



There is a deceptively simple analogy at work in the many clay sculptures made by Charles Simonds: that the body, the earth and architecture are all different forms of dwellings. We inhabit them all; they are all crucial to our well-being; and in various ways they are the outward expression of our inward selves. Our bodies show the signs of our transit through life; they give hints of our emotional and spiritual histories. In the same way, the landscape bears witness to the passage of time, revealing its own inexorable ways and the fruits of our efforts to make a life with—or against—nature.

Architecture, too, whether home or house of worship, is a sign of our emotional and spiritual aspirations, and an extrapolation of our bodies in the landscape.

While this analogy might seem straightforward enough in its outlines, it has proved endlessly complex in its details, giving Simonds the provocation for a quarter century of work. His sculpture has been shown episodically over the years, notably in a traveling exhibition that was seen at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, the Los Angeles County Museum and the Guggenheim Museum, New York, among other institutions, from 1981 to 1983, and more recently in a series of solo exhibitions at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. A current retrospective affords the opportunity to see the full range of Simonds's work in greater detail. Organized by Daniel Abadie, it opened at the Centre Cultural de la Fundació "la Caixa" in Barcelona in April; it will be shown at the Jeu de Paume, Paris, in December, before beginning a tour of other European museums.

Simonds announced this guiding analogy in one of his first compelling assertions as an artist, when he enacted his birth from the earth. He buried himself unclothed in the

red cleft of a New Jersey clay pit in 1970 and filmed himself emerging from the ooze. In this simple ritual he affirmed his belief in the basic identity between his body and the landscape. The analogy was extended to encompass architecture the following year when, lying naked on the earth, he smeared his body with clay, creating a landscape, then built upon this living ground a cluster of habitations constructed of numberless tiny, unfired clay bricks. To underscore his notion of the reciprocal links between human biology, the earth and architecture, he named this latter ritual

*Landscape<—>Body<—> Dwelling.*

Soon these tiny clay habitations came to represent for the artist the dwellings of an imaginary civilization of little people.

Simonds was their inventor and their historian, carrying a bag of tiny bricks with him wherever he went, creating their homes and their ritual places on the sides of buildings in the streets of New York, Paris, Berlin, even Shanghai. Later, as his work began to attract attention in the art world, these dwellings started to appear as installations and as freestanding sculptures in galleries and museums. Inasmuch as Simonds had a prototype in mind for his landscapes, it was in prehistory when the earth itself, its caves and crevices, was a dwelling. Simple structures built into cliffs—by the Native Americans of the Southwest, for example—gave the artist his basic repertory of architectural forms: rectangular chambers grouped into linear, circular and sometimes spiral configurations.

These forms represented episodes in the mythical history of the little people, which Simonds recounted in a story he wrote called *Three Peoples*. They surfaced in a 1976 installation for the Projects gallery at the Museum of Modern Art, New York,

Circles and Towers Growing No. 7

(1978),

7" x 30" x 30", unfired clay.

called "Picaresque Landscape," a rugged, room-sized composition of clay hills and rocks punctuated with the dwellings of different peoples. Those of the linear people, Simonds wrote, "made a pattern on the earth as of a great tree laid flat, branching and forking according to their loves and hates, forming an ancestral record of life lived as an odyssey, its roots in a dark and distant past...." The linear people were continually moving on, but the circular people stayed in one place, building their dwellings in concentric rings around a kiva-like ceremonial space, a dome/womb that was the site of a yearly procreative ritual.

Although they had their source in an elaborate fantasy, the little people were meant to provoke us by comparison into thinking about the way we live, and about the abiding if almost forgotten connections between ourselves and nature. To affirm these connections, Simonds began exploring a kind of architecture by natural analogy. In a series of sculptures collectively called "Circles and Towers Growing," buildings rose and fell like the stages in the development and decay of a plant, or like episodes in the formation and erosion of a landscape. At the same time, individual dwellings began to suggest botanical and anatomical forms. Buildings started to look like sprouting plants; breastlike, phallic and vaginal shapes became more common in his landscapes. These were crude allusions to the generative power of the earth, to the idea that the ground itself is a living body. In a refreshing antidote to convention, the earth was not configured as female—as Mother Nature—nor was architecture projected as male. Both were decidedly more androgynous. Thereafter, Simonds's dwellings were not only places for living, but also living places: houses that sprouted like seeds, blossomed

and wilted like flowers, twisted like grasses in the wind, burst like seed pods or melted like ice. This tendency toward elaboration is not something Simonds pursued simply for its own sake. Rather, it signifies the importance to the artist of the ever deeper connections he perceives between the morphology of landscape, the body, plants and architecture. The challenge for him, he explains, is "how to keep the natural part in the architecture, how to make a natural event become architecture."

