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Simone Leigh

Press Packet

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# HYPERALLERGIC

[Art](#) [Reviews](#)

## Simone Leigh's Monuments to the Black Femme

Leigh's survey split between two Los Angeles venues demonstrates the futility in prescribing a definitive role to the Black feminine in a postcolonial world.

Nereya Otieno September 22, 2024

LOS ANGELES — Simultaneous exhibitions of an individual artist's work can be hard to pull off successfully. The shows' conceits might contradict one another, or differing curatorial visions can cloud the artist's actual intent. *Simone Leigh*, a traveling exhibition on view concurrently at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the California African American Museum (CAAM), makes it work.

The comprehensive and thought-provoking exhibition spans nearly 20 years and includes work from Leigh's 2022 Venice Biennale presentation. Its synchronized presence in two distinct institutions — one that honors the Black American story and one, located near glitzy Beverly Hills, that presents top-tier contemporary art to Los Angeles — brings into focus the notions that Leigh's work purposefully butts up against. By presenting a cohesive exhibition split into two differently coded locations, it demonstrates the futility and ignorance in prescribing a definitive role to the Black feminine in a postcolonial world. Yes, this is Black art. Yes, it is focused on the Black femme. Yes, it delves into the roots of a far-flung diaspora. Yes, it is distinctly American. And yes, it is for you, even if you are none of those things.



Simone Leigh, "Jug" (2022), stoneware (all photos Nereya Otieno/*Hyperallergic*)

Otieno, Nereya. "Simone Leigh's Monuments to the Black Femme." *Hyperallergic*, September 22, 2024.

Leigh’s work interrogates critical components of sculpture through her signature use of clay as a medium that highlights the forging of form. By exaggerating or dulling specific aspects of familiar figures, she draws attention to the fact that it is a creation — not a truth. In one work at CAAM (“Jug,” 2022), molds made from watermelons are used to create stoneware cowrie shells. Cowrie shells were a highly valued currency across the African continent, while watermelon has long been weaponized to degrade the stolen Africans who were enslaved in the US. In “Jug,” Leigh transforms ridicule to riches, and bridges a chasm between American Black and African Black values.

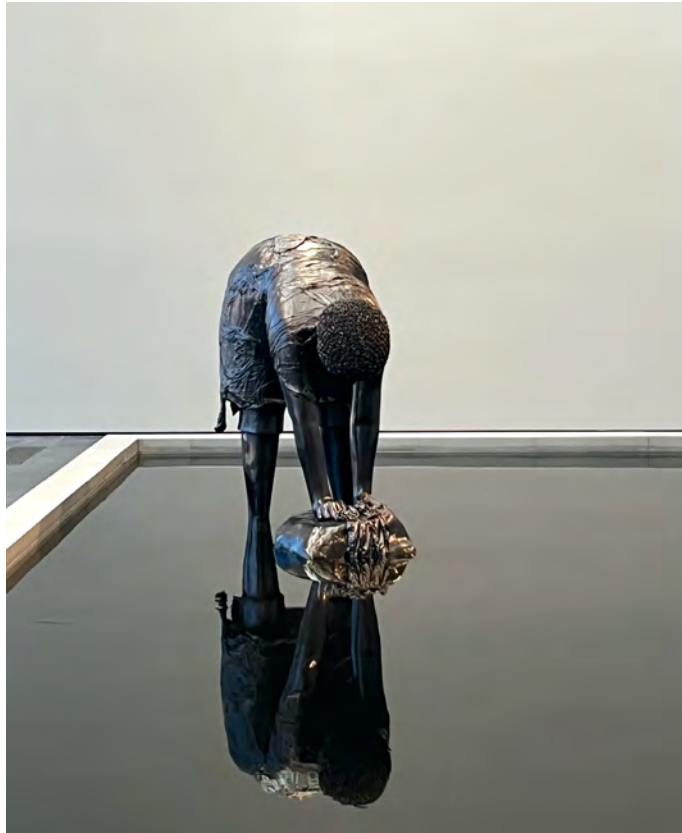
Her work also prods at the relationship between architecture and people. Is architecture designed to bring out our imagination or to contain us? When we present ourselves or envision others, we create a scaffolding for perception. But are we doing so in a way that is supportive or caging? Her sculptures of Black women are sturdy and stoic, and larger than life — bodies as encasings, the Black feminine as a load-bearing pillar. “Sharifa” (2022), a bronze sculpture nearly 10 feet tall and 3 feet in diameter, stands high above viewers with a modestly bowed head. It appears as if nothing but heavy machinery or a natural phenomenon could topple it. Yet many of Leigh’s works, including “Sharifa,” are based on real people — other artists — with feelings, goals, and hardships. It recalls a line from *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the first novel by renowned South African writer Bessie Head: “They were afflicted by the same ailment — loneliness. But if a grown woman cried, all those hot tears might melt the iron rod that was her backbone.”

The solidity of her sculpted Black women — physically weighty and imposing in scale, iron rods and backbone — aggrandizes but does not sexualize them. Their curves are not lewd, but rather



Installation view of “Sharifa” (2022) and “Conspiracy” (2022) in *Simone Leigh* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Otieno, Nereya. “Simone Leigh’s Monuments to the Black Femme.” *Hyperallergic*, September 22, 2024.



Simone Leigh, “Last Garment” (2022), bronze

geometric, foundational, protective, strong, and often purposeful; this is Leigh’s architecture at work. They’re beautiful and present and taking up space, but they do not belong to the viewer. In fact, their sense of privacy and unknowability awakens a level of envy in me. Take “Bisi” (2022), a looming armless bust and mannequin-like head whose lower half resembles the hideaway skirt of the Nutcracker’s Sugar Plum Fairy. Facial characteristics do not betray her anonymity, allowing her story to remain her own. Most of Leigh’s sculptures have vague features that, to me, eradicate the importance of viewers’ perceptions of them. All of Leigh’s figurative sculptures seem to belong primarily to themselves (even if one could seek refuge inside her bell form), as they challenge viewers to question whether they can say the same.

“Conspiracy” (2022) at LACMA, one of three video works in the show (the other two are at CAAM), projects footage of Leigh and her assistants peppered by conceptions of entombment, death, archaeological digs, and anthropological studies. Scenes of clay working are juxtaposed with images of mummification and unboxing of artifacts and rituals filmed on remote-looking islands. “Break-down” (2011), a collaboration with artists Liz Magic Laser and Alicia Hall Moran, could represent the interior monologue of the artists in “Conspiracy”; the video shows a Black woman in an ornate theater singing in operatic runs — a Western art — and decrying how she must constantly perform in order to feel accepted. The other CAAM video work (“my dreams, my works must wait till after hell,” 2011), a collaboration between Leigh and Chitra Ganesh under the name of “Girl,” is so subtle that it could be mistaken for a still. A Black woman lays on her side and faces away from the viewer, her head disappearing in a pile of rocks. The only evidence of movement are the tiny ripples her skin makes from silent but seemingly labored breath. It’s a tormented sort of peace. This sentiment ties

all three video installations together, and perhaps summarizes some of Leigh's own artistic journey. It mimics the anxiety and distress that artists experience when creating something unique that will inevitably be judged, that will be excavated by strangers to see if it fits within their parameters of "good."

Both sites feature an outdoor sculpture, enabling passersby to engage with Leigh's art. I find something poetic about this arrangement. Within the walls are works of historical commentary, impressive in scope and weight. Outside rests a single work, free to breathe the air amid the architecture of nature, its solitude transforming it from sculpture to monument.



Simone Leigh, "Sentinel" (2022)



Installation view of *Simone Leigh* at the California African American Museum

Otieno, Nereya. "Simone Leigh's Monuments to the Black Femme." *Hyperallergic*, September 22, 2024.



Installation view of "trophallaxis" (2008-17) and "Bisi" (2023) in *Simone Leigh* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

*Simone Leigh continues at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Mid-Wilshire, Los Angeles) and California African American Museum (600 State Drive, Exposition Park, Los Angeles) through January 20, 2025. The exhibition was organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and co-presented in Los Angeles by Taylor Renee Aldridge (CAAM), Naima Keith (LACMA), and Rita Gonzales (LACMA).*

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CULTURE

March 18, 2024

## A New Sculpture Park Reexamines Slavery's Legacy in America

by Julia Halperin



Simone Leigh, 'Brick House.' Photo by Equal Justice Initiative/Human Pictures

Bryan Stevenson, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, has spent much of his career studying how slavery has shaped American life. But until 2021, he had never visited a plantation. When he finally did travel to sites in South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, he was “struck by how much the architecture of these spaces is organized around white supremacy,” Stevenson said. Compared with the “romance and prestige”

Halperin, Julia. “A New Sculpture Park Reexamines Slavery's Legacy in America.” *W Magazine*, March 18, 2024.

of the big house, where the enslavers lived, the dwellings of enslaved people were, he recalls, “literally marginalized.” It would be impossible, he concluded, to shift visitors’ focus within these spaces to where it ought to be: the 10 million people who were enslaved in the United States. The experience set him on a path to develop a different way to tell the story of enslaved people in America. He decided to build an alternative: the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park, which opens in Montgomery, Alabama, on March 27.

It is the third and newest site developed by the Equal Justice Initiative. The first two—a museum that traces the evolution of the transatlantic slave trade to our age of mass incarceration and a memorial, the country’s first, to victims of racial terror lynchings—opened in 2018. The ambitious trio is an outgrowth of EJI’s work providing free legal representation for people on death row. (Stevenson chronicled one of his early cases in the bestselling 2014 memoir *Just Mercy*, which became a feature film in 2019 starring Michael B. Jordan.)

Stevenson is part of a handful of creatives and public intellectuals, including filmmaker Ava DuVernay, the director of the documentary *13th*, Nikole Hannah-Jones, the creator of the *New York Times*’s 1619 Project, and Elizabeth Alexander, the president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, whose work argues that our popular understanding of America has been built on misinformation. According to the nonprofit Monument Lab, half of the 50 people most frequently commemorated by monuments in the U.S. were enslavers. But how do you teach a history that many people don’t want to learn? Having spent more than two decades arguing in front of juries that support the death penalty, Stevenson says, “You learn to think differently about what’s persuasive. You have to find people where they are and take them on a journey.”

The Freedom Monument Sculpture Park follows a winding path on the banks of the Alabama River in Montgomery, and culminates in a shining monument: two steel walls towering 43 feet overhead in a V shape recalling an open book. Carved top to bottom in letters smaller than a pinkie finger are the 122,000 surnames



Inside Freedom Monument Sculpture Park.

Photo by Equal Justice Initiative/Human Pictures



Photo by Equal Justice Initiative

that nearly five million Black people chose for themselves when they were recorded for the first time as free individuals in the 1870 U.S. Census.

As a memorial to individuals (and their descendants) who survived a system that history has defranged and depersonalized for more than a century, the space is extraordinarily effective—and as grand in scale as any monument on the National Mall. Visitors can look up their family names using a QR code to determine how many formerly enslaved people shared their name and where they lived.

Before arriving at this triumphant moment, however, visitors traverse a sculpture park unlike any other. This is a cultural institution developed by lawyers. It does not present art objects as elusive, many-headed hydras that encourage multiple interpretations. The sculptures here—coupled with first-person narratives, historical information, and artifacts like 170-year-old dwellings from cotton plantations and a replica of a train car once used to transport enslaved people to the South—not only tell a story, but also make a powerful case: that the American history we've been taught is wrong.

Freedom Monument Sculpture Park begins with a nod to the flourishing and complex societies of the Indigenous people who inhabited this land before Europeans arrived. There are sculptures by Indigenous artists Rose B. Simpson, Allan Houser, and others, accompanied by audio of the Maskoke tribe speaking their language. (EJI commissioned half of the art in the park; the rest was purchased or donated.)

The park then turns its focus toward Africa as the cradle of civilization. Next to opal stone sculptures of an African king and queen by the Zimbabwean artist Joe Mutasa, plaques recount the splendor of the kingdoms of Egypt, Kush, Aksum, and Mogadishu. Later sections bear witness to the transatlantic slave trade and

the brutality of slavery. Wooden slabs record laws that permitted human trafficking and abuse (in 1827, for example, Missouri stated that homicide “shall be deemed excusable” if committed by accident in the process of “lawfully correcting a slave”). We also see notices that formerly enslaved people put in newspapers in an effort to track down husbands, mothers, and children from whom they had been separated.

Unlike traditional monuments to past horrors, which implicitly or explicitly reinforce how far society has come, EJI constantly reminds us how the past echoes in the present—especially if the past has not been reckoned with. In one powerful juxtaposition, a stainless steel sculpture by Hank Willis Thomas of two arms locked in confrontation—one with a police baton bearing down the other—stands next to a whipping post from Delaware. (Delaware became the last state to outlaw the use of whipping posts as a sanctioned sentence in 1972—the same year *The Godfather* was released.) “My work is a tool in [Stevenson’s] toolbox and a brushstroke on his canvas,” Willis Thomas says.

The sculpture park opens with a work that had personal resonance for Stevenson: the American artist Simone Leigh’s *Brick House*. He first encountered the 16-foot-tall bronze bust of a Black woman whose Afro is adorned with cowrie shells at the 2022 Venice Biennale. In the midst of the buzzing international art festival, he felt the shock of recognition: there was his grandmother. “My first instinct was to run to the sculpture and wrap my arms around it,” he says. Weeks later, “I was preoccupied with it, I was having dreams about it, and we were told, ‘Oh no, you can’t have it.’” After he convinced Leigh to visit the site and showed her the place of prominence he had in mind, she agreed to donate her personal copy.

Stevenson noted how different *Brick House* feels installed here—in a city that is both the first capital of the Confederacy and the hub of the Civil Rights Movement—than in a marbled hall in Venice. What feels novel about the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park is that the art isn’t an end unto itself, as it is in a conventional museum or exhibition hall. It is a means to a spectacularly ambitious end: historical reckoning and social



Photo by Equal Justice Initiative

Halperin, Julia. “A New Sculpture Park Reexamines Slavery’s Legacy in America.” *W Magazine*, March 18, 2024.



Photo by the Equal Justice Initiative

change. The site will affect Black visitors, other visitors of color, and white visitors (like me) differently. But its approach is deliberately multifaceted. Walking along the path, you feel the material activating different parts of you: the landscape fuels the imagination, the statistics land in the brain, the large-scale sculptures resonate in the body, and the monument and first-person narratives hit the heart.

The didactic objective helps explain why the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park, by and large, resists abstraction. Plenty of sculptors not represented here—like Richard Hunt, Maren Hassinger, or Melvin Edwards—use abstraction to respond both to art history and the Black American experience in profound ways. Sites like Peter Eisenman’s 2005 Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Berlin also deploy the form to communicate the weight of trauma. But, Stevenson suggests, America isn’t ready for that. We are too early in the process of reckoning with our history.

“When I went to Berlin and saw that memorial, I was very moved by it,” Stevenson says. “But they are trusting people to come into that space with a working knowledge of the Holocaust that allows them to convert that abstraction into something powerful. And I knew we couldn’t do that. We wanted to avoid the ability to misinterpret. This isn’t just conceptual—it is literally the history of people.”

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## Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

### Simone Leigh's L.A.-bound sculptures, now in D.C., are stirring and elegant



Simone Leigh, "Sentinel," 2019, from the artist's beguiling solo exhibition at the Hirshhorn in Washington, D.C. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

**By Carolina A. Miranda**

Columnist

Dec. 2, 2023 8 AM PT

I am currently on jury duty, using the lawyers' many sidebars to write this newsletter, which is also a sequence of sidebars. I'm **Carolina A. Miranda**, cog in the U.S. judicial system and art and design columnist at the Los Angeles Times, and I'm here with all the essential arts news — not to mention some architecturally significant tinned fish:

Miranda, Carolina A. "Simone Leigh's L.A.-Bound Sculptures, Now in D.C., are Stirring and Elegant." *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 2023.



Simone Leigh's U.S. pavilion at the Venice Biennale featured thatch on the roof and a large-scale sculpture, titled "Satellite," inspired by a West African ritual mask. (Antonio Calanni / Associated Press)

## Leigh's beguiling hybrids

I didn't make it to the **Venice Biennale** last year. But I did make it to Washington, D.C., early last month, where I caught **Simone Leigh's** fantastic solo show at the **Hirshhorn Museum** and Sculpture Garden.

Titled "**Simone Leigh**," the exhibition features numerous works from her Biennale installation, in which she famously draped the U.S. pavilion in thatch, transforming the building's neo-Palladian façade into a piece of African architecture. (The gesture nodded to a 1931 Parisian expo in which various European metropolises showed off the architecture of the countries they'd colonized.) The show also featured a 24-foot-tall sculpture titled "**Satellite**" in its exterior courtyard — a female form with rounded head inspired by West African **D'mba ritual headdresses**. That piece too is at the Hirshhorn, fronting the museum on Independence Avenue.

Also in the exhibition are several new bronze sculptures, fabricated this year, which continue Leigh's long-running exploration of African art and the Black female form. Among them is a remarkable work titled "**Herm**," which features a faceless Black figure whose body appears to be slipping out of the vertical plinth that encases it.

Miranda, Carolina A. "Simone Leigh's L.A.-Bound Sculptures, Now in D.C., are Stirring and Elegant." *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 2023.

“Simone Leigh” originated at the **ICA Boston** (the institution that commissioned Leigh’s installation for the Biennale) and was organized by **Eva Respini** with **Anni A. Pullagura**. After it completes its run in D.C., the show will make its way to L.A. for a joint presentation by **LACMA** and the **California African American Museum**. (That leg of the show will open in June and run through January 2025.)

But I was glad to be able to catch Leigh’s show while it’s on view at the Hirshhorn — because the installation will be hard to beat.

Leigh’s sculptures consist of oversized female forms and large-scale architectonic pieces and, frequently, hybrids of the two. A head of a woman might emerge from a Quonset hut, or from a ceramic cube inspired by the patterns of textile blocks. She often depicts women as vessels (literal jugs), signifying their work as carriers — of ideas, of life, of bodily processes and all the traumas that go with.



“Jug,” 2022, left, and “Anonymous,” 2022, by Simone Leigh, at the Hirshhorn. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

Her figures can be aloof and sphinx-like, since they don't have eyes. They are also deeply sensuous: rounded forms, buoyant skirts and supple glazing. (Stoneware is one of Leigh's preferred mediums.) And the Hirshhorn's rounded architecture, with its gently curving walls, feels like just the right vessel for these vessels.

Moreover, the sparse installation lets Leigh's pieces breathe. Each gallery feels like a chapel, drawing the eye to a bold color, the drape of dried raffia, the ways in which "**Sentinel IV**," a bronze inspired by the anthropomorphic design of Zulu ceremonial spoons, seems to defy gravity. (The show feels like a rejoinder to the ethnographic stuffed-in-a-vitrine displays to which so much African art has been subjected in the West.)

The building's circular shape creates an ideal path for navigating the show. Complete the circle and you can seamlessly begin the journey anew through Leigh's gorgeous, timeless figures.

*"Simone Leigh" is on view at the Hirshhorn Museum through March 3 in Washington, D.C.;*  
*hirshhorn.si.edu.*

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ART & DESIGN

## Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum hosts a retrospective of Simone Leigh's work

NOVEMBER 6, 2023 · 5:13 AM ET

HEARD ON MORNING EDITION

By Olivia Hampton



Simone Leigh, *Satellite* (2022), installation view in front of the Hirshhorn Museum entrance on Independence Avenue. Bronze.

*Rick Coulby for the Hirshhorn/Simone Leigh, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery*

As imposing as Simone Leigh's sculptures may be, they all begin with a bit of soil and water.

Take a 24-foot bronze sculpture that stood at the entrance to the U.S. Pavilion of the Venice Biennale last year and now greets visitors to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture

Hampton, Olivia. "Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum Hosts a Retrospective of Simone Leigh's Work." *NPR*, November 6, 2023.

Garden in Washington, D.C. as part of a major retrospective. Modeled after an African D'mba headdress — usually a wooden relic of the Baga peoples of the Guinea coast — *Satellite* (2022) lacks eyes and arms but has sagging breasts and a satellite-like concave shape for a head.

The piece began as a clay sculpture before being cast in bronze. Much like other selections on view from two decades of Leigh's ceramic, bronze and video creations, African folktale traditions and African diaspora traditions inform the distinctly Black femme work.

"I try to back off from full-on portraiture," Leigh told Morning Edition. "In my work, I started using forms that I would call anthropomorphic. And as time has moved on, the work has become more and more figurative."

Three new pieces featured in the Hirshhorn exhibition were cast in dark, lush bronze. The trunk of Vessel's "body" is hollow, like a nest or capsule. *Herm*'s bust stands on a tall pedestal supported by a single foot sticking out the back. And *Bisi* features an enclosure scaled to Leigh's own body and also shaped like a skirt.

"Often there are forms in my work that refer to enclosure or dwelling or architecture," explained the Chicago-born artist, who is the first Black woman to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale.



Simone Leigh, *Herm* (2023). Bronze.  
Timothy Schenck/Simone Leigh, Courtesy  
Matthew Marks Gallery



Simone Leigh, *Anonymous* (detail), 2022.  
Stoneware.  
Timothy Schenck/Simone Leigh



Simone Leigh, *Cupboard* (detail), 2022. Bronze and gold.

*Timothy Schenck/Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery*

“Making monumental forms of black women is just absolutely thrilling and as fun as you would imagine that it is.”

The Hirshhorn’s presentation is Leigh’s first museum survey in the U.S. capital, and it’s part of a national tour that began in April at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, which served as the biennale’s commissioner last year. The show heads next to Los Angeles, touring jointly there via the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the California African American Museum.

Clay is a humble material historically dismissed in fine arts as crafty and utilitarian. But Leigh found it liberating to fly under the radar earlier in her career because she was working with ceramics.

“I was largely ignored. And that really helped me because I feel like I was able to develop a lot of work as an artist in relative obscurity. And for me personally, that became a great source of strength,” she said.

“It’s always been interesting to me the way ceramics or this idea of being formed in a kiln environment and changing things by changing the environment mimics identity formation. So it’s always been a fun dialogue for me back and forth.”

The gallery wall appears to be wearing a large, bejeweled pin in *Brooch #2* (2008-2023). Bullet- or breast-like shapes protrude out of the center surrounded by plantain forms cast in the kind of pre-stained porcelain used by doll makers to mimic different skin colors. There are varying patterns on the fruit shapes, which look weathered.

“You can change objects in a kiln by introducing salt or soda, but you can also change what happens to an object in the kiln by its positioning, whether it’s near the firebox, or what it was next to can affect its color,” Leigh explained.

“What I realized is that one of the reasons why I have this long term engagement in ceramics and why it is so interesting to me is that I often don’t even know what’s coming out of the kiln.”



Simone Leigh, *Sentinel*, 2019. Bronze.

Timothy Schenck/Simone Leigh



Simone Leigh, *White Teeth (For Ota Benga)*, 2004. Porcelain, steel, and wire. Installation view, Simone Leigh, the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2023.

*Timothy Schenck/Simone Leigh*

Due to the unpredictability of ceramic work, there is a significant amount of destruction involved in creation here, something Leigh compares to dating.

“Even after 30 years of working, I still have probably a 30% loss rate of everything that I make in my studio,” she said. “The way I think of it now is when a sculpture is being built, it’s like we’re dating. It’s not really a relationship until it’s really finished. So I don’t have an emotional attachment to something when it’s being made, so it doesn’t hurt so much when they fall apart anymore.”

That approach has also helped Leigh develop a different perspective on sculpture more generally speaking, especially when it comes to her large bronze works.

“There’s a lack of preciousness I have to building that I think helps me to build in clay modeling for bronze. It’s been really supportive to have that kind of perspective on the material,” she said.



Simone Leigh, *White Teeth (For Ota Benga)* (detail), 2004. Porcelain, steel, and wire.  
*Timothy Schenck/Simone Leigh*



Simone Leigh works on a sculpture in her studio.  
*Shaniqwa Jarvis/Simone Leigh*

Hampton, Olivia. "Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum Hosts a Retrospective of Simone Leigh's Work." *NPR*, November 6, 2023.

During a press preview of her exhibition, Leigh took a question from a writer for *The Hilltop*, the student newspaper of Howard University, a historically Black research university. The writer wanted to know what advice Leigh might give young Black artists trying to make their way today.

“I think the most thing important things for Black women right now, for me, is to be disobedient, as much as possible,” she replied. “Almost everything is wrong for what is expected for the way of a Black woman... And if you’re just really cantankerous, it can be helpful. I would also say there’s no way to avoid a lot of hard work and trial and error.”

*The radio version of this story was edited by Jan Johnson and Jacob Conrad. The digital version was edited by Treje Green.*

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## The Washington Post

ART

# Simone Leigh is exactly where she wants to be: Everywhere

After a groundbreaking showcase at the 2022 Venice Biennale and several other D.C.-area appearances this year, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden hosts the sculptor's first museum survey



Installation view of "Satellite," a 2022 bronze sculpture by Simone Leigh that is part of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden exhibition "Simone Leigh." (Rick Coulby/Matthew Marks Gallery)

Review by Kriston Capps

November 3, 2023 at 9:00 a.m. EDT

For her groundbreaking presentation at the 2022 Venice Biennale, American sculptor Simone Leigh took a page from history, borrowing a theme from the sordid 1931 Paris Colonial Expo. That early-20th-century carnival put the cultures of African and Asian peoples colonized by Western powers on display for elite Parisian audiences to consume. In Venice, Leigh covered the United States' neoclassical pavilion with a facade of wood and grass, turning the Palladian brick building into a

Capps, Kriston and Simone Leigh. "Simone Leigh is Exactly Where She Wants to Be: Everywhere." *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2023.

thatched hut — an ironic backdrop for sculptures that point sincerely to African forms and history of the African diaspora.

