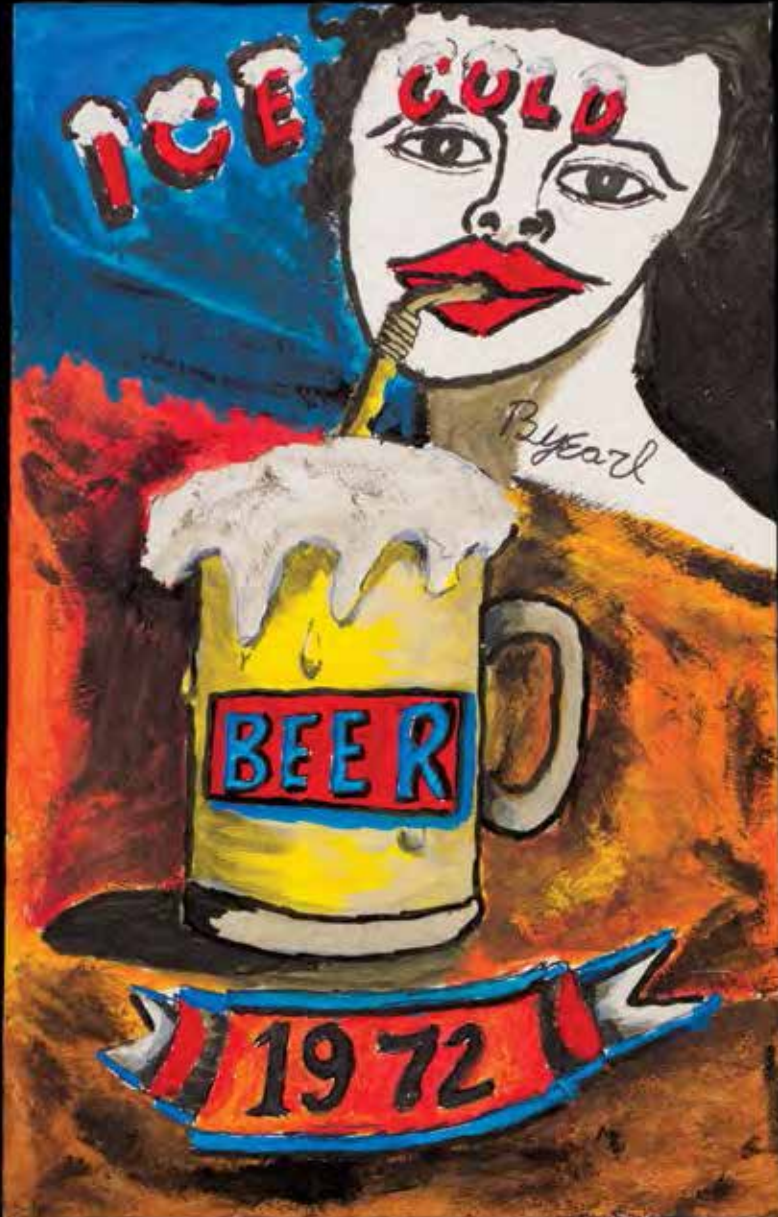


EARL'S ART SHOP AND CAFÉ

by Sara Camp Arnold



AT THE INTERSECTION OF POP CULTURE and vernacular art, Mississippi artist Earl Wayne Simmons works. Born in 1956, Simmons has lived and labored for most of his life in Bovina, a few miles east of Vicksburg. As a child he fashioned toys from found objects and developed a grade-school passion for drawing and painting. By the time Simmons dropped out of twelfth grade, he was selling his creations to teachers.

Simmons left Mississippi for Job Corps training in Louisville, Kentucky, where he continued to build the sculptures of cars, motorcycles, airplanes, jukeboxes, and animals that he collectively refers to as his toys. By the late 1970s, he was back in Bovina, constructing a multi-use building he called Earl's Art Shop. Between construction, landscaping, and sawmill jobs, Simmons designed, built, and expanded the rambling structure, using reclaimed or repurposed materials. Eventually, Earl's Art Shop encompassed a studio, gallery, café, and souvenir shop. Visitors could tour the property, sip a drink at the café, peruse the gallery, and make a purchase at the souvenir shop, literally taking a piece of Earl's Art Shop home with them.

In 1994, the Mississippi Arts Commission awarded Simmons a fellowship. The recognition brought a new wave of visitors to Earl's Art Shop, and he used the fellowship funding to add multiple wings to the building. Over the 1990s, Simmons turned his focus from sculpture to painting. His paintings focus on Mississippi pop culture icons like hot tamales, juke joints, and Highway 61. Often they riff on images from mass-market advertisements, calling out brand names Budweiser, Coca-Cola, or Kool cigarettes.

Earl's Art Shop was gutted by fire in 2002 and again in 2012. Today Simmons lives in a FEMA trailer and works outdoors; Earl's Art Shop is under construction yet again. Lesley Silver, owner of The Attic gallery in Vicksburg, serves as Simmons's primary retail outlet. Over the past thirty-five years, Simmons has achieved something rare for a vernacular artist. Through his idiosyncratic rendering of popular culture, he has become a pop culture icon. 🍷



Art courtesy of Earl Simmons and the Attic Gallery, Vicksburg, MS, photographed by Kaitlyn Silver Boerner.