

Westwood Gallery, which represents Danny Simmons, recently exhibited 36 of his works in a solo show titled, “The Long and the Short of It” in its Lower Manhattan gallery. Much of Simmons’ work is a nod to the past: dot motifs, figurative abstractions, and textiles serve as reinterpretations of African and Indigenous art, such as the Minkisi figures from the Congo in “The Painter” (1999). Simmons’ work as an artist, a collector, and a philanthropist is connected to whom and what inspires him. “I also want to write another novel,” Simmons tells me. “And I’m working on a script with a friend. It’s about what it would look like if Black and brown people led a second American Revolution.” Other things on Simmons’ agenda include future tour dates for Wordsmith, his performance series that blends music and poetry, and a fundraiser for Rush Philanthropic Arts, the arts organization he co-founded. Run-DMC and Eartha Kitt performed. Despite his ambitious upcoming plans, Simmons and I spoke mostly of beginnings; specifically, the chances he’s been afforded and the ones he’s given to others.

**Molly Guillermo (Konch):** So, the story goes, at least this is what I’ve heard, is that when Ishmael Reed was a young writer, he met one of his role models and the guy ended up being very dismissive of him. So, Ishmael made it a mission to uplift young writers and give them a chance. When I read about your Rush Arts Foundation, I thought that might be a value you share with him. Can you relate that to your work and how you got your start?

**Danny Simmons:** I got my start from my mother. She was an amateur painter and I used to watch her, and then I started emulating her. Years later, in the ’80s, I tried to show my work down in Soho, before Chelsea was the big place for art. And there were no outlets for artists of color. I mean, no one was interested in showing my work. And maybe it was because I was new,

but I didn't see any Black artists, or artists of color, or women artists on the walls of the galleries down there. So, I decided to start hosting my own art shows and shows for the people who also didn't have opportunities, and that's how it all started. I opened my first gallery called Sanctuary Gallery. It was the ground floor of my brownstone in Bedford Stuyvesant. I created a gallery on the first floor of my home and ran that for a few years. And then, a few years later, I started Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation with my brothers Run from Run-DMC and Russell. We found a place and we hosted a fundraiser where Run-DMC performed. We raised enough money to open a place in Chelsea. One of the first things we did was hire people to run the gallery. We also gave money away to other arts organizations that work with kids. After we built all of that, we started working with the kids in Chelsea where our galleries were located on 26<sup>th</sup> St. I saw a need there, in the projects where these kids lived. They never came to the gallery district on the other side of town. So, I went over to a place called Hudson Guild, met the kids, talked to them, and worked with them. We built a children's program that's still running to this day here in Philadelphia. We also started showing artists right out of school and emerging artists. While this was going on I was also pushing my own career, not at my own gallery, but outside of chairman of the board, and I was getting more opportunities. My career was starting to blossom as Rush was starting to blossom. And I think that the reputation that I was getting from running this Black gallery in Chelsea brought to people's attention that I was also an artist. Now we're in our 28<sup>th</sup> year and we're getting ready to do a big fundraiser in the Hamptons again. I bought a building in Logan for the gallery, and I bought a house here in Philadelphia because it's a lot cheaper. We've been running the gallery for seven years. I renovated the building and now we're running programs out of it. So that's part of that story.

**Konch:** Congrats on your 31<sup>st</sup> year of sobriety, by the way. I think when it comes to addiction, you often have your addiction versus your ambition. They're at odds. You're ambitious and you envision this whole life for yourself, but you don't necessarily fit into it because of the addiction. With you, you're this successful artist, but for so many years behind the scenes there was an internal struggle.

