Charles Simonds

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CHARLES SIMONDS IS KNOWN for his architectural fantasies, which suggest an abandoned primitive civilization, now become an archaeological residue to be explored in microscopic detail. But in his new works the fantasy seems to have run away with the architecture, which often seems to be no more than a facade clinging for dear life to the freshly primordial clay. It has become a convulsive titan struggling to free itself from the Lilliputian brickwork which ties it down. There is a new sense of reckless freedom in Simonds's sculpture—a new sense of the autonomy of the material medium, and of abandonment to it. In his earlier work, architecture and earth were in harmonious if precarious balance. This has been disrupted in the new work; earth has become uncontainable and uncontrollable. And menacing: in several works raw earth towers over the delicate, refined architecture, threatening it—and civilization, which it represents—with complete irrelevance. Simonds's manmade structures have become beside the point of the life force that the earth embodies. Civilization may survive the catastrophic upheaval, but it looks transient, fragile, vulnerable-beyond repair. Simonds's clay has returned to nature with a vengeance. His buildings have always been ruins, but they now they seem more mournful, empty, and diminutive than ever.

More than ever, Simonds is working from his unconscious—the unreconstructed clay of his emotional substance. If buildings are conscious constructions, then apocalyptic clay is unconscious expression. Y, 2001, has an automatist flair, adding to its evocative power. Indeed, it seems like a nativity and crucifixion in one: our beginning and end unite in the unconscious, where there is no sense of time. In one extraordinary work Simonds has created a flagrantly bizarre body—a self-generating, tuber-like growth that seems animal, vegetable, and mineral at once—surreal, without the literary window dressing. Earth has become visceral and exciting, reminding us of Simonds's famous performance: he erupted from the earth, like a newborn god from the depths. Indeed, Simonds conceives of this, and other works, as eruptions—natural phenomena, making their irrational presence decisively felt.

Simonds's point of departure is *Smear*, 1998, in which the gestural malleability and abstract expressivity of clay is emphasized at the expense of the rational form it can be given. The mold has been broken, and the clay is mysteriously organic. While not eliminated, architectural structure has been reduced to insignificance:



what counts is the grand gesture of clay, an emblem of instinctive energy. The smear has become much more dramatic in the new works—all but formless, conveying a sense of relentless process. Phantom forms seem to be embedded in it, and monstrous forms magically precipitate out of it, all of them will-lessly eccentric and intimate. But what counts is the feverish drive of the amorphous clay—its headlong intensity. Next to its earthiness, the architecture looks like an apparition. Simonds has said that the architectural "image" often comes to him through his immersion and absorption in the clay, rather than "a priori," as it sometimes did. Thus the matrix of clay counts for more than whatever might emerge from it.

The direction of what Simonds calls the "transformative moment" has changed. Earlier, he was interested in the moment when bodily earth changed into architectural structure. Now he is more interested in the earth's architecture, as it were—its bodily character, which looks unstructured compared to man-made constructions. This goes hand in hand with a change in perspective: previously Simonds placed us outside and above the terrain, now he forces us to mentally climb it—to experience it from the inside, as it were. The terrain has become conspicuously difficult, complex, rugged; it would be a dangerous, impossible task to climb it in reality. But imaginatively we can enter its spirit, letting ourselves be guided by its current. There are clearly strong currents in it, as its magma-like movement suggests.

There is, then, more of sense of release in Simonds's new works than in his earlier ones, and more of a sense of geological than historical time. Simonds thinks of them as fractal explorations, but their irregularity also has emotional meaning. They carry "the tradition of the irregular" into new territory, where the irregular signifies the labyrinth of the unconscious. One can freely associate to the seemingly malformed, grotesque character of Simonds's terrain—but in nature nothing is grotesque or malformed, as Victor Hugo, an earlier master of the evocative terra incognita of the Rorschach-like surface, has said. Simonds's surface is an emblem of primary process thinking, and his architecture symbolizes secondary process thinking, but the two no longer converge, as in everyday thought. It is their conflict that makes Simonds's new clay sculptures profoundly dynamic, provocative, and maddening.