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Habitats; Brooklyn Artist Who Prefers to Show Others' Works

By PENELOPE GREEN

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DANNY SIMMONS isn't much interested in talking up his own paintings, which are figurative and abstract expressionist canvases that reach for themes both explicit, like racism and sexism, and delicately mystical, like those that show the process of painting itself as akin to prayer or meditation.

He seems happier narrating the work that surrounds his few displayed canvases, a mighty collection of antique African and contemporary African-American pieces, pop ephemera, toys and comic books that has swallowed most of his living space at the back of his buff-colored brick carriage house in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn.

Mr. Simmons -- like his brother Russell, the hip-hop mogul -- is as much mentor as maker. He is a gentle man with a hungry eye who started painting in a serious way in his 30's and started collecting as a way of enriching his own work.

Along the way, Mr. Simmons, 50, became a gallery owner and arts philanthropist. Indeed, the long and spacious hall that leads from his front door within the carriage house is all gallery -- called, appropriately enough, the Corridor Gallery.

His m.o., Mr. Simmons said, is to nurture and showcase the work of neighborhood artists, including that of students at the nearby Pratt Institute. It seems that the ability to simultaneously stir up a vast number of projects is coded into the Simmons family's DNA, along with a magnetic attraction to the telephone -- and a talent for real estate. On a Friday morning not too long ago, Mr. Simmons's phone rang continually -- though he protested that "Russell's phone rings way more times than mine" -- while he explained the engine behind his own career's wiggles and his purchase almost nine years ago of his 7,500-square-foot "19th century public garage."

The carriage house had been carved into three apartments, he said, as well as a two-car garage and that hall -- which he took one look at and pronounced, "This is a gallery." The house cost him \$340,000 -- and much ribbing from the neighbors, all of whom thought he'd been taken for a ride.

Last month, Mr. Simmons converted one apartment, opening it up into a 1,500-square-foot gallery; until next Saturday, the walls are displaying the work of Pratt graduate students. He finances the shows himself, with help from a grant from Rush Arts, a foundation he created with his brother. (Rush is Russell's nickname.)

Danny Simmons built a stage on his roof large enough for performances of Def Poetry Jam, of which he is a co-producer. You can reach the stage via a delicate helix of a staircase in his living room, a kind of by-the-way space that he has colonized with a television and a small leather couch.

These little domestic settings are nestled into the larger collections almost apologetically. A huge metal crate for his dog sits empty in a studio. (Mr. Simmons's roommate, a Russian wolfhound named Trotsky, died last month.)

TWENTY years ago, Mr. Simmons said, he had a degree in social work from N.Y.U., a master's in public finance from Long Island University and a set path, like his parents', of "get degree, get job, get pension." His mother, Evelyn, worked as a schoolteacher and painted as a hobby; his father, Danny Sr., was a truant officer who also taught black history at Pace and wrote poetry as a hobby.

Mr. Simmons was devising policies and procedures for the city's Bureau of Child Support and just hating it, he said, when his mother gave him a prod. "Go ahead and be an artist," she said. "Nobody will let you starve."

Russell had just begun making records -- he had dropped out of college one semester shy of graduation, "the bane of my father's existence," Danny said, while working on the same degree as his elder brother.

Joey, the baby, had renamed himself Run (as in Run-DMC) and at age 18 was making music. Danny went looking for a house for Kurtis Blow, one of Russell's early stars, when he found a limestone three-family town house in Crown Heights.

It cost \$40,000, and "I said to Russell, 'Why don't we do this together?' I was working for the city and I put in \$5,000 and he put in \$5,000 and I borrowed the rest

from the credit union." They lived in one of the units for a few years, until they sold the property for \$150,000. "That was a tremendous amount of money back then," he said, "and what that meant was that I certainly wasn't going to starve."

He bought a four-family brownstone in Stuyvesant Heights and thought long and hard about what it meant to be an artist. (Russell and Joey, of course, went off to change music history. Russell has his own way of describing his family. "Danny's the fine artist," he said the other day, "the real thing, a cultural hero. Joey's the commercial artist, and I'm just an exploiter, the greedy one.")

The reason he began collecting African art, Mr. Simmons said, was that he was interested in Picasso and Cubism. "I didn't have any formal art training," he said, "and I was learning by looking and reading." When he thought about marketing himself as an artist, he didn't see any viable forum for his work, so he made his own gallery by gutting an apartment in the house and calling it Sanctuary.

Now, gallery living is a habit with him, and collecting is a serious bug.

Mr. Simmons has **the artist Simone Leigh's solemn and lovely ceramic vessels, which bubble with breasts; the works pose questions about what it means to be female.** He has pieces by Derrick Adams, like three filmy do-rags spiked with Mickey Mouse ears and floating from the ceiling. He has hand-carved chairs from Ethiopia, and a Yoruba beaded chair.

He also has more comic books than is probably normal, and a tiny army of toys menacing the sink in a bathroom.

"Some people have 401Ks, and I have comic books," said Mr. Simmons, whose collection includes a slew of Marvel firsts from the 1940's. "I started collecting those when I was a kid.

"As for the art, all I know is that when I first moved in here, the walls were awfully empty."