The Lost Worlds of the 'Little People'

Charles Simonds has built his miniature clay civilizations wherever the city afforded them an ephemeral home—in gutters, on window ledges, under loading platforms, in vacant lots

by PHIL PATTON

THERE WERE YELLOW AND ORANGE lilies in a vase in Charles Simonds' apartment. On the wall hung a plaster cast of an iguana swallowing its tail. Whelk egg cases from the sea and a large hornet's nest dangled from exposed sprinkler pipes. On the windowsill, soft opalescent light filtered through the sides of a chambered nautilus shell.

Simonds lives alone and ascetically in the front room of his loft in New York's Chelsea area. There is a small open kitchen and a minimum of furniture. The whole room is dusted with a faint layer of faded orange from the clay that goes into his pieces: miniature worlds and tiny civilizations that Simonds creates in the studio in back and on the street, works that are not remotely like anything else in art today, or, probably, ever.

A couple of Simonds' pieces sit near the window: constructions of houses and towers in orange and gray clays growing out of organically shaped landscapes, surrounded by cascades of tiny gray bricks. There are small houses, tiny bits of pottery and sticks of wood. There are, however, no people, only the signs of their former and possibly future presence.

"The city makes us all feel like 'Little People,' " says Simonds. Here, Lower East Side children watch him build a tiny dwelling.

The earth in these pieces seems animate, the forms that develop from it vaguely sexual and biological as well as archeological. Like the natural objects that decorate his rough, unfinished living and working quarters, they evince a deep interest in the various forms of living objects.

Simonds began building small dwellings in the street for his imaginary race of "Little People" in 1971. He has since constructed several hundred of these impermanent works. (Thanks to weather, children and pedestrian depredations, they rarely last more than a day or two.) Most of them were built on New York's Lower East Side, others in Berlin, Paris, Dublin and Venice, some as far away as Shanghai and Guilin, China.

Simonds' miniature settlements—both the temporary and the permanent ones—are the best known aspect of his work, but they are only one part of it. There are his designs for *Floating Cities*—models of factories, dwellings and other types of buildings erected on floating platforms and, in theory, rearrangeable as modules. There is the *Growth House*, constructed of burlap-covered earth "bricks" filled with seeds that eventually grow, carrying the material on a cycle of soil to building to plant; and the life-size pieces created at Artpark in Lewiston, New York, near Niagara Falls, using the remains of an old railroad tunnel and stones piled in cairns. Most recently, there are the pieces Simonds extemporized from piles of natural and technological debris, creating a sculpture each day for two weeks, at the Walter Phillips Gallery of the Banff Centre in Banff, Alberta, a year ago.

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Simonds' approach to building is biological and anthropological. He says his main theme is "how people live in time and space in relation to their architecture."

COURTESY WALTER PHILLIPS GALLERY

Pieces of natural and technological debris were incorporated in sculptures made at Canada's Banff Centre last year.

All of Simonds' work, however, relates to a central theme: ''How people live in time and space in relation to their architecture'' and, beneath that, to a larger concern with the relation of all creatures to their bodies, their shells, their dwellings, their environments. In the house of Simonds' art there are many mansions, but within this art is a pattern as clear as that of the nautilus' multichambered shell.

Simonds has always been interested in reaching beyond the art world to a wider audience. He has not until recently been represented by a gallery, but he has had a number of museum shows—at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum Ludwig in Cologne (his work is especially appreciated in Europe) and most recently a show organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. That show, with some changes, traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum, the Fort Worth Art Museum and the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. Its last stop will be the Guggenheim Museum in New York, where it is to open in September.

His work, either in the form of permanent installations or as sculptures on board, is in the collections of numerous museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Gallery of South Australia and the Kunsthaus in Zürich. At the Whitney Museum, a piece in the permanent collection has been set up in the museum's stairwell. Its ''signal towers'' can ''communicate'' with a similar structure set up on the window ledge of a building across Madison Avenue.