In *Red Flow*, for example, the primary natural event appears to be generation. There are analogies to organic growth in its architecture: a small tumulus seems to sprout in the foreground; behind it, two towers coil together like intertwining vines. These forms are obviously phallic, a reminder of the essentially sexualized terms in which the artist perceives the workings of nature. They rise from the debris of other buildings, as if nourished by the compost of earlier dwellings. Between them is the red flow of the title, an allusion to the water that is the lifeblood of the earth.

While *Red Flow* suggests growth, the natural event in *Wilted Towers* would seem to be decay. Six towers have collapsed—detumescent, like flesh; perhaps desiccated, like plants in a drought. They have begun to decompose from their tops down; their setting is a dusty landscape devoid of other signs of life.

Architecture thus grows and decays like the body and like plants. So too does the earth, Simonds suggests in other works. In the sculpture *Leaves*, for example, a square building encloses a rectangular chamber defined by vertical slabs of stone.

Architecture here takes its cues from landscape: the building derives its configuration from the rock chamber. But both mimic

Red Flow  
(1984),  
12" x 30" x 30", unfired clay.

(preceding page)  
Justice  
(1981),  
9½" x 30" x 30", unfired clay.

plants—the rock walls seem to unfold like the petals of a flower, while the dwelling features a serpentine brick facade, like waving grasses.

The analogies between the body, the earth and architecture have become more explicit as Simonds has turned to figurative imagery, especially heads, in the last few years. A 1993 *Head*, for example, is both aged flesh and weathered landscape: the facial features are like caverns, the cracks are like wrinkles or like fractured earth. This rugged head gives birth to architecture: dwellings erupt from its forehead, like Athena from the brow of Zeus, at once the expression of landscape and of human creativity. But who is this grotesque character? With one eye closed and the other barely open, is he rousing from sleep or near death? What unseen pain causes his nostril to flare and his mouth to gape? Is this a metaphorical portrait of the artist in the throes of creation? Whatever the answer to the riddle of this sculpture, it confirms that Simonds is still pursuing some of his abiding preoccupations, but in a richly psychological new vein.

The material of Simonds's work—unfired clay—is crucial to the success of his expressive ambitions. He exploits all the colors of his chosen medium—red, gray and especially yellow. Red and gray are generally used interchangeably in his architecture; although in *Red Flow*, red suggests the vitality of growth, while in *Wilted Towers*, gray evokes the coldness of death. This distinction is repeated in his landscapes, in which gray is generally used for rocks while red is employed to depict more organic landscape elements. Yellow and red are also used in their viscous forms, with rivers and pools of dried slip suggesting the fluids of the earth—urine and blood.

Basic, instinctual, even infantile manipulations of the clay—piling, smearing, patting—are often the point of departure for Simonds's sculptures. And their completion is often left to chance: the sculptures are left to dry, shrink and crack as they will, aging like our bodies and subject to the same natural events and processes as the earth from which they are made. "You're a witness to the fact of the material," Simonds explains. "You're letting the material tell its own story." Aging is especially evident in a work like *Circles and Towers Growing No. 4*, where the yellow slip has dried and cracked, or in *Leaves*, where the structure encloses a precinct with a blistered clay floor. Indeed, Simonds's work is unimaginable without clay. Its malleability, its sensuality, its color and scent and texture all appeal to him. He also attests to "an interest in clay as the most traditional art material and as a prima materia of life." Clay is literally the corpus of the earth and a common metaphor for our bodies; it is the original and basic building block of architecture. It marks the passage of time—it is a product of erosion and sedimentation—and so suggests comparisons to the generation and decay of our bodies and to the rising and falling of our buildings. No other material could embody so effectively the analogy that is at the core of Simonds's art.

*John Beardsley is an author and curator. He is presently completing a book on environments by visionary artists entitled Gardens of Revelation due next year from Abbeville Press.*

*Charles Simonds lives and works in New York City.*

(right)  
Circles and Towers Growing No. 4  
(1978),  
9" x 30" x 30", unfired clay.