**Simmons:** Thank you. I started using drugs when I was 15. I used marijuana, LSD, and psychedelic drugs, and around age 17 I started using heroin. And from ages 17 to 21, I was addicted with a \$100 a day heroin habit. In high school and in college I was shooting heroin, at which point I went into rehab [for a short time]. I didn't stay, but I promised my brother Russell when we took an acid trip together that I wouldn't shoot heroin anymore. I didn't say I wasn't going to get high anymore. I just wasn't shooting heroin anymore. I kept my word, but I still used it. And I used a lot of cocaine. Around age 30, I got back into heroin and narcotics because of pain. I've been in pain my entire life. When I was 13, I broke my hip and had a hip operation. I was taking pain medication, and when I ran out of that and went out and bought a bag of dope. From age 30 to 37 I was sniffing dope. But during that whole time, I mean, I owned a house. I was married. I went to graduate school. So, for the most part I was able to manage an addiction well. I mean, all my friends were street people and drug dealers and criminals and to some extent, so was I. Except that I had a master's degree and I worked during the day. But maybe [at] about 33-years-old, that sort of changed because of cocaine and heroin. I was using them together and it became more compulsive.

Now, I was always creative. I quit my job and decided to become an artist full time. And then drugs became the focus of my life. I painted and I wrote, but drugs became the focus.

Before, I had to manage a job, but suddenly I didn't have to do that anymore because I was playing around at being an artist. I had all day long to use. So, I painted, and my art career was progressing, but I wasn't really being an artist. I was a drug addict who did art. At 37, it got so out of hand that I went to Russell, and he sent me to Hazelden [Treatment Center] in Minnesota. I didn't really want to stop using drugs. But when I got to Hazelden things happened. I learned things about addiction, like that I would never be able to control it or take it back to a place where it was recreational. I was beyond recreational drugs. And if I didn't stop using drugs, I was going to lose everything: friends, family, everything I owned. So, I stopped. I became a drug counselor because of my social worker background, which helped with my recovery. And from there, I filled the spiritual void in me. Making art replaced my drug use. I created Rush to help other artists. That's my way of giving back. I continued to build my career and to build Rush. So, 30 years later I'm still doing the same thing. I'm building my career and managing a gallery that gives young artists exposure and teaches kids. I replaced drugs with art.

**Konch:** What was your family dynamic at the time?

**Simmons:** Well, Russell's a businessman, you know, Def Jam Records. Run was concerned about me, but that's my baby brother. But I was so good at masking it. I didn't look like a junkie, but Russell knew because he had people reporting back to him on my activity. Back in 1991 or '92, Russell was having a party for Madonna, so I went, and I said to him, I need help. The reason was that I was going to lose my brownstone in Brooklyn. Three days later, I was on a plane to Minnesota.

**Konch:** I read that your first gallery was at the Annex Gallery in Tribeca around that same time. How was that received?

**Simmons:** Oh, that was one of my first shows that I partnered with. They gave me a show and then I partnered with a gallery and Annex was a sort of a bridge between the gallery that I had in my home in in Brooklyn and later Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation. It was a gallery that we had for about a year and a half down in Tribeca. That's when I really realized the power of art because thousands of people would come to those shows. And I incorporated a lot of hip-hop into those shows. I had hip-hop and fashion, as well as an understanding of where the power of spoken word came from. I had spoken word concerts in the gallery, so the gallery became more of a multi-use cultural center. And still to this day, we do a lot of different things in our gallery. But yeah, we used to have all kinds of people. We really built a reputation as the hip gallery to go to and party. We had all the 90s stars show up to 105 Hudson Street.

**Konch:** I've noticed that in beginner art classes, and I'm sure also in the youth classes Rush offers, the most common question is, "How do I begin?" How do you answer that?

**Simmons:** Usually when I start thinking of my abstract paintings, I think of the colors first, and the colors dictate the movement that I start creating when I start laying down colors, and they become shapes and forms that move with each other. So, color really is the overall, driving, initial force of a painting, and then making the colors react to each other and interact with each other becomes the shapes. I like earth tones, so a lot of my paintings have earth tones. I'm not really into pastel colors. But the earthy tones, the greens, the browns, the red, black, white, you

know, blue, those colors resonate with me more than purple and pink. I'm also working with fabric now. We're integrating paint and fabric into a piece. I'm looking at patterns and color in fabric to match with paint on canvas.