Recently, Simonds was working on the largest piece he has ever undertaken, a mountainlike sculpture on a round base, for the floor of the Guggenheim. The work was fabricated in 64 separate pieces. He was experimenting with a clever system involving casters that would allow him to turn it, like some tremendous Lazy Susan, in order to see all of its sides.

Simonds' ''mortar'' is a thin white liquid composed of Elmer's Glue thinned with water, into which he dips each brick. Working quickly and surely, and using a pair of tweezers angled at the neck, Simonds lays the bricks, which he mass-produces with a rolling cutter. He lines a round hole in the red clay base of the piece with the gray bricks, then builds the wall above the ground level to produce a sort of kiva shape.

A portable radio of indefinite age, covered with clay dust, manages to fill the large studio with rock music. Tables are crowded with large plastic bags and El Pico coffee cans filled with clays Simonds collects on his extensive travels. He doesn't mind talking while he works, a practice that carries over from working in the street.

One couldn't resist asking him if people who encountered him working in the street didn't simply think he was crazy. ''Some do,'' he says, ''but when I say, 'I'm building a house for little people,' there's a kind of 'Oh, yeah' reaction. There's a certain logic to the process that people sense.''

The ''Little People,'' the imaginary race for which

Simonds constructs his pieces, are a kind of generalized early culture, with what he calls "a fictional ethnography." The "Little People," Simonds says, "migrate through time and space." They have a history, which his work explores, but not a continuous one: Any given work may be later in that history or earlier. The shapes and details of Simonds' works reveal the histories of the tribes as well as their sociologies.

"The 'Little People' first lived in Soho, and then in 1972 they migrated to the Lower East Side," Simonds said in 1974. "They live wherever the architecture of the city seems to offer them home—in gutters, on window ledges, in niches in walls, under loading platforms, in vacant lots and so on. . . ."

For viewers of his work, whom Simonds encourages to develop their own visions of the "Little People," the act of imagination grows from the fact that "the city makes us all feel like 'Little People' sometimes." A film by Rudy Burckhardt shows Simonds working on one of his Lower East Side pieces a few years ago. He arrives at the site with his materials in a bag slung over his shoulder. Beside the crevice where he sets to work is some graffiti: "Shorty" and "Junior." Latin music from the radio of a passerby envelops the scene. Simonds has been working a few minutes when an abandoned car down the street catches on fire. The crowd that has gathered to watch him wanders down the block to watch firemen arrive and extinguish the fire, then drifts back. "You can accept the idea of there being a race of 'Little People,' " Simonds says, "as you accept so many other *faits accomplis* of city life."

As important as the street works themselves are the reactions of passersby to Simonds as he creates them. The artist has a whole collection of stories about constructing the pieces. "If you are working in Spain," he says, "the people think the structures are Spanish houses, or North African ones. On the Lower East Side, which is heavily Puerto Rican, people think they are Puerto Rican. Most Americans think they are southwestern Indian."

People's reactions differ in other ways as well. Only in Germany, for instance, did people come up to Simonds and ask him, "Who gave you permission to do this?" In Bad Godesberg, Germany, he was taken for a terrorist and nearly arrested. In China, Simonds was repeatedly refused permission to undertake his pieces—no one wanted to take responsibility for granting that permission—but when he simply started out without permission he was surrounded by crowds that literally cheered him on.

Simonds has described his experience of working in China:

> I could feel the excitement of the people following me and the chatter as word was passed through the streets. As soon as the red clay hit the wall, a roar went up. My hand was shaking. . . . I worked for some time to continuous yelling and then, realizing that everything was okay, I looked up. Every window of a six-story school building some distance away was packed with children screaming and waving. . . .

