

# artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

CRITICISM ► EXHIBITIONS

Saturday, December 10th, 2011

## Little People Orphaned Once More: Charles Simonds at Knoedler

by Christopher Lyon

**Charles Simonds: *Mental Earth, Growths and Smears* at Knoedler & Company**

Nov. 3, 2011 to January 14, 2012 (now by appointment only)

19 East 70 Street at Madison Avenue

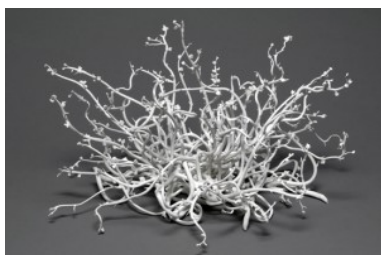
New York City, (212) 794-0550



Charles Simonds, *Mental Earth*, 2002. Metal, polyurethane, paper and clay, 72 x 126 x 89 inches. Courtesy of Knoedler & Company

The elusive Little People who notionally build the tiny dwellings and inhabit the miniature landscapes made by Charles Simonds have had to endure everything from heedless vehicles to curious children demolishing their abodes in broken curbs and abandoned buildings in the forty-some years since the artist began to “follow” their migration through SoHo and the Lower East Side. Recently they faced a new challenge uptown, in the sudden collapse of the 165-year-old Knoedler & Company, where Simonds’s most recent work was shown, just a month after the show opened.

The exhibition was organized mainly in two galleries. In the smaller one were two porcelain sculptures, technical tours de force made nearly twenty years apart at the Manufacture Nationale de Céramique, Sèvres, that are striking departures for Simonds. *Tumbleweed* (1993) is a realistic, impossibly intricate rendering of the plant that detaches itself from its root when it is mature and dry, rendered ghostlike here in the porcelain’s pure white unreflective finish. Unlike *Tumbleweed*, stubbornly turned in on itself, ready at any moment to roll away to parts unknown, *Life, with Thorns*, completed in 2011, reaches outward threateningly with its spiked stems, commanding the space around it. The earlier work, emblematic of rootlessness and desolation, and the later one, recalling traditional depictions of the Crown of Thorns, are like a two-sided portrait of the artist as existential prophet: rootless, peripatetic, and yet in the end defiantly messianic and even darkly judgmental.



Charles Simonds, *Life, With Thorns*, 2011. Porcelain, 13 x 21 3/4 x 17 3/4 inches. Courtesy of Knoedler & Company

Despite the fantasy and miniature scale of Simonds’s work, the messages they convey are far from comforting or child-friendly, as shown by two new tabletop pieces in this gallery, which recall his earliest work. *Ruined Blossoms* (2011) displays three plantlike miniature brick structures, seemingly in successive stages of growth. The smaller “juvenile” brick plants seem to have been aborted in some way—dead of thirst perhaps or crushed by an outside force. A third “mature” brick plant apparently has survived: two tower-stalks remain erect, though the remaining ones wilt or are prone on the desert-like surface of the piece. Growing morphs into building—a basic paradigm of Simonds’s work—in *Grown Walls* (2011), which relates as well to the cycle of life in depicting an androgynous male-female form in the middle of a landscape that grows outward in successive rings, initially circular but becoming rectilinear as they approach the limits of their compact clay realm.

The larger rear gallery was devoted to flying, twisting landscapes, hanging from the ceiling or projecting from walls, that embody the twin themes of building and growing—male and female principles, respectively, that in some works can be teased apart, but in others are folded or collapsed onto each other. In addition there were a pair of wall-mounted “smears,” excretory swipes of hardened clay that speak to “body function issues,” as Simonds delicately put it. Each is a captured primal gesture in his primary medium, clay. More than a medium, clay has, as Arthur Danto points out in a thoughtful catalogue essay for this show, a “primordial nature,” and one has long noticed a Golem-like aspect to Simonds’s work, a conjuring of larger-than-life beings out of

base clay. The question becomes, as Simonds put it in an email message that informed the venerable philosopher's essay, "Where do 'will' and imagination meet material (material reality, meant physically and 'philosophically')?"