“Satellite,” the 24-foot-tall sculpture that anchored Leigh’s show for the U.S. Pavilion, is now standing tall outside the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Works from her Venice presentation, which traveled first to Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art earlier this year, are on view at the Hirshhorn through March 3, along with three new bronzes: “Bisi,” “Herm” and “Vessel.”

Leigh’s turn representing the United States in Venice has rocketed her to international stardom. Counting this latest show, no fewer than five museums in D.C. alone have shown her works this year, including the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Glenstone, the Phillips Collection and the National Gallery of Art, where another severe bronze holds pride of place in the East Building atrium: “Sentinel” (2022). In advance of her show at the Hirshhorn, Leigh spoke about her studio process, newfound fame and a summer she spent living in D.C.

*(This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)*

**Q:** *Since your presentation at the Venice Biennale, it seems that every museum in the country has rushed to display or acquire your work. How does that feel?*



Simone Leigh at work in her studio in 2021. (Shaniqwa Jarvis/Courtesy of Simone Leigh)

Capps, Kriston and Simone Leigh. “Simone Leigh is Exactly Where She Wants to Be: Everywhere.” *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2023.



“Sentinel” (2019) is one of two sculptures from Simone Leigh’s “Sentinel” series on view in the Hirshhorn exhibition. A third “Sentinel” sculpture, from 2022, is on view at the National Gallery of Art. (Private collection, Boston/Timothy Schenck)

**A:** It’s exciting. It’s also overwhelming. I’ve lived outside this kind of glare for most of my life. I didn’t expect to ever have my work be quite this visible. I’m overwhelmed by it right now, to tell you the truth.

**Q:** *Can you describe some of the changes that you’ve experienced?*

**A:** It felt important that my work is included in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art. I don’t think that gallery has had a lot of change, so it was very meaningful for me to have my work placed in that particular spot. For me, it was a great achievement. On the other hand, Saisha Grayson, the curator who curated my work into the video show that’s up at the Smithsonian American Art Museum right now, has been following my work and supporting my work for many, many years. So the other thing that’s happening is the fruition of very long-term relationships that I’ve had with curators over decades. The third thing is having this presentation at the Hirshhorn, which is another real achievement for me. I’m excited because it will be the second iteration of the show, and I have tried to make presentations that are specific to each installation. I’m excited the Hirshhorn will present three new bronzes.

**Q:** *Tell me about “Satellite.” What’s the origin for this piece?*

**A:** “Satellite” is the kind of subject matter I’ve been interested in for a long time. I like to think about the body and how it can be an apparatus for ancestor worship. There’s a giving and receiving with the body. I’m always riffing on different kinds of African art, sculpture and material culture. In this case specifically, I was thinking about the D’mba mask. The wooden apparatus used for the mask has become popular sculpture to collect in the West. It was included in the Peggy Guggenheim collection in Venice. “Satellite” is another part of the conversation about African art in an American Pavilion context.

**Q:** *The U.S. Pavilion in Venice is a neoclassical building that resembles Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. For a piece called “Facade,” you obscured the pavilion by covering it with a thatched roof and wooden beams. What does that building mean to you?*

**A:** I was very aware of the building being Monticello-like and referencing that style of architecture and all the content that comes with that. Monticello was built by slaves. It wasn’t that much of a shift to imagine another kind of building that has more early African forms. There’s not as big a gap between the facade I created over the pavilion and the pavilion itself, if you think about how things are made and how value is created.

**Q:** *Your work pairs bronze and stone with materials historically associated with craft and women’s work: ceramics, porcelain, terra cotta, raffia. Is there still an unfair negative connotation associated with these materials?*



Installation view of the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art’s “Simone Leigh” exhibition. (Timothy Schenck)

**A:** That has definitely been a through line in the work, making labor more visible. Which is part of my obsession with terra cotta pots. Their value is so tied to the value of women, which is how I started my career in art, just thinking about that. People's attitudes toward ceramic materials in art have changed over the last 20 years really dramatically. I had an artwork rejected from a show that I applied for in maybe 2001. I was told by the curator that she would not show my work because it was ceramic. When I came to New York and started to work in art, a lot of artists were more interested in detritus, and more interested in getting rid of objects, and making more ephemeral art or art that could not be collected. And so I had to wait a long time before people could understand what I was doing. There was a sense that I was out of step with everyone else.

**Q:** *You make full-size clay versions for your monumental bronze sculptures before you cast them. That's an unusual approach in sculpture. Can you talk about your process?*

**A:** What I've learned is that if you take a smaller object and use 3D modeling to blow it up, it becomes something different than what you intended. The only way to really realize the object — to be viewed by the viewer in the way that you would want it to be understood — is to make it to scale. If you're looking down on something on a tabletop, it would appear completely differently than if you're looking up at it when it's something 24 feet tall. Also, it gives me the opportunity to improvise and change as I'm building. That's a really important part of the process for me.

**Q:** *You worked as an intern at the National Museum of African Art. What was that like?*

**A:** I worked with the ceramics curator, and I xeroxed all of these books and pamphlets that described West African and Southern African ceramic building techniques. These are texts that were written mostly by anthropologists or missionaries. I knew a lot of these texts that I was reading were fraught, because of the conundrum of anthropology as a colonial science. In college, I was reading Edward Said and "Orientalism" and starting to learn a lot about post-coloniality, or what we were hoping would become a discourse around post-coloniality. Now we don't say that anymore, since it's not like colonialism has really stopped. The museum was relatively new. There were a lot of scholars of African art who didn't necessarily have a home in the U.S. to gather and have discourse with other people, so it felt very intellectually rich and exciting. It was exciting to be in a library of African art forms. I felt like I got access to a lot of texts. That was wonderful at such a young age.

**Q:** *What year was this?*

**A:** I think it was 1987, maybe '88.

**Q:** *Do you have strong memories of living in D.C. from that time?*

**A:** I remember going to the Ethiopian restaurant Meskerem. I remember going to a lecture on West African hand-building at Howard University. I met with Nigerian artist Sokari Douglas Camp, and she gave me a lesson on hand-building at Howard there in the studio one time. I remember listening to the curators go back and forth about how they could get people excited about Dogon statuary, how to bring people into the building. It was amazing to hear those conversations.

**Q:** *Has this level of success changed your studio practice at all?*

**A:** I've been able to make more work. I worked with one assistant for most of my career. Then before exhibitions, we would hire more people to work with us. Now I have a studio with 12 employees. That's as big as I can get. I don't think I can get any bigger without losing some control of the work. It's still something I'm watching all the time. I'm constantly tinkering to try to figure out what's exactly the right-size studio. I'm in a great place right now. Especially because three of those people, three of the 12, are administrative support. So I've been able to hire people to do enough of the administration, the emails and paperwork, that I'm actually able to be more in the studio than I would have been five years ago. It's a thing. I've reached my limit. I don't want a studio that's very big. I'm in a good position where I don't feel pressured to make work at all. I'm very happy with my studio practice right now.

## **Simone Leigh**

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue and Seventh Street SW.  
hirshhorn.si.edu.

**Dates:** Through March 3.

**Admission:** Free.

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## SIMONE LEIGH

BY SAUL OSTROW

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Institute of Contemporary Art,  
Boston  
April 6–September 4, 2023

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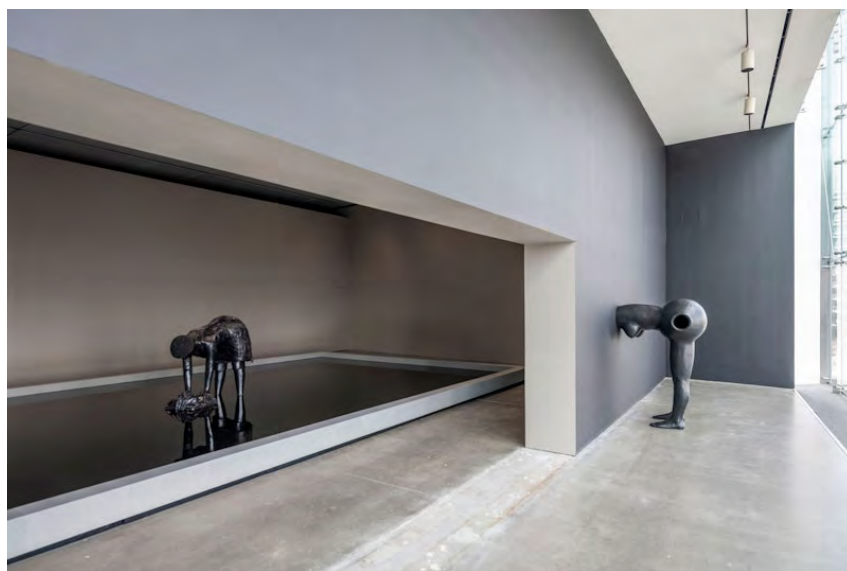
Simone Leigh makes highly refined and stylish sculptures that seemingly tell consciously constructed stories as well as unintended ones. The installation of this exhibition of her works at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston is stark, dramatic, and elegant. The walls, painted a warm gray, set a mood comparable to a Robert Wilson stage set. The nine works Leigh installed in the US pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022 form the core of the show. Her sculptures contain embedded narratives built upon sub-Saharan tribal imagery, the folk-art tradition of stoneware face vessels, as well as colonial and literary sources. Each work also tells other stories, which tend to be more feminist and sexual than racial. Though acknowledged, these narratives are often glossed over in discourse. Leigh is a Black artist of Jamaican descent, and so problematically and all too often, her works are solely viewed through the lens of race, rather than being seen and

interpreted for what they are aesthetically and symbolically. As such her sources override the ends to which they have been applied.

From a walk-through with the artist at the press preview of the ICA exhibition, I got the sense that Leigh takes pride in her mastery of modeling and casting techniques; the meaning of her sculptures was secondary. In this she may be likened to Martin Puryear whose early reputation was built on his refined, hand-crafted constructions. Where Leigh differs from Puryear, relative to craft, is that he is concerned with what he can get materials to do, whereas Leigh is concerned with what they may express. Unlike Puryear, Leigh is not a modernist but rather a postmodern assemblagist

who combines differing historical traditions. Her mash-ups of the folk pottery of the American South with traditional sub-Saharan African iconography taken from votives and effigies results in cross-coding narratives in which history and identity are assembled and reassembled at will. This is the apparent source of the common interpretation that Leigh's women are symbolic composites of Black material culture.

Yet another potential source for Leigh's work who goes unnoticed is the African American sculptor Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, who in 1899 moved from Philadelphia to Paris and studied sculpture with Rodin. Leigh, like Fuller, celebrates her cultural identity by resisting



Installation view: Simone Leigh, ICA Boston, 2023. Courtesy ICA Boston.

stereotypical representations of the Black body, while taking pride in her African and Black heritage. Fuller is best remembered for her sculpture *Ethiopia Awakening* (1921) which depicts a Black woman wrapped like a mummy from the waist down, her upper torso thrusting upward, suggesting she is awakening from a long sleep. Much of Fuller's work was commissioned by W.E.B. Du Bois and exhibited at several world expositions. Adhering to Du Bois's view that artistic expression is an organic part of the political project of building a Black public image, Fuller's works were intended to raise up, in the nomenclature of Du Bois's time, the visibility of the Black race.

The video, *my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell...* (2011) produced by Girl (the name under which Leigh and artist Chitra Ganesh collaborate), included in the show suggests another key to Leigh's overall project. A prolonged image of a naked Black back seen from the shoulders to the waist lying on its side in a spotlight, barely moving—nothing really seems to be happening—nonetheless disturbs, as the figure's head is buried beneath a pile of rocks. The video articulates Leigh's general strategy: high aesthetic values verging on the sensuous juxtaposed with images or elements whose psychological and symbolic implications are numerous, yet indeterminant.

The strong presence of Leigh's forms, the variety of surfaces and finishes she produces, and the drama of her display all initially draw viewers to her work. What often goes unnoticed is that almost all of her women are in some manner deformed or mutilated—limbs are cut off, bodies are truncated, heads decapitated. The main signifier of their gender are breasts, as legs and

lower torsos are replaced by forms derived from jug-like vessels, haystacks, and hoop skirts. As such her women are immobile, they often lack genitals, and when female genitalia is referenced it is as a cowrie shell, which were once traded for goods and services throughout Africa. They are like unequal equations with the lower half an abstract mass and the upper half an effigy.

Leigh's women are further shut off from the world by being eyeless and earless, another state of incompleteness. This is not due to violence; instead, Leigh has modeled them in such a way that there is no indication that they were ever meant to see and hear. Her sculptures of heads, such as the stone-ware works *Untitled* (2023) or *102 (Face Jug Series)* (2018) are nearly genderless, with nothing particularly female or feminine about their features. Their racial identity resides in full lips, broad noses, and tightly-curved hair, stereotypically characterized as Black facial features. Such details make who and what these women are meant to represent much more ambiguous. While they may speak, they are otherwise cut off from the outside world. It is difficult to determine if this is metaphor, or an allegory.

Likewise, sculptures of full figures have their own eccentricities. *Sharifa* (2022) a bronze portrait of the author Sharifa Rhodes Pitts, at twice life size, has all its features and limbs intact, yet the body is concealed by a sheath extending from beneath her bare breasts to the tips of her toes. The figure gazes inwardly, appearing to either lean against the wall or emerge from it, reminiscent of a Victorian funerary sculpture. Another bronze, *Last Garment* (2022) naturalistically depicts a laundress bent over at the waist, standing calf deep in a pool

of water. She directs her gaze downward to view her own reflection, so as not to acknowledge those who would objectify her. Another full figure in the show is the sculpture *Dunham* (2023) also in bronze and patinated a uniform black. Armless and again bent forward at the hips, the figure has its head buried in the wall and her buttocks have been replaced by a jug. Where the left hip would normally be is instead the jug's gaping mouth, which affords the viewer access to gaze into the container's empty interior.

The story proposed by the exhibition's press release dubiously asserts that Leigh's work "challenges traditional hierarchies of art and labor," and that her sculptures "give visibility to overlooked narratives or histories." Seemingly, we would need to know that Leigh's source material for *Last Garment* (2022) is a nineteenth-century souvenir stereoscopic photograph C.H. Graves titled *Mammy's Last Garment* which depicts a Jamaican laundress, and what that image may have represented in context of the nineteenth-century British tourism industry. Instead, Leigh's formal language tells us more about the inner life that circumscribes her work than the source materials so often referenced. In light of the status of women in general and Black women in particular, the narrative that emerges from her work carries with it an existential message of incompleteness, helplessness, and stoicism. Viewed from this perspective Leigh's works take on a subtle complexity significantly different from the one built upon her various historical and literary sources.

Saul Ostrow is an independent critic, and curator, Art Editor at Large for *Bomb Magazine*.

# TIME

## *Simone Leigh*

### SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE

By Venus Williams

My first encounter with Simone Leigh and her artwork occurred over a decade ago, and I will never forget the feelings I experienced in that moment—her art resonated with me in my heart and my core. The unique elegance, well-executed technique, and overall majesty of her work transcend the art form and captivate attention, and the message informing that work is even more powerful.

For generations, Black bodies have been stereotyped, marginalized, and commodified, but Simone completely upends that narrative with her sculptures—centering the experiences of Black individuals and celebrating Black bodies, specifically female bodies, for their beauty, strength, and pride. In doing so, she inspires generations of Black women to feel empowered and to situate

their experiences as central to American history and culture. Her presentation at the 2022 Venice Biennale was monumental and won her a Golden Lion, which speaks to her impact not only on the art world, but on generations to come.

*Williams, who won seven Grand Slam singles titles, is a philanthropist and entrepreneur*



PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAYLEN DION

## FINANCIAL TIMES

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Art



## Reshaping the colonial past

Simone Leigh | In her first museum survey at ICA Boston, the American sculptor aims to challenge tropes about the black body, she tells *Enuma Okoro*

I wanted to be anything but an artist. I thought I was asking for a life of poverty and strife, which I had already had enough of...But one thing I did know was ceramics. And I couldn't stop making things."

New York-based artist Simone Leigh shared this thought with me in Venice last October as we sat in the parlour of her hotel, sunlight

dancing off the Grand Canal and casting shimmering shadows on the walls. Leigh was there as the first black woman to represent the US at the Venice Biennale.

For her acclaimed installation "Sovereignty", she converted the facade of the US pavilion into its own sculpture, a steel-and-wood structure with a thatched raffia roof. It was a nod to both African architectural forms and the 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition, a fair where people from countries under colonial rule were put on display.

Leigh also won the Biennale's prestigious Golden Lion for the 16ft sculpture "Brick House", her first bronze. The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston presented the US Pavilion under the curation of Eva Respini.

Now Respini is chief curator of Leigh's first museum survey at the ICA Boston. Across nine rooms and the Founders Gallery, it consists of 29 works created between 2004 and 2023 that show a consistency of themes and materials. They are a testament to her creation of a visual language that spotlights and amplifies the labours of black women and material culture against ways they have historically been overlooked or rendered invisible through colonialism and its ongoing after-effects.

Leigh, who was born in Chicago in 1967 to Jamaican parents, has a quietly commanding presence. Her voice is soft and calm as she reaches for her phone to show me a black-and-white photograph dating from the late 1990s, when she moved to New York after completing a BA in philosophy and art at Earlham College in Indiana.

"This is me when [my daughter] Zenobia was two and I was getting up at four or five

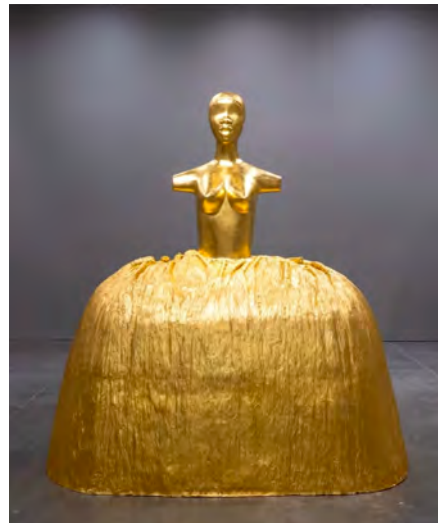
in the morning to make these small pinch pots. Becoming an artist and becoming a mother was almost simultaneous. It was hard, and I didn't have a solo show of my work until five years later. But the decision to take it seriously and accept that this was going to be a thing happened then."

The photo shows the artist, then in her early thirties and unknown to the world, sitting cross-legged. Between her legs she cradles her daughter while gazing directly into the camera lens, doe-eyed and fatigued. Surrounding them are concentric circles of dozens of small white porcelain conical forms. The image makes me think of a contemporary Madonna and Child, except here the woman is nurturing both her child and her craft.

For Leigh, it represents the time in her life when she realised she couldn't get away from art. In an exquisite way, it also speaks to what seems to be at the centre of her practice and art, capturing the self-determination of black women and the ways in which care has been used as a modality

of living and flourishing across time. These are aspects also key to Leigh's own route into making art.

"When I was in college I did a summer internship at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art," she says. "I Xeroxed everything they had, [including] these little detailed packets made by missionaries and anthropologists on how to make Nigerian pots. That's how I taught myself. The pots were so incredibly beautiful to me, made by women and perfect in conception."



**Clockwise from main picture: Simone Leigh creating artwork for the 59th Venice Biennale; 'Satellite' (2022); detail from 'White Teeth (for Ota Benga)' (2004); 'Last Garment' (2022); 'Cupboard' (2022) at the ICA Boston**

Simone Leigh: Matthew Marks Gallery; ICA Boston | Photos of artworks by Shaniqwa Jarvis and Timothy Schenck

Leigh began making pots herself, but eventually moved away from the practice because she felt misunderstood. "I was always a conceptual artist but people would be very distracted by the object-making. It didn't make sense to them that I was making the pot because of the idea of the pot."

Her first show was held at Rush Arts Gallery in New York in 2001, scheduled to open two days after September 11. "[The timing] was a disaster. I packed up everything and put it in storage and got a job. I didn't really recover until I did a solo show at Momenta Art in 2004. That's where I would really say was the beginning."

Leigh began with very few forms, "pots, breasts and this idea of teeth, which was centred on Ota Benga's teeth". (Benga was an 18th-century Congolese man with sharpened teeth who was displayed in human zoo exhibits in the US in the early 19th century. He later died by suicide.) Then came a shift and expansion in Leigh's work sparked by travelling to Africa.

"I went to South Africa in 2007, and eventually started going every year... and visiting other countries [on the continent]. Because of my Jamaican heritage, I realised that my work made more sense in a discourse more focused on the after-effects

of colonisation. I was

Leigh feels that the concept of the ‘noble savage’ has not been discussed enough in art

running into documentation created by missionaries all the time and anthropologists. So my research was fraught with colonial framing.”

In the process, she connected with the work of South African artists Dineo Seshee Bopape and Nicholas Hlobo and the Zimbabwean Lucia Nhamo. “The way they were using traditional culture to inform and make new work seemed more aligned with my practice. So I realised if I moved around, there were whole art worlds outside of the US that I could be engaged in.”

I meet Leigh again at the ICA Boston for a walk-through on the eve of the show’s opening. Over the past 20 years, she has worked in ceramics, bronze, video, social-practice programmes and installations, always centring

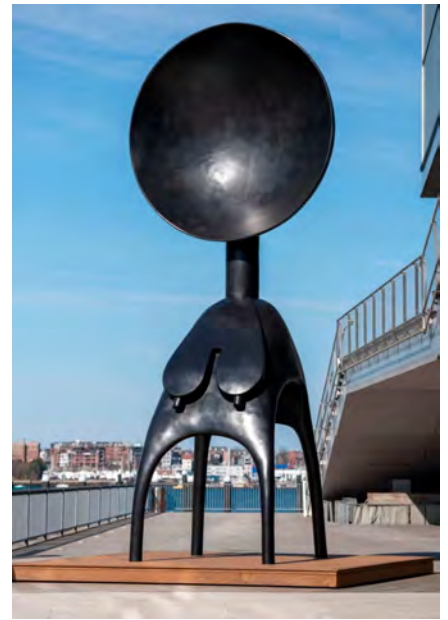


facets of black femme and female-identifying existence, engaging with black feminist theory and acknowledging gaps in the past to name them and reclaim them in order to move forwards.

But it is her large-scale and small sculptures and videos that make up the ICA Boston survey. It opens with the 24ft-tall 2022 bronze “Satellite”. The body of the sculpture is based on the torso from the traditional Nimba ceremonial headdress of the Baga people of coastal Guinea Bissau that was associated with female leadership. But in place of the traditional head is a large satellite disc. Respini said of this in Venice that it “is a symbol of modern communication and serves as a beacon welcoming broadcasting the ideals of the exhibition and the ideas of Simone’s work”.

Also included is the 89-inch-high bronze-and-gold sculpture “Cupboard”. Modelled in clay during the pandemic and cast in bronze last year, it depicts an armless female form. The face has flared nostrils and thick closed lips. There are no eyes, making the interiority of this radiant black woman seem off-limits to the viewer’s gaze. The slim naked torso sits on top of the large dome-like bottom structure that draws on variations of African architectural dwellings and gathering places. Here it is transformed into the body or skirt of the female form.

To make the skirt, raffia pieces from Madagascar were dipped in clay and layered before it was cast. “This body is the result of many years of exploring different forms,” says Leigh. “For a while I was really interested



in Cycladic bodies and different kinds of formal representation of the black body. This is something I feel is very resolved now.” One can’t help but think that part of that resolution is the way in which Leigh has used scale, form and material to re-narrate and reclaim the symbol of the African hut from colonial representation.

In the nine other rooms, signature elements of Leigh’s art are on display: the tiny handmade rosettes that cover her vibrantly coloured head busts; the cowrie shells; the raffia skirts; the face jugs influenced by the work of enslaved potters from the Edgefield District of South Carolina. Leigh’s creative process includes the use of atmospheric firing that allows her to add elements to the kiln, changing the atmosphere and the object. “I like to think of the kiln environment as a metaphor for identity formation,” she says.

Towards the end of the exhibition is “Last Garment”, a monumental bronze metal, steel and water installation of a woman

bent at the waist standing ankle deep doing her laundry in a large pool of water. She is scrubbing a garment on a rock, but her head is facing down at the water and viewers cannot see her face. All we see are the hundreds of tightly coiled rosettes that form the short afro of her hair.

The piece was shown in Venice, but in Boston the pool is significantly larger, and it is set with the background of the Boston Harbor, which viewers see through the large windows opposite. A handout at the museum informs a reader that the image is named after a 19th-century souvenir photograph of a Jamaican woman washing (“Mammy’s Last Garment”). And that images like this were made to for “a growing anglophone Caribbean tourism industry”.