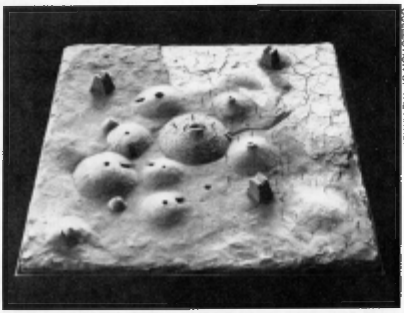
Simonds frequently chooses depressed or working class areas of the cities where he works: the Kreuzberg section of Berlin, for instance, inhabited by many *Gastarbeiter*, foreign workers from Turkey or North Africa; or the Belleville section of Paris. The placement of the works is informal—the main criterion is an active street life.

In Paris Simonds encountered a young girl who had her own fantasies of little people before encountering his work. She regarded his work as her fantasy come to life. The girl spent hours watching Simonds work and in the evening brought a covered tray of food for his dinner.

In Berlin's Kreuzberg section, Simonds was surrounded by a boisterous crowd of children. "They were climbing all over me," Simonds recalls. "All of a sudden I sensed that something was up. This kid of about 14 or 15 showed up with a tremendous knife. The kids stepped back and the boy with the knife drew a wide arc in the dirt. He arranged the kids by height behind the arc, so everyone could see and I could work.

"The nice thing about the street," Simonds says, "is that people have a choice. They can walk on by or they can stand and watch. I'm fascinated by talking to these people, learning from them.

"The street is a very anonymous place. It's very different from a gallery or museum in that way. The street also encourages people to talk. They know that they will probably never see you again; you don't exchange names.



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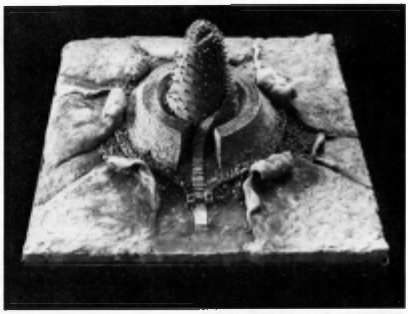

DES MOINES ART CENTER

In Simonds' work in clay, the earth often takes on feminine forms, while towers and other constructions assume phallic and masculine shapes. LEFT *Circles and Towers Growing Number 4*, 1978. RIGHT *Brick Blossom*, 1981, from the "House Plants" series.

© HOWARD BARASH

Simonds is creating a 64-section work, his largest to date, for the Guggenheim Museum installation of his traveling retrospective.

"The pieces are a kind of gift to the street. Also a threat. But because they are vulnerable, beautiful, precious, people respond to them. They identify with the labor that goes into them, and that helps preserve them. Children are the main threat, and often the older children, the head honchos on the block, will tell the smaller kids, 'If you touch that I'm going to kick your tail.'"

The length of time a street piece survives, Simonds says, depends on its height: "The lower they are the more quickly they will be destroyed by little children." Simonds doesn't announce when he will work on them, nor does he invite critics to attend, and he doesn't come back to check on the pieces' survival or destruction.

THE BASIC MATERIAL FOR ALL OF Simonds' work is clay, which he sprinkles with sand to give a patina of age, an almost velvety texture. Simonds discusses clay in personalized terms. "Every clay is different," he says. "It responds differently when you touch it. If you are aware, it speaks. It tells you who it is."

Simonds has a favorite spot near Sayreville, New Jersey, for obtaining his clays. Once or twice a year he packs up a front-end loader scoopful or two and brings it back to his studio. Most of the clays he uses are not cleaned or homogenized. The clays can stay around for years; dry clays are easily revived with water.

Some critics have schematized the meanings of Simonds' different clays into rigidity. In fact, he says, "The color of the clay is important, but not programmatic. The red has a thousand moments. It's extraordinary for its fleshiness. It's rubbery; it almost springs back when you touch it. For me, its association with the body is inescapable.

"The gray suggests stone, blocks or rocks. From these two basics it is easy to project a larger series of associations. It all has to do with how you use the clay, the history of what you remember it having been."

Other colors seem to take their meanings for Simonds from those two basics—red for the animated earth, gray for the buildings and other works of man. "I have a pink," he says, "that will make you blush. It's better than makeup. There are green clays—things you wouldn't imagine."

