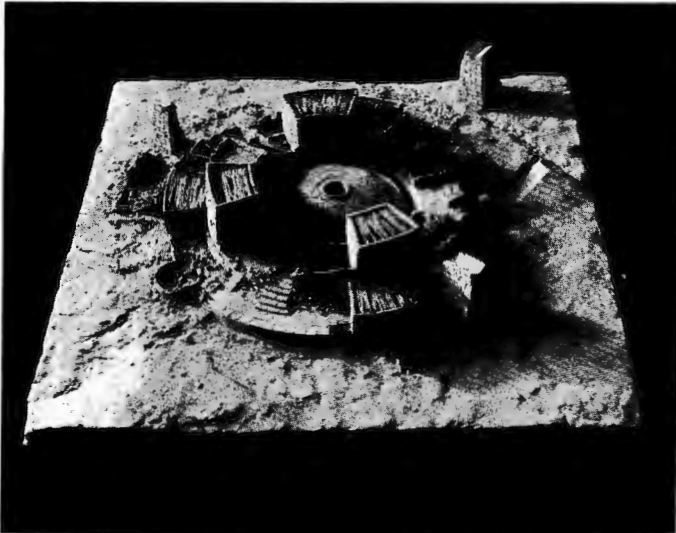


Charles Simonds, *Circles & Towers Growing, #4 (Untitled)*, 1978. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

Charles Simonds, *Circles & Towers Growing, #5 (Observatory)*, 1978. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.



The Charles Simonds exhibition travels to:

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, January 28-March 21, 1982.

Fort Worth Museum, April 13-May 30, 1982.

Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, June 21-August 15, 1982.

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1983.

CHARLES SIMONDS:

Christopher Lyon

"The history for me and for them—the Little People—is an endless invocation of *to dwell*, to make homes. Making a dwelling is like building a campfire: you inhabit yourself in one particular place *now*." Charles Simonds indicated a corner of the room. "Now we're going to 'make home' over there." He pointed in another direction. "Now we're going to 'make home' over there."

This conversation took place in Chicago three days after the opening of "Circles and Towers Growing," Charles Simonds' cycle of twelve miniature landscapes. The work, completed in Germany during 1979, is the centerpiece of a traveling exhibition. The cycle's November 1981 presentation in Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art was its first appearance in the United States.

Simonds is best known for the dwellings, as he calls them, that he's built all over the world to house his imaginary civilization, the Little People. Two days before the exhibition opening, he had completed the latest set of dwellings, a permanent installation built into a foundation wall of the museum. The installation consists of a village, a small city, a quarry, and a virgin landscape. A long connecting road and assorted other dwellings and ritual places are all built into holes and niches broken out of a twenty-five-foot expanse of exposed brick. The work has become an enormous conversation piece for the museum's new cafe, which was constructed simultaneously in the same room.

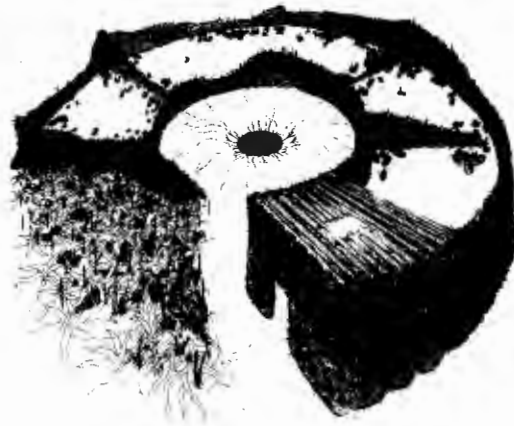
I asked Simonds to describe himself in terms of the roles or functions of artists in this society, and he responded, "thinker, maker, grower, activist—somewhere between a cook and a farmer."

ACTIVIST

One of the Little People's origins can be traced to Simonds' childhood visits to the Southwest where he first saw Indian dwellings and where he also once ran away from his parents. His entire life has evolved as a pattern of restlessness or searching combined with an instinctive nonconformism. He is the grandson of Russian Jewish emigrants and the son of Vienna-trained psychoanalysts.