For Leigh, the work aims to repudiate the concept of the “noble savage”, which she feels has not been discussed enough in art. “It’s such an important visual that was used to shepherd ideas [about black people] throughout the world. In this case the ‘noble savage’...and to justify a lot of things,” she says. “What I like about what happens in this work is that her gaze is averted and she can look at her own reflection even while she might be going through this experience of being part of a souvenir that’s used to create tropes about the black body that are still pernicious.”

I ask Leigh what she hopes her work will achieve. “It’s hard to respond to that question without a discussion of what is wrong in the world and what would need to change. I have liberated myself

from that burden. It is not my intention to respond to or trouble someone else’s story but to tell my own.”

*At the ICA Boston to September 4, icaboston.org, then the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC from November 3*

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## The Boston Globe



PHOTOS BY TIMOTHY SCHENCK

By Murray Whyte  
GLOBE STAFF

A gilded female form, armless and sleek, stands resolute in the entryway of “Simone Leigh,” the artist’s eponymous, first-ever career survey, just opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art. Life-sized and anchored to the concrete floor with broad, textured skirting that shimmers under warm light,



Top: Simone Leigh's "Cupboard" at the ICA exhibit. Other works in the show include "Last Garment" (far left) and "Anonymous" (near left).

Leigh's work is not for those in search of uncomplicated beauty. But in its complexities is a sublime more rich and full than beauty alone. It seduces in whispers, and engulfs with meaning.

# A new show charts Simone Leigh's remarkable 20-year ascent

► "SIMONE LEIGH"  
Continued from Page G1

it's extravagant and imposing enough to stand you back and steal your breath. Invitation, or warning? Maybe both. Leigh's work is not for those in search of uncomplicated beauty. But in its complexities is a sublime more rich and full than beauty alone. It seduces in whispers, and engulfs with meaning.

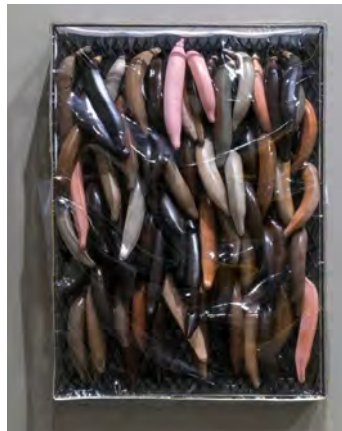
Leigh, born in Chicago in 1967, is likely best-known for her superstar turn at the Venice Biennale last year, where, as the official representative for the United States, she transformed the US Pavilion into a breathtaking lesson on buried histories. The Jeffersonian facade was swallowed in raffia, a tropical frond she uses often in her work to signal colonial plunder across the Atlantic world; inside, she exhumed stories specific to the exploitation of Black women's labor in the grisly making of the country itself. Under the weight of it all, an austere grace pervaded the galleries, a contemplative calm. Because this, I think, is Simone Leigh: Soft-spoken but insistent, with deep echoes that penetrate and persist.

All of the Venice project has come home to the ICA, including the towering 24-foot bronze, "Satellite," 2022, which looms by the



PHOTOS BY TIMOTHY SCHENCK

Above: installation view of the "Simone Leigh" exhibit. Below: "Slipcover."



museum's door. The ICA, under deputy director and chief curator Eva Respini, produced both the Biennale project and this survey. Amid earthy-gray walls meant to evoke the warmth of clay, Leigh's principal material, the show is arranged with an elegant logic; some spaces are faithful re-creations of the Venice installation, but they're interspersed throughout the exhibition's eight distinct rooms, and integrated with

work across almost all of she's often said that Black Leigh's career.

The show's 29 pieces are organized in a loose chronology that spans nearly 20 years of Leigh's career, right up to now; they reflect the artist's commitment and consistency across materials and themes over time, and chronicle an ascent to the height of her powers. Walking from room to room, I had the sense of watching greatness unfold, of history in the making. Amid all the rhetoric dominating art-world discourse in recent years — around racial reckoning, gender equity, and justice more broadly — Leigh's work is a clarifying device, elegant and frank. Whatever future generations make of this moment, I feel sure her voice will endure.

Race is right up front in almost all of Leigh's work;

women are her primary audience, and their labor — disregarded at best, dishonored and exploited at worst — the fuel for her creative fire. You can catch your breath in that first space next to "Cupboard," 2022 — that golden form with the domed skirt, a Leigh motif — and find "Slipcover," tucked nearby on a corner of wall. It's one of the earliest works here, dated 2006 (she's reworked it several times, including for this show earlier this year).

Inside a clear plastic-zip case, porcelain plaitains in fleshy pinks and browns dangle in neat rows. During a packed press tour earlier this week, Leigh said the forms were fired using doll-makers' color codes, concocted to mimic skintone. It's provocative and ghostly,

like grim comedy — false flesh, ziplocked and packed up. Sharing space with the otherworldly glow of “Cupboard,” the piece tracks a profound evolution, Leigh’s shift from registering injustice to transcending it — creating beauty no less freighted with trauma, but beauty all the same.

The second space here is Simone Leigh 101 — an overview of favorite forms and materials like raffia, ceramic rosettes, and face jugs, riffs on the ceramic forms made by enslaved people in the Edgfield District of South Carolina that helped launch her career. It’s as stirring a remedial study as you’ll find. The half-dozen pieces here show a mastery of firing and glaze that establish Leigh as an expert maker. During the tour, she spoke often of the material idiosyncrasies that kindled her own imagination; of the residues a kiln would accumulate, an essence it would invisibly impart in each subsequent firing. For her, she said, the kiln was a metaphor for identity formation, a crucible that fires and marks all that passes through with what came before.

Leigh works and collaborates broadly in media that include video, three of which are here. But the tactile medium of ceramics is where she lives. Her monumental bronze pieces, like “Jug,” and “Sentinel,” 2019, paired here, begin life as clay.

Leigh’s material enthusiasms establish an important fact: Nothing here is sent to a fabricator to be made; everything bears the touch of her own hand. That helps explain the deep intimacy that an exhibition of Leigh’s work can evoke. In Venice, she made things even more personal, which was very much the point. Two works here, “Anonymous” and “Jug,” both 2022, re-create a space in Venice, where the artist put on view a gruesome episode of the plantation-era south. The two forms are extracted from a historic photograph of a young Black woman, seated at a table that holds a face jug from Edgfield, South Carolina.

The jugs were talismanic ceramic objects for their enslaved makers, fitted with grotesquely cartoonish facial features. (In a wonderful confluence, more than a dozen are on view at the Museum of Fine Arts right now, part of “Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgfield,” where some of Leigh’s work is included). The 1882 photograph, by James A. Palmer, was intended as cruelty; he called it “The Wilde Woman of Aiken.” Leigh’s “Anonymous” liberates her from ridicule, bestowing a serene beauty upon her — head in hands, a shimmering, ghostly white. “Jug,” freed from Palmer’s gaze, is remade at near human height and studded in

toothy cowrie shells — imposing, menacing, a protector.

There are some things Leigh can’t reclaim — the woman’s name, for one, disregarded by Palmer and lost to the ages. But her work is rarely about specific people so much as emblems — of injustice, of exploitation, of form and custom that defy simple readings. The domed skirt so prevalent in her figures evokes an art history touchstone in Diego Velazquez’s “Las Meninas,” a portrait of the regal Infanta Margaret Theresa and her entourage (Leigh has a 2019 piece named after it, in fact).

But the skirt also evokes the raffia-clad architecture of African cultures that came to be appropriated in Europe and America as a primitivist cliché: Leigh’s veiling of the US Pavilion in Venice mimicked the 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition, to which Africans were brought to live in raffia-thatched huts on site as specimens of French colonial dominance.

Grim histories are knit into Leigh’s work, an inevitable, perhaps, for a Black woman exploring colonial residue in America. Even so, it provokes solemnity, but not pathos. This is an artist who meets power with power, unflinching but graceful, and in pursuit of truth.

The exhibition concludes with “Last Garment,” 2022, a monumental bronze made for Venice of a Black

## ART REVIEW

### SIMONE LEIGH

Through Sept. 4. Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, 25 Harbor Shore Drive. 617-478-3100, [www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org)

woman bent double in a reflecting pool, laundering fabric against a stone. Like “Anonymous,” it’s an extraction of a historical photograph, taken without its subject’s consent, as evidence for white tourists of the hygienic habits of the Black Jamaican population. Leigh makes her monumental and resolute, her gaze, cast down, belonging only to her.

Here, the ICA has opened a wall facing east into Boston Harbor, where slave ships once came and went, underwriting the obscene wealth of a colony founded on exploitation and built through bondage. She stands in a pool that reflects her own image, and on all of us.

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# The New York Times

IDEAS | PERSONALITIES

SUNDAY, APRIL 17, 2022

## Arts & Leisure

The New York Times

### Simone Leigh, In the World

The first Black woman to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, the acclaimed sculptor is bringing many ideas beneath one (thatched) roof.  
BY SIDDHARTHA MITTER | PAGE 12



SARAH VAN RIJ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mitter, Siddhartha. "A Time to Share Her Inspirations With the World." *The New York Times*, April 17, 2022, pp. AR 1, 12–13.

## Art

# A Time to Share Her Inspirations With the World

The sculptor Simone Leigh holds court in Venice.

By SIDDHARTHA MITTER

Simone Leigh was on the phone from Venice. It's not all here yet, she told me.

She had been installing her exhibition of bronzes and ceramics in the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale — one of the most prestigious commissions in the art world, and the first time it has been awarded to a Black female artist. This edition of the Biennale had been delayed a year by Covid-19, and, Leigh reported, it has not been spared disruptions: “Satellite,” a 24-foot bronze female form with a concave disc for a head, destined for the forecourt of the Pavilion, was in transit, not certain to arrive in time for next week's opening.

But Leigh was unper- turbed. The pièce de résis-

tance exceeded her hopes. She was giving the building a makeover: A neo-Palladian structure with white columns that waves to Jeffersonian architecture, it has gone African, with a thatched roof that drapes partway down the facade, supported by a discreet metal armature and wooden poles.

Seeing the work of her architect Pierpaolo Martiradonna and his team, what struck Leigh was the rich fullness: the shagginess of the thatch, the forest effect of the wood poles. She was into it. “It has an over-the-top Blackness that I really like,” she said.

The concept was “1930s African palace,” she said — a notion that takes aim at the Colonial Exposition held in Paris in 1931, in which France and other powers showed off their territories, featuring replicas — or amalgams — of

local architecture and sometimes “natives” brought in to inhabit them.

Beyond this, Leigh is making a pointed connection to the shared history of global exhibitions that includes the Biennale itself, with its classic national pavilions from the interwar years. In the heyday of Modernism, nations saw no contradiction between flaunting the colonial “civilizing mission” and their high-art achievements.

In Venice, Leigh confronts these parallel histories by turning the building itself into a sculpture, said Eva Respini, the chief curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, which is presenting the pavilion show. “She’s taken these two ideals and enmeshed them to create something entirely her own.”

Leigh, 54, is hovering near art-celebrity status. She won the Hugo Boss Prize in 2018, took part in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, and even prompted a market kerfuffle last year when she left the mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth just 21 months after joining, landing at the smaller Matthew Marks Gallery.

She had a memorable and widely-seen success in “Brick House,” her bronze sculpture on the High Line. For two years, until May 2021, the 16-foot-tall bust of a Black woman with a rounded torso and cowrie-tipped braids presided impassively above the traffic — without eyes, thus with no gaze to meet, as though withholding private thoughts.

A counterpoint to the Far West Side's skyscrapers, it was a triumph of sculpture

and urban design. “Brick House” will also be seen at the Biennale's international exhibition, where work by 213 artists — the vast majority women — will be shown in two vast spaces, the Arsenale and the Giardini, from April 23 through November 27th.

The Pavilion commission — which is awarded by the State Department, and will lead into Leigh's first museum survey, at the ICA, in 2023 — represents the culmination of a journey to scale. “I never thought I would be able to work literally with architecture,” she told me at her home in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, during one of several interviews for this story. “Most artists don't get this opportunity to see their ideas writ large in this way.”

It is also a chance to share her inspirations — from her study of philosophy and ethnography to the history of Black and African art and objects — in ways that no single sculpture can convey. These interests stoke a core concern of her art practice: Black female subjectivity — the sense of self of Black women in the world, their histories, their work, their inner lives.

“The less ‘important’ objects in African art are ones that enter the domestic sphere and are changed by daily or ritual use, by care and love,” Leigh said. “They bring me back into the realm of women's labor.”

Rashida Bumbray, who curated Leigh's 2012 breakthrough exhibition at The Kitchen, in Chelsea, and is organizing with her an international convening of Black women artists and scholars





in Venice in October, said that the Biennale would assemble the ideas and methods Leigh has honed for decades “in one place — this time to the nth power.” And the promise of the Biennale, with its international audience, is propelling Leigh out into the world.

### Beauty in the ‘Horrorifying’

Leigh was living in a yurt in rural Virginia in 1992 when a book fell into her hands that would shape her thinking straight through to Venice: a 64-page souvenir photo book from the 1931 Paris colonial fair.

A Virginia heiress had set up the hippie-ish pottery community where Leigh was learn-

ing to use an anagama — a Japanese single-chamber “cave” kiln that fires for days at a time. The woman’s father had left a collection of photography books; she asked Leigh to organize it and select a book to keep.

The fair glamorized colonialism, yet the book was also beautiful, Leigh told me. “It has some really well done ‘noble-savage’ photography,” she said. “And you really feel the architecture — the camera relates your body to the buildings.”

The Paris fair was one of the last of its kind before World War II scrambled the geopolitical order. It was sprawling, with new modernist halls and replicas of structures like the An-

gkor Wat temple. The United States Pavilion copied George Washington’s Mount Vernon, with cottages for the colonies: Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, Samoa, Alaska, Hawaii, the Virgin Islands.

Other buildings mixed ethnographic detail with wild confluences. The separate territories of Cameroon and Togo were given a joint pavilion whose architects drew on Cameroon’s Bamoun-Bamileke cultures for a wood structure with a tall thatched dome.

The whole enterprise has attracted scholarly studies, including books by the architectural historian Patricia A. Morton in 2000 and the

art historian Steven Nelson in 2007. But in the yurt, Leigh was struck by what the images demonstrated: how colonial depictions could elevate cultures while generating new ways to dismiss them.

Her background had primed her to appreciate these ambiguities. Growing up in Chicago, a daughter of middle-class Jamaican immigrants, she was used to toggling daily between worlds — West Indian, African American, white.

During visits to Jamaica she grasped how colonialism and resistance, rather than contradictory, produced complex, continually renewing, social values and aesthetics. “I think like

Above, Simone Leigh inside the United States Pavilion at the 59th International Venice Biennale, with her new glazed stoneware work, “Jug” (2022). Left, another view of “Jug.” Below, “Martinique” (2022), made of glazed stoneware, nods to a statue of the Empress Josephine (wife of Napoleon Bonaparte) on Martinique. Protesters decapitated the statue in 1991 because of her ties to slavery.

someone from the Caribbean,” she said. “I like how complicated it is, seeing beauty in something that was horrifying at the same time.”

Her father was a Nazarene pastor, and home life in Chicago followed “extreme” strictures, she said, but she attended public schools where her friends were “weirdos and people with fundamentalist backgrounds.” The West Indian community was small, but around them was the rich African-American culture of the South Side.

In high school she read Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks. At Earlham College, a Quaker school in Indiana (she argued to her parents that it was a Christian institution), she got into ceramics — and majored in philosophy. She was drawn to French feminists like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

Leigh told me that it occurred to her recently how much her new work reflects the influence of her hometown’s abundant public art. “I realized that it’s a lot like sculpture that I grew up with

in Chicago — the Mirós and Picassos all downtown,” she said. “It’s a similar scale, a similar presence.”

She had found her zone, and it was there all along.

### **Old Objects, New Meanings**

Leigh’s work has expanded greatly from the ceramics that she presented in 2011 as an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and in 2012 at The Kitchen, which included interpretations of household objects like water jugs and fantastical suspended pieces bristling with cowries and gold-tipped quills.

She was already in her 40s when those shows drew notice. The commitment to ceramics had kept her outside the art-world mainstream, while abstraction — she never made usable objects — separated her from the pottery scene. She felt removed, too, from tendencies toward conceptualism in Black American art at the time.

But in Africa, where she began traveling in 2007, she found artistic and intellectual

kinship. In South Africa, artists like Dineo Seshee Bopape, Kemang Wa Lehulere and Nicholas Hlobo were boldly using earth and common objects. “They were working with material culture and not running away from it,” she said.

In Nigeria, the curator Bisi Silva, who fostered contemporary art at a center in Lagos, became a mentor. “I wrote to her, ‘Whatever you do, I want to do it with you,’” Leigh said. (Silva died in 2019, at 56.) In Namibia, Leigh met activists seeking recognition of the Herero genocide committed by the German military between 1904 and 1908. A Herero headdress stylized from dozens of ceramic roses became a motif in her art.

Leigh’s first outdoor project, commissioned by the Studio Museum in Marcus Garvey Park in 2016, made her African influences explicit. It consisted of three hut-like structures built of clay with thatched roofs — inspired by imbas, “kitchen houses” in rural Zimbabwe, where valuables are kept and meetings

held.

But the huts had no entrances — a move that gave them a brooding, hermetic energy, as if they were protecting secrets. It also alluded to a social reality — the way kitchen houses are locked up when a family emigrates.

By making the huts solid, Leigh communicated how traditional objects accrue new meanings, said the Zimbabwean artist and designer Nontsikelelo Mutiti. “Contemporary life allows those objects to have another potency.”

The imbas drew curators’ eyes and sparked a studio epiphany when Leigh placed a small ceramic head on the maquette of a hut. “That’s how those busts started that have house-like bodies,” she said of the hybrid form that became a signature.

In her 2018 Hugo Boss Prize exhibition of new work at the Guggenheim Museum, she proposed further riffs: a ceramic bust whose skirt had a jug-handle; a raffia dome from which a stove pipe rose. A breeze-block wall in the gallery evoked domestic architecture in dwellings through the Global South.

Leigh’s Venice show presents fresh advances: her first portrait, “Sharifa,” a colossal likeness of the writer Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, one of her closest friends. The bronze has a geometric lower body from which one foot protrudes in a gesture that Leigh attributed to Egyptian statuary.

At the foundry, Rhodes-Pitts helped model the form for another bronze, “Last Garment,” being shown in Venice — a washerwoman, bent over and kneading a garment in a reflecting pool. The source was a vintage postcard from Jamaica, a trope in colonial depictions. The work is as fig-



## Art

urative a piece as Leigh has made — as if reaching through the souvenir to engage the person whom it both depicted and diminished.

In taking on these images, Rhodes-Pitts said, Leigh was “working with traces of the colonial stain — these things that the culture can’t look away from even while insisting that they are marginal.”

The process gets emotional. For months, Leigh worked on ceramic pieces based on an 1882 staged photograph by James A. Palmer, a white photographer in South Carolina who made souvenir images of Black people. The picture showed a woman at a table with a face jug, the kind made by potters in the region, with a sunflower rising from it. (It is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which calls the work

“culturally offensive”).

The image has a bizarre origin story: It was based on press depictions of Oscar Wilde, who visited the United States that year and was portrayed first as a monkey, then as a Black woman — a consommé of racism, misogyny, homophobia and xenophobia.

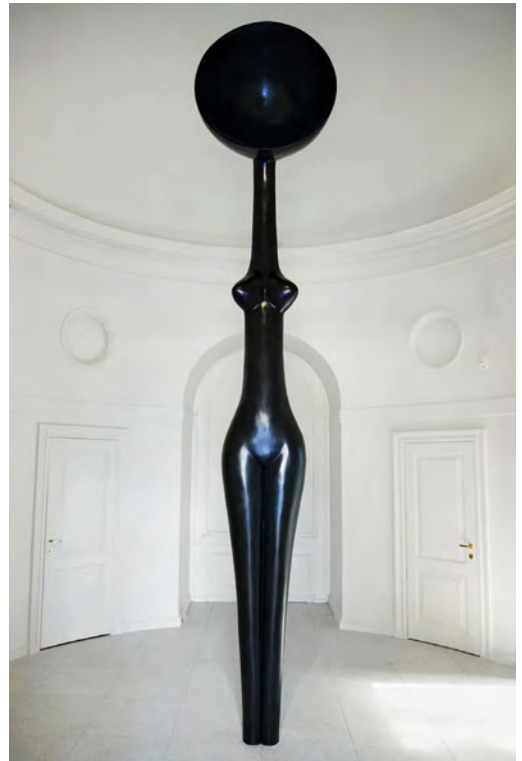
Reinterpreting the scene in two ceramic works, Leigh morphed the features on the face jug into giant cowrie shapes and gave the uncredited sitter — whom she called “Anonymous” — a cylindrical lower body. Still, the violence of the premise was getting to her. “I was uncomfortable with seeing this tableau being built in the studio over time,” she said.

In February, Leigh remade her sculpture of “Anonymous” in papier-mâché and raffia and set it on fire on the Red

Hook waterfront. Inspired by the burning of Vaval, the Carnival King effigy, in Martinique, the scene forms the climax of “Conspiracy,” a 24-minute film by Leigh and Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich that will run in the pavilion.

The film begins with Leigh in her studio, then features the abstract jazz vocals of Jeanne Lee and readings from Zora Neale Hurston and the Yale art historian Robert Farris Thompson. As the effigy burns, the artist Lorraine O’Grady watches in witness. The film, Hunt-Ehrlich said, presents “the art in conversation with the influences, but also with the community.”

For Leigh, the ritual of burning the effigy was therapeutic. “It gave me so much relief,” she said. “I never get to destroy my work in that way.”



### A Global Conversation

Two days before Leigh left for Venice, we met at her brownstone. We spoke over green tea at the kitchen island, with Margot, her recently acquired puppy, nearby. A rolling garment rack in the living room was loaded with her outfits for the journey.

As her sculptures have grown, so has her enterprise. She has a vast studio in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, with five assistants and an impressive range of kilns. She makes her bronzes at Stratton Sculpture Studios, a foundry in Philadelphia, constructing the clay models on site at full scale.

But she is not seeking endless expansion. “I have always made my

Above, in the rotunda of the U.S. Pavilion, Simone Leigh’s “Sentinel” (2022), a 16-foot-tall bronze. Below left, the neo-Palladian pavilion has received a makeover with a thatched roof and wooden supports. The theme is “1930s African palace,” Leigh said. It takes aim at world expositions and colonial fairs.



own work and I want to continue to make my own work,” she said. Her investment, she added, aimed to carve out space — physical and mental — for hands-on making. “What looks like big right now has a lot to do with my self-care.”

She has titled her Venice exhibition “Sovereignty.” The name rings like a statement of self-determination. But the claim is not just on her own behalf: After she was awarded the Venice commission, some 500 Black women in the arts gathered on a Zoom call to celebrate. There were tears, said Bumbray, who helped organize the call. “It was a moment to acknowledge that she exists because of this whole community, and we exist because of her.”

Leigh has reiterated that Black women are her primary audience, and she has insisted on bringing that audience with her into institutional spaces, so that her art is not experienced in isolation but as part of a cross-generation exchange.

Lorraine O’Grady, who at 87 is a pillar of the art world and a mentor to Leigh, said the younger artist refused to separate the audience that enables her work — Black women — from the market and institutions that consume it.

“Simone is certainly aware of all the other audiences out there, trust me,” O’Grady said. “But we’re talking about something very deep, which is the audience with whom you have interior conversations as you work, in order to shed light on issues that have received no light for centuries.”

Leigh’s October convening in Venice, “Loophole of Retreat,” aims to bring together hundreds of Black women from every continent,

including O’Grady. It will build on an event by the same name in 2019 at the Guggenheim, one of Leigh’s proudest achievements. The title refers to the crawl space where Harriet Jacobs, author of the 1861 autobiography, “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” avoided her enslaver for seven years while still observing the world and planning for freedom.

For Leigh the image epitomizes how Black women possess agency, no matter what. “The tendency when people hear Black women’s stories is to focus on what happened to them, not the intellectual labor and creativity they brought to the situation,” she said. “My work is about what they did *from* those compromised positions — the labor, the care, the love, the ideas.”

# THE NEW YORKER

## PROFILES

# MONUMENTAL

*Success for the sculptor Simone Leigh may have come late, but it seems foreordained.*

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

A modern-day Tocqueville, surveying American life from a friendly distance, could easily conclude that we are living in an era of Black ascendancy. This might sound crazy to Black people who cope with oppression and injustice on a daily basis, but in the cultural sphere the prominence that African Americans have held for more than a century in music is increasingly evident across many genres. It is unmistakable in contemporary art, where market-savvy galleries scramble to add Black artists to their rosters, and such major figures as Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, David Hammons, and the late Jean-Michel Basquiat bring record-shattering prices at auction. At the Venice Biennale, the oldest and still the most important international exhibition of recent art, the United States was represented on the last two occasions by an African American artist—Mark Bradford in 2017 and Martin Puryear in 2019. When this year's Biennale opens, on April 23rd, the artist in the United States pavilion will be Simone Leigh, the first Black woman to be designated for this honor.