Simonds collects clays—and sands as well—from different parts of the world. Recently, for instance, a friend was delegated to bring back a new supply of yellow clay Simonds had found at a Berlin tile manufacturer's.

He can speak of clay in affectionate, almost intimate terms because he has been working with it since he was very young. Along with his older brother, John, Simonds studied clay modeling with John De Marco and Claire Frezano, Italian sculptors in New York who did architectural sculpture—"angels on churches and so on," he says. Simonds turned out to have a natural gift for making clay portraits. "There was never much question as to what I was going to do in life, because working with clay was what I *could* do." Even today, he says, "there are things I watch my hand do that are almost thoughtless. I can remember the moment of learning them. It is knowledge you have in the

hand." He stopped doing figurative sculpture while in college, but occasionally does a piece for himself or his friends.

Simonds' parents were both psychoanalysts. Each began with a fairly orthodox Freudian approach, but Simonds' mother became known as something of a rebel in the profession for her researches into sleeping and dreaming. Her interest lay in child development, particularly the way in which a growing child discovers his body. The implications for Simonds' art, with its emphasis on dwellings as an extension of the body, are clear. "Everything about me," he says plainly, "is inspired by that—not in a direct way, but in an underneath way."

Growing up on New York's Upper West Side, Simonds spent many childhood hours in the American Museum of Natural History, experience that he agrees probably contributed to his interest in animal and plant forms. Among the more ambitious projects he has imagined is a plan for a natural history museum of his own. Asked what the museum would contain, he answers oracularly: "Everything. From the very beginning of time to the present. Everything."

Simonds, 37, is a strongly built man whose brown hair is now cut back from its former generous length. He studied art at Berkeley, receiving his B.A. in 1967, and at Rutgers, where he obtained a master's degree. He taught briefly at Newark State College and by 1970 was living in lower Manhattan and beginning to execute his street pieces. He shared a building on Chrystie Street with artists Gordon Matta-Clark and Harriet Korman and later lived on Prince Street for several years with critic Lucy Lippard.

Simonds' work is so unusual that it is not easily linked with any artistic predecessors, but he cites at least two artists as being important for his early work. One was Robert Smithson, whose use of earth-related materials was influential and who appreciated Simonds' work. The other, Simonds says, was Claes Oldenburg, with his related ideas of working in the street. "I read about Oldenburg's plans for monuments around the city, one of which was a giant cube at the intersection of Broadway and Canal Street.

"I also envied Oldenburg's way of eroticizing the whole world, of his appropriation of form, of the communalities in things, of taking anything in the everyday world and transforming it, as opposed to 'making art.'"

The first works that Simonds acknowledges as belonging to his mature career were "ritual" pieces, performed in the early '70s in clay pits in New Jersey and documented on film and in still photographs. In *Birth* (1970), Simonds says, "I buried myself in the earth and was reborn from it." In *Landscape/Body/Dwelling* (also first performed in 1970), "I lie down nude on the earth, cover myself with clay, remodel and transform my body into a landscape with clay and then build a fantasy dwelling place on my body on the earth."

The photographer and filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt's 1973 film of *Landscape/Body/Dwelling* shows the artist as a kind of Gulliver, naked in a claypit, building dwellings on his belly and thigh. The scene, with the bare gray clay landscape and the lonely figure of Simonds in its center, is like something out of Beckett. The piece is a kind of touchstone for all of Simonds' work, because it relates body to dwelling directly.

From these early, personalized pieces grew the dwellings for the "Little People." Washington, D.C.-based art writer and curator John Beardsley has characterized the early development of Simonds' work as a movement from the private and personal to the public and social. "What originated as a private fantasy," Beardsley says, "assumed a public purpose: to encourage us, through the observation of the changing physical and social structures of the little people, to contemplate the structures of our own lives."

