

Columns

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The Friel World: Portrait of the Artist

John Friel

The artist and garden designer once had a regular name, but it's gone. Simple has been his nickname for many years, his legal ID since 1995. Asked his age, he says "I'm under 60. Simple is 11. I have two birthdays."

Clear on that? Me either. We're not alone: "The banks get confused," he smiles.

I met Simple about 20 years ago, while helping a mutual friend restore an 19th-century stone farmhouse. I consider myself pretty handy, but this strange guy with the ponytail, Fu Manchu whiskers and slight speech impediment seemed to know how to do everything, from concrete to carpentry to plumbing and wiring.

That fall I attended an epic Halloween party at Simple's nursery, a garden of unearthly delights where nothing was what it seemed. A working faucet protruded from a living tree. Optical illusions drew you into gardens which proved not to exist. A peacock roamed through rooms with living walls of espaliered trees. Odd sculptures accompanied quirky topiaries. The patio, cunningly constructed of different-colored cut bricks, looked disconcertingly three-dimensional, like a tumbling block quilt.

"My place never fit in the Delaware Valley," Simple recalls, "because I had fun. I didn't look at my garden, I lived my garden."

Allen Bush of Jelitto Seed commissioned two Simple designs: at his former nursery, Holbrook Farm, and his Louisville, KY home. He calls Simple "a savant... the most spatially brilliant person I know. He summed up two garden vignettes in the blink of an eye."

Not that there were no hitches. For example, "Simple suggested music speakers, and I didn't like that idea," Allen says. "I imagined a quiet garden. Then one day he put out a boom box and caught me dancing. The speakers went in. In the end, I loved the space. I still do."

Long-time friend Stephanie Cohen says, "He processes things differently than you or I would. He's a folk artist."

"I consider myself not to be a designer," says the man himself. "I'm a garden personalizer. I don't tell people what they want or need. I go, they have an idea, and I make it happen. I enjoy making spaces within spaces."

Simple's talent for *trompe l'oeil* can work miracles, stretching small gardens into larger ones. "You have to stage an illusion correctly," he explained. A strategically-placed mirror "doubles the field of vision. You walk along a path, you see people walking toward you -- and then you realize, it's you."

But miracles have a dark side. "It does fool people," he says. "I've walked into my own mirrors." At one installation, "dead birds kept piling up. It looked like an opening; they'd dive down to go through..." Thud.

Simple started his nursery from scratch, and discovered he was "blessed with green thumbs. I was hybridized into horticulture: I've got my mother's love of plants and my father's drive. It's a pain in the ass."

Simple studied hort in vo-tech school, then worked at a retail greenhouse and an orchard, where "I first got involved in training plants." His cold frames yielded "high percentages, doing it half-assed. Before I knew it, I had five acres of nursery stock. Then the market flopped. I could hardly give my plants away. A lot of people went down."

The nursery and his marriage crashed around the same time. Simple roamed far and wide: the Carolinas, Kentucky, all the way to California where he collaborated with grass guru John Greenlee on projects including John's own garden. ""His ground was level when I got there," Simple recalls, "but I'm from the East. I like hills." Let there be hills, Beverly.

Out west, he discovered Berkley sculptor Mark Bullwinkle's pierced-metal works: "I came home, got a torch and starting burning stuff."

Fast-forward to the 21st century. I keep meeting Simple at hort events, especially parties around Philadelphia. His handshake tells me he's still a working horticulturist -- not one who draws and points while others dig and fetch, one who goes out and does.

I invited him over for what proved to be an excellent interview technique: We went kayaking. I live along a small river, above an old mill dam. We paddled upstream for several miles through Amish farmland, ogling great blue herons, hawks and ducks -- and interviewing.

Make no mistake. This is an unusual person. Norman Mailer spoke of "the blind self-acceptance of the eccentric who can't conceive that his eccentricities are not clearly understood." Simple is beyond that: He doesn't really expect to be understood.

"I think differently from other people," he told me as we sat in calm water, watching a heron warily watching us. "I see things differently." That's where his partner/collaborator Michael Howell helps. Howell's design firm, Create a Scene, won an award at the Philadelphia Flower Show for a rock garden/cottage vignette incorporating Simple's neon art and folksy touches, like metal cat sculpture hose reels.

"We're a good team," Simple says. "He translates for me a lot."

As we paddled, I asked about his garden art involving, of all things, neon. Yes, neon. At some point, Simple intuited that the gas-filled tubes generally associated with Broadway and beer would be a perfect fit for gardens. He enrolled in the Hollywood (FL) School of Neon to learn this arcane combination of white-hot glass, noble gases and electricity. He loved it.

"I took it to the limit," he said. "Some people made one or two pieces; I came home with a van full. They kept having to yank me out of the dumpster."

In August, the Garden Writers Association held its national conference in PA. Among the tour stops was the playful public garden Chanticleer, and Simple was asked to decorate. He took it to the limit. Dozens of pieces illuminated the night. Free-form tubes beamed in borders, boxed sculptures flickered on walls, spangled copper dangled from trees.

Probably the most universally applicable of Simple's neon works are his fat copper pipes, like giant wind chimes. A concealed neon tube provides the light; torched cutouts release it. In a clever play on the wind chime theme, the cutouts are shaped like musical notes. Visible music sprays out into blackness.

Garden writer Fran Gustman called the neon "a wonderful, fun way to put color into the night garden. And it wasn't flashing 'Bud'."

Well, of course it wasn't. "I don't do signage," Simple says. "I do art with neon, for garden spaces. Lights have a lot to do with the mood of the space. Neon is not a bright light; it's an accent."

Simple's signature was all over the recent Fashions in Bloom tour. He designed the exotic structure, part greenhouse, part starship, at Conard-Pyle's nursery in West Grove, PA. The five-winged plastic-skinned shelter "sort of hovers above the ground," Simple says. "It was a team effort. It's my concept. I scribbled it on a piece of paper, and Steve (Hutton, C-P president) went for it."

Simple's stuff is not for everyone. He once designed a garden combining a strategically placed mirror and a reflecting pool. If you knew where to stand, you got a bird's eye view of the lady's room. "It offended some people; it made some people laugh." He shrugged. "That's the fun."