In late October, I spent a day with Leigh at the Stratton Sculpture Studio in Philadelphia, where all the bronze works for her Venice show have been fabricated. Bronze is a relatively new material for Leigh, who made her mark

as a master of ceramic sculpture. She met me at the front door, and introduced me to Shane and Julia Stratton, who own and operate the studio. Just inside the door was the bottom half of a huge sculpture based on a West African *D'mba* ritual mask, the kind that rests on the wearer's shoulders and rises to an imposing height. The finished work will be installed outdoors in Venice, in the forecourt of the U.S. pavilion. Next to it stood a sixteen-foot, semi-abstract female figure whose spoonlike body was encircled by a giant serpent. This one will not be going to Venice. Leigh's work is in demand worldwide, and the spoon woman was for Prospect New Orleans, a citywide exhibition that would open in January. (Venice will have a similar version, though without the snake.)

"It's entitled 'Sentinel (Mami Wata),' my interpretation of a West African water spirit, a deity who has destructive powers as well as creative-generative ones," Leigh explained. (A few days later, when there was a flood in the apartment she had rented in Philadelphia, she blamed it on the *mami wata*.) The Prospect New Orleans curators had wanted to install her sculpture on an empty pedestal in Lee Circle, where a statue of Robert E. Lee had once stood. Leigh had balked at that. "With all the furor about Confederate statues being pulled down, I saw that I was being

caught up in a big American problem that I hadn't planned on addressing," she told me. "I also realized that a sixty-five-foot pedestal with a sculpture on top of it was absolutely ridiculous." Her *mami wata* was installed at the base of the pedestal.

Leigh, who is fifty-four, has the calm, deep-seated confidence of someone who goes her own way. Her physical presence makes her down-to-earth manner seem regal. A tall, handsome woman with long, braided hair, she buys the ankle-length dresses she wears from Casey Casey, a shop in Paris whose owner, Gareth Casey, uses patterns that resemble those of French work dresses from previous centuries. "They're so well made, and they last forever," Leigh said. "My style is international auntie." Leigh didn't call herself an artist until 2001, when she was a single mother raising her daughter, Zenobia, in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, and for years after that she had to struggle with an art world that looked down on ceramics, her chosen medium, as a material for hobbyists or studio potters. Her boundless energy, superb craftsmanship, and expanding vision kept her going, and the breakthrough, when it came, was so decisive that an invitation to represent her country at the Biennale seemed foreordained.

Her bronze sculptures were cast from

clay models, which Leigh makes in a large room on the top floor of the Stratton studio, a century-old, three-story building with a rope-operated elevator. Leigh had used eleven thousand pounds of imported French clay to build the figures; after each was cast in bronze, the clay was recycled and used again. Throughout the casting process, Leigh has worked closely with Shane and Julia Stratton and their senior staffer, Pavel Efremoff, and a crew of four assistants, who make ceramic molds for each section of the sculpture, pour in the bronze,

weld the parts together, and do the chasing and finishing. "It's the same process that's been around for three thousand years," Julia said. "We're dinosaurs." The *D'mba* piece was so big—twenty-five feet high—that its top grazed the ceiling, so the Strattons had raised the roof and put in a four-sided skylight. The Strattons have worked with other well-known artists, including Matthew Barney and Hans Haacke, but for the past three years Leigh has been their main client. "Our preference for this time in our lives is to be Simone's backup singers," Shane told

me. "We love her, and we love her work."

Two nearly finished clay figures were in the big room when I was there, both of them realistic and more than twice life-size: a standing woman, nude and headless (the head would go on later), and a woman bent at the waist, with both arms extended outward. "Women washing clothes in a river became a typical postcard in Jamaica during the late nineteenth century," Leigh said. Leigh's parents are Jamaican, and she spent time there when she was a child. "I think there's a line going through this show



*Leigh in her Brooklyn studio. In demand worldwide, she will represent the United States at the Venice Biennale in April.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAYLEN DION

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Tomkins, Calvin. "Monumental." *The New Yorker*, March 28, 2022, pp. 46–55.

that's about the souvenir—the idea that we like to bring other worlds into our world. The souvenir is a seemingly harmless object that has actually proven to be quite devastating. This one is a very racist image.” The live model for the washerwoman and the standing woman was Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, a writer and teacher who is one of Leigh’s closest friends. “There are very few projects of mine that she hasn’t been involved in,” Leigh said. When Leigh was working on a video for a show she had at the Guggenheim Museum in 2019, she asked Rhodes-Pitts and several other friends to try to remember and assume positions they had been in when they gave birth. “Sharifa was just leaning against the wall, thinking, and that was the start of this sculpture,” Leigh said, referring to the headless woman. (“It was about me being completely into myself,” Rhodes-Pitts recalls.) Even without the head, the figure conveyed for me a sense of inward gazing. I asked Leigh if it was also a portrait—she had told me she never did portraits. She thought, and said, “Yes. I would describe it as a portrait, the first portrait I’ve ever done.”

Across the room, pinned to the wall, was an enlarged photographic image of an African American woman in a floral dress, sitting at a table on which there was a jug with a grotesque human face. Leigh explained that the photograph, taken in 1882, was a parody of Oscar Wilde, who had travelled throughout the United States on a lecture tour that year. His tour had given rise to dozens of newspaper and magazine cartoons and parodies of his flamboyant clothes, effeminate mannerisms, and poetic descriptions of the aesthetic movement in England. Some showed Wilde as a monkey, and in this image a photographer in Aiken, South Carolina, had depicted him as something that, in Aiken, could be considered even more insulting: a Black woman.

“What’s interesting is that this is the first known photograph of a face jug,” Leigh told me. In the U.S., pottery jugs with human faces (often caricatured) originated before the Civil War in the Edgefield District, in South Carolina, where they were made secretly by slaves,

for their own amusement, and then openly by freed workers after Emancipation. “We don’t know what they mean, but I think they are in the class of power objects in African art, objects that do things in the world,” Leigh said. “Anyway, I decided to reproduce this entire—tableau, shall we call it?—in ceramic for Venice, a 3-D version of a souvenir portrait that was done to mock Oscar Wilde. The funny thing is that it’s a stunningly beautiful photograph.”

Leigh recently staged a public burning of an eight-foot paper effigy of the Oscar Wilde woman. Two years earlier, she had been to the carnival in Martinique, where the climactic event is the ritual burning of an effigy of the Vaval, the carnival king, who also personifies the bad things that have happened during the past year. Leigh’s burning took place on a stretch of the waterfront near her studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and the effigy stood for racist images in general. In discussing the event with me before it happened, she saw connections to the controversy over pulling down monuments. In 2019, Leigh was invited to participate in a competition for a sculpture to replace the statue, in Central Park, of J. Marion Sims, a doctor who had made advances in gynecology by performing experimental operations on enslaved women. Her design won, but it was not used. Leigh says that she will never again have anything to do with commissioned public monuments. “I feel weird responding to questions of what a monument should be,” she said. “But if I had to offer something it would be this Vaval idea.”

When I talked with Leigh in Philadelphia, she hadn’t made a final decision on the works that will be in her Venice exhibition. She planned to include a number of her new clay pieces, in addition to the bronzes. “I’m still very much someone who works with clay,” she said. She and the Strattons had, in defiance of contemporary trends, returned the practice of clay-modelling for bronze to a handmade process. “Some works being made today are objects that were scanned electronically and then blown up and rendered in marble or whatever, and they often look kind of machined, like some-

thing from Disney,” Leigh said. “Shane and Julia suggested that I make mine to scale, in clay. Until I met them, I didn’t know I had that alternative, and it’s made a big difference. What I’m learning, getting better at, is how things look in bronze—things like drapery and clothes and shoes, how they translate.” Leigh is in control of the process from start to finish. She also pays for it. “If your gallery is paying, then they’re the client,” she says. “You’re not the client. I pay for everything myself so I can be free, and that’s better for everyone. That’s the difference between being successful when you’re fifty-four and when you’re twenty-nine. It’s worked very well for me.”

The Church of the Nazarene, founded in 1908 in Pilot Point, Texas, is one of the many evangelical orders that have taken root in Jamaica, where Gilbert Obadiah Leigh, Simone’s father, is from. Her mother, Claire, was born in New York but was sent to Jamaica in her early childhood. Both of them became Nazarene missionaries. Gilbert was a preacher, and was assigned to a Nazarene church in New Jersey, and then, a year later, to one in Chicago, and Simone, the youngest of their four children, was born there in 1967. “My father was extremely charismatic, a fire-and-brimstone preacher,” Leigh told me. “He’s ninety-three now, and he was preaching until he was eighty-five.” He was also ambitious. He formed his own corporation, and got grants from the government for his social projects—at one point he ran several day-care centers and a boys’ home. A street on the South Side of Chicago is named for Gilbert Leigh. The two older Leigh children, Stephanie and Steven, embraced the Nazarene faith without question, but the younger ones did not. Whitney, a lawyer, who is fifteen months older than Simone, circumvented the church’s ban on dancing, moviegoing, and other sinful pleasures by not letting his parents know that he engaged in them. “I could get away with things my sister couldn’t because I was a boy,” he told me. “But when we were little I didn’t have the crystalized resistance that Simone had. I didn’t confront our parents the way she did. Simone was always very inquisitive, and always very independent.”

Her independence led to frequent



punishments, with a belt or a switch. “I was definitely the most rebellious child in the family,” Simone confirmed. “When I was four or five, my parents told me I was going to die, and my body would wither away and my soul would go somewhere else, and I could not deal with the idea of my body withering away. I cried for a week. I did all the religious things. Before I was seventeen, I went to church more often than most people do in their entire lives. We had vacation Bible school, and Nazarene sleepaway camps, and I even taught Sunday school for a while. But I never became a believer.”

Their family life was far from austere. After a few years of living in the parsonage, Gilbert bought a large house in South Shore, a formerly white neighborhood near the University of Chicago. A few African American families had moved in during the nineteen-sixties, and the whites had taken flight. “I grew up in what could be called a mansion, near a golf course, two blocks from the lake,” Leigh said. Whitney Leigh added, “This was the same kind of neighborhood that Michelle Obama grew up in. There were houses by Frank Lloyd Wright in it. Our house had a walk-in wine cellar in the basement, which we used to store books.” Their mother wanted the children to absorb as much culture as possible. Leigh remembers going to André Watts concerts, and standing in line for five or six hours to see the Tutankhamun exhibit at the Field Museum. “We’d spend weekends at the conservatory, taking music lessons,” she said. “I became a serious piano player, and I also played a lot of tennis. At one point, very briefly, I was a ball girl for the U.S.T.A. For a Black person in the United States, the South Side of Chicago was a wonderful place to grow up.”

In the summer, the family sometimes visited Jamaica. When Simone was twelve, she went to her paternal grandmother’s funeral, and learned that she had a Chinese ancestor, most likely one of the many Asians brought to Jamaica as indentured servants. “My father changed the spelling of our name, from Lee to Leigh, when he immigrated to America,” she said.

The Nazarene Church condemned many aspects of secular life, but Leigh’s parents believed in education. Three of the Leigh children attended Kenwood

High, a strong public school in Hyde Park, and all of them excelled. Stephanie and Steven went on to a Nazarene college in rural Illinois. Whitney, who spent high-school summers studying Russian, had pushed his independence too far. In his last year of middle school, he skipped classes for two days to visit a girlfriend, and his parents found out. They took him out of that school, and instead of going to Kenwood he was sent to a Catholic high school, and then to a small Christian college in Michigan. After that, he persuaded his parents to let him go to Stanford Law School. He became a lawyer, founded his own firm in San Francisco, and lived there, far from the family, until this year, when he moved to New York to help Simone care for their aging mother.

Simone’s escape was more traumatic. After graduating from Kenwood, she enrolled at Earlham College, a Quaker school in Richmond, Indiana. She had convinced her parents that it was a Christian college, but, once there, she “just let go of the whole belief system” that she had struggled with since early childhood. Earlham “really saved me,” she said. “Quakers believe that God is in everyone, and they respect people so much. It was ideal for me to be in the Quaker environment at that time.” Her newfound peace was short-lived. During the winter of her sophomore year, her

mother learned that Leigh was having a sexual relationship with her first serious boyfriend. “My father hired a private investigator,” she said. “He called my boyfriend’s parents and threatened to bring charges of statutory rape. He said I had to come home, and I didn’t.”

When she did go home, at the end of the spring term, her father gave her an ultimatum: she could go to a Christian college in Chicago and live at home, or she could leave. That night, she woke up and found her mother and her older sister praying over her. Leigh, who was nineteen, packed her things in a green canvas bag and left, and her parents stopped supporting her. “They cut me off,” she said. “I barely talked with them for ten years.”

She returned to Richmond, and took a leave of absence from Earlham. “I worked at the state hospital, as a licensed practical nurse, until I got legal independence from my father and could fill out my own tax returns and get student loans,” she said. After six months, she was able to continue her studies at Earlham, where she followed a full liberal-arts curriculum. She had planned to become a social worker—the school was known for its social-justice department—but two of her teachers, Kate Wininger and Michael Thiedeman, changed her thinking. Wininger taught a course on Women in Philosophy. “That

course energized Simone to speak and participate,” Winger told me. “I thought she was a really powerful person, with a great willingness to listen. Simone was popular, but not with everyone. People who are more reticent don’t like it when you take up space. Thirty years later, I remember how she really stood out.”

Leigh’s interest in philosophy was motivated in no small part by her rejection of the harsh Nazarene morality. “Fundamentalists Christians of the variety that I was associated with don’t really respect other human beings, especially non-Christians,” she told me, in one of our conversations. “They are in the world but not of the world.” Earlham opened up new worlds and different cultures. The school had a department of Japanese studies. Leigh took courses in Japanese history, literature, calligraphy, and painting, and saw many Japanese films. Reading Edward Said’s “Orientalism,” she said to herself, “Oh, wow, that’s happening right here in this college. The Western world eats other cultures—takes from the culture and denigrates it at the same time, and it becomes part of their culture.” Winger introduced her to the writings of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and other post-structuralist French feminists, and to the second generation of American feminists, who argued for a less militant and more inclusive stance. “A lot of American feminism then was: Become a man,” Winger said. “Become the rational being that you know you can be. But the Frenchwomen were saying no, men are truncated.” Leigh found all this liberating. She would eventually come to see her own work as being addressed primarily to Black women, who so often found themselves held back not just by white supremacy but by the political and social focus on the Black male.

Michael Thiedeman introduced her to working with clay. Thiedeman was well known in the pottery world. He had studied for two years with an American master potter, Warren MacKenzie, whose teacher had been the great English ceramic artist and scholar Bernard Leach. Thiedeman had a deep knowledge of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean pottery; he liked to say that he was essentially “a refugee from a different century.” Leigh had taken a ceramics class in high school, but it hadn’t caught her interest. In Thiedeman’s beginners’ class,

the attraction was immediate. She had no interest in learning how to use the potter’s wheel. “I was working with her on a simple coil pot, and *bang!* It took,” Thiedeman told me. “From then on, my work was Simone. Simone was a blessing. She was so full of life, full of spirit, full of humor. She discovered who she was and where she was headed—she was always going to make sculptures, not utilitarian vessels. I encouraged her to apply for a summer internship at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. She got it, and for two months she was surrounded by African vessels—great, voluminous forms, which I think were crucial to her development.” (Leigh also read Sylvia Leith-Ross’s book “Nigerian Pottery,” which made a deep impression.) “She was a wonderful student, and a truly remarkable human being,”

Thiedeman said. Oddly, Leigh never thought about becoming an artist. “I didn’t want to be poor,” she explained. “And it didn’t seem like art could bring me stability or a family or any of the things I wanted.” But she continued to work with clay and with Thiedeman. “I became an art major so I could have a studio,” she said.

Leigh graduated from Earlham in 1990 and moved to New York, where she lived at first with a friend in Harlem, and got a job at a ceramics-supply store in Greenwich Village. The store had a studio in the basement, and in the evenings she was able to continue working on the large terra-cotta water pots that she had been making at Earlham. “For ten years, I was obsessed with these water pots,” she told me. “It was a kind of perfect form, and it was something

women had been making all over the world for centuries, this anonymous labor of women.” She loved working with clay—the warm feel of it, and the excitement of the firings. By this time, Leigh had read “A Potter’s Book,” “The Unknown Craftsman,” and other classic texts on ceramics, and she knew that pottery could be a way of life. “Things weren’t working out in New York, though,” she said. “I didn’t get a great internship, or into a graduate school.”

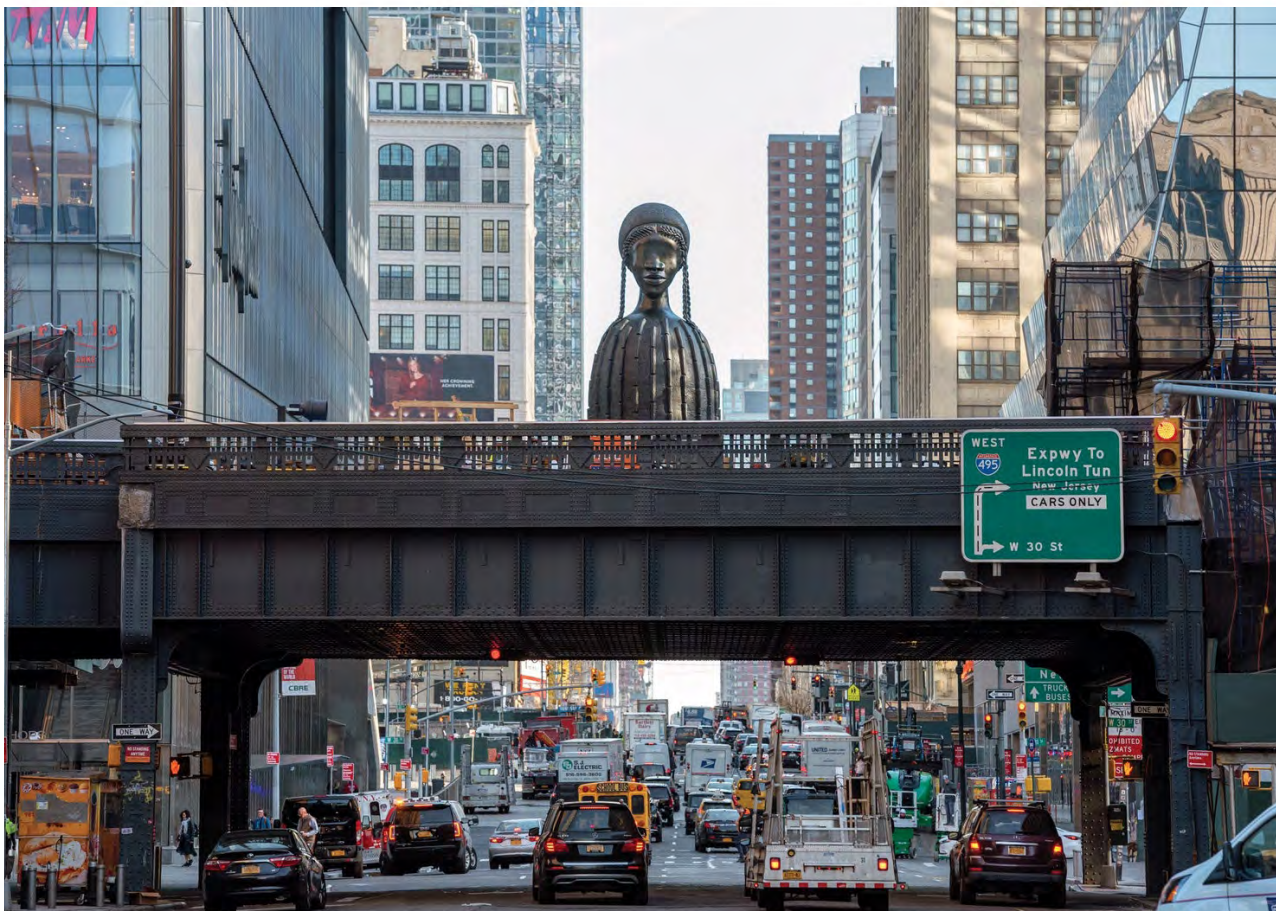
In 1992, she went to live in a yurt near Charlottesville, Virginia, where a group of white bohemians had established a commune. “There were people who described themselves as Sufis, and people who taught the Japanese tea ceremony, and others who were living out all kinds of utopian fantasies,” she recalled. There was also a group of would-be ceramic

artists, who fired their work in a Japanese-style anagama kiln. It was her first experience with American studio pottery, an informal brotherhood of amateur and professional craftspeople who worked outside the commercial marketplace. “I’d thought I just wanted to live in the woods and make objects,” Leigh said. “But I had entered an environment with a lot of bitter and angry people, people who had expected to eke out a nice living, and it didn’t happen. The others were all making functional pottery. I really enjoy and appreciate the craftsmanship of many American studio potters, but I think it’s a sort of failed utopia. Quakerism is another. I guess the biggest failed utopia right now would be America. At any rate, I’ve never been interested in purely functional pots. I’ve never made one mug. The water pot that I would spend

an entire week building made no sense in that context. And I didn’t realize how much I would miss the city, and how alienating it would be to live in the country. I learned that I can’t exist outside a Black community.”

Leigh went back to New York in 1993. She shared an apartment in Williamsburg with a professional photographer named Yuri Marder, whom she didn’t know, and supported herself with a succession of temporary jobs. Estranged from everyone in her family except her brother Whitney, she said, “I was poor all the time. There were periods when I didn’t have any money at all.” For several months, she made and fired yellow, green, and blue stoneware tiles for two Brooklyn subway stations, Prospect Park and Parkside, which were being renovated, and she taught art to very young children. Somehow she managed to find studio spaces where she used her free time to work with clay. “It’s strange, because I had a kind of confidence that I was making important work,” she told me. Now and then, someone would buy one of her big water-pot sculptures, but she was pretty sure the pottery world would never accept her work, and several people had assured her that, in the art world, ceramic sculpture was not considered art. Eventually, she thought, she would save enough money to move to San Francisco, where Whitney lived. “But then I married my roommate in Williamsburg,” she said, and burst out laughing.

Marder, four years older than Leigh, was the son of an Austrian refugee from Hitler who had become an English professor, and an American-born opera singer whose parents were from Poland. He and Simone were married in 1994, at the Marders’ summer house on Monhegan Island, in Maine. Leigh’s sister Stephanie and her brother Whitney came to the wedding, and so did her father. Simone hadn’t seen him for years, and he had not been invited. He came alone. Gilbert and Claire were separated by then—they never divorced, but Claire had left the house in Chicago and moved to Harlem. Gilbert made a good impression. “I was really amazed that he came, and after that we started having a relationship again,” Simone said. It was not a reconciliation. They rarely see each other. She has become closer to her mother, who lives in



*Leigh's sculpture "Brick House" (2019), on the High Line. The sixteen-foot bust of a woman was her first work in bronze.*

a house in Brooklyn that Leigh bought for her, two blocks from her own. Both of her parents are ill, and I was unable to interview them for this Profile.

Zenobia was born in 1996, and for the next five years Leigh was a full-time mother. She stopped going to her studio. This self-imposed hiatus may have put a strain on the marriage, and it ended when the marriage ended, in 2001. Simone and Zenobia had to leave the Brooklyn brownstone where they had been living, and they moved into a two-thousand-square-foot loft in Crown Heights, near the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. It was a beautiful, open space, with skylights and plenty of room to work. "She behaved as though we had money before we had money," Zenobia, who is a graduate student at U.C.L.A., recalled. Leigh poured her energy into making clay objects in a variety of mostly abstract shapes. "I started creating materials for sculptures—for example, the thousands of small rosettes that I'd later use to build larger objects," she said. "I also began using chicken wire and metal ar-

matures to hold things together, and hanging pieces from the ceiling." When she had enough work to fill a kiln, she would pile it into her vintage Volvo station wagon and take it to be fired at one of various kilns around the city.

Her friend A. O. Scott, a freelance journalist at the time and now a film reviewer for the *Times*, described some of her new work as "large vessels in sort of breast forms." Scott and Leigh had met a few years earlier, pushing their babies' prams in Prospect Park; his son, Ezra, and Zenobia were the same age, and they are still close. Scott was struck by Leigh's self-confidence. "I really felt she was doing something that could turn out to be major," he told me. Leigh was coming into her own then as a social energizer. Remembering the gatherings in her loft, Scott said, "There would be maybe a dozen people, kids and grownups, artist friends of hers like Wangechi Mutu, but also her own mother, and the director of the nursery school where Zenobia had gone. She was a magnet for remarkably interesting academics, film-

makers, radical feminists. Simone can be a bit overwhelming—calling you at six-thirty in the morning to talk at length—but that's the flip side of her greatness."

Zenobia's master's degree at U.C.L.A. is in sculpture. "I wasn't overjoyed when I realized that she was going to be an artist, but there it is," Leigh told me. Zenobia had seen how difficult an artist's life could be: "I watched my mom struggle for a long time when her work wasn't being recognized. As a young child, I didn't understand why she was so exhausted and physically unavailable to me. She was working a full-time job, taking me back and forth to school, doing residencies, and trying to have a studio practice." The full-time job was teaching art at Studio in a School and other early-childhood programs in the city. "I loved, loved, loved teaching art to children," Leigh told me. "They're wonderful artists, and they don't need outside approval." She had also discovered "the divorced woman's dirty secret"—built-in child care. Zenobia spent weekends and summers with her father, and that

meant hours of uninterrupted work time.