Simonds attended high school in New York City and then studied art at Berkeley in the mid-sixties, during the time of the Free Speech movement. "It was pretty awake," he remembers. "You really felt like you were participating in history, which is an amazing experience. You *know* that you're making history—not you, but the whole situation you're part of." Simonds returned to Berkeley in the mid-seventies and found that the tables originally set up near the campus gate for distribution of political literature were selling health food. By that time he was already well established on New

A Profile



Drawing for *Growth House*, 1975. Pen and ink on paper, 25 x 29½". Collection of the artist.

York's Lower East Side as an artist and community activist. Since about 1970 Simonds had been building dwellings there for the Little People. At first, no one knew quite what to make of him, although his reception there was quite friendly. "You see, if you just go into a community and make a dwelling, you're sort of a nut. It's pretty detached from anything else. Whereas if you work there for a while, you're the guy who's also trying to get the park done; and you're the guy who happens to be doing this other thing that's real sweet, but real peculiar, too."

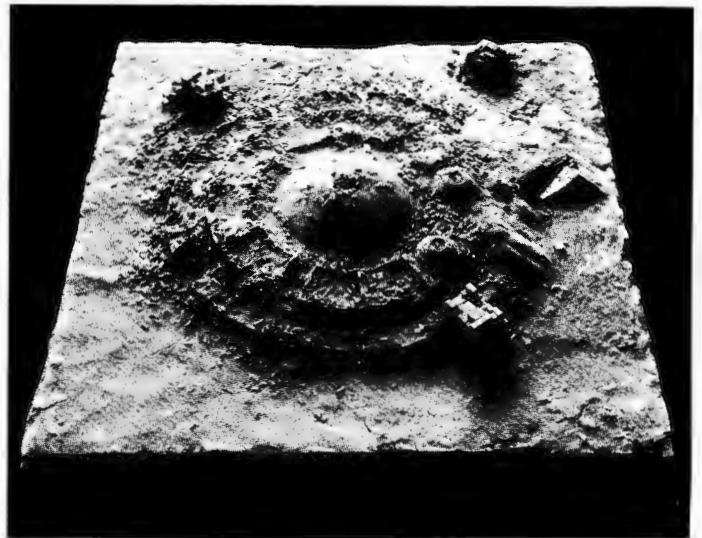
As time passed, Simonds became something of a folk hero and eventually a highly visible figure in the community. That park did get done. It is a combined play lot and pocket park called La Placita as well as a collective sculpture, all of which Simonds helped to establish with the Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing and other organizations.

Meanwhile, he was an even more mysterious figure to the art world, since he was apparently uninterested in showing his work in museums or galleries, and in fact still conducts his business without a gallery or an agent. He was seen as actively antimuseum, but he declares, simply, that "the art world is that way. . . . They see it as a gesture when it's just a fact. Most art doesn't make itself available to most people, and so if you're doing something that's very popular, people think you're making a gesture. In fact, it just happens to be real nice to work in the street. People are great. . . . I don't discriminate in either direction."

Earlier he had told me, "I found a way of doing what I wanted to do that didn't need that art-world structure, you see? So it makes that structure look sometimes useful and other times incidental, and at the worst, sort of a distortion."

After five years or so on the Lower East Side, after making over two hundred separate dwelling sites there; Simonds was offered the opportunity to work for a month in the streets of Paris; at the same time he was given a museum show at the Centre National d'Art Contemporain, and later he received a grant to spend a year in Berlin.

When he returned to New York, the Lower East Side, always a neighborhood in swift transition, had changed greatly. Simonds had changed as well. "In a certain way I had learned a lot from that situation, and by going back I wouldn't have learned more. In terms of what I perceived as some of the real problems of that neighborhood, the only way that I was going to have any real, substantive or structural effect on them was to deal on a level of abstraction."