**Konch:** Is there a spiritual element to your use of fabrics?

**Simmons:** Well, mostly I use a lot of African fabrics because they're colorful and they have a lot of shapes, but also Aboriginal fabrics and Indigenous peoples' fabrics. Most of the figures and the motifs that I have come from Indigenous art. I collect a lot of African art. I collect the textiles from Indigenous people from around the world, mostly African. And those things lead to my paintings. That and body painting. When I look at the body painting of people and more natural things, I always see abstraction, so even though they have underlying spiritual meanings, they present often as abstraction. I coined a term at one point to explain how I felt—Neo-African Abstract Expressionism, which takes African motifs and turns them into abstraction, but also really trying to retain the spiritual quality that I find in the African art I collect. I have around 1,000 pieces of African art.

**Konch:** I see a lot of dots in your paintings. Is that a reference to body painting and body paint designs?

**Simmons:** Yes, there's a body painting reference and there was a lot of dotting in bark painting by the Pygmy people. I really related to these bark paintings they did. A lot of times the paintings

talk about journeys, spiritual journeys, and these dots and where they lead to. I took a lot of cues from that. So that's where the dots came from. That and body painting.

**Konch:** Have you ever done sculpture?

**Simmons:** Early on I did sculpture. I'm doing things that are sculptural now, but still with fabric and paint. What I've been doing is creating paintings with fabric dripping onto the floor so they're very sculptural looking, but they're really painted fabric. They're not like wood or branded or anything like that. It's sculpture but with fabric.

**Konch:** How does your poetry tie into your art? Does it?

**Simmons:** I don't really create one for the other. I mean, they come out of the same creative impulse. But I think that my poetry, and my novel, is more storytelling, and painting is more pinpointing a feeling or emotion. Writing is for me storytelling, even in my poetry. It's very visual. I guess that's how they connect. My writing is very visual also. It's also very abstract. I don't really read straightforwardly, but it's not completely abstracted like some Beat writers. But there are a lot of references that you need to tie together. So, they do connect but they're not directly linked.

**Konch:** What's on the wall behind you? Is that one of your works?

**Simmons:** No, I don't actually have any of my paintings up in my house. These are different things. I have an artist behind me named Odili Donald Odita, I have Derrick Adams. I'll take you a little quick tour. Up here is Derrick Adams' *Boy on Swan*. Mickalene Thomas, Ming Smith, Renee Cox. If I turn on the light, we'll be able to see the African art that I was talking about. But you can see some of it now. This is David Driskell, Carrie Mae Weems, Wangechi Mutu, James Van Der Zee. These huge guys are from the Congo. All the way in the back there is a Vanessa German piece. I have constant inspiration here. I just got this two days ago. This little guy is from Congo's Sanga people. A lot [of the art] is from the people who were showing at the gallery. It was a non-profit, and often we didn't sell something, so I'd say, okay, I'll buy a piece to make sure that they sold something. Some are some of the biggest artists in the world now, like Wangechi Mutu, Mickalene Thomas, Simone Leigh. All these artists started at Rush.

**Konch:** You are surrounded by inspiration, literally. It reminds me of *The Panther and The Lash* by Langston Hughes. It was the first book of poetry I ever read. I still have the same copy; I can see it from where I'm sitting. I was wondering if there's a book of poetry you've read that changed your worldview in that way.

**Simmons:** I'm going to tell you the God's honest truth. The book that changed my worldview wasn't a book of poetry. I swear, it was Ishmael Reed's *The Free-lance Pallbearers*. It was so revolutionary in the way it was presented and the way he wrote it that it just changed the way I wrote. It was the most pivotal book in my literary readings, ever. And then of course, there were other books like *The Odyssey*, but *The Free-lance Pallbearers* was the epitome for me. That book changed my life.