Leigh had finally realized that she was an artist. She had her first show in 2001, at the Rush Arts Gallery, on West Twenty-sixth Street, where Derrick Adams was the curatorial director. It opened in September, shortly after 9/11, and Leigh will tell you that no one ever came, but a few people did. One of them was the collector A. C. Hudgins. He didn't buy anything, but he remembers seeing a hanging, chandelier-like clay sculpture. What struck him about Leigh's work was the presence of her hand in it. "She wasn't just taking some image and popping it into the computer," he told me. "It's all about the hand." Hudgins became a mentor and one of Leigh's most important supporters over the years, along with Peggy Cooper Cafritz, the Washington collector and civil-rights activist, and the artist and writer Lorraine O'Grady. "Simone has nerves of steel," O'Grady told me. "She understood the situation of the culture and where it was headed before the culture itself knew."

Leigh's sculptures were in a solo show at Momenta Art, in Brooklyn, in 2004, and she was featured in several group exhibitions. She also began to get residencies—invitations to work in community spaces such as the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the Henry Street Settlement, where her work was seen by other artists and museum curators. In the summers, when Zenobia went to Monhegan Island with her father, Leigh travelled abroad. "That was a really big thing," she told me. "I went to South Africa and Nigeria in 2007, for three weeks. Each year after that, I'd go to a different country." In Namibia, she learned from descendants of the Herero people about the genocide that took place between 1904 and 1907, when the German colonial government responded to an uprising by starving thousands of people to death. Bisi Silva, a Nigerian-born curator who had returned from Europe to start a contemporary-art space in Lagos, became another of Leigh's mentors; she introduced her to many African curators and artists. "So I started having a different art career outside of the U.S.," Leigh said. At home, though, recognition still seemed far off and uncertain.

This began to change in 2010, when Leigh received a coveted residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. It included

an exhibition there, and Leigh's show impressed a number of art-world insiders. Derrick Adams included her in a group show that he was curating at the Jack Tilton Gallery, on East Seventy-sixth Street. Tilton and Leigh took an instant liking to each other. She joined his gallery, and had two very well-received shows there. For the first time, she was able to stop teaching and live on sales of her work. Leigh and Tilton went to jazz concerts and museums together, and had long, philosophical discussions about art. "He really understood how to work with artists—something he said he had learned from Betty Parsons," she told me. (Tilton had worked for the Betty Parsons Gallery, and Parsons had put him in charge of the gallery when she retired.) "I don't know how to explain it," Leigh added. "Jack was the kind of white person who doesn't change when Black people come into the room."

In 2012, a show at the Kitchen, a nonprofit alternative-art space in Chelsea, featured three large, hanging sculptures. Hudgins, making up for his earlier failure to buy a work, acquired a Leigh sculpture that was in the shape of a watermelon and covered in blue rosettes. Also on view was Leigh's first video, a five-minute, futuristic study of Uhura, the only Black character in the main cast of the original "Star Trek" series, which Leigh had watched as a child. (Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts was Uhura.) Leigh had always resisted working in any form except clay, but she enjoyed the collaborations with other people which video required. Encouraged by Rashida Bumbray, who had curated her show at the Kitchen, Leigh branched out into social practice, in 2014, with the "Free People's Medical Clinic," sponsored by the public-arts institution Creative Time, which turned the Stuyvesant Mansion, in Brooklyn, into a medical center offering free H.I.V. tests, health screenings, yoga lessons, and other benefits. (It was modelled on the Black Panthers' community actions.) In 2016, at the New Museum, she organized "The Waiting Room," another social initiative with guides to physical and spiritual health. "Even though many critics and artists think 'The Waiting Room' is my most important work, I see it as one of my failed projects," Leigh told me. "It didn't feel like it was my work. I'm uncomfortable calling something

my work that's out of my control. After that, I was really stubborn about doing anything besides making sculpture."

Two other shows in 2016, at the Tate Exchange in London and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, introduced her ceramic sculpture to a wider audience. Tilton had arranged for her to show at the Park Avenue Armory in New York, for which she made six small busts of imaginary women, with multicolored ceramic rosettes for hair; all of them sold at the preview. "There was something about them that stopped people in their tracks," Lauren Hudgins Shuman, A. C. Hudgins's daughter, recalled. Shuman worked for Jack Tilton, and to her the show was clearly "a turning point in terms of recognition." It was also Leigh's last show with Tilton. His gallery lacked the resources to handle Leigh's expanding career as a major artist, and Tilton was not well. After the Armory show closed, Leigh decided, with great reluctance, to leave the Tilton Gallery and move to Lühring Augustine, a larger gallery with a strong roster of artists. Breaking the news to Tilton, she said, was agonizing.

"Simone is never comfortable, and so her work never stops expanding and growing," Rashida Bumbray told me recently. (Bumbray is now the director of culture and art at the Open Society Foundations.) It would have been unthinkable for Leigh to repeat herself with more of the ceramic busts that had been such a success at the Park Avenue Armory. In 2018, she won the Hugo Boss Prize, and the following year she appeared in her first Whitney Biennial. She also began doing full-length sculptures of Black women. The figures are bare-breasted and seven or eight feet tall, and they wear voluminous hoop skirts made of raffia. A few of them have generic facial features; in others the eyes are missing, or the face is blank. One has what looks like a floral wreath where her face should be. ("I toggle back and forth between abstraction and figuration," Leigh told an interviewer.) "Only in retrospect did I see that this was a natural evolution of form, from the water pot to the full figure," Leigh told me.

In the spring of 2019, a sixteen-foot bronze bust of a Black woman appeared on the High Line in New York. Mounted

on a plinth, it was clearly visible to pedestrians and people in cars and taxis on Tenth Avenue, and its power caught and held their attention. Her hair was done in long braids, and her torso had an architectural dimension, which echoed the traditional building styles of the Mousgoum people of Cameroon. (Two years earlier, Leigh had been similarly inspired by dome-shaped, mud-and-raffia kitchen houses, called *imbas*, from Zimbabwe; she had built three of these structures for a show at Marcus Garvey Park, in Harlem.) Her monumental High Line sculpture was figurative and abstract, a mysterious and majestic goddess of Black womanhood.

Cecilia Alemani, the High Line's curator of art projects, had commissioned the piece in 2016. "I was very impressed by her work at the Kitchen show," Alemani told me. "It was definitely something unexpected compared to what was going on at the time, and I could see that with the right support she could push her practice to another level." The High Line gave Leigh a quarter of a million dollars to make the sculpture, and Alemani and her team introduced her to the Strattons. It was Leigh's first bronze sculpture. She made the full-scale clay model in the Stratton studio, and rented an apartment in Philadelphia so that she could be there for the casting, which took seven months. "Somehow my thirty years of working with clay had made me really good at clay modelling for bronze," she said. "I had no idea I would be so comfortable working at that scale."

"Brick House," the sculpture's title, came from a documentary film Leigh had seen about St. Louis, a city made largely of brick, but it also referred to an expression in Black culture. "If I called someone a brick house, any Black person would know what I was talking about," she explained. "It's a woman who's—I hesitate to use the word 'strong,' because of the stereotypes of Black women as towers of strength. It's about the idea of an ideal woman, but very different from the Western ideal woman, who is fragile. Unfortunately, I think people just related it to the song 'Brick House,' which was released by the Commodores in the nineteen-seventies." ("Ow, she's a brick house/She's mighty-mighty, just lettin' it all hang out.") Leigh now wishes she had called it something else,

even just "Untitled." But nothing could lessen the sculpture's impact as a work of public art. "The Strattons said something I thought was really significant," Leigh added. "They said that 'Brick House' was the first time in their career they had made a work that wasn't making fun of something else. It's not ironic, it's straightforward."

Leigh authorized three other castings of "Brick House." She owns one, and Glenn and Amanda Fuhrman, influential New York collectors, bought the two others—they kept the first and donated the second to the University of Pennsylvania, their alma mater, where it stands on ground level outside the arts building. Leigh took me there when I was in Philadelphia, so that I could see, as she put it, "how different it is when you can relate it to your own body, without the plinth." Cecilia Alemani is directing this year's Venice Biennale. She has arranged for "Brick House" to travel by boat to Venice, where it will occupy a prominent spot in her big international exhibition.

Leigh and I met again in July, at her waterfront studio in Red Hook. The studio is on the ground floor of a warehouse building that overlooks a large section of New York Harbor, including the Statue of Liberty. Leigh had moved into it a few months earlier, after a yearlong, million-dollar renovation that included a complex ventilation system for three kilns. Leigh, wearing a bright-orange,



ankle-length dress and white clogs, showed me around. "This is the big deal," she said, standing in front of a six-foot-high salt-and-soda kiln. "It's an atmospheric kiln—the closest that ceramics come to true alchemy. At the height of the firing, around two thousand and three hundred degrees, you introduce salt, which is dispersed throughout the atmosphere of the kiln and combines with the silica in the clay to create a unique kind of glaze. You change the object by changing the atmo-

sphere. The results are often not what you'd expect. After thirty years, I still don't know exactly what's coming out of the kiln, and I love that. I lose between twenty-five and fifty per cent of what I build—things that don't make it through the firing." Two smaller kilns, one of which is about to be replaced by a state-of-the-art Blaauw model, from the Netherlands, occupy separate spaces in the studio. "We can experiment with temperatures and glazes. It's just endless play."

In the main workroom, a large, rectangular space with glass doors that lead to a promenade on the water, a studio assistant—one of six—was working on the raffia skirt of an eyeless woman. Five other female figures, finished or nearly finished, each one different, took up the rest of the space. All of them were leaving in a few days for Zurich, where Leigh's first exhibition with Hauser & Wirth, her new gallery, would open in September. Leigh had left Luhring Augustine in 2020. The gallery had done very well with her work, raising her prices significantly, getting her sculptures into museum collections, and connecting her with the David Kordansky gallery in Los Angeles, but Leigh had found that she disliked the complications of working with more than one dealer. Invitations to show her work were coming from a wide range of museums and galleries, and she had decided that she would be better off with one of the big international galleries like Hauser & Wirth, which has branches in all the major art centers and would assign one person to represent her.

The large sculptures in her Zurich show were priced at seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and they all sold in the first week. By then, though, Leigh had decided to leave Hauser & Wirth. "It's just not appropriate for me," she said. "It wasn't a good fit." Her second gallery change in less than two years drew notice inside and outside the art world. The story broke in *ArtNews* on October 29th, with statements of mutual love and respect from Leigh and from Hauser & Wirth, and the news was widely reported. In an Instagram post (now deleted) that went viral, a clip from the 2004 German film "Downfall," about Hitler's final days, which has been parodied repeatedly in recent years, was adapted to depict Iwan Wirth, the gal-

lery's co-founder, as the Führer, screaming imprecations at his cowed staff. ("We look like goddam idiots! . . . And don't fucking tell me she went to Pace!") Leigh weathered the brouhaha, with irritation and some amusement. A month later, after receiving offers from many top galleries, she joined Matthew Marks, whose roster includes Robert Gober, Jasper Johns, Vija Celmins, Katharina Fritsch, Martin Puryear, and Charles Ray. "I feel honored to be in that gallery," she told me, sounding not a bit demure.

Leigh's exhibition at the Venice Biennale was commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. Jill Medvedow, the institution's director, and Eva Respini, its chief curator, had conceived the show in 2019, as a mid-career retrospective, and it will be re-created as such, with additions and a catalogue (the first major one on her work), in 2023. For Venice, Leigh hired her own project manager, Susan Thompson, who speaks Italian fluently, and her own architect, Pierpaolo Martiradonna, who designed her Red Hook studio. Martiradonna reinforced the gallery floors so that they can support the large bronze sculptures, and carried out Leigh's request to give the somewhat prissy, faux-classical U.S. pavilion a thatched roof. (The costs were largely offset by major grants from the Mellon and Ford Foundations.) Leigh subsidized the making, with Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, of a poetic film about the ethnographic portrayal of ceramic work, which will be on view in one of the galleries. This was in keeping with what Zenobia describes as her mother's "Act like you've got it until you get it" approach to life.

Leigh, who admits to being "a little bit of a conference whore," and her friend Rashida Bumbray are currently organizing a meeting of Black women artists, writers, and academics, called "Loophole of Retreat," which will take place at the Biennale from October 8th to the 11th. It is a continuation of a gathering, with the same title, at the Guggenheim in 2019, the year Leigh had her show there. The title refers to an 1861 memoir called "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," by Harriet Jacobs, who spent seven years in a crawl space in her grandmother's attic (the "loophole of retreat"), hiding from her brutish owner. Leigh recruited the scholars Saidiya Hartman and Tina

Campt, both of whom she met at the Berlin Biennale in 2018, as curatorial advisers. "It will be an intellectual free-for-all," Leigh said, "part two of an ongoing project to create a place for Black women intellectuals. Saidiya said that the academy does not believe there is such a thing as a Black woman intellectual, and that struck me." Naomi Beckwith, the deputy director and chief curator of the Guggenheim Museum, talked to me recently about Leigh's unwavering focus on womanhood. "I think Simone is through and through a feminist," she said. "In form, in material, in subject, in objects, and even in her literary inspirations, she's always coming back to some kind of conceptual language around womanhood, and what that does in the framework of an American art history."

Unable to travel to Venice until recently, because of the pandemic, Leigh is looking forward to spending time there this spring. "I'm going to have my own water taxi," she said, laughing. For the past five years, Leigh told me, she has been running to catch up with her career. We were talking on Zoom last month, and she was in a reflective mood. "I feel like I'm moving into a different phase of my life," she said. "I'm

going to slow things down. I could have twenty people working for me and make three times as much work as I make now, but there's no way I could supervise or have my hand in everything, or have relationships with all those people."

Her success still surprises her. She now lives in a brownstone in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, a house that is not unlike the one she grew up in. ("I don't think it would be incorrect to call it a mansion.") Recently, she acquired a goldendoodle named Margot, whom she adores. I asked her if she ever thought about getting married again. Leigh said no, then reconsidered. "I'm just getting to think about it, now that my daughter is in college and out of the house," she said. "I've had a lot of lovers, but no serious partner." And then, her confidence resurgent: "I probably will find someone soon."

When I first met her, Leigh had said, "It looks like I may not suffer the fate of most of my forebears, who have ten years of success and then they're forgotten." After a pause, she added, "Maybe that's not going to happen to me. I feel like I'm in my prime, so far as work is concerned. I've had thirty years to make a ton of mistakes. Now I feel ready, and for some reason I'm not intimidated." ♦

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# Art in America



## THE PRIVACY TO HEAL

Why Simone Leigh pivoted from creating enigmatic clinics for Black women to sculpting commanding figures honoring African craft.

By *Cyrée Jarelle Johnson*



**“MYSTERY,” “RIDDLE,” AND “SECRET” ARE WORDS** found in much of the writing about Simone Leigh. Not only do they aptly characterize her majestic, figurative sculptures with eyeless faces, they especially suit *Free People’s Medical Clinic* (2014) and its progeny, *The Waiting Room* (2016). Both presented in New York, these were experience-based social practice works, in which various healing justice practitioners – nurses, herbalists, yoga instructors, and others – provided free services, often directed specifically toward Black women. Even if photos could do them justice, few can be found online. Adding to the enigma, my requests for images from Stuyvesant Mansion, once the home of Josephine English, the first Black gynecologist in the state of New York, and the site where *Free People’s Medical Clinic* was originally staged, went unanswered, as did requests for comment from several people and organizations involved in the show’s planning, execution, and documentation.

Eventually, after many attempts to contact anyone qualified to speak about either exhibition, it became clear that this privacy is essential to the preservation of the work. The silence around Leigh’s projects is a deliberate choice. Privacy and dignity are key concerns when it comes to the health and safety of Black people; they can be a matter of life or death. To keep vital healing modalities alive, be they traditions of medical herbalism or corps of Black nurses organizing care for elderly and sick people, they must be kept secret, or they risk being destroyed. That is, if the two precedents to which Leigh repeatedly refers are any indication. She frequently invokes the United Order of Tents, a secret society for Black women medical professionals that was founded in Virginia in 1867 and continues today. The Order maintains both its roster and healing practices for members only. A volunteer-run Black Panther initiative is the source of Leigh’s 2014 title, *Free People’s Medical Clinic*. From 1968–75, the Party’s clinics were frequent targets of police raids and building evictions.

The bulk of available photo documentation focuses on the healing service providers who participated in *Free People’s Medical Clinic*, a Creative Time commission that operated for one month at the Brooklyn mansion. The providers included yoga and Pilates instructors, herbalists, nurses, and individuals trained to help participants navigate the Affordable Care Act. They were dressed in uniforms that resemble those worn by members of the United Order of Tents. In Creative Time’s introduction to *Free People’s Medical Clinic*, such providers are cast as the impetus for the work, and the clinic is called “a temporary space that explores the beauty, dignity and power of black nurses and doctors, whose work is often hidden from view.”

**BLACK HEALTH SEEMS DOOMED TO BE PULLED** between poles of spectacle and invisibility. *The Waiting Room*, which took a format similar to that of the 2014 work, was installed at the New Museum and at times included events open exclusively to Black women. The work’s title refers to the death of Esmin Elizabeth

Green, a Jamaican woman who died in 2008 after being neglected for a full day in the waiting room of Kings County Hospital Center in Brooklyn, where she sought psychiatric care. Her body lay for more than an hour on the floor where she collapsed, publicly visible and captured on the hospital's camera system; a staffer, perhaps to confirm she was dead, kicked her body. The video still exists online.

But the work is not a response to Green's death alone, as her story is no anomaly. Barbara Dawson died in 2015, also of a pulmonary embolism for which she was not treated. Instead of being neglected, she was arrested while seeking care that she hoped would save her life. When the doctors could not find the clot of which she complained, she was taken for a liar. When she insisted that she knew her body best, that she had a right to live, pleading "please don't let me die," care was not rendered; instead, the police were notified. "Either walk out of the hospital peacefully or I can take you out," a cop demanded, relenting only when she became unresponsive.

This is what can happen when Black women and gender minorities seek health care in a field whose history is deeply entwined with oppression. Consider the origins of American gynecology itself, which relied on enslaved Black women as public test subjects in operating theaters and on plantations throughout the United States. Dr. J. Marion Sims, considered "the father of modern gynecology," received plaudits and statues for his deeds. So it's no small choice to hold *Free People's Medical Clinic* in the former home of Josephine English, who delivered the six children of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (once known as Malcolm X) and Betty Shabazz.

These are also precisely the conditions that inspired the Black Panther Party to create its Peoples' Free Medical Clinics. There's an astonishing symmetry between Leigh's two projects and their less artistically focused antecedents. The HIV screenings held within the installations rhyme with the Party's sickle cell anemia testing. Like the Party's clinics, *Free People's Medical Clinic* and *The Waiting Room* were staffed by volunteers. For the Black Panther Party, these volunteer professionals included physicians, pharmacists, lab technicians, medical students, and members of the National Black Nurses Association. Leigh hosted more esoteric wellness professionals alongside these traditional medical providers, including Karen Rose, a celebrated herbalist and owner of Sacred Vibes Apothecary in Prospect Park.

Leigh's art exhibition focused on healing justice was temporary; it served to encourage work in the world rather than solve a systemic problem. While the Order remains in secrecy and the Panthers' free clinics were destroyed, Leigh was able to create a model for healing justice in the space of the museum, receiving deserved praise instead of attacks.

**IT'S TOO EASY, THOUGH, TO THINK OF THE Panthers' approach to healing justice as inherently radical and Leigh's as only working within the framework of the capitalist art world. To do this neglects the historical necessity of sneaking pleasure**

Previous spread:  
Simone Leigh, *Brick House*, 2019, bronze, 196 by 114 inches.

Black Panther Party nurse administering sickle cell test in Boston, 1971.

Black Panther Party nurse administering blood test in New York, 1971.

and breathing room under the nose of an oppressor. As a former organizer, I've seen resilience-based actions, such as community gardening and wellness, demeaned to lift up protests and other direct approaches to insurrection. But where do we fill our cup, where do we go to imagine what's possible when we are done fighting, and what's on the other side of the movement if it succeeds? These are questions that art can help answer, because it seeks possibilities in the face of current conditions.

Leigh's projects presented an alternative to the Western biomedical understanding of health—a realm where Black women are believed when they talk about their bodies and needs, where their decisions are the final word about which healing practices suit them, and where they are no longer punished for failing to comply. Care sessions were interspersed with lectures, public workshops, and the procession of at least 100 Black women artists. Both exhibitions were positioned as a "DIY model for spiritual and physical wellbeing,"



Previous spread: Photo Timothy Schenck/Simone Leigh/Courtesy the artist and High Line; This page, from top: Courtesy It's About Time Archive



Left: View of Free People's Medical Clinic, 2014, at Weeksville Heritage Center, Brooklyn.

Below, left: View of Free People's Medical Clinic, 2014, at Weeksville Heritage Center, Brooklyn.

as curator and writer Jared Quinton phrased it on Artsy. Unless these alternative approaches to spiritual, physical, and emotional wellness exist alongside Western biomedicine, Black people cannot thrive.

*Free People's Medical Clinic* and *The Waiting Room* both reflect lineages of healing resistance, and reintroduce those modalities to communities in need of that historical knowledge. This is essential, as we are often isolated from our ancestral forms of healing, including forms of herbalism traditional to West Africa, movement practices lost to the Middle Passage, and other forms of physical and emotional resilience-building that sustained us prior to and throughout enslavement. Drawing from older traditions of African and African-diasporic modes of creation and healing, these works succeed in showing the through line between what has already been built and what is yet to be.

*Free People's Medical Clinic* brought an end to Leigh's clinic-based work. The artist was born in Chicago to Jamaican immigrants in 1967, studied feminist and postcolonial theory at Earlham College in Indiana, and taught herself ceramics. Following these installations, she pivoted to figurative sculptures. In April 2019, Leigh told Elizabeth Karp-Evans at *Cultured* magazine that she "will not create social practice works anymore, at least not any more public-facing works," as too much of it was 'out of [her] control.'" Although Leigh didn't go into specifics, there's something to be said about how turning Black healing into an artwork could result in hollow voyeurism. By providing healing to communities in need but limiting who could view the documentation – and, at times visit the installation/performance – Leigh managed to strike a delicate



balance by making sure Black healing practices didn't get overlooked or forgotten, while also refusing to allow them to be turned into spectacles.

**LEIGH'S MONUMENTAL SCULPTURES ARE MUCH** more visible – one has been displayed on Manhattan's High Line, and in 2022, a number of them will appear at the Venice Biennale, where Leigh will be the first Black woman to stage a solo exhibition in the US pavilion there. But they are also more enigmatic than the clinic-based projects. They suggest the maturation of her strategy of refusal and concealment. Many stand like watchful deities, and sometimes feature a



At top: View of "Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room / Teen Apprentice," 2016, at the New Museum, New York.

Above: View of "Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room / Herbs for Energy and Pleasure with Karen Rose," 2016, at the New Museum, New York.

melding of Black women's forms with various objects. In an essay accompanying Leigh's 2019 Guggenheim Museum exhibition in New York — she was also the first Black woman to receive the institution's Hugo Boss award — writer Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts contemplates one of the prominent mysteries of the artist's work: why the figures have no eyes. "Perhaps through their unseeing eyes we may comprehend the riddle of private and public and publics winding across Leigh's multiple arenas of engagement," she offers. "Perhaps it's a riddle Leigh answers as easily as she sometimes offers an entry and elsewhere seals it up." Whether invoking craft traditions or healing practices, Leigh has long been interested in honoring Black culture without allowing it to be subsumed by the white-dominated art world.

The sculptures not only center Black women, but

engage them as the most relevant interlocutors for her art. "Black women are my primary audience," the artist wrote in a viral 2019 Instagram caption addressing white art critics' assertion that her sculptures in the Whitney Biennial were insufficiently radical. *Sentinel IV* (2020) is a sleek, towering female figure, breasts pointing out like small arms to either side, with a mesmerizing concave head. The figure draws its form from ceremonial wooden ladles of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dan communities of Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, where oversize figurative spoons were presented to women as tokens of gratitude. The work's placement in the recent New Museum show "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America" — adjacent to Kerry James Marshall's *Souvenir IV* (1998), which features a figure similar to *Sentinel IV* on display in a living room — is a testament to the timelessness of Leigh's work.

Leigh's collaborative practice is often intergenerational. Not only does she spotlight ancestral knowledge, she also incorporates many genres of Black women's art. As part of *The Waiting Room*, she founded and coordinated Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter, that previously mentioned procession of more than 100 artists, all of whom responded to a call from the Movement for Black Lives. The "women filled the institution from white wall to white wall with performances, workshops, videos, chants, a text collage, a digital altar," Jillian Steinhauer reported for *Hyperallergic*. "The space swelled with an unapologetically empowering celebration of Black women[']s . . . lives. It was unlike anything I've ever seen in a museum."