Charles Simonds, *Circles & Towers Growing, #7 (Untitled)*, 1978. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

Charles Simonds, *Circles & Towers Growing, #8 (Untitled)*, 1978. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.



One kind of abstraction in Simonds' work is represented by his visionary architectures, such as his 1978 *Floating Cities*. A very large scale model in the current exhibition shows a seaborne community composed of discrete units—housing, factories, farmland, and so on—which may be rearranged in various configurations according to economic necessity or changing social needs.

Another sort of abstraction, one revealing a basically philosophical intent, is achieved by the works he calls emblematic. These are an attempt to make a kind of architectural emblem for a life process, much as an incinerator might approximate digestion. *Circles and Towers Growing* is the most ambitious of these emblematic works. It approximates the process of creation itself.

GROWER

Simonds' organic architectures embody the concept of growth in both literal and metaphoric ways. His 1975 Artpark project *Growth House* was a circular, seasonally renewable dwelling constructed from "growth bricks"—bags of earth containing seeds. "What you build as your shelter," he explained, "turns into food; you harvest it and eat it. And so it sets up a kind of marriage of building and growing, shelter and food."

Growth is a dominant metaphor in Simonds' thought. Collaborating with Rudy Burckhardt, the well-known photographer and filmmaker, Simonds has made three short films that establish the basic mythology of the Little People and demonstrate in a ritualistic way how the dwellings "grow" out of a landscape.

In the first, entitled *Birth*, we see a raw-earth landscape. A mound in the middle ground begins to move. A head emerges, and Simonds slowly stands, his body covered with the multicolored clay and earth. *Body — Earth*, the second film, is again set in a primitive landscape. Scale is uncertain. In the foreground we see shapes that resemble frozen gray waves. An abrupt cut reveals Simonds' body writhing in wet muddy clay, which when it had dried became the beautiful landscape we were first shown.

Simonds is born of the earth in the first film and, in effect, copulates with his mother in the second. In the third, *Landscape — Body — Dwelling*, he "gives birth" to little dwellings that he builds on a clay landscape molded onto his own body. The architecture literally grows on him.

Simonds conceives of clay as a living substance. Consisting of hydrous silicates of aluminum, clay also typically contains impurities, which give it color. The red clay from which Simonds often fashions his landscapes is colored by ferric oxide, hematite—a name derived from the Greek word for blood. A strong biblical precedent exists for a conception of clay as the *materia prima* of life, a term Simonds has used in discussing this subject. In the Book of Job, one speaker says, "In God's sight I am just what you are; I too am only a handful of clay."

The equation of earth with body can be quite literal, as in one section of the installation Simonds built for the Museum of Contemporary Art. A city is set into a hole in the wall; the ground beneath the dwellings and the overhanging "cliff" converge in smooth folds at the deepest part of the hole; the vaginal allusion is unmistakable.

With *The Dinner Party* exhibition happening across the city while Simonds was working, a woman stopped to watch Charles. He stepped aside so that she could see, and she poked her head into the hole. "Where's the rental office for the apartments?" she asked.

"It's very exclusive," Simonds said. "And there's not much plumbing."

"Have you been to Judy Chicago's show?" the visitor asked. "No, I haven't, but I intend to."

"You've got some of her . . . uh, symbols."

Simonds laughed. "The response to that is, I've probably seen as much of that as she has."

The idea of growth implies time. *Circles and Towers Growing* narrates the rise and decline of parallel civilizations—the people who build circular dwellings and those who build towers. Twelve versions of the same landscape are seen at successive moments in an imagined history.

The first landscape looks like a dry, cracked lake bed. No features serve as landmarks; the setting is Nowhere. The cracks may simply indicate a drying out, but they may also mean that the earth is cracking, emitting forces from deep within.

In the second landscape, pink womblike domes have broken through the crust. Some of these have tiny holes at the top, like air holes; some of these holes have developed into labial openings. A dome near the center almost appears to have lips. We sense that the earth has been impregnated and is about to give birth.