As in response, an expressionistically rendered hanging sculpture, *Mental Earth* (2002), captures the collision of psychic experience and actuality at the core of the art and, one imagines, the psyche of this son of a couple who were Vienna-trained doctors and psychoanalysts. The ambitious, "post-analytic," tortured figure, a "smear" more than ten feet across, looks to this viewer like an inside-out rendering of the self, flayed and monumentalized. A serpentlike "head" at one end (or so one imagines it) and a coiling tail with shit-brown coloring at its other end—and less extravagant extrusions also projecting from the core of twisty rock supporting the work—appear to represent a kind of rolling id, whose miniature brick structures twist and curl in sync with the spiraling, seething rock to which they cling.



Charles Simonds, *Grown Walls*, 2011, detail. Wood, plaster and clay, 9 x 30 x 30 inches. Courtesy of Knoedler & Company

Four works flanked *Mental Earth* like courtiers, providing the best viewpoints of the large piece. Moving around them, one felt like a visitor in a virtual helicopter, cruising past impossibly lofty and inaccessible mountain fastnesses. *Two Streams* (2011) is a wall-mounted piece mostly made from squared-up granitic forms on which are perched seemingly abandoned miniature dwellings, reminiscent of ancient ruins like those in the American Southwest. The streams of the title are tongue-like forms snaking across and beyond the site, implying an extensive unseen landscape.

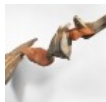
*Arabesque* and *Twist*, both 2011, are more fantastic pieces, both projecting from the wall in alternating clays of gray and orange (roughly the color of burnt sienna pigment), which are Simonds's basic palette. *Arabesque* terminates in a set of towers, torquing wildly, as if seen through a distorting lens. In *Twist*, the most overtly phallic of the wall-mounted pieces, an erect projection grows from a cracked, clifflike "parent," smooth orange forms developing brick-textured "skin," maturing into gray, and terminating in a wizened but still vital tip.

The projecting and hanging rock formations, partly body, partly landscape, bring to mind venerable traditions of Chinese art: landscape painting, certainly, with rocky heights floating among clouds, seemingly disconnected from the earth, but more specifically the miniature rock formations that became popular during the T'ang Dynasty.

"Orphanness" is the term Simonds himself has used to describe his existential stance, while "finding his way home" is the impulse that drives him and, presumably, the restless, elusive Little People. A tale has survived of a Taoist at court in the ninth century who longed to go home but the Emperor would not allow it. In the palace there was a miniature landscape, representing the three mountains on the sea. "Unless one is immortal, one could never enter that region," said the Emperor, pointing.


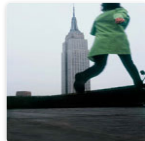
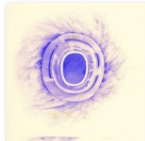


"The mountains are only a foot high," laughed the Taoist. "I am weak but I will try to inspect it for Your Majesty." \* At that, he leaped into the air, became smaller and smaller, and disappeared into the little world, never to be seen again.

\* Michael Sullivan, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980 p. 85)



[click to enlarge](#)

More from artcritical

- |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|      |  |        |  |  |
| <a href="#">"I Build Ruins": Charles Simonds and the Dwellings of his Little People</a> | <a href="#">Vitality Amidst the Ruins: Lower Manhattan's gritty golden age</a>      | <a href="#">Lee Bontecou: Drawings from 1958 to 1999 and Sarah G. Austin: Assemblages</a> | <a href="#">Alan Saret at the Drawing Center, Richard Pousette-Dart at Knoedler</a> | <a href="#">Milton Avery: Industrial Revelations, at Knoedler &amp; Company</a>     |

[print](#)

0 Comments **artcritical**

 **Login** ▾

 **Recommend**

 **Tweet**

 **Share**

**Sort by Best** ▾



Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS 

Name

Be the first to comment.

ALSO ON ARTCRITICAL

**Civic Entrepreneur: Artist and Dealer Richard Timperio, 1946-2018**

1 comment • 4 months ago

**SallyForth** — Thanks for documenting the importance of what Sideshow did. We artists are as numerous as sparrows, ...

**Insider Criticism: Mrs. Peter Plagens Reveals All**

1 comment • a year ago

**billy evans** — So nice that two artists have each other. A beautiful thing.

**A God In Training: Sangram Majumdar in conversation with Jennifer Coates**

1 comment • 2 months ago

**Becca Kallem** — Thanks for this great interview.

**War of Independence**

1 comment • 10 months ago

**Joanne Mattera** — Hear, hear! The lack of wall labels is very annoying. Perhaps these galleries are too important (ahem) to ...

 **Subscribe**  **Add Disqus to your site** **Add Disqus** **Add**

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10