THROUGHOUT THE PAST YEAR, THERE SEEMED to be no alternative to the medical industrial complex that experiments on us, incarcerates us when we seek care, and leaves us to die in emergency rooms. That the disposition of the US medical profession has changed so little in the intervening half-century since the Panther clinics confirms the necessity and inherent radicality of *Free People's Medical Clinic* and *The Waiting Room*. Black people were two times more likely to die of Covid-19 than white people, and were far more likely to bear the most harrowing consequences of the infection despite not being the race most likely to contract it. The alternatives imagined by *The Waiting Room* and *Free People's Medical Clinic* seemed as urgent as ever. So why terminate such a vision of possible futures?

Leigh never wanted the works to be "heroic," she told William J. Simmons in *Interview*. She didn't think that they could save anyone. "My project was to expose an arena of expertise, a gold mine of knowledge that we have ignored, or even that we don't know exists," she explained. "I did not intend to set up a mock NGO pretending to rescue Black people from some abject situation. I'm tiring of having to talk about that post-colonial fantasy. This insistence on focusing on this same savior narrative is so perverse." The world-building of these two shows was not meant to last forever, but here we are, seven years on, returning to these models as proof of concept.

Inside the purple covers of *Waiting Room Magazine*,



the companion text to the 2016 installation, there's an archival advertisement that reads: THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY ANNOUNCES THE GRAND OPENING OF THE BOBBY SEALE PEOPLES' FREE HEALTH CLINIC. SERVING THE PEOPLE BODY AND SOUL. The magazine, which was impeccably bound by Zimbabwean designer Nontsikelelo Mutiti, was filled with Black medical ephemera ranging from an article by writer A. Naomi Jackson to the memoirs of a nurse who served during the American Civil War. It's not easy to find a copy now that the show is over, which could be said for almost any exhibition catalogue. Those who attended the exhibitions will be able to refer to the text; those who weren't will likely never see what it holds. Here again, the privacy embedded even in Leigh's public-facing work is deliberate and carefully negotiated.

Yet her demand for privacy is paradoxically emphatic—public, even, and her model contains a multitude of possibilities for Black artists prioritizing their own wellness. It rings in the message of artist Tricia Hersey's project *The Nap Ministry*, which bears

View of "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America," 2021, at the New Museum, New York.

the slogan OUR REST IS RESISTANCE, and lives in Naomi Osaka's refusal to participate in a press conference while her mental health suffered. This demand for privacy to create, heal, and truly live is a stance of protection—one that must be carved out and fiercely protected.

The energy preserved by this carving is among its rewards. In 2018, Black women activists pushed a Central Park statue of J. Marion Sims from its plinth. Meanwhile, Simone Leigh's statues continue to rise around the world. ●

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#### ON THE CALENDAR

Simone Leigh at Hauser & Wirth, Zurich, Sept. 17–Dec. 4.

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# FRIEZE

## ‘Embodying Anew’ Is A Symphony of Black Subjectivity

At Maximillian William, a group show celebrates modernist sculpture bringing Simone Leigh and Magdalene Odundo’s anthropomorphic vessels together with Thaddeus Mosley’s Brancusian forms

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BY VANESSA PETERSON IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, UK REVIEWS | 24 JUN 21



In a 1993 essay for *Artforum*, scholar and critic bell hooks references Lorna Simpson’s photograph *Waterbearer* (1986) as an example of ‘subjugated knowledge’. In it, a woman, her face obscured, pours water onto the floor from two containers. Text at the bottom of the image reads: ‘They asked her to tell what happened / Only to discount her memory.’ Here, ‘subjugated knowledge’ describes the thoughts, feelings and labour of women – especially Black women. You hope the subject’s turned back is an act of defiance, that she is refusing to offer any more of herself.

Peterson, Vanessa. “‘Embodying Anew’ Is A Symphony of Black Subjectivity.” *Frieze*, June 24, 2021.



Magdalene Odundo, *Untitled*, 1984, burnished and carbonised terracotta, 32 × 20 cm.  
Courtesy: the artist and Maximilian William, London

The works in ‘Embodying Anew’ – a concise group show with the vitality and depth of a museum presentation – feel equally strong-willed. The exhibition brings together artworks by Simone Leigh, Thaddeus Mosley and Magdalene Odundo – artists who often have had to create in defiance of their craft and skill being discounted or pigeon-holed.

Three ceramic forms by Odundo serve to represent her 40-year career: her works feel like the beating heart of the show. Odundo graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1982 and travelled to Nigeria and Kenya to learn about various African pottery methods, including centuries-old techniques used by Gbari women in Nigeria. Clay isn’t thrown on a potter’s wheel; rather, it is painstakingly hand-coiled. The unglazed vessels are then fired at high temperatures, often more than once, which leads to a rich depth of colour: deep mahogany, shiny blacks, bronzes, rusts, striking terracottas.

Odundo’s sculptures contain anthropomorphic qualities, as though they follow the curves of a woman’s body. In a 2020 interview with J.W. Anderson, Odundo says that she thinks ‘very much of the body itself being a vessel, a shell or container’ and links this idea to the ways in which various African cultures believe bodies and

objects can contain the spirits of ancestors. These sentiments are echoed in Leigh's *Stretch (GREEN)* (2020), a towering, glazed sculpture of the face and neck of a Black woman, resplendent with an afro, and Mosley's *Repetitive Sentence* (2015), a gravity-defying form made from walnut wood.

In a 2019 interview with *The Art Newspaper*, Leigh says that her work has been a 'lifetime of critical inquiry' and of centring Black female subjectivity. Months later, in conversation with *The New York Times*, she references Odundo's practice as a key influence. Critical inquiry and Black subjectivity can be found in all three artists' practices. Mosley, still making work at the age of 94, is self-taught; he uses wood from felled trees in Pittsburgh as his primary medium, exploring plane and volume in a way that recalls Constantin Brâncuși. *Repetitive Sentence* is an example of what he calls 'animated sculpture' and is a testament to the artist's jazz sensibilities – it also feels like an ode to what has made and sustained him. Mosley grew up in a family of musicians; his friend, artist Sam Gilliam, refers to him as a 'jazz critic.' Experimenting with modernist frameworks of sculpture and breaking them apart, Mosley's work – which sits in conversation with that of artists such as Martin Puryear – tests the limits of physical possibility.



Simone Leigh, *Stretch (GREEN)*, 2020, stoneware and teadust glaze, 64 × 25 × 25 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Maximillian William, London



Thaddeus Mosley, *Repetitive Reference*, 2015, walnut, 224 × 132 × 66 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Maximillian William, London

Mosley and Leigh, who will be the first Black woman to represent the US at the Venice Biennale in 2022, have rarely shown in the UK; Odundo seldom exhibits in the US. (A recent Salon 94 show was her first in New York since 1991.) To bring the three together feels like a statement of intent. Separately, the artworks implore you to return to them time and again: to follow the way the light falls and bounces shadows across the gallery; to understand their anthropomorphic qualities; to imagine the lives, musical notes and histories rippling to the surface. Collectively, the show feels like the wildest kind of jazz: it is improvisation, syncopation, scholarship, care, attention, memory. Every artwork sings – in chorus, but also in powerful singularity.

*'Embodying Anew' at Maximillian William ended on 19 June.*

*Main image: 'Embodying Anew', 2021, installation view at Maximillian William, London. Courtesy: the artists and Maximillian William, London*

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# ARTnews

## How Simone Leigh's Sculptures Centering Black Women Brought Her to the Venice Biennale

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October 19, 2020



Simone Leigh. ©Simone Leigh/Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth/Shaniqua Jarvis

Last week, it was announced that Simone Leigh would make history at the Venice Biennale by representing the United States in 2022, making her the first Black woman ever to do the country's pavilion at the world's top art festival. "There's no better artist for our time," said Jill Medvedow, the director of the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, the museum commissioning the pavilion. What makes Leigh so important right now, and why has she risen to the status of the one of the top artists working today? Below is a guide to Leigh's art, her career, and the ideas that guide her work.



Simone Leigh, *Las Meninas*, 2019. ©Simone Leigh/Courtesy the artist and Cleveland Museum of Art/Farzad Owrang

### **Black female subjectivity forms the core of Leigh’s art.**

Leigh has been upfront about her work’s target audience: Black women, whose traditions, she once told the *New York Times*, “have been left out of the archive or left out of history.” She added, “I still think there is a lot to mine in terms of figuring out the survival tools these women have used to be so successful, despite being so compromised.”

Accordingly, whether her works take the form of monumental sculptures, performances, films, or pieces with an activist dimension, Black women have long been her protagonists. In her sculptures, which are arguably her most iconic works, the forms of Black women appear to meld with jugs and conical structures. But even when not outright depicting the Black female body, her sculptures often have corporeal qualities.



Simone Leigh's *Brick House* (2019) on the High Line in New York. *AP*

Cowrie shells have appeared frequently in her art—sometimes, they adorn her busts of Black women's heads; at times, she creates alluring blown-up forms evocative of them. Some scholars, including art historian Huey Copeland, have said that the shells are meant to have a vaginal look to them. Leigh once told the *Art Newspaper*, "I would describe the cowrie shell as a stand-in for the female body, or a body in general, or a representation of an absence as well as a presence."

To make those elegant sculptures based on the cowrie shells, Leigh casts molds of watermelons—a fruit that forms the basis for a racist stereotype about Black men and women. Leigh has also compared the negative associations of the watermelon to those historically levied against the Black body, which she once said is often considered "too large, overgrown, fat."

"As regards watermelon, Leigh's molds function as receptacles for transference, means of implanting knowledge of the fruit's racial and racist associations into her objects," curator Nicole J. Caruth has written. "In sculpting and building up the shapes, instilling in each her own views and aesthetics, they are totally transformed and offer up new frames of reference."

### **Leigh's sculptures have secrets.**

The women of Leigh’s sculptures tend to be missing features—they frequently have no ears, and their eyes are smoothed over. They are walled off from the viewer—maybe as a protective mechanism, maybe as an act of refusal. “Perhaps through their unseeing eyes we might comprehend the riddle of private and public and publics winding across Leigh’s multiple arenas of engagement,” the essayist Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts once wrote. “Perhaps it is a riddle Leigh answers as easily as she sometimes offers a entry and elsewhere seals it up.”

Leigh’s sculptures are mysterious—they seem to stonewall the viewer, though one gets the sense that the women she depicts contain deep psychologies that are only legible to some. The women’s quietude is a way of self-preservation, curator Helen Molesworth has written: “Her figures are not giving up their secrets. They are not there for the taking. They cannot be occupied, colonized, co-opted, or subjugated.”

But her figures conceal more than just their psychologies—they also allude to centuries of undertold histories of Black resistance against colonialism, racism, sexism, and white supremacy. Her art is often highly specific in its references, and it is the kind of work that rewards efforts on the part of the viewer to decode some of these allusions, which are often made obliquely. Many of her sculptures, for example, feature half-naked women whose torsos morph into conic forms. Back in 2015, Leigh said she based that form on Mammy’s Cupboard, a diner in Atlanta whose architecture resembles a skirt-wearing Black woman.

Although these allusions are implicit, Leigh believes her viewers need to interact with them. When Leigh showed her work at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, she hit back at white critics who claimed the exhibition—and her art—was not radical enough. If those critics were not familiar with the writings of Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, and Christina Sharpe; the history of colonialism and the Benin Bronzes; and the events that led up to the Herero Genocide in what is now Namibia, among other things, they were not equipped to converse with her art, she said in a widely discussed Instagram post. “And that,” she wrote, “is why, instead of mentioning these things, I have politely said black women are my primary audience.”



Simone Leigh, *107 (Face Jug Series)*, 2019. ©Simone Leigh/Farzad Owrang/Private Collection



Simone Leigh, *Free People's Medical Clinic*, 2014. ©Simone Leigh/©Creative Time/Courtesy the artist, Creative Time, and Weeksville Heritage Center

### **Care, healing, and self-preservation play a large role in her art.**

Leigh's most famous work, a 2014 project called *Free People's Medical Clinic*, started with a historical inquiry into the United Order of Tents, a secret society founded in 1867 by two former enslaved people that convenes Black women nurses and is still in operation. Organized by Creative Time, the project that grew out of it converted Brooklyn's Stuyvesant Mansion into a functioning medical center that offered free HIV tests, health screenings, yoga, and more to the surrounding community. It paid homage to Josephine English, the first Black ob-gyn in Brooklyn, who once worked at Stuyvesant Mansion, and to community-oriented endeavors launched by the Black Panthers. (The Asiko Art School, which is operated by the Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos without any government funding, was also an influence.)

*Free People's Medical Clinic* helped put Leigh on the map, and it has endured as one of Leigh's iconic works, even though it only exists now in the form of documentation. (The project is often classified as social practice, a kind of activist-oriented art reliant mainly on interactions, conversations, and exchanges instead of physical objects.) She later expanded on it for a project known as *The Waiting Room* (2016), and she has spoken about it as a form of health care that could be trusted by Black women, who have historically been disadvantaged by the current systems in the United States.

While much of her other work takes vastly different forms, the concepts that guide the project infiltrate her other pieces. "The general lack of empathy for black people is a factor in every aspect of



An event called “Afrocentering with Aimee Meredith Cox” held as part of Simone Leigh’s 2016 installation *The Waiting Room* at the New Museum in New York. ©Simone Leigh/Courtesy the artist and New Museum

interaction with medical providers,” she told *Art in America* in 2015. “It goes to the core of what is difficult to name and change in terms of structural racism and sexism.”

**Over the past decade, Leigh has become one of the most famous artists in the U.S.**

Born in 1967 in Chicago, Leigh got her bachelor’s degree in art and philosophy from Earlham College in Indiana. When she eventually came to New York, she started out creating ceramics for an architecture firm that was producing tiles for the city’s subway system.

Leigh’s artistic career got some of its earliest support when she participated in the Studio Museum in Harlem’s venerated artists-in-residence program in 2010 during her 40s. She was launched to more widespread fame when she staged *Free People’s Medical Clinic*, and the years that followed brought her bigger solo shows at institutions such as the New Museum in New York, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, as well as presentations held via the Studio Museum and Tate Modern in London.

As her work obtained greater visibility, she began picking up top awards, such as the Guggenheim Museum’s \$100,000 Hugo Boss Prize in 2018 and a \$50,000 United States Artists Fellowship in

Greenberger, Alex. “How Simone Leigh’s Sculptures Centering Black Women Brought Her to the Venice Biennale.” *ARTnews*, October 19, 2020.

2019. Last year, she appeared in the Whitney Biennial, and she is set to take part in the forthcoming edition of the Prospect New Orleans triennial, which was pushed from 2020 to 2021. In 2019, the same year a 16-foot-tall commission for the High Line art park in New York was unveiled, she joined Hauser & Wirth, one of the biggest galleries in the world. In 2023, she will have her first major museum survey at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston.

Her Venice Biennale pavilion is set to bring Leigh her greatest exposure to date, and she has greeted the news ecstatically. Last week, Leigh told the New York Times, “I feel like I’m a part of a larger group of artists and thinkers who have reached critical mass. And despite the really horrific climate that we’ve reached, it still doesn’t distract me from the fact of how amazing it is to be a Black artist right now.”



Simone Leigh, *Jug*, 2019. ©Simone Leigh/©Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation/Courtesy the artist and Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation/David Heald

Greenberger, Alex. “How Simone Leigh’s Sculptures Centering Black Women Brought Her to the Venice Biennale.” *ARTnews*, October 19, 2020.

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# BAZAAR<sup>Harper's</sup>

## Sculptor Simone Leigh Makes History as the First Black Woman to Represent U.S. at the Venice Biennale

"I also recognize that this is a time when black artists and intellectuals of the diaspora are flourishing and have reached critical mass," she said.

BY [ERICA GONZALES](#) / OCT 15 2020, 1:59 PM EDT

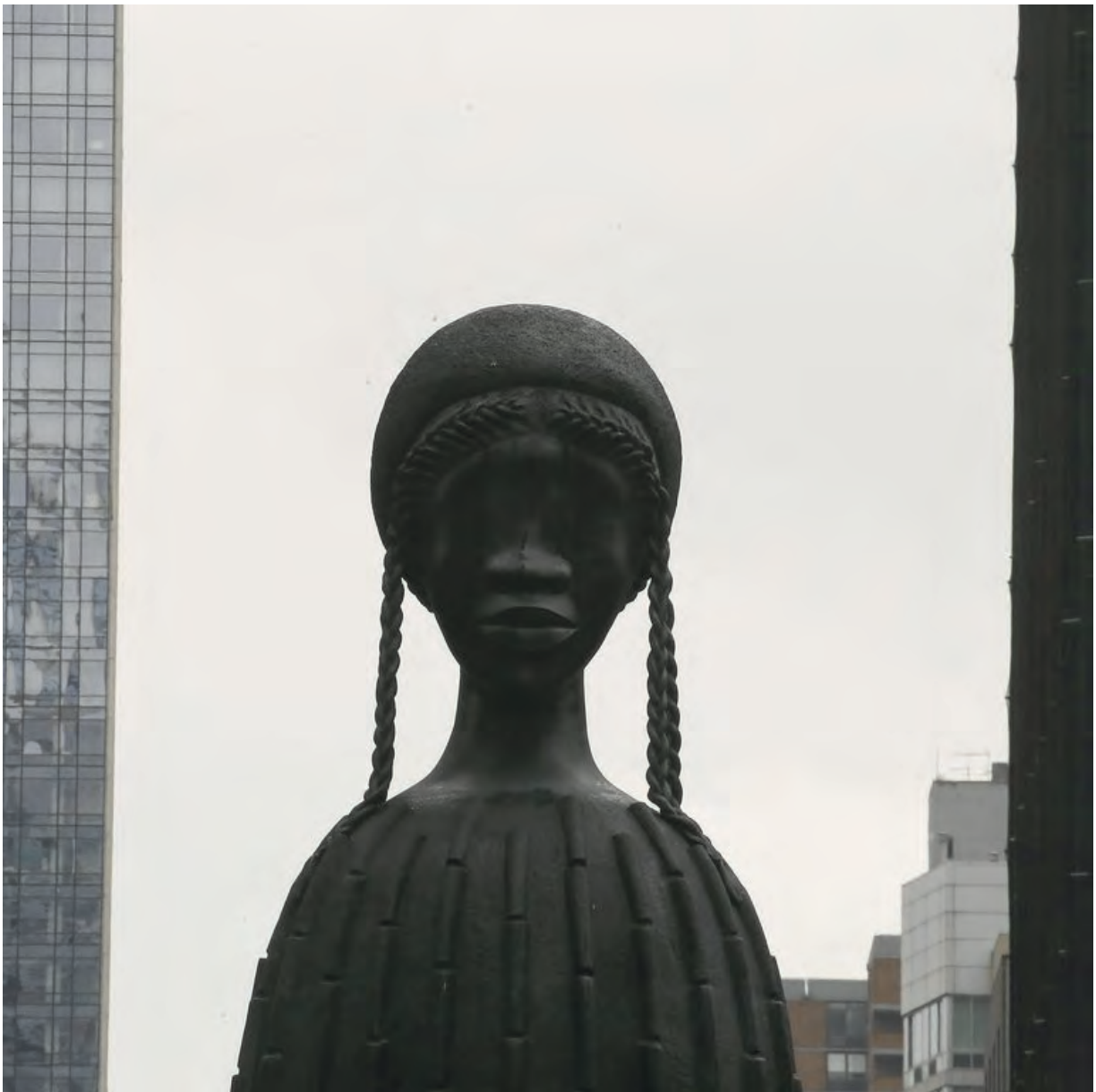


**S**culptor Simone Leigh has made history as the first Black woman chosen to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, one of the world's most prestigious art and culture events. The Brooklyn-based artist, renowned for her large-scale work celebrating Black women, will make her debut in 2022.

Gonzales, Erica. "Sculptor Simone Leigh Makes History as the First Black Woman to Represent U.S. at the Venice Biennale." *Harper's Bazaar*, October 15, 2020.

“I feel like I’m a part of a larger group of artists and thinkers who have reached critical mass,” Leigh told *The New York Times*. “And despite the really horrific climate that we’ve reached, it still doesn’t distract me from the fact of how amazing it is to be a Black artist right now.”

Leigh’s Venetian show, mostly composed of sculpture, “will engage the work of black feminist thinkers who have enlarged and transcended the limits of this democracy,” she explained on Instagram. The presentation will run from April 23 to November 27, 2022. It’s set to be her biggest show to date.



Leigh’s *Brick House* statue in New York City in May 2020.

JOHN LAMPARSKI GETTY IMAGES

Gonzales, Erica. “Sculptor Simone Leigh Makes History as the First Black Woman to Represent U.S. at the Venice Biennale.” *Harper’s Bazaar*, October 15, 2020.

Leigh's work for the Biennale will feature a series of new pieces and installations, including a monumental bronze sculpture in the outdoor forecourt of the venue's pavilion. She'll address "an 'incomplete archive' of Black feminist thought, with works inspired by leading Black intellectuals," Eva Respini, co-commissioner at the Biennale, said. "Her work insists on the centrality of Black female forms within the cultural sphere, and serves as a beacon in our moment."

On Instagram, Leigh further shared the significance of her milestone in the wake of a global reckoning on systemic racism and racial injustice. "To be the first Black American woman to occupy the American Pavilion for the 58th La Biennale di Venezia is a great honor," she wrote. "I acknowledge the paradox of my position during this time when the depth of white supremacy in America is in full view. I also recognize that this is a time when black artists and intellectuals of the diaspora are flourishing and have reached critical mass."



*Las Meninas*, 2019. Terracotta, steel, raffia, porcelain. © Simone Leigh. Courtesy of the artist and The Cleveland Museum of Art.

FARZAD OWRANG

Gonzales, Erica. "Sculptor Simone Leigh Makes History as the First Black Woman to Represent U.S. at the Venice Biennale." *Harper's Bazaar*, October 15, 2020.

Leigh was born in Chicago in 1967 and received her bachelor's degree in fine art in 1990 at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana. Throughout her decades-long career, she has worked with sculpture, video, and installation in pieces that explore the experiences of Black femmes, with styles and materials inspired by African art.

In 2018, Leigh won the esteemed Hugo Boss Prize, which came with a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim museum in New York City. She has also presented at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and earned a slot at the Whitney Biennial at New York's Whitney Museum in 2019.



*Jug*, 2019. Bronze. © Simone Leigh. © 2019 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Courtesy of the artist and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

Gonzales, Erica. "Sculptor Simone Leigh Makes History as the First Black Woman to Represent U.S. at the Venice Biennale." *Harper's Bazaar*, October 15, 2020.

# The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2020

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## At Venice Biennale, A First for the U.S.

Simone Leigh, who explores Black women's stories, will create an exhibition for 2022.

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

Simone Leigh, a Brooklyn-based sculptor whose large-scale works address the social histories and subjective expe-

riences of Black women, will represent the United States at the next Venice Biennale in April 2022. The first African-American woman to receive this honor, among the art world's most prestigious, Ms. Leigh was selected by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs on the recommendation of museum professionals and artists convened by the National Endowment for the Arts.

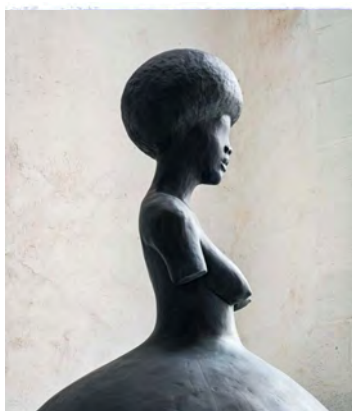
"I feel like I'm a part of a larger group of artists and thinkers who have reached critical mass," Ms Leigh, 52, said. "And despite the really horrific climate that we've reached, it still doesn't distract me from the fact of how amazing it is to be a Black artist right now."

The last two U.S. representatives to the Biennale — Martin Puryear, also a sculptor, in 2019, and Mark Bradford, a painter, in 2017 — are Black artists, as well. The next edition was originally scheduled for May 2021, but the pan-

demic forced it to be postponed a year.

Working primarily in ceramics, Ms. Leigh has long elevated the labor of Black women. She has fused representations of their bodies with vernacular architectural forms from Africa or utilitarian vessels such as jugs and pitchers, made and used throughout the African diaspora.

These distinctive figures, sometimes faceless and veering into abstraction, have been holding court in New York recently, from the 2019 Whitney Biennial to a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum after the artist won the institution's Hugo Boss Prize in 2018. Ms. Leigh's majestic 16-foot-tall bronze bust, titled "Brick House," gazing down Tenth Avenue from the High Line Plinth since 2019, celebrates Black female beauty and strength — not often commemorated in the public sphere. (The Kenyan-American artist Wangechi Mutu recently offered another alternative to monuments in her



SIMONE LEIGH AND THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION, DAVID HEALD



SIMONE LEIGH AND THE MENIL COLLECTION, IAN BRAEMER  
Top, "Jug," from 2019, bronze. Above, "No Face (House)" from 2020, made from terra-cotta, porcelain, India ink, epoxy and raffia.



SHANIQWA JARVIS, SIMONE LEIGH AND HAUSER & WIRTH

sculptures of female figures for the facade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

Ms. Leigh's exhibition at the U.S. Pavilion, a 1930s Palladian-style space with a rotunda and Doric columns, is co-commissioned by Jill Medvedow, director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, and its chief

curator, Eva Respini, who is also organizing the artist's first survey exhibition at the Boston museum in 2023.