The third landscape shows the first signs of structural imposition: two tiny corduroy roads of willow twigs wind into the area from different directions. Stakes, as if for measurement, appear, surrounding several of the more prominent domes. This landscape represents a hermaphroditic possibility. The central dome has now sprouted a phallic projection, so that it exhibits both a female and a male nature.

After this landscape, the imaginary history branches. To the right a female circular architecture develops, building on, then supplanting the original geologic forms. On the left the towers rise, mimicking the phallic protrusion. The circle people continue to be obsessed with time in their subsequent structures. We see celestial sighting devices in several of their landscapes.

At the penultimate landscape, reading from front to back, the two paths converge again on a ruined foundation having features that suggest both the female and the male lines. In the last landscape, even the outline of a foundation has been obliterated. Nothing remains but scattered, weathered bricks. The landscape is approaching the state of nothingness from which it began.

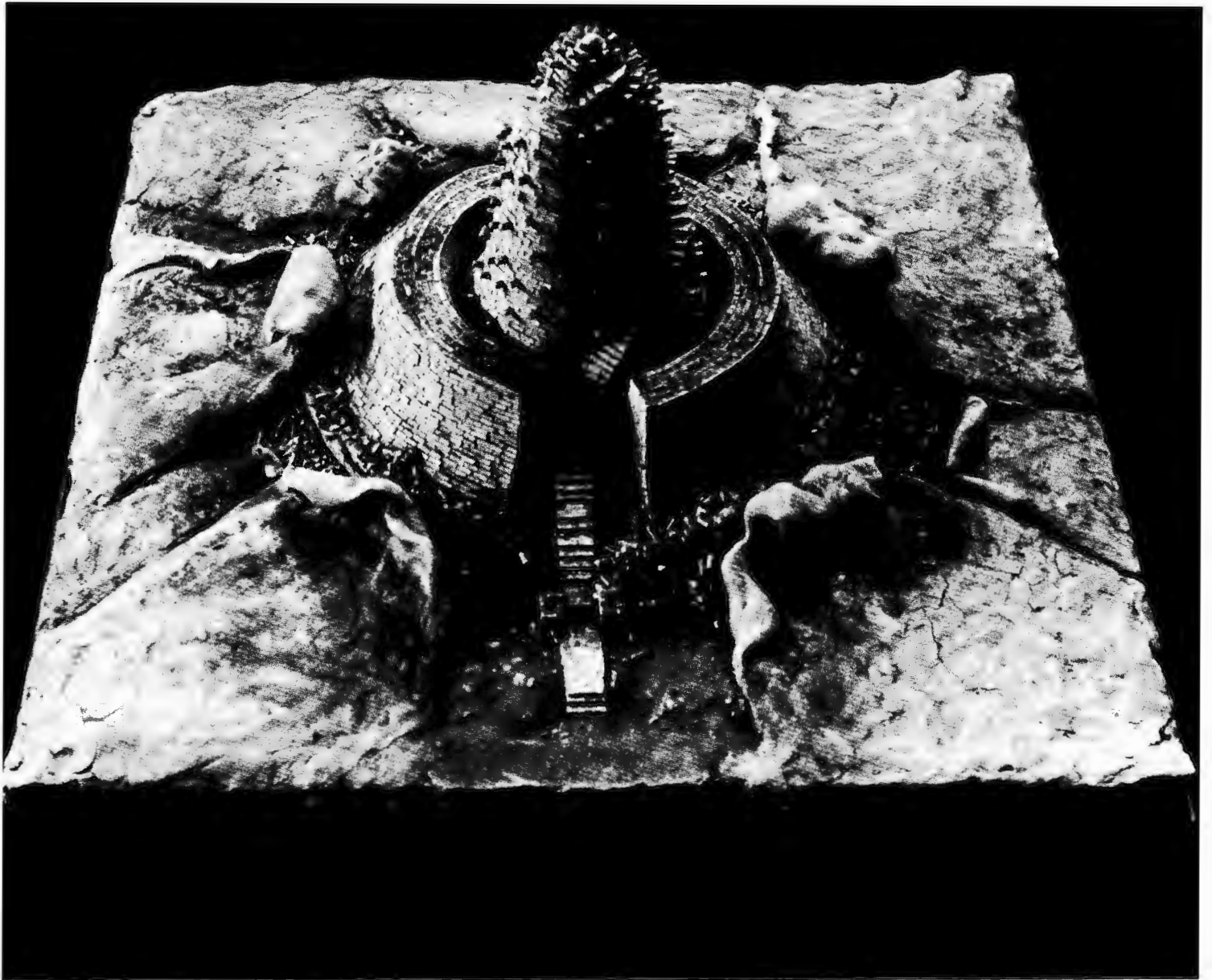
Circles and Towers Growing is Simonds' most conceptually ambitious treatment of his growth theme. Though he doesn't discuss work in progress, he did indicate that in it he will explore the metaphors of growth further.