At the same time that he began constructing pieces on the Lower East Side, Simonds became involved in another project that was to give a permanent political coloration to audiences' perceptions of his art. Working with several Lower East Side community groups, he helped plan and build a park and playlot, completed in 1974. Called Project Uphill, the park on East Second Street had as its purpose, in Simonds' words, "to develop a feeling for the land as opposed to asphalt, hill forms as opposed to flats. . . ." Although he today plays down any political aspect to his work, Simonds at that time called building the park "a political act." Implicit in that political act and in the building of the emphemeral, outdoor settlements of the "Little People" was a rejection of the limitations of the art world.

Among some in the art world, Simonds' attitude was regarded as rather pretentious. At one point, for instance, writing about Simonds' street pieces and his work with the Lower East Side park, sculptor and writer Ira Joel Haber accused him of "a patronizing attitude toward art and the people who make art," a "superficial approach to poverty, injustice and human suffering" and "cheap liberalism."

There were political overtones to other Simonds projects of the mid-'70s. One, a proposal for the *Stanley Tankel Memorial Hanging Gardens at Breezy Point*, called for planting the abandoned steel skeletons of two apartment towers with wisteria and other trailing plants. Brooklyn community activitist Stanley Tankel had led the successful fight to stop construction of the buildings, which their critics felt would ruin the waterside site. (At a cost of $2 million, the unfinished steel skeletons were finally dynamited by the city—an event, Simonds recalls, marked by a party and the consumption of a quantity of champagne.) Another of Simonds' proposals called for similar treatment of an abandoned tenement on the Lower East Side.

Today, Simonds' political views and his attitude toward the art world sound less doctrinaire. He feels that his views then were misunderstood and that his criticisms of the art world were taken to be much more negative than in fact they were.

"I probably sounded much more against the galleries than I was," he says. "My going to work in the street was not an attack on the galleries, it simply made them look very peculiar and in certain ways ridiculous. The world of galleries was simply of no use to me. You don't have to attack or fight something that isn't in your way." Still, he admits, "I was often more angry then.

"I would come from working on the Lower East Side to the house where I lived in SoHo and hear these art people talk about how they had spent their days, which were so different from mine. Their concerns seemed bizarre, if not obscene.

"Today I think I don't feel as exclusivist as I used to. Once I was insistent about working only on the street. Today my view is not to exclude any way of working. I accomplished what I wanted to do on the Lower East Side,

so there was no purpose in continuing. It's not as if you can fundamentally change things there. You can only scratch the surface and that will always be true."

Simonds has been fortunate up until now in having been able to carry out his work without the services of a gallery. Almost since the beginning of his career he has had numerous commissions and grants from individuals, foundations and museums—including a D.A.A.D. grant from the German government and the grant from Artpark. He lives sparely, devoting most of his time to work and travel. Last fall, however, he cast his lot with the Castelli Feigen Corcoran gallery, which now represents him.

Simonds has also done a number of pieces for private homes, including one for a collector in Antwerp, Belgium. "I'm interested in the point at which a home becomes part of conscious behavior, a reflection of the mind of the owner, as opposed to being a simple shell or nest," he says. Simonds contrasts his work for private patrons with that in the street. "When you work with a family you have to become very close to them, unlike on the street. You are poking around, seeing what nerve you touch."

A number of his ideas remain in the form of sketches or models. (Simonds says that he is not a very good draftsman and resorts to sketches only when he is not in a position to execute a project immediately.) The floating city idea is one such project. Simonds says that it grew out of a proposal several years ago to build a floating park in the East River. "I thought, 'What if everybody could have a barge with his own fantasy landscape on it?' Then, later, I saw a newspaper article about floating factories. [The factory was one that billionaire industrialist Daniel Ludwig had built in Japan, then floated to his wood pulp operations in Brazil.] I began to imagine all sorts of buildings migrating from place to place on water."

