of the Frick, which I long considered among the most sophisticated,

elite museums. Now I have discovered that the Frick is quite socially minded. Interestingly, work from later in my career relates more directly to the Frick's holdings: Starting in 1995, I worked with the Sèvres porcelain manufactory in France, where we pushed the boundaries of the medium to its extremes and created objects exploring a very special kind of earth and my relationship to it.

Now part of Frick Madison, my *Dwellings* have become a notable site and a place of memory for generations of Whitney and Met visitors who have grown up seeing it. So, in a way, it still has followed my original intention, which was to create the experience of movement through time, an awareness of our own mortality. Certainly, from the Little People's point of view, museums come and

go. But the Little People are eternal.

To hear Charles Simonds discuss *Dwellings*, visit the audio stop recorded by the artist on the Bloomberg Connects app.