MAKER

"I'm interested in how organisms live, the ways in which they live. It's not just the objects, it's the means of inhabitation—how they go about it." Charles Simonds is a serious student of nests, of shells, of all the strategies that creatures have developed to house themselves. He has said "I've learned more from watching the small-brained genius of the caddis fly larva building its house . . . than by studying the work of large-brained architects."¹

As pleasing as they are, however, the individual dwellings that Simonds builds do not tell us very much about the Little People, except that the level of their technology is pretty low. The Little People themselves are never seen. "Sometimes there's a sense that they left a couple of seconds ago and you just happened to miss them," Simonds said, "and in other cases it's as though they've been gone for a long, long time."

The pattern of their building activity over time does give us a handle on their identity. "They live a peripatetic life, which is seemingly like a search but is also a wandering. It's not exactly headed toward finding a particular thing so much as it's a movement from here to there, each time trying to find a home." The dwellings have evident-



Charles Simonds, *House Plants, Brick Blossom*, 1981. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

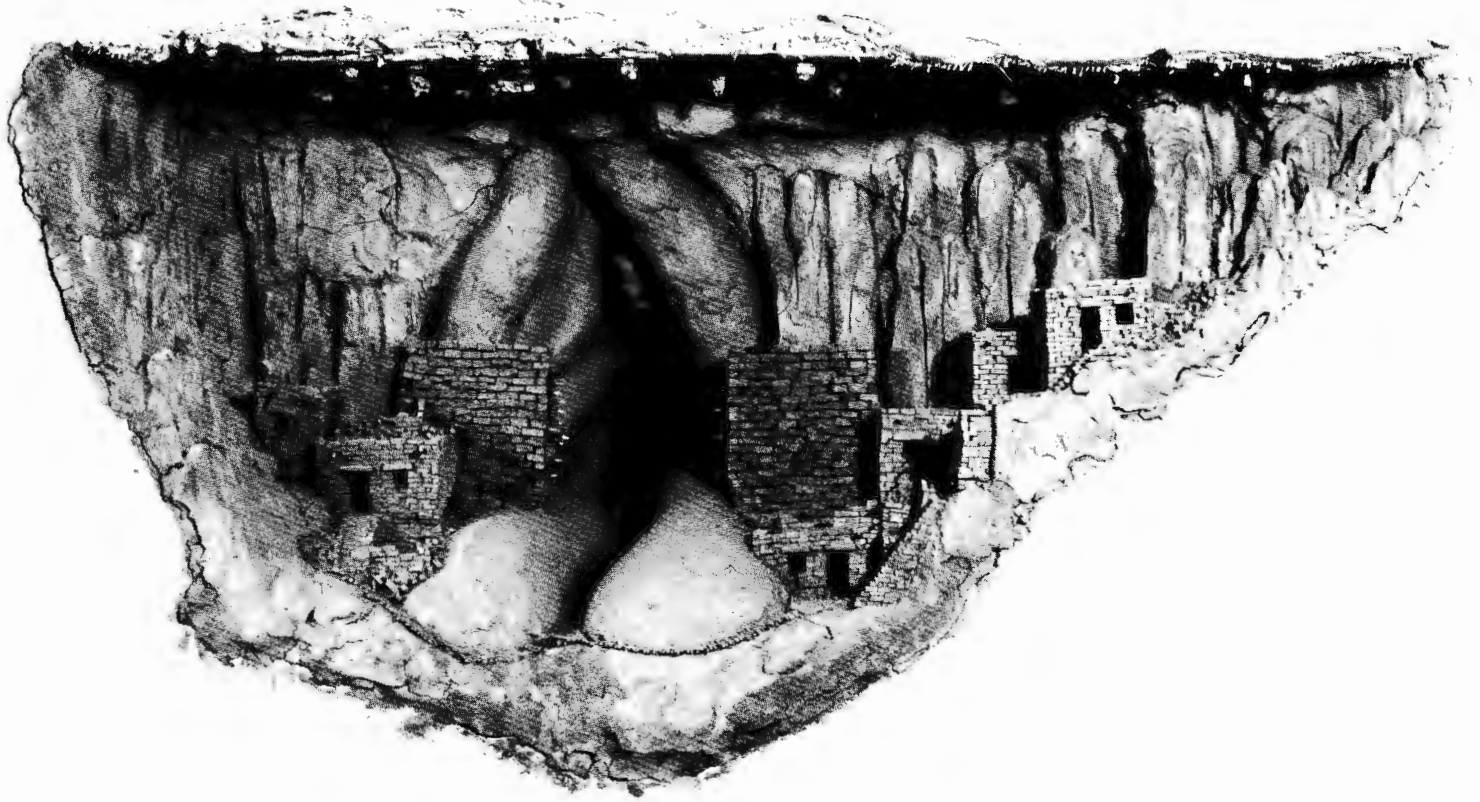
ly functioned as houses for the Little People, but, as the saying has it, a house is not a home. "These people obviously haven't found their true home yet."

