

Shelter

Charles Simmons

Monumental

October 8 – November 6, 2021

Self-taught African-American artist Charles Simmons (1939-2020) resided in North Carolina throughout his life. One of eleven children, Simmons left school after ninth grade and worked with his family to grow crop tobacco; he was later employed by the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company for 35 years.

Simmons started carving wood in the 1970s, typically in the form of dolls given as gifts. After retirement, he became a dedicated artist, painting and carving a large number of works, many of which relate to his life experience and surroundings.

A friend and neighbor of artist Raymond Coins, the two men often worked alongside each other, with Simmons carving sculptures out of wood, and Coins out of stone. Eventually Coins, who became a sort of artistic mentor, taught Simmons how to work with stone, and as his motor functions declined with age Simmons adopted this medium exclusively for his sculptural work.

The exhibition's title, on the simplest level, refers to the tradition of stone carving for public monuments. But it also speaks to how incredibly prolific Simmons was in the short span of time that he focused solely on his artwork. While his friend Coins, who was white, has received significant recognition, Simmons has not. Despite the same subject matter – animals and humans – and the same techniques, even despite the fact that the two artists sometimes signed the other's work, Simmons has been largely ignored since the early 2000s.

This exhibition seeks to reintroduce Simmons to the larger art community, and give his work the recognition it deserves.