

# Leaping Mediums

***An allergic reaction to his art forced Silverhill's David Simmons into papermaking, "mixoglyphs" and a more demanding dance with his muse.***

Photos by Adrian Hoff



David Simmons was a married man with a one-year-old son when he graduated with a Fine Art degree from the University of South Alabama in 1977. Fortunately, he had a "real job" to fall back on. And while swinging a hammer in south Alabama heat wasn't exactly what he wanted to do for a living, it did pay the bills.

"In school they teach you how to make art," explained Simmons, "they don't teach you to be an artist."

"I sat in my studio, which I had just built," he continued, "I sat there for two years trying to figure out what to do with all of this education I had."

Simmons was then young and idealistic enough to pursue a career in art. His strong sense of design meshed well with his chosen medium: serigraphs, the artistic application of the silkscreen process.

Ten years later, his days as a carpenter but a memory, Simmons was a successful, full-time artist. Repetition had reduced the complex technical aspects of his medium to reflex actions. He'd sold thousands of prints and won hundreds of awards; he enjoyed the financial rewards of having established himself as one of the premier silkscreen artists in the South. His major concern — producing enough prints to satisfy the demand for his work.

"That spring (1987) I worked 12, 14 hours a day for weeks on end trying to get enough artwork to where I felt comfortable, to be able to take what I needed to shows and galleries and exhibitions," he explained.

Near the end of that intense work period he became ill. "I thought it was fatigue at first," he recalled, "because I was getting flu-like symptoms: headaches and blurred vision and everything that goes along with that."

Simmons took a few days off. He felt fine. He returned to work. The symptoms returned and, as he continued working, grew more severe. He began to suspect a

*Continued on p. 32*

---

**By Adrian Hoff**

From *Mediums* p. 31

connection. Three months later his suspicions were confirmed — he had developed an allergic reaction to fumes from the inks used in silkscreening.

His successful career suddenly, unexpectedly ended. His technical skills became useless. There would be no new serigraphs to maintain the client-base he'd cultivated. He was back where he had been ten years earlier. Almost. He was no longer young. There was now a daughter and a second son to support. And idealism had been tempered by art market realities and first-hand knowledge of how difficult it is to master one's medium. His hammer lay on the edge of the table. But who'd hire a 35-year-old carpenter with a decade-long void in his resume, filled only with "self-employed artist"?

"I went into a real panic after I realized that I couldn't do silkscreen anymore, because my career was built around that one medium," Simmons admitted. "To have had thousands of people purchase and take home and enjoy a silkscreen, and think of my name associated with it, and then to realize that wasn't going to happen anymore — I really did panic."

Simmons dabbled in oils. While he wasn't sure what he was looking for, he soon realized it was not to be found in applying paints to canvas.

Reading books on papermaking, a craft

he'd been flirting with for years, he ran across several references to the casting of paper.

"While I was working on the paintings, I began experimenting with the paper," he recalled. "It was very tentative: a lot of mistakes, a lot of backtracking. It took about a year and a half before I felt comfortable with the direction it was going."

Initially his approach had been traditional.

Artists working in cast paper generally do their original piece of artwork in clay, or some other material which can be cast. From that they create the mold. They do the casting. The paper, as it is released from the mold, is the end product.

"The stark whiteness wasn't enough," said Simmons. "It still looked unfinished to me. I tried different applications of pigment, none of which seemed to work for what I wanted the final appearance to look like. Eventually, through experimentation, I came across the process of paint and pencil."

By then Simmons knew he was on the right track. He had found his new medium, discovering the means by which to add color to his cast paper images. He had not, however, defined the technique by which he could translate his visual ideas into physical images.

I'd been thinking about it continu-

ously for weeks," he recalled. "I was looking for that one element that would make it what I wanted it to be."

"I actually had a dream one night," he continued: "you do your carvings, you cast them, and then you assemble them into one piece."

"Everything came together after that one thing snapped in my mind. I literally got up the next morning and started working towards what I'm doing now."

What he is doing now is difficult to define. Art shows classify the work as "Mixed Media." Safe but rather vague. Simmons' own name for his creations is "mixoglyphs," but even he is at loss when asked to categorize his new medium. "To produce a piece of artwork like this," he explained, "I draw, I carve, I cast, I mold, I paint and I color."

"I'm a sculptor who draws and casts and colors — category unknown," he added with a laugh.