The archetypal wandering people are the Jews, and I thought it not unlikely that the grandson of Jewish emigrants would have drawn on that history of exile and wandering. Simonds does not intend such an identification, but he finds the parallel interesting.

Jewish legend also provides a fascinating analogy to the relationship between Simonds and the Little People. There are many tales of a strange creature of clay called the golem. The golem legend was created by wonder-working rabbis adept in the Cabala. They would fashion a man from clay, recite certain mystical formulas, and bring it to life. Simonds' film *Birth* could almost be a vision of the making of a golem.

In legends, a golem normally functioned as a supernatural servant, a powerful creature that sometimes ran amok (Mary Shelley's Frankenstein monster and Goethe's ballad *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* are probably based on the golem legends.) Simonds' relationship to the Little People is ambivalent: he is both the creator of a little golem society as well as its servant, *its* golem. He describes himself in relation to them as "an agent, a follower, a kind of medium, a chaser (I'm always chasing them), a revealer. I meet them. We have meetings. That's what happens: I invoke them."

When I obstinately pointed out that they did, after all, spring from his imagination, he answered somewhat wearily, "That's always a problem for people. I don't have an answer to that. Obviously, the Little People are a fantasy and they come from me, so they're me. But psychologically, at least, they're separate from me.



Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, 1981. Collection Kunsthaus Zurich.

So it's a self-contradictory kind of relationship. But in a certain way, that's what gives it its energy.

"That psychological issue always comes up, and the answer is, I'm not insane, so I'm perfectly able to realize that the Little People are not alive. Once I enter their world, it's as real as can be. But . . . I'm perfectly aware of *me*. That's why I always think of myself as their agent—because in a sense they're asking me to do things. I'm the person who's responsible for them, to get them *home*."

Simonds built one dwelling on the Lower East Side in a sheltered spot, and it has remained now for about ten years. Normally, however, the pieces are destroyed soon after construction—run over by a truck or wrecked by little kids playing bombardier, as Simonds tells it. Not only is he inured to this aspect of the dwellings' existence, but he seems to take a certain satisfaction in it. "That's the world. That's life. Like my friend, Mark says, it's a jungle out there. That's the real world. That's what makes them participate in real life. That's the point where they interface with the facts."