Ms. Medvedow said she could not think of an artist better suited to representing the United States at this time. "The idea of Simone Leigh in Venice does disrupt the narrative of 400-plus years of

**Simone Leigh at Stratton Sculpture Studios in Philadelphia, where she fabricates and casts her large-scale bronzes and other works. Ms. Leigh was selected to represent the United States at the next Venice Biennale.**

American history,” she said. “Her sculptures are really commanding in the space they occupy. The scale and presence and magnificence of her figures are so demanding of visibility.”

The neoclassical building sits inside the Giardini, the Venice park that hosts the national pavilions. Ms. Leigh plans to do an outdoor monumental bronze statuary in the forecourt, framed by the building’s architectural colonnade, and a series of sculptures and installations throughout the five interior galleries. “It’s surprisingly similar to working in a space like the White House that just has many layers of meaning,” said Ms. Leigh, who anticipates using ceramic materials, raffia and steel in addition to bronze. “I am aware of those histories as I’m building the exhibition.”

She declined to go into greater detail on what she intends to do, given that the show is a year and a half away and may well change, other than to say it will be anchored by some texts on Black feminist theory, which is how she typically conceptualizes her exhibitions.

The “stiffness” of the U.S. Pavilion can be hard to manage, said Cecilia Alemani, director and chief curator of High Line Art, who commissioned Ms. Leigh’s “Brick House” and is serving as the artistic director of the international group exhibition in the 2022 Venice Biennale.

“On the High Line, Simone confronted the history of sculpture and monumentality,” said Ms. Alemani, noting that the artist chose the traditional technique of bronze figurative sculpture — the same medium as the

Confederate statues now being removed from public spaces — to present a symbol of something very different. “It’s a similar relationship with history when it comes to the American pavilion,” she continued. “Her challenge will be to turn that space upside down metaphorically with the stories that she’ll be able to tell through her artwork.”

In a partnership with Spelman College, the historically Black liberal arts college for women in Atlanta, the artist and the curators from the Institute of Contemporary Art will work directly with students on all aspects of the Venice commission as part of a training program for museum professionals and scholars. “It’s one of my favorite parts of the project,” said Ms. Leigh, who has often collaborated with communities of Black feminists in her own performances and video-based works.

“Given the Black female subjectivity of Simone’s topic,” Ms. Medvedow said, the Spelman partnership “felt like a tremendous opportunity and part of this overdue cultural shift about who needs to be represented and how we’re assigning representation in our field.”

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# ARTnews

## Sculptor Simone Leigh Picked to Represent United States at 2022 Venice Biennale

BY **ALEX GREENBERGER**

October 14, 2020 7:00am



Simone Leigh.

©SIMONE LEIGH/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH/SHANIQWA JARVIS

Greenberger, Alex. "Sculptor Simone Leigh Picked to Represent United States at 2022 Venice Biennale." *ARTnews*, October 14, 2020.

With her sedate, elegant sculptures enjoying increased visibility, Simone Leigh has been chosen to represent the United States at the 2022 edition of the Venice Biennale in Italy, the world's biggest art festival. The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston is commissioning the pavilion in the cooperation with the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, with ICA director Jill Medvedow and chief curator Eva Respini at the helm.

Leigh's Venice Biennale presentation, which will run from April 23 to November 27, 2022, will be followed by an ICA show in 2023. That exhibition—the New York-based artist's biggest survey show to date—will include her Biennale works.

“This is an area where the United States productively works with all other countries around the globe, and there's no better artist for our time,” Medvedow told *ARTnews*.

Leigh's Venice Biennale pavilion is set to include new sculptures by the artist, whose work centers Black women and draws on an array of crisscrossing historical strands and references. A monumental bronze sculpture will be situated outside the pavilion, and inside will be works made from raffia, ceramic, and bronze—materials that have become staples in Leigh's work.

As part of the Biennale project, Leigh is also working with Spelman College's Atlanta University Center Art History + Curatorial Studies Collective, which aims to cultivate curators and scholars with the hope of launching Black professionals into an institutional pipeline that has historically skewed white. Art historian Nikki Greene and MIT List Center for Visual Arts director Paul C. Ha will act as advisers to the partnership, which will see participants work with Leigh in the run-up to the exhibition and contribute to the catalogue.

Over the past couple decades, Leigh has created a distinctive body of work that pays homage, often in low-key, allusive ways, to aspects of Black history. Born in Chicago in 1967, Leigh has worked in a variety of modes, though she is best-known for her large-scale sculptures, which frequently make use of styles culled from African art. Often, though not always, they feature Black figures whose bodies appear to fuse with various objects; they are usually depicted eyeless and earless.



Simone Leigh, *Las Meninas*, 2019.  
©SIMONE LEIGH/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART/FARZAD  
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In 2016, for example, in a presentation put on by the Studio Museum in Harlem, she created the work *A particularly elaborate imba yokubikira, or kitchen house, stands locked up while its owners live in diaspora* in New York's Marcus Garvey Park. For it, she created three hut-like forms with thatch roofs, translating an architectural style drawn from Zimbabwe's Shona-speaking communities for a new locale.

Yet her work has also taken on more expansive forms that include filmmaking, installation, and social practice work. For the arts nonprofit Creative Time in 2014, Leigh created *Free People's Medical Clinic*, which welcomed people to attend workshops and medical treatments free of charge. It paid homage to Josephine English, the first Black ob-gyn in New York, and to similar initiatives undertaken by the Black Panthers during the 1960s.

The Biennale pavilion comes as Leigh's fame ascends in the art world and beyond. In 2018, she won the Guggenheim Museum's \$100,000 Hugo Boss Prize, and in 2019, she joined Hauser & Wirth, one of the world's biggest galleries. Her work has also appeared in exhibitions such as the Berlin Biennale, the Whitney Biennial, and the Dak'Art Biennale of Contemporary African Art, and such venues as MoMA PS1, the New Museum, the Hammer Museum, and other venues.

Past artists to have represented the U.S. at the Biennale have in recent years included Martin Puryear (2019), Mark Bradford (2017), Joan Jonas (2015), Sarah Sze (2013), and Allora & Calzadilla (2011).

Leigh's pavilion is set to make history at the Biennale. No other Black woman based in the U.S. has ever helmed a pavilion at the art festival.



Simone Leigh, *Jug*, 2019.  
©SIMONE LEIGH/©SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM  
FOUNDATION/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SOLOMON R.  
GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION/DAVID HEALD

“What we’re seeing right now is an unbelievable explosion in the presentation of work of African-American and diasporic intellectuals, creative, artists, writers, and thinkers,” Medvedow said. “It is overdue, really exciting, and critically important, and Simone is part of this flourishing. It recognizes an artist who has been hard at work at making her art and building her art for decades. The decision is based on the importance of her and her ideas.”

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## sculpture



Simone Leigh, *Sentinel*, 2019. Bronze and raffia, 198.1 x 166.4 x 102.9 cm. Photo: David Heald © 2019 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

# Simone Leigh in New York

January 8, 2020 by Susan Canning

Simone Leigh seems to have been everywhere recently—at the Whitney Biennial, on the High Line, and in the Guggenheim—providing an opportunity for an in-depth engagement with her creative concerns. Leigh’s sculptures and installations incorporate a wide range of materials, from stoneware and raffia to pipe, concrete block, and more recently, cast bronze, creating a mash-up of functional objects and architectural-scaled constructions that argues for a more diverse and

Canning, Susan. “Simone Leigh.” *Sculpture Magazine*, January 8, 2020.

inclusive high art practice. Together, her materials form a repertoire of figures, vessels, and hut-like structures that speak from and to black female experience. Like the braided clay that adorns some of her ceramic sculptures, Leigh's practice articulates a richly interwoven narrative of recuperation, resistance, restitution, and healing that directly addresses this core viewership even as it puts the broader public on notice.

Leigh's 2018 Hugo Boss Prize exhibition at the Guggenheim took its title, "Loophole of Retreat," from a chapter in abolitionist Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). The phrase alludes to the tiny attic crawl space where Jacobs hid for seven years, a place (and an idiom) signifying enclosure and enactment, filled with discursive potential—as a means of escape from an impossible situation, as a sanctuary and refuge where one can withdraw, contemplate, and plan the next move, and particularly in its secluded, enclosed darkness, as a place symbolic of the narrow, restricted role for black women in white America.



Simone Leigh, *Jug*, 2019. Bronze, 214.6 x 126 x 123.8 cm. Photo: David Heald  
© 2019 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Courtesy the artist and  
Luhring Augustine, New York



Simone Leigh, installation view of "The Hugo Boss Prize 2018: Simone Leigh, Loophole of Retreat," 2019.  
Photo: David Heald © 2019 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Leigh's installation imagined the possibilities of Jacobs's axiom through sculptural "bodies" that evoke disparate, alternative modes of agency. For Leigh, whose background is in ceramics, this meant challenging notions of craft and the sculptural tradition of the classical nude while purposefully mixing cultural codes to engage and circumvent notions of vessel, dwelling, shelter, conduit, and void in an expansive dialogue about blackness, otherness, and difference, and the spaces of women's labor. Though her female heads and busts often lack eyes (and ears), the smooth, hollowed-out sockets imply refusal and a rich, inward-turning vision rather than erased identity or blindness. The Guggenheim show featured two larger-than-life cast bronze sculptures combining busts of afro-headed women with utilitarian objects. In *Jug*, an armless nude torso rests atop a cone-like storage vessel that resembles a wide-hooped skirt. Both container and body, the form is richly surfaced with a dark patina that reflects back as impenetrable blackness, sealing off any discovery of the content hidden inside. *Sentinel* inverts the scheme. Now, a head without eyes is affixed to a raffia skirt and a large pipe, like those used for irrigation ditches or underground tunnels, to suggest a sphinx-like figure. The pipe provides a range of associations, from water transport or nourishment to passage, both emptying out and filling in the vessel that is the enacted black female body.

In the back corner, hidden behind a wall constructed of decorative ceramic blocks, a stoneware vase with braided edges was accompanied by a sound piece made in collaboration with poet, musician, and activist Moor Mother. Juxtaposing the labor of giving birth with stories of incarceration—in particular, the story of Debbie Africa, a member of the Philadelphia MOVE collective, who delivered her child in prison while other women protected her by distracting the guards—this highly politicized combination of visual form and sound once again demonstrated the strength and defiance of black women.

One of the most engaging aspects of Leigh's work derives from the way that she uses scale and placement to manage and even circumvent our response, replacing the desire for explanation with open-ended inquiry. *Panoptica*, in the Guggenheim show, was a case in point. A red terra-cotta pipe chimney rises up from a multi-tiered, raffia-covered base resembling a Batammaliba roundhouse from Togo and a hoop skirt. Looming overhead, the hybrid body/building, its pipe both a chimney and a woman's torso, represents both hearth and home. The warm raffia beckons, offering shelter, yet no entrance can be found.

Leigh's *Brick House*, commissioned for the High Line Plinth (on view through September 2020), looks out from between glass skyscrapers at the Spur, at the junction of 10th Avenue and 30th



Simone Leigh, *Brick House*, 2019. Bronze, 9 x 9 x 16 ft. Photo: Timothy Schenck, © High Line, Courtesy the High Line

Street. At 16 feet tall, this cast bronze is her most monumental piece to date—the large, eyeless head, with its strong features, afro, and cornrow-braided hair, inserts its curves and imposing presence into the rigid geometry of the surrounding city, tempering harsh verticality and cold materials with a natural and nurturing note. The head sits atop a dome-shaped body /base that, as in Leigh's other works, overlays a mix of references, including vernacular architecture—from Mammy's Cupboard on Route 61 in Natchez, Mississippi, which merges domestic cook and mammy stereotypes, to *teleuk* dwellings of the Mousgoum people in Cameroon and Chad. *Brick House* cannot help but remind us of just how few monuments are dedicated to African Americans in New York; only one of them, Alison Saar's Harriet Tubman Memorial (2008) in Harlem, is devoted to a woman. *Brick House* provides another model, commemorating in its serene, slightly bowed, unseeing head the healing power of black women's subjectivity.

This discursive exchange on the restorative and resistive potential of black women characterizes much of Leigh's recent work. During the run of her Hugo Boss Prize show, she extended her exploration of community care, self-help, and recovery through a day-long conference on mobilizing black women's intellectual labor. Daily screenings of *Untitled (M\*A\*S\*H)*—her video set in a mobile medical unit, which references the United Order of Tents (a secret society of black female nurses founded in 1910)—and two related films by Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich reinforced the message. Together with the three sculptures on view at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, these examples of Leigh's recent projects reclaim the vessel of the black female body, filling it up and into a state of being.

# e-flux

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson  
**Suspended  
Munition:  
Mereology,  
Morphology,  
and the  
Mammary  
Biopolitics of  
Transmission in  
Simone Leigh's  
*Trophallaxis***

01/08

e-flux journal # 105 — december 2019 Zakiyyah Iman Jackson  
Suspended Munition: Mereology, Morphology, and the Mammary Biopolitics of Transmission in Simone Leigh's *Trophallaxis*

Simone Leigh's stated interest in "black women as a kind of material culture" has generated a career-spanning and award-winning meditation on black women as containers of trauma and knowledge.<sup>1</sup> This essay will offer some brief comments on Simone Leigh's *Trophallaxis*. The sculpture recalls not only racializing and imperialist histories of the breast, but also social insects as figured in political philosophy and scientific discourse. It evokes these associations by performing and inciting an investigation of a long-standing practice: the making of societal/organismic analogies, in particular the comparison of human societies to those of social insects such as ants and bees. Feeding behavior has played a key role in this tradition, which relates wholes and parts of various species in nature, generally within a political idiom.<sup>2</sup> While entomologists' precise interpretations of trophallaxis vary, what they share is the idea that soma is none other than trophic exchange. If the understanding of trophallaxis is the giving of soma to an Other, I ask: what does the history of the breast, with its attendant racializing cleavages of being, do to traditions of comparison? Thinking across the scale of the cell, the breast, and embattled human sociality, this essay shifts black feminist critical attention from the posterior to the breast and suggests that thinking sociogenically troubles utopic interpretations of trophallaxis in the biological sciences and beyond.

While an axiom of contemporary social theory readily acknowledges that our received categories of race are relational and grounded in histories of slavery and empire, it is worth considering how the distribution of soma itself, across demarcations of race, is the outcome of racial reasoning's circuit of comparison and hierarchical division of flesh and mammary labor. I suggest that Leigh's *Trophallaxis* is fruitful for thinking about how black female flesh un/gendered gives flesh both to bodies and to our prevailing categories of species and sex/gender and their systems of notation. Ultimately, *Trophallaxis* suggests the productive and explosively generative potential of intertwining histories of social insects and the mammary politics of transmission for Western origin stories of society and ontologies of the human.

A fusion of fecundity and cataclysm, Leigh's *Trophallaxis* recalls melons, bombs, and an insect egg sac. The sculptural work is at once a singular and collective breast. Composed of black porcelain and terracotta, the individuated breasts have gold and platinum nipples. The placement of antennae on mammary forms suggests conductivity or alternately exploding shrapnel. Hung from the ceiling in a chandelier-

like formation, *Trophallaxis* hangs low enough to reveal a lattice of skin cells as well as tears in the skin, boot marks, and other signs of brutalization and distress. Taken as a whole, its pendulous shape is one fraught with racializing history.

As Jennifer Morgan has shown in “‘Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770,” the imagined proof of the African’s incivility and degraded humanity was frequently located in the perceived shape of the breast.<sup>3</sup> The key to African females’ purported childbearing and child-rearing practices was thought to be emblemized by the breast. In this context, the breast took on mythic proportions: “European writers turned to black women as evidence of a cultural inferiority that ultimately became encoded as racial difference. Monstrous bodies became enmeshed with savage behavior as the icon of women’s breasts became evidence of tangible barbarism.”<sup>4</sup> African females’ breasts were depicted as exaggeratingly pendulous, even as bestial additional limbs. The European imaginary equated African females’ purported fecundity and propensity for easy birth and breastfeeding with their projected astonishing capacity for manual labor. Painless, meaningless, and mechanical childbirth, in their estimation, was the measure of the black female sex and of blackness, more generally.<sup>5</sup>

Londa Schiebinger, writing about the starting point of modern zoological nomenclature, reminds us that Linnaeus, the so-called “father of modern taxonomy,” coined the term *Mammalia* in 1758, meaning “of the breast,” a term capacious enough to embrace humans alongside a wide-ranging class of vertebrates.<sup>6</sup> In the same volume, Linnaeus also introduced the term *Homo sapiens*, “man of wisdom,” to distinguish humans from other primates. For Linnaeus, female mammae become the icon of *Homo sapiens* for reasons, Schiebinger argues, “that have less to do with the uniqueness and universality of the female breast than with eighteenth-century politics of wet-nursing and maternal breastfeeding, population growth, and the contested role of women in both science and society” in an era defined by debates concerning “universality” and “equality.”<sup>7</sup> As to the matter of adjudication, it was held that if evidence could demonstrate that social hierarchies issued from natural hierarchies, this assumption of “fact” could stem the leveling tide of democracy and abolitionism without moral opprobrium. As Schiebinger notes, it is strikingly odd that Linnaeus would base the name of a class on mammae, considering that they are only typically active in half the group and only for short periods

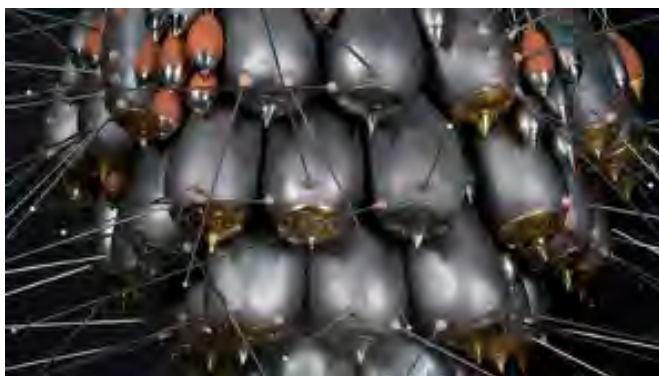
of time (during lactation) or not at all. Linnaeus not only could have chosen a more sex- and gender-neutral trait (*Aurecaviga*, “the hollow-eared ones,” or even *Lactentia*, “the sucking ones,” for example), he could have also have chosen a term based on the conservative conventions of the day: scientific nomenclature usually conserved suitable terms, and new terms were derived from modifying traditional ones, commonly Aristotelian. *Mammalia* observed neither convention.<sup>8</sup>

This idiosyncrasy can perhaps be explained by the fact that Linnaeus was involved with the struggle against wet-nursing. He joined a vocal group of politicians and physicians who argued that elite European women should end their dependence on peasants and, in overseas colonies, native and Negro women.<sup>9</sup> The latter emblemized the historic bestial connotations of female nature. Wet-nursing, during the mid and late eighteenth century, became associated with infant mortality and depopulation, and even national depravity and ignoble character were thought to transfer from diseased, unclean, and morally corrupt wet nurses drawn either from lower racial classes or impoverished European economic classes.<sup>10</sup> What is more plausible, Schiebinger notes, is that economic considerations may have pushed some wet nurses to take on more babies than they could adequately nurse. The abolishment of wet-nursing was also instrumental to gynecology’s and obstetricians’ displacement of midwifery. Medicine established its authority over pregnancy and birth, in part, through anti-wet-nursing campaigns.<sup>11</sup>

Linnaeus’s term *Mammalia*, according to Schiebinger, helped to legitimize the restructuring of European society by emphasizing that nature itself dictated that elite European females suckle and rear their own children. Rather than rendering nature universally comprehensible, Linnaeus’s systematics projected exclusively upper- and middle-class European notions of gender, such as gender-role complementarity, onto nature.<sup>12</sup> As Schiebinger suggests, one could argue that in coining the term *Mammalia*, Linnaeus broke with longstanding traditions that saw the male as the measure of all things. In the Aristotelian tradition, the female was considered an error of nature or a monster. In Linnaeus’s system mammae became the sign and symbol of the “highest class” of animals.<sup>13</sup> However, I would counter this by saying that assigning a new value to “the female” and elevating women’s reproduction (understood as European and elite) was purchased at the price of transferring and deepening teratological associations of “the female” with *the* “African female,” which

ultimately racially calcified into the singularity I term *blackfemale*.<sup>14</sup>

Both Morgan and Schiebinger have shown that the comparative anatomization of the breast played a crucial role in determining and differentiating both the matter of species and the matter of sex – “hemispherical” and firm breasts were thought to be racial characteristics of European and Asian women.<sup>15</sup> The idealization of the “hemispherical” breast is effectively a version of mapping that implied that the earth and its inhabitants could be divided into two halves and that an essential hierarchical racial division could conveniently be read in the perception and comparison of breast shape. The African female’s purported characteristic pendulous breasts provided evidence that the indeterminate and contested (yet inferior) ontology of the blackfemale with respect to the discourses of species and sex/gender issued from nature itself. In both discourses, the blackfemale, and often the “Hottentot” female specifically, was the incarnation of the matrix for systems of classification.



Leading up to the eighteenth century, within the logics of comparative anatomy, racialized and racializing comparisons of the female sexes were sought to answer the question of the boundary of the species and the means of species reproduction. Additionally, because females were burdened with the idea that they directly shape racial traits and characteristics, such as those compared by phrenologists, this made the blackfemale responsible for black inferiority in general. However, it is important to note that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, scientists and physicians did compare males, almost exclusively, in fields like craniometry and phrenology, which attempted to gauge intelligence and rationality – in short, fitness for civic life and the affairs of politics.<sup>16</sup> This exclusivity stemmed from the view that reason is what qualifies humanity and from the contention that females of all races were irrational and unfit for politics and science. Thus,

while comparisons between males determined rank within the species of humanity, the “African female” was defined as the boundary of the species and thought to shape the inferior characteristics of African-derived people as a class, precisely because of her ontologized positionality as blackfemale.

The discourses of sex/gender and race worked in conjunction, or to put it more precisely, the discourse of sex/gender operating as racial (which is to say as species) discourse depicted blackness and black femaleness, in particular, as limit cases because African females were not so much deemed masculine, as is often claimed, but rather because African females failed to differentiate at the registers of sex and gender according to the emergent modern terms of these discourses, for which they were the foils; they were thought to develop neither feminine temperaments, such as delicacy, purity, chastity, passionlessness, and moral and spiritual virtue, nor feminine sex characteristics, including so-called racial characteristics such as redness of lips, length and style of hair, skin color, and shape of nose and skull – features placed alongside breast shape and assessments of the posterior, pelvis, and pudendum.<sup>17</sup> In sum, ascriptions of racially black femaleness administered and disciplined categories of species, sex, and gender. Mechanistic childbirth and feeding were thought to provide evidence of the underdevelopment of the African female’s gender and sex. The antinomy of the idealized “angel in the household,” “the African female” as a discursive formation materialized in the context of Europe’s need for productivity; in response to this need, mechanistic childbirth and utilitarian breastfeeding would ultimately become forcefully located in the globalizing economies of slavery.

The title of Leigh’s sculpture, *Trophallaxis*, refers to transferring of liquid food between adult social insects or between them and their larvae. The shared contents is sometimes called “crop milk.”<sup>18</sup> In 1918, William Morton Wheeler coined the term “trophallaxis.” Not simply a nutritional fluid exchange, trophallaxis can involve the transfer of pheromones, organisms such as gut endosymbionts, and information to serve as a form of signaling.<sup>19</sup> In a choreography that synchronizes eusociality and the division of labor, trophallaxis enables some ants to stay and look after the nest whilst others forage for food. The sharing behavior is a means of resource distribution, dispersal of chemical messages around the nest, and the creation of a unified colony odor.