He starts by carving each new form from leather-hard clay. He pours plaster over the clay original, making a negative mold. Paper pulp is poured into the mold and left to dry. Once removed from the mold, the "glyph" is stained with a dark acrylic wash, which provides a background color and sizes the paper, making it stiff enough to accept the pigment. The process, up to this point, Simmons considers more craft than art.

"The papermaking is not the important part of it for me. That's just a step to go through to get the image that I want to produce. I wanted the images I'm doing now to have a dimensional aspect to them. So carving in clay and going through the process of making molds and casting the paper is basically the craft part of it," he explained. "The art part comes in assembling them, forming the concept for that piece of artwork, choosing colors which will express that image the best, and then presenting it well."

The work is unique. Talking with artists who crisscross the country working the show circuit, no one recalled having seen art works which even remotely resemble those Simmons is currently producing. "What really sets him apart is his use of color" explained Joseph Gallo, vice president and head of technique development at Urbana, Illinois-based Editions In Cast Paper, "he's not bound by purist

### Who leads, Who Follows, The Three Graces, by David Simmons





rules." Gallo, a nationally known artist who's been working in cast paper for 13 years, said he was "quite impressed" with the Simmons' creations.

In silkscreen, inherent technical constraints demand that the image be almost entirely pre-conceived. Simmons' new work is less structured, more intuitive. There are no preliminary sketches. He creates each glyph as an independent design element. They are his visual alphabet. The mixoglyph, assembled piece by piece almost like a jigsaw puzzle, may contain up to 80 individual glyphs.

Although created by a radically different technique, Simmons' current work owes much to his past. It is similar in composition and subject matter, and much of the imagery (birds, fish and water) still relates to his environment. The colors, however, are far more intense than those of his serigraphs.

"I wanted to get more of the feel of the decorative arts of past ages. Byzantine temples were always decorated with brilliantly hand painted or carved tiles. Medieval art was almost jewel-like. And they're finding out now that a lot of the Greek architecture and sculpture was painted in very brilliant colors."

Simmons' interest in ancient and medieval architecture is reflected in the way he composes and constructs his images. The rough, toothy finish, produced by using color pencil on cast paper, meshes well with these changes in his work. It too evokes something that is older than it actually is.

Three years ago David Simmons sat in his Silverhill studio facing a potentially career-ending dilemma. Today he is, once again, a successful, full-time professional artist. In 1989, his first full year exhibiting mixoglyphs, Simmons enjoyed the best year (financially) of his artistic career. He was awarded "Best of Show" at both the Art and Jazz Festival in Destin, Florida and the National Shrimp Festival of Art in Point Clear and "First Place in Category" at the Eastern Shore Art Association's juried art show in Fairhope. His new work can be found in art museums, commercial galleries and both private and corporate collections.

In retrospect, Simmons views his being forced out of silkscreen as providential. "There were other things I wanted to do

with silkscreen," he said. "But at that particular time I was on the verge of a burnout anyway. I was pretty much fed up with being an artist. I was ready for a change."


"I wasn't ready for a change in media," he continued. "Because for most artists, changing your primary medium is a very risky thing to do. I wasn't ready for that risk."

His new work is bolder, more energetic. Even Simmons concedes that the cast paper is artistically, if not yet techni-

cally, stronger than his serigraphs.

"There should be, in artwork, that little something extra that makes it work," he said. "I don't have a word for it. I don't think anybody has. Some pieces of artwork have it. Some don't. It's very elusive. But I think, with the cast paper, I've been able to come across it more frequently than in the silkscreens."

"I'm very happy with it. I enjoy doing the cast paper as much, or maybe even more than the silkscreens. Yes. I was ready for a change." 🐦



do it  
for  
yourself

*The Clinic*  
**FOR PLASTIC SURGERY**

**Breast Surgery**  
 • Augmentation  
 • Reduction • Lifts

**Facial Surgery**  
 • Face • Cheeks • Eyes  
 • Chin • Nose

**Body Contouring**  
 • Thighs  
 • Abdomen  
 • Arms  
 • Liposuction

**Also Specializing in Hospital Based  
 Reconstructive Surgery**  
 • Breast Reconstruction & Reduction  
 • Microvascular  
 • Maxillofacial  
 • Traumatic & Cancer Reconstruction  
 • Pediatric  
 • Hand

~Printed Information Mailed On Request  
 ~Saturday Consultations Available By Appointment  
 ~Financing Available ~ Credit Cards Accepted

**Jonathon S. Pendergrass M.D.**  
**Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeon**  
 Board Certified Plastic Surgeon  
 175 Louiselle Street  
 Mobile, Alabama • 36607  
 205 • 433-2608