So the precarious odyssey has unfolded, from the Lower East Side out into America, from Paris and Berlin to Shanghai. We begin to wonder whether the true home sought by the Little People is a patch of the earth or something more elusive, an Israel of the spirit.

After Simonds has sculpted his miniature landscapes, after he has patiently built the dwellings, laying in tiny clay bricks with tweezers, a final procedure remains. He wets some of the surfaces with diluted Elmer's glue and sprinkles fine sand over them with a kitchen sieve. He gently blows on the falling sand so that it catches in the cracks

and drifts through the structures.

Suddenly the entire scene pops into focus and becomes a unified whole. These moments have a special significance for him. "It's like something crystallizes. All of a sudden you can see it. That's an important moment because it's the moment at which I leave that world for that day. I disconnect from the act of making it, of bringing it to life. That's the point at which it's borne out into the world which is separate from me. I've stopped touching it."

THINKER

"The development of a personal-universal mythology is a central concern of mine, as is the use of that mythology as an investigative tool to fracture the present."²²

Simonds' descriptions of the three peoples provide a fictive anthropology for alternate lines of development of the Little People. There are the People Who Live in a Line, the People Who Live in a Circle, and the People Who Live in a Spiral. His narrative about the last group has prophetic implications for our own society.

"☉ believed in a world entirely created by their own wills, in which nature's realities were of little concern. Their dwelling formed an ascending spiral—with the past constantly buried, serving as building material for the future. They obsessively gambled with their resources, the number of inhabitants, the height of the structure. As the dwelling grew higher and higher, it buried the *cultivable land*. As it grew, fewer and fewer workers were needed for its construction. ☉ aspired toward an ecstatic death, the point at which their great dwelling would inevitably collapse.

Circles and Towers Growing seems to relate most directly to the People Who Live in a Circle. Here we also see an implied warning, a kind of visual parable. This people is highly conscious of its past, and one of the dwellings here occupies an eddy in the flow of time, a sidetrack where a branch of this civilization gets stuck, going around and around, chasing its own tail, and appearing to have no future other than a slow, entropic decline.

Circles and Towers Growing embodies a personal-universal mythology that gives an account of artistic creation. It may be compared with the narrative philosophy of divine creation presented in the Cabala, the central tradition in Jewish mysticism. The Cabalists' doctrine of divine emanation, in which God gradually reveals himself in successive creative aspects, called *Sefirot* (the singular form is *Sefirah*), is often schematized in the form of a branching Tree of Emanation. A diagram of the flow of time through *Circles and Towers Growing* bears a striking resemblance to the Cabalistic tree, with the successive stages of emanation corresponding almost exactly to the successive versions of the landscape in *Circles and Towers Growing*.

The Cabala is a tradition that evolved and developed through time, often in contradictory ways. Thus, there is no definitive system but, rather, a shared terminology and certain controlling concepts that may be expressed in various ways. The evolution of the idea of growth in Simonds' work suggests that he may think in an analogous manner.

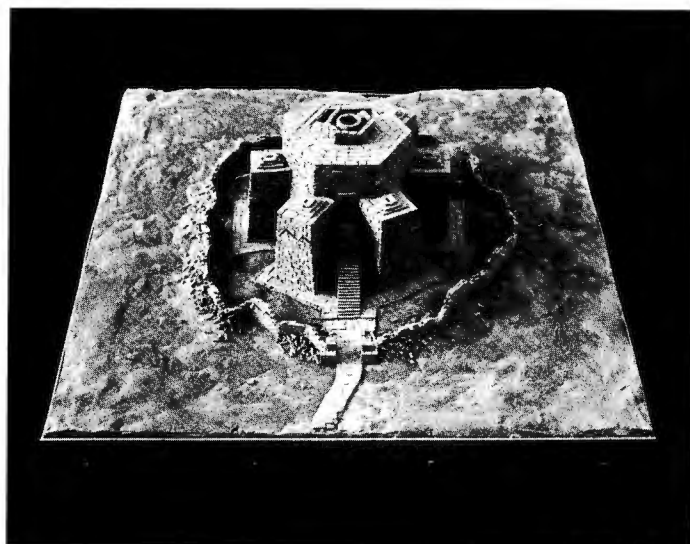
"There are preexisting ingredients, like pieces that you sort of throw up in the air, and they come down in different ways each time. Then they reveal to you forms of the ways in which they can possibly be. In other words, you don't know what the form's going to be until it reveals itself to you. But you know what the pieces of the puzzle are that you can juggle. I don't know if I could identify them for you, but there are specific realms of thought that I'm constantly remixing." These realms may be considered as functional equivalents of the *Sefirot*, the realms of divine emanation.

