

## Artist's Long Journey returns him to Pittsburgh

As one walks through Uptown, something changes when near the corner of Forbes and Gist. A brilliantly colored mosaic double bassist plays his instrument, a plaster gorilla pokes its massive head out from under a door, and large concrete dachshunds congregate around a fire hydrant. At the center of this cloud of public art, which includes the three gargantuan musicians forever jamming on Liberty Avenue Downtown, the ornate sculpted mural on Forbes avenue at Duquesne's campus, and the resplendent "Welcome to Uptown" mosaic, lies the studio and home of one of Pittsburgh's most prominent artists, James Simon.

Behind the ornately painted wrought-iron doors, Simon's studio is filled with the common detritus of a busy artist, along with many of his creations. Bags of plaster and glazing mix fill shelves, along with colorful clay chameleons, a 7-foot tall statue of a man bisected in the center, and various smaller figures playing accordions and guitars, facing the center of the room as if to cheer for him. The motifs of music and animals are apparent in much of Simon's work. He describes music as "the most expressive way that people live through their happiness and sadness. For public art, musicians greeting people always gets me excited." As for the animals? "I just really like making creatures," he explains.

In both his mosaics and his sculpture, Simon's style is familiar yet unmistakable. His figures are thick-limbed and slightly distorted, almost always in action; rocking a baby, playing an instrument, or drinking a cup of coffee. Many of his sculptures resemble more expressionistic renderings of Diego Rivera's murals, but if Simon's work has borne major impact from other artists he does not mention it, instead listing his experience in other trades and his personal travels as his main influences. Simon speaks slowly and deliberately about his art and his life, smiling frequently as he looks back on his life. He recalls details and conversations from decades prior, reciting the full names of the many people that he has crossed paths with. "My life is a very long story, so I'll only give you the somewhat long version of it," he says with a laugh.

After graduating from Peabody High School in 1972, the Stanton Heights native spent almost half a lifetime travelling the world before returning to Pittsburgh in the 1990's. The son of a father who played violin and a mother who danced, Simon's upbringing was shaped by the arts. Besides his parents, Simon cites two formative influences during his childhood that would affect his life for years to come: a high school art teacher named Ed Kosowitz, and a love of travelling. "Mr. K" exposed Simon to sculpting and pottery, and drew his attention artistically in spite of his general apathy towards high school. "The only thing I really loved in high school was the ceramics class I took. [Kosowitz] got me interested in clay and sculpture that kept me sane in high school because I didn't like the rest of it." But decades before sculpting would be his primary occupation, Simon became obsessed with travelling the world. At age fifteen, he and a friend named Barry hitchhiked to Miami under the stated pretense of sleeping over at a friend's house. Simon remembers

the effect that the trip would have on him: “I realized that there were all kinds of things in the world that I wanted to check out. ..There’s a whole book of that trip, but that introduced us to the possibilities of travelling the world.”

Soon after his high school graduation in 1972, the pair planned another trip, but this time did not return to Pittsburgh. Travelling west, they spent time in Berkeley, California, to live out the Baby Boomer dream of living on a commune in the aftermath of the West Coast hippy counterculture. Simon soon moved northward to Eugene, Oregon, where he would learn trades that would guide his life for decades to come: “Oregon in the early 70’s was this great place, back then it had all the leftovers from the 60’s and I was living on a farm next to Ken Kesey and the merry pranksters and all those people. I befriended these guys who were master carpenters, Ray Ennis and Michael Ostowski, and other people, they were a little older than us and they took us under their wing.” Carpentry would become Simon’s entry into the world of skilled trades, providing his first paid jobs, but he had little interest in settling down. “I just wanted to do whatever I could to make money for more adventures.”

A long-time violinist, Simon’s growing interest in the instrument would provide an inroads to new travels and “adventures,” as he would soon pursue music and violin-making seriously. While in Eugene, Simon met a luthier named Roger O’Donnel who introduced him to instrument making. He recalls, “He was a terrible violin maker, I didn’t know that at the time. A total butcher.” Yet O’Donnel fostered Simon’s love of violins, which was furthered when he moved to England to study under the Hungarian violinist Kato Havas, who he first met at a workshop on Gypsy violin styles in California.