**Konch:** Was there a time, particularly during your addiction, where you felt like art or poetry saved your life?

**Simmons:** Of course. I knew I had to replace drug use, but for me “drug use” wasn’t just the use of the drugs. It was a whole lifestyle. It was my friends. It was the people I hung out with every day. It was the after-hours clubs I hung out in. There’s something very alluring about street life that I loved. And suddenly I had to change all of that. It wasn't just stopping drugs. It was stopping the lifestyle. But I was making art and I had friends in the art world who were concerned about me. The art world embraced me and my recovery. I needed to replace the drugs with art. I don’t think I would have survived sobriety without having art.

**Konch:** What was street life like? It seems like there are so many wild and exciting moments in that world.

**Simmons:** I stayed in afterhours clubs. I stayed selling drugs and buying drugs. You know, street life was a lot of fun. It was the biggest part of the addiction. The street life, the clubs, the gangsters, the excitement. All of that was really alluring, along with the drugs. The drugs were such a huge part of the lifestyle. I mean, everybody I knew [on the street] either sold or used. It was like being part of two separate worlds. I didn't want the art world to know about the drugs. But I wasn’t going to last very long like that, because my drug addiction was starting to creep in and take over my entire life. I couldn’t let that happen. Maybe it was because of the type of upbringing I had or my values, but I wouldn’t allow my life to be engulfed by drugs. Once I

realized that it was unmanageable, I had to make a choice. I didn't want to stop using, I never wanted to stop using. And to this day if I figured out how to manage using drugs, I'd still probably be using drugs. But, you know, it became unmanageable. It was just one of those things. You either live a healthy life or go completely down the tubes. It's one way or the other.

**Konch:** What was your public image at the time?

**Simmons:** My public image was that I was dangerous. Let me put it that way. People were afraid of me because I was unpredictable. They knew I was I had five earrings in my ear. I wore painted overalls and painted boots, and I carried a gun. I was a hippie artist with a gun. I remember there were places I wouldn't be let in because they were afraid something might happen if I were there. The gangsters didn't fear me. They thought I was amusing because of the way I dressed and acted, and because of my education they really liked me. But regular, normal people were afraid of me because I was unlike anybody they knew.

**Konch:** Now I have this image of you. You're a famous artist with this famous family. You've dedicated yourself to philanthropy. But you also have this very rough backstory. How do you reconcile these two identities? Do you feel like you are all these things at once? Or are they at odds?

**Simmons:** I feel like my past is my past and it's also who I am today. I don't know if they need to be reconciled. It's the evolution of me growing up as a human being. I mean, another part of

me is when I was a Black Panther, a radical who was fighting cops in the streets. I embrace that story. That's part of my life too. I embrace New York street life as part of my life—

**Konch:** Hold on. Black Panther? You were a teenage Black Panther?

**Simmons:** You know, the Black Panthers. The revolutionary Black Panther Party. Wow. That was...I was 15 years old. It started out I was selling to some Black Panther people on the streets of Jamaica, Queens. Me and another very famous artist, Dawoud Bey, a famous photographer, we took over the school and got involved in all types of activism. I was a revolutionary. I still have very revolutionary philosophy. So that was part of my persona too. In my teen years I was a revolutionary and embraced the revolution. That morphed into counterculture, which morphed into drug use, which morphed into...you get it.

**Konch:** It's interesting that you use the word "morph," and that you talk about evolving. I read another interview with you where you were describing your art in the same way. You were saying that your art is constantly evolving. For instance, you use textiles, and then after a few years you drop the medium and move on. Do you see yourself as growing with your art?

**Simmons:** Growing with my art is growing as a human being. If you're not growing both intellectually and spiritually, you're stagnant. I have always been inquisitive, looking, searching, and trying to understand who I am. And who I am changes as I experience life. ■

*Edited for length and clarity.*