On a transparent level, *Circles and Towers Growing* narrates a progression through time. The final, desolate landscape corresponds, I think, to the world we and the Little People inhabit. Symbolically, the work represents the gradual revelation of an initially hidden creative force that is spent by the time it reaches the last landscape.

If that creative force were divine, it would become possible to read this work in reverse. We could speak of a spiritual journey "up" this river of time, the journey becoming a process of mystical initiation culminating in union with the Godhead. For the Little People, the journey would represent a path leading to their true home, their Jerusalem, their origin in the imagination of the artist.

The sixteenth-century Cabalists in Palestine developed the theory that God needed to withdraw from part of himself in order to make room for Creation—He exiled part of himself. This divine presence in exile is known as the *Shekhinah*, poetically called the Bride of God, and sometimes identified with the mystical "body of Israel," the Jewish people. In the wake of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, these Cabalists developed an interpretation of the history of exile as a symbolic mission: the Jews must travel in every part of the globe to find and restore through righteous acts the sparks of the *Shekhinah* hidden by our world.

The paradox of Simonds' relationship with the Little People—that they simultaneously spring from his imagination and have a separate existence—here finds a mystical resolution. The Little People are in exile from Simonds. Their wandering is a search for him.



Charles Simonds, *Ritual Furnace*, 1978. Collection Jack Chachkes. Photo Rudolph Burckhardt.

The circle will close if we take one more step and say that Simonds is searching for himself.

Ultimately, Simonds' creations, so accessible and "popular," retain an opacity, a mystery that opens them to endless interpretation by all viewers—big and little people, art and non-art people. Simonds is interested in others' ideas but will take no responsibility for what they think about his work. "I never feel any obligation [to believe] that people understand anything. At all. Period."

He uses his experience in the streets for examples. "You make something, right? Some people come by and immediately dive in and say, 'Oh yeah, I know, the Little People! That's just like if we were living at the corner of this big world, and we were just incidental and time was going by.' They take the scale and turn themselves into Little People in relation to another world. Some people can just do that.

"Little kids will dive right in and start to build a trail. They're right in there. Other people come by, and they'll say, 'Oh, that's silly. That's just stupid.' And they walk on. They don't get anything.

"Now the person who stops and then starts to think about this and lets it all roll around in his head and starts to see Little People in all different places and starts to use that as a way of hinging reality, thinking about time and place, is getting a lot more out of it, seemingly. But that's all a coefficient of what they choose to let themselves do. I don't even open the door. I just provide the doorway. *They* choose whether they want to go in or stay out, and how far into the doorway they want to go. So I don't really have any obligation in that, or any control. Or any real interest.

"I mean, I have a relationship—me to the Little People. That's very intimate and it isn't going to be changed by whatever other people do. That's me and them. It doesn't have anything to do with you or anybody else. And that's the story for me."★

... quoted in Nancy Foote, "Situation Esthetics: Impermanent Art and the Seventies Audience," *Artforum* 18, 5 (Jan. 1980), p. 29.

★. From an interview with Daniel Abadie printed in the exhibition catalog for "Charles Simonds: Temenos," Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y. Abadie, curator of the Musée de l'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, introduced Simonds' work to Europe.