Havas learned of his love of carpentry and early attempts at violin making, and put him in contact with Andrew Dipper, a luthier and instrument restorer based in England. His reception was not as warm as Simon had hoped: “I said [to Dipper], I want to do this could you teach me, he said no way you don’t know anything. Go find someone who will teach you all the basic stuff.” After searching the United Kingdom for a luthier willing to take him as an apprentice, Simon found David Vernon, a Manchester-based instrument master who taught him the trade. After finishing his apprenticeship, he would spend much of the following years between the United Kingdom and Oregon, working with both Vernon and Dipper.

It was through Dipper that Simon would meet Alvaro Escalante, a Mexican luthier who would influence the artist’s decision to move to that country. Simon relocated to Tepostlan, Mexico in the late 1980’s, where his interest in sculpture began to bloom once again.

“I had already learned so much about craftsmanship from making violins for all these years, but I began to look around Mexican culture and see all these cultural themes, and all these Indian figures that began to get me excited about art and sculpture again,” he recalls. “I was

still making violins, but all the art and culture and community and nature that I experienced [while in Mexico] just captivated me back towards sculpture little by little.”

Simon’s many travels around the world, some of them he recalls without reference to year, decade, or means of travelling, have had a major influence on his artwork. The Aborigines encountered during a hitchhiking trip through Australia had a significant effect on him, noting that “[the Aborigines] have these amazing faces, they look like the earth, like the ancient earth. They’re very special, the way they look at the world, it’s all very spiritual... the aborigines and their artwork definitely had a big influence on me.” His time spent in Greece also influenced his art, through exposure to traditional Greco-Roman sculpture. “I spent a lot of time at Crete, I spent a lot of time walking, and there’s all these places, these museum warehouses filled with great sculptures, ... it’s not because I was an artist or I was researching sculpture, I just loved the sculpture and looking back that had a big influence on me.” Many of Simon’s stories could include this clarification, that his myriad life experiences have only influenced his many works by chance.

In the early 1990’s, Simon attended a Tai Chi workshop in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and was captivated by the practice. “I fell in love with Tai Chi in Brazil, and I asked the master there in his studio how long it would take to totally master it, and he said three years, so that’s how I moved to Brazil.” By 1994, Simon was living primarily in Sao Paulo, with a sculpting studio that began to attract attention from the Brazilian art scene, as well as patrons in the United States and Mexico.

Simon’s return to Pittsburgh would come through random chance when in 1998, his father suffered a stroke. During his long recovery, Simon decided to stay in. He has since made the city his home once again, settling into his Uptown studio and home in 2000. While his decision to live and work in Uptown (above his studio lies his living quarters) was simply an economic one, Simon has brought new life into this community. “The art on Gist and across [Uptown] has really given community members a new feeling that they are a part of something to be proud of,” says community activist Linda Kuster. “[Simon’s] art is a huge part of the area’s renewal process.” Likewise, his statue of St. Michael, devoted to three slain Pittsburgh policeman in Bloomfield, helped the healing process of the grieving community, his mosaic entry sign to Braddock helped a community reeling from the effects of deindustrialization regain pride, and his massive statue of a trumpeter in Cleveland’s Buckeye neighborhood has aided a neighborhood trying to regain its former beauty. He takes pride in the transformative nature of his art, saying “I always want my art to be for the low-income people, the indigenous people, and victims of racism and discrimination.”

Simon now makes his living primarily by selling statues and taking commissions, though the nature of his medium places him far outside of the standard gallery-bound Pittsburgh art scene, although many of his friends are artists.

His learning of Mosaic-making in the past decade reflects Simon's seemingly freewheeling pattern of learning new trades as well as his commitment to public art and local communities. "I wanted to make an art project with kids, after I talked with [Braddock mayor] John [Fetterman] about the idea. Sculpting isn't really that interactive at least with kids, so I figured that glass mosaics might be better." Simon ordered a book about mosaic-making through the mail, and fluently added the new craft to his repertoire.

After a life experience as rich and varied as his, Simon still struggles to view himself primarily as a sculptor, "I'm just a nice Jewish boy," he jokes. He often refers to his sculpting as something that he "does for a living," a profession that could hardly define a man who has done so much with his life.

That his career as a sculptor has gained so much prominence in the region is a testament to the creative and adaptive abilities of a man who does not like to sit still.

As I walk out of his studio, I ask why the 7-foot tall male figure in the center of the space has been cut in half. "I haven't cut him up enough. You always just have to do something new."