Part of Simonds' rejection of the standard gallery system was implicit in the transient nature of much of his work. Simonds' street works are doomed to ephemerality from the start, and at one point they constituted about 90 percent of his output. He has said that he likes the idea of his work continuing to exist as "an oral tradition," much as the continuity of history and culture in an early society is oral.

Simonds saves the clay and other materials from temporary or otherwise destroyed pieces and reuses it; the materials thus acquire a kind of history of their own. The 12 pieces in the cycle *Circles and Towers Growing* (1978) that Simonds executed for exhibition in Europe (at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, the National Gallery in Berlin and the Galerie Baudoin Lebon in Paris) were constructed of materials that had been used in his project at Documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977.

Although his pieces have the feel of archeological sites—the sense of real places, where real people lived, inviting our latter-day interpretation—Simonds does not base them on actual peoples or on archeological research. His dwellings and other structures are offered as something like universal prototypes of primitive dwellings. The permanent pieces, for instance, include pyramids, labyrinths, observatories, signal towers, ritual ruins—in fact, all the types of structures that reflect the beliefs and mores of a society. Often, as in the *Circles and Towers Growing* series, the earth takes on feminine forms, with towers and other constructions assuming phallic and masculine shapes.

Simonds' sites encourage the amateur anthropologist in every viewer to ponder the nature of the people who occupied them. There is a strong sense of narrative, of legend and history, about his work. But while one part of the "interpretation" of the pieces turns on the mythology constructed by viewers, another turns on Simonds' own mythology, as expressed in "Three Peoples." This essay, published originally in Genoa in 1975 and reprinted in the catalogue of the current exhibition, is the clearest exposition of the complex logic that lies behind his pieces.

The first people, the "people of the straight line," are wanderers, Simonds wrote, who, when they "moved from one dwelling to the next . . . left everything behind untouched as a museum of personal effects." The dwellings of these people grow in lines, like roads, and frequently cross over each other. "The past," for them, "formed a tremendous net on which their lives traveled. . . ."

The "circular people" develop their cities in a series of concentric rings around a "womb/dome" that resembles a southwestern American Indian kiva. The annual cycle of things is the basis of life among the "circular people," and the workaday regularity of their lives is broken only by the orgylike ceremony that concludes (or begins) each annual cycle.

The "people of the spiral," Simonds wrote, have as their goal "to achieve both the greatest possible height [of their dwellings] and to predict the very moment of collapse, the moment when the last of their resources would be consumed and their death inevitable." These people he relates to those depicted by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the painting *The Tower of Babel*.

SIMONDS' LIBRARY—PILES OF BOOKS stacked in odd places around his studio— reveals his deep interest in biology, especially in the architecture of living creatures. The books, which Simonds seems to be in the habit of showing to writers interested in his work, include Karl von Frisch's famous works on the habits of bees as well as his *Animal Architecture*; Edward O. Wilson's *Sociobiology*; textbooks on evolution; volumes on *Sex Lives of Animals Without Backbones* and *Patterns in Nature*; and even a paperback of Arthur Herzog's novel *The Swarm*.

His interest in natural forms, in evolution and life cycles might at first seem at odds with the built worlds of his "Little People," their villages and ruins. But Simonds' biological interest is a deep one. He is not especially interested in architecture, he says, at least not in "stylistic terms." But the shape of a hornet's nest, or the organization of colonies of single-celled organisms, he finds fascinating.

Simonds' work is susceptible to all sorts of serious academic and sociological references. Notes to critical pieces about him are studded with names like Claude Lévi-Strauss, Karl Jung, Mircea Eliade, Gaston Bachelard, Italo Calvino and Samuel Beckett. But the fact that he seems more interested in science than philosophy hints at the real nature of Simonds' art: Its success lies in its avoidance of portentousness, its keeping a sense of place as well as playfulness in the foreground.

For all its levels of anthropology and psychology, it is an art that remains highly personal. Its myth is built around a dedication to a private fantasy, and its esthetic, like its subject, is that of the container—the shell of the adult around the imagination of the child. ■