Early twentieth century entomologists, imagining humans as social insects, linked trophallaxis to the origin of human society. As

historian of science Charlotte Sleight has shown, feeding behavior in particular, including trophallaxis, was seen as the key to the riddle of the origin of sociality. Though generated to explain a specifically myrmecological phenomenon, trophallaxis from the outset was understood to cover general features of society. Wheeler suggested that mutual feeding relations were the true, necessary cause of social forms of life.<sup>20</sup> More precisely, as historian of myrmecology Abigail Lustig asserts, for Wheeler, “the center of the vortex, always remained the relationship between mother and offspring; all the other possible permutations of relationships were somehow extensions or subversions of this primal instinct.”<sup>21</sup> Trophallaxis did not even have to entail an immediate reciprocation; the important thing was that the exchange had the ultimate function of maintaining society in equilibrium.<sup>22</sup> Wheeler posited that the only difference between the two species was that humans, an evolutionary novelty compared to ants, had not had time to incorporate their functional division of labor into their “heritable morphology.”<sup>23</sup>

However, per my discussion of Jennifer Morgan’s and Schiebinger’s work, precisely what antiblack discourse suggested was that race divides the female sex into separate black and white female sexes, such that black breasts were divergent at the register of morphological sex and that they were peculiarly suited for slavery and mechanical reproduction. Moreover, the question of heritability was forcefully resolved by the seventeenth-century Virginia slave code known as *partus ventrem sequitur* – “that which is brought forth follows the womb” – effectively catalyzing an emergent discourse of race that would equate morphology with social ontological status.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, given its definitional context is parental care, mammalian nursing is sometimes considered trophallaxis.<sup>25</sup>

Auguste Forel, pioneering entomologist and eugenicist, in his *The Social World of the Ants Compared with that of Man*, has a romantic and utopic reading of trophallaxis. Forel saw its human significance as confirming his optimistic faith in socialism.<sup>26</sup> His concept of the “communal stomach” observes that in some ant species individual colony members store food in their crops, or second social stomach, and transfer it to larvae and other community members. In the process of doing so, pheromones travel alongside food, thus demarcating the perimeter of community. Wheeler’s conception of the trophallactic circuit recalls the regulatory function of a membrane dividing and mediating inner and outer worlds.<sup>27</sup>

In *Interstices*, Hortense Spillers draws our attention to a singularity legally established

under slavery by telling us that black femaleness in flesh and symbol primarily acts as a regulating function rather than a self-willed agent: She is “the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world. Her issue became the focus of cunning difference – visually, psychologically, ontologically – as the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and ‘other.’”<sup>28</sup> In *Monstrous Intimacies*, Christina Sharpe emphasizes a crucial distinction between the mother’s breast and the wet nurse’s breast under slavery, whereby for the wet nurse “neither blood nor milk ensured familiarity,” nor the rights of maternity nor privileges of womanhood.<sup>29</sup> Thinking with Sharpe, I argue that this division of labor does not simply assure the denial of rights of motherhood for the enslaved; it also reinforces racially ontologizing cleavages in the semiotics of sex and gender in the felt and lived experiences of the flesh that passes on sociogenically as mother’s milk.<sup>30</sup>

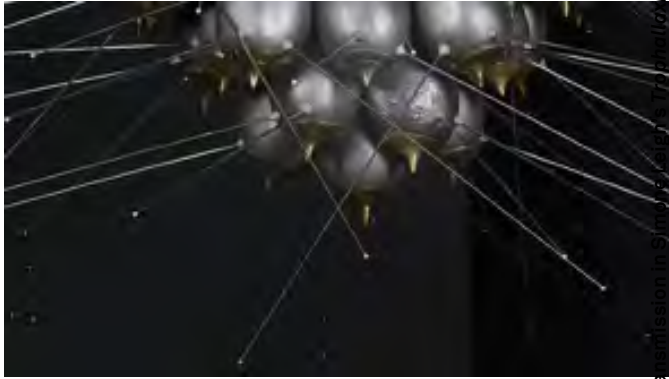
According to Forel, trophallaxis sustains the nest as a social entity. However, if we consider the mereological communal violence of the breast on command under slavery, then it troubles Forel’s eutopic conception of trophallaxis and the notion of community that underwrites it. Partial objects are prior to the coalescence of identity, or the sense of a bodily ego one acquires upon entering into the symbolic order (iconography of civilization, history, culture); slavery attempts to effect the privation of a “body” and lock one in a state that is prior to the felt sense of bodily integrity. “Before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’” Spillers writes.<sup>31</sup> Here, the *before* has spatial as well as temporal significance, as *before* recalls that the master class gains a sense of proprietary embodiment and sovereign “I” retroactively. Thus, the ekphrastic scenes of enfleshment Spillers describes act as a mirror stage such that the other is spatially before the lash, and her ensuing fragmentation hypostatizes – by that I mean converges literal and figurative meaning – in the abstractions made of flesh. The gold and platinum nipples of Leigh’s sculpture mark the conversion of the nipple and its labor into somatic currency.

At/as the meeting point of *morphe* and *logos*, blackfemale flesh un/gendered functions as the constitutive outside of normative femininity and gendered humanity, more generally, in its normativized genre. From the perspective of dominance, normative – i.e., white bourgeois – femininity is arguably the only womanhood there is. However, in order to protect and uphold this exclusivity, it is necessary to repress the material and symbolic supplementarity of *black female flesh*. For it is a

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supplementarity produced along very different gendered and material lines: terms and conditions of enslavement *and scientific discourse* that subtend and rupture corporeal integration, ontological integrity, binarisms of sex and gender, and logics of gender-role complementarity. At the same time, a breast on command or the flesh as a repository of transgressive pleasure rather than bodily integrity differentiate gender and/or recourse to chastity and virtue. Thus, the blackfemale de-essentializes gender and shows the arbitrary relation between flesh and symbol.



In Toni Morrison's 1988 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, Schoolteacher "arrived to put things in order."<sup>32</sup> A man who "always wore a collar, even in the fields," Schoolteacher was an emblem of both the epistemic powers and abuses of scientific and biblical authority under slavery.<sup>33</sup> In the world-making Schoolteacher produced by letter and lash, it is Sethe who makes the ink. The ink was made of "cherry gum and oak bark," recalling the chokecherry tree on her back.<sup>34</sup> She is a figure constitutive to Schoolteacher's transubstantiating pedagogy. The ink and the notebook *need* Sethe and her avatars for its alchemy of being and world. The scent of the ink haunts Sethe's memory, recalling the atmosphere of slavery.<sup>35</sup> When Sethe overhears her name in one of Schoolteacher's many lectures, he instructs his nephew, who was writing in one of his books, to "put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up."<sup>36</sup> In doing so, Schoolteacher establishes the measure and metrics of being and world, indeed of being-in-the-world. Sethe's mammary rape soon follows. This is an allegory of world history.

No, this is not a figure to confuse with any commonsensical conception of a queen bee.<sup>37</sup> Logician and grammarian Charles Butler, sometimes called the "Father of English Beekeeping," in *The Feminine Monarchie, Or the History of Bees*, saw in bee sociality a

matriarchal thesis synonymous with the moniker: queen bee displacing Aristotle's king bee thesis.<sup>38</sup> But as Spillers shows, such monikers, when applied to black women, have historically functioned with pernicious irony: "the black woman" is a term of "overdetermined nominative properties."<sup>39</sup> The nominative is a grammatical case of a noun that generally marks the subject of a verb or predicate, as opposed to its object. But "the black woman" is an ironic nominative in that the modifier "black" actually functions to objectify and aims to foreclose the actional agency of the nominative such that the case and its normative deployment would seem to suggest that the putative referent is the causal agent of her objectification, or at the very least introduces confusion into the terms of agency itself. The qualifier "black" not only functions to objectify and confuse the causal relations of agency, but also to un/gender.

Under slavery black female flesh un/gendered is produced by the order as an actant: actants have affect and modify actors, but without the pretense of liberal humanist notions of will or self-directed agency – however attenuated, relative, and relational. Spillers argues that those ascribed as black females are a fleshly metaphor whereby "the human body as a metonymic figure" and "resource for metaphor" is essential for "an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements."<sup>40</sup> In short, the foreclosure and/or abjection of this figure make possible the transmission of the social as a hierarchy. And as it turns out, the name "queen bee" is a misnomer. Contrary to what the name implies, a queen bee does not reign over or directly control the hive. While she is primary to the reproduction of the community, everything else that is claimed to be known about her is a matter of perception and myth.

In Nancy Leys Stepan's well-known essay "Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science" (1986), she argues that scientific analogies construct the very similarities and difference supposedly "discovered" by scientific methods.<sup>41</sup> So if analogies in science, historically, have functioned due to the imperceptibility of their arbitrariness and through a metaphorical system that structures the experience and understanding of difference such that the entities compared acquire new meanings in their analogical meeting, then we have to ask what are the social conditions of science that naturalize "nature" and generate the reality effects of arbitrary comparisons.<sup>42</sup>

The analogies that project abject somatic difference onto the blackfemale figure, in the making of this figure, have enabled the metaphor linking white womanhood to blackness even in her seeming absence. Without this chain of

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metaphors, much of the data on “women’s” bodies

(length of limbs, width of pelvis, shape of skull, weight or structure of brain) would have lost their significance as signs of inferiority and would not have been gathered, recorded, and interpreted in the way they were. In fact, without the analogies concerning the “differences” and similarities among human groups, much of the vast enterprise of anthropology, criminology, and gender science would not have existed. The analogy guided research, generated new hypotheses, and helped disseminate new, usually technical vocabularies.<sup>43</sup>

While new analogies produce new research questions and scientific “facts” by directing the course of empirical research, they do so in the context of histories that generate change as well as continuity and often assume the literalness of metaphor due to science’s perceived objectivity and veridicality. As discussed here, the consequences of science’s metaphoricity are not simply intellectual but also political and moral. The imbuing of insect/societal analogies with moral weight, Lorraine Datson explains, “were attempts to turn dross into gold, to create value out of the least promising materials,” namely insects – and, I would add, per the gilded nipples of Leigh’s sculpture, African females, differentially and relationally.<sup>44</sup>

During the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, ridicule was heaped on naturalists who devoted time, resources, and passion to what were considered unworthy objects. It was held that such misguided attention would spoil one for polite society and the serious duties of family, church, and state.<sup>45</sup> In turn, naturalists countered that the intensity and direction of their attention was warranted because what observation revealed was the inner workings of divine handiwork.<sup>46</sup> Mastery of the disciplines of attentive observation and the texture of description, or what we typically understand as empiricism, increasingly defined who was a naturalist worthy of the name.<sup>47</sup>

Accused of idolatry, naturalists, particularly entomologists, justified their rapt attention in terms of creaturely love, claiming that “divine providence could be discerned in the design of a fly’s wing or the industry of the beehive – in part to defend themselves against the charges of triviality, but also in part to redeem even the most lowly objects as repositories of divine artistry and benevolence.”<sup>48</sup> What ultimately elevated ants and bees in the scales of value, however, was the perceived (hierarchical)

complexity of their societies: recall “the feminine monarchie.”<sup>49</sup>

In the case of *the African female*, denuded of a civilizational claim and genitrix of the primal horde, moral weight was attached to her, to her nakedness, as an object of study without the ennoblement and sympathy entomology typically extended to ants and bees. When insects are referred to as “queens” in this tradition, it is typically without the mocking irony that the moniker holds in the history of ascriptions of the blackfemale. In other words, unlike ants and bees, the blackfemale’s status as specimen neither led to an elevation of axiological status nor produced subjects of sympathetic identification.

The blackfemale figure has historically been perceived as either exaggeratingly large, or synecdochically. As Susan Stewart notes, enlargement is often deployed as a stratagem to imply menace, and representations of the gigantic often end up synecdochic.<sup>50</sup> The synecdochic fissuring of the blackfemale may indeed gesture toward the sublime function of this figure: uses too numerous and too vast and too overwhelming to depict in a representationalist image. Mythologized as mammy, the blackfemale figure, with or without the bulk, with or without the headscarf, with or without her apron, domestic busyness, and simple moral correctives but stuffed with this peculiar *mater(nal)* function to the point of fissuring, embodies the threat of rupture. She, Sharpe instructs,

becomes large, superabundant, splits into more of herself. Impossible to contain her in one body, impossible not to see her, she circulates widely but remains invisible nonetheless ... Having no place in the memory of her creators as a creation she becomes a realized figment of collective imagination, an avatar of the collective unconscious. A phantasmatic figure, she is everywhere, in every place.<sup>51</sup>

The evocative power of Leigh’s *Trophallaxis* would suggest that abstract artwork is an appropriate vehicle for that which exceeds the representationalist frame and cannot be captured by the mind’s eye. The sculpture’s antennae evoke the reception and transmission of energy. If sexuating antiblackness is imagined as an electromagnetic wave, then it theoretically, potentially amplifies into infinity. However, the munitions suggest this process of absorption and emission could redirect antiblack sexuative energy in such a way that it splits, and its trace and successive fissures might act as a bomb rupturing sex, gender, species, and *the world*.<sup>52</sup>

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Viewed from one perspective, this is a baleful unspeakable cataclysm; but from another perspective, such an event provides the leveling conditions that make (possible) a different future.

X

All images: Details of Simone Leigh, *trophallaxis*, 2008-2017. Terracotta, porcelain, epoxy, graphite, gold and platinum glazes, and antennas. Dimensions variable. Copyright: Simone Leigh; Courtesy of the artist and Luhning Augustine, New York.

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- 1  
Simone Leigh, "Knowledge as Collective Experience," Creative Time Summit 2015 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=70&v=q31nf3\\_f3is](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=70&v=q31nf3_f3is).
- 2  
See Charlotte Sleigh, "Brave New Worlds: Trophallaxis and the Origin of Society in the Early Twentieth Century," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 38, no. 2 (2002): 133–56. Entomologists such as Auguste Forel, Adele Fiedle, and William Morton Wheeler alternately drew principles of "social hygiene," slavery, primitivity, blackmail, bribery, internationalism, and pacifism from the life of ants. My observations, in this essay, are perhaps especially true for early entomologists in search of the origin of sociality.
- 3  
Jennifer L. Morgan "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770," *William and Mary Quarterly*, no. 54 (1997): 167–92.
- 4  
Morgan, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder,'" 191.
- 5  
Morgan, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder,'" 186.
- 6  
Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Rutgers University Press, 2004), 53. See chapters 2 and 3, in particular, on the comparative anatomization of the breast.
- 7  
Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 4–5.
- 8  
Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 41–42.
- 9  
Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 63.
- 10  
Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 67–68.
- 11  
Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 68–69.
- 12  
Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 74.
- 13  
Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 53.
- 14  
Here, in using the conjoint "blackfemale," I am thinking with a previous model, namely Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (i.e., "whitefolks"). In reaching for language we find that the conjoin(ing) noun underscores the specificity of social positioning.
- 15  
Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 64.
- 16  
Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 148.
- 17  
Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 156, 158–59. We can see this kind of thinking even in the work of Darwin. See Darwin's comments on the role of racial characteristics in sex selection in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871).
- 18  
In birds, feeding via regurgitation is sometimes called "crop milk." See the following for an early, if not the earliest, use of the term: Oscar Riddle, Robert W. Bates, and Simon W. Dykshorn, "A New Hormone of the Anterior Pituitary," *Proceedings of the Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine* 29, no. 9 (1932): 1211–12.
- 19  
Mark E. Suárez and Barbara L. Thorne, "Rate, Amount, and Distribution Pattern of Alimentary Fluid Transfer via Trophallaxis in Three Species of Termites (Isoptera: Rhinotermitidae, Termopsidae)," *Annals of the Entomological Society of America* 93, no. 1 (January 2000): 145–55.
- 20  
Sleight, "Brave New Worlds," 133
- 21  
Abigail J. Lustig, "Ants and the Nature of Nature in Auguste Forel, Erich Wasmann, and William Morton Wheeler," in *The Moral Authority of Nature*, eds. Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 302.
- 22  
Sleight, "Brave New Worlds," 150
- 23  
William Morton Wheeler, "The Social Insects: Their Origin and Evolution," *Nature*, no. 122 (1928); and Sleight, "Brave New Worlds," 146, 150.
- 24  
Indeterminacy and flexibility has been emphasized in scholarship on the question of race in early colonial slavery, but Morgan demonstrates that the process of imagining black women as vectors of racial inheritance and, thus, slave status began several decades before this code was enacted into law. As Morgan argues, it is through the bodies of black women that assumptions about race and status were conferred, formalized, and navigated. The Virginia legislative pronouncement, she argues, only belatedly codified hereditary racial slavery into English colonial law. See Jennifer L. Morgan, "*Partus sequitur ventrem*: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 22, no. 1 (2018): 1–17.

25

On this point, this essay is informed by social systems biologist Adria LeBoeuf's work on trophallaxis. See LeBoeuf, "On Mammalian Breast Feeding" (n.d.); and her video "What is Trophallaxis?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e84sjk8z3lE&list=PL2LxPSJAVUWfRz36L5m0k>

26

But in order to see it this way, Forel had to emphasize trophallaxis as a means of social bonding and kin survival over its associations with communal boundary regulation, caste, and immunity. Moreover, some forms of trophallaxis have been described in less communitarian terms, particularly that of parasitism. Some species of wasps have been described as nest invaders that restrain and force trophallaxis on captive hosts. See Hal C. Reed and Roger D. Akre, "Usurpation Behavior of the Yellowjacket Social Parasite, *Vespula austriaca* (Panzer) (Hymenoptera: Vespidae)," *American Midland Naturalist* 110, no. 2 (1983): 419–32; and Reed and Akre, "Colony Behavior of the Obligate Social Parasite *Vespula austriaca* (Panzer) (Hymenoptera: Vespidae)," *Insectes Sociaux* 30, no. 3 (1983): 259–73.

27

Sleigh, "Brave New Worlds," 149–50.

28

Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 155. Here I draw on this essay, as well as the essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in the same volume, to tease out some of the implications of Spillers's thought, in light of Lacan's mirror stage and Bruno Latour's concept of an actant as that entity or activity which "modif(ies) other actors." Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 2004), 75. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (W. W. Norton, 2006).

29

Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Duke University Press, 2009), 165.

30

Building on the work of Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter suggests that sociogeny defines (human) being in a manner that is not reducible to physical laws. In fact, said laws are redefinable as sociogenetic or nature-culture laws because culture is not only what humans create but also what creates human being. Sociogeny

suggests that cultural codes hold the potential to redirect "biology." If the organismic body delimits the human species, then the body is itself culturally determined through the mediation of the socialized sense of self as well as through the "social" situation in which this self is placed. Wynter limits the scope of what she calls the "sociogenic principle" to the activities and efficacies of the nervous system. See Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be 'Black,'" in *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, eds. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gomez-Moriana (Routledge, 2001), 30–66. In my forthcoming book, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (NYU Press, 2020), I extend and revise her theorization of sociogeny by considering what venturing beyond the nervous system reveals about the entanglement of semiosis and the organismic body.

31

Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 206.

32

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Knopf, 1987), 11.

33

Morrison, *Beloved*, 44.

34

Morrison, *Beloved*, 44.

35

Morrison, *Beloved*, 6.

36

Morrison, *Beloved*, 228.

37

An earlier version of Leigh's *Trophallaxis* bore the title *Queen Bee*. My reading of *Trophallaxis* suggests an ironic meaning to the earlier title.

38

Butler's *The Feminine Monarchy* (1634) was actually a revision of a text originally published by Joseph Barnes in 1609, which was itself the first full-length English-language book about beekeeping. However, Barnes and Butler were not the first to describe the largest honeybee as a queen. Luis Mendez de Torres did so in 1586. His observation was later microscopically confirmed by Jan Swammerdam in 1670. As Cyrus Abivardi explains, although Aristotle noted that some authorities referred to the large ruler bee as the hive's mother, he found the hypothesis unlikely, since "nature only arms males." Because the hive's "ruler" has a sting, Aristotle concluded that it must be the king, and the defenseless drones were, therefore, the females. See Cyrus Abivardi, "Honey Bee Sexuality: An Historical Perspective,"

*Encyclopedia of Entomology* (Springer, 2008): 1840–43.

39

Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 203.

40

Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 205.

41

Nancy Leys Stepan, "Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science," *Isis* 77, no. 2 (June 1986): 264.

42

Stepan, "Race and Gender," 265–67.

43

Stepan, "Race and Gender," 272.

44

Lorraine Datson, "Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment," in *The Moral Authority of Nature*, 100.

45

Datson, "Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment," 104.

46

Datson, "Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment," 105.

47

Datson, "Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment," 108–12.

48

Datson, "Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment," 105.

49

By the 1920s, darker peoples of Africa, South America, and Asia were arguably at times depicted as more savage than "races" of ants – that is, morally inferior to ants. Examples include the work of Belgian entomologist Eduouard Bugnion, and H. G. Wells's short story "The Empire of the Ants." As Charlotte Sleigh puts it, "Psychologically speaking, ants were a paradox, for they shared brutishness with the 'Negro' or 'Indian' and a complex social order with the European." See Sleigh, "Empire of the Ants: H. G. Wells and Tropical Entomology," *Science as Culture* 10, no. 1 (2001): 64. I have extended this observation by identifying the manner in which sex/gender qualifies this insight.

50

Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Duke University Press, 1984), 71.

51

Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 161.

52

A number of Black Studies scholars are currently in the midst of an exciting conversation concerning a

reconsideration of the idea of "world." See, in particular, the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva and her important ethical call, on behalf of planetary existence writ large, for an "end to the world as we know it": Da Silva, "An End to 'This' World," interview by Susanne Leeb and Kerstin Stakemeir, *Texte Zur Kunst*, April 12, 2019 <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/interview-ferreira-da-silva/>; and Da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2015): 81–97. In my work, on the question of the destructive/creative power of the black *mater*(nal), as *mater*, as matter vis-à-vis the metaphysics of "world," I have focused on the particular problem of the definite article "the," as a qualifier of "world." In light of the work of Quentin Meillassoux and other realist approaches to "world" and anti-correlationist stances (i.e., some New Materialist approaches), I have argued for a disenchantment of the idea(l) of "the world" as a knowable concept while holding on to the notion of incalculable and untotizable worldings. I argue that "the world," and especially "the world as such," fails as a concept, fails at knowability, but succeeds as an ideal(l) of imperialist myth predicated on the absent presence of what I call the black *mater*(nal). This critique is not limited to any particular representation of "the world," but is a rejection of the concept of "the world." See Zakiyyah Jackson, "Sense of Things," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 2 (2016). This argument is extended in my forthcoming book, *Becoming Human*.

08/08

e-flux journal # 105 — december 2019 Zakiyyah Iman Jackson  
Suspended Munition: Mereology, Morphology, and the Mammary Biopolitics of Transmission in Simone Leigh's Trophallaxis

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## The New York Times Magazine



Clockwise from top: Lorna Simpson, Simone Leigh and Amy Sherald.  
Adrienne Raquel for The New York Times

### **'I Want to Explore the Wonder of What It Is to Be a Black American'**

Simone Leigh, Amy Sherald and Lorna Simpson  
talk about the expectations faced by black  
women in an art world obsessed with identity.

A conversation with JENNA WORTHAM OCT. 8, 2019

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Leigh, Simone, Amy Sherald, Lorna Simpson, and Jenna Wortham. "I Want to Explore the Wonder of What It Is to Be a Black American." *The New York Times Magazine*, October 8, 2019.

**H**istorically speaking, work by black American artists has long been overlooked or excluded from major American museums and galleries. But recently, that position has started to shift, as institutions reconsider their longstanding biases. A wave of black scholars and academics are being appointed to curatorial roles, shaping (and reshaping) exhibitions and landmark solo shows and revising collections to honor the contributions of black artists. The heightened visibility has also led to a commercial frenzy, including record auction prices. Last year, for example, Sean Combs, the music producer, bought the painting “Past Times,” by Kerry James Marshall, for \$21.1 million, which was the highest price ever paid for an artwork by a living African-American artist.

On a warm September afternoon, three accomplished artists met at the bar Ode to Babel in Brooklyn. With incense burning in the background, the women gathered on soft leather couches with tea and snacks to discuss their observations and reflections on this moment in time.

Simone Leigh, 51, is a sculptor whose work has been acquired by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, among others. Her 16-foot bronze figurative statue, “Brick House,” was the inaugural commission for the High Line Plinth in Manhattan. She is currently in the running to make a memorial to replace the Central Park statue of J. Marion Sims, a 19-century physician who performed gynecological experiments on enslaved black women.

Amy Sherald, 46, a painter, was selected in 2017 by Michelle Obama to create her portrait for the Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery. In 2018 she was awarded the David C. Driskell Prize for her contributions to art within the African diaspora and was a recipient of the Pollock Prize for Creativity, which honors outstanding artists whose work has an impact on society. In September, she mounted her first New York solo show at Hauser & Wirth.

Lorna Simpson, 59, is an artist who has been showing her work since the 1980s. In 1990 she became one of the first African-American women to exhibit at the Venice Biennale, and in September, she received a J. Paul Getty Medal for her contributions to the art world.

**Jenna Wortham:** We’re having this conversation right now because it feels as if we’re in a particular moment for black artists, and even more specifically black female artists. I would love to talk about what that moment is, exactly — and how you see your position in it.

**Simone Leigh:** I do think the idea of who needs to be represented and how is being reassessed in many different fields right now, including art. The changes I see are across culture — there was a black photographer today, for example, and our moderator is black. That’s more normal than it would have been even a year ago in my experience — and it wasn’t even a surprise to me.

**Amy Sherald:** Yes, it does feel like a moment. I think it’ll be easier to understand it when looking back than it is when you’re in the midst of it. My niece came up with her father to New York to see Serena Williams and Coco Gauff and Naomi Osaka play in the U.S. Open, and I realized that she’s going to grow up never knowing there were no black tennis players. She was born when Barack Obama was president, so blackness is just a norm for her. It’s different than it was for our



“Wigs (Portfolio)” (1994), by Lorna Simpson. James Wang/Hauser & Wirth

generation. We still walk into spaces, and we see black people, and we high-five — “Yeah, we’re here.” We treat it as if it’s an achievement, and they will treat it as if it’s a norm.

**Leigh:** There have been other recent landmark moments too: Faith Ringgold, the 89-year-old, Harlem-born African-American artist, recently had her first-ever European survey at the Serpentine Galleries in London, and Lola Flash, the 60-year-old activist and photographer who documented queer life during the AIDS crisis, was at Autograph, a London art institution. Elizabeth Alexander, a black poet, was appointed president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Rashida Bumbray, who is an amazing black curator and choreographer, was appointed the first director of culture and art at the Open Society Foundations, a global philanthropic organization based in New York. Her reach and the projects she’ll be able to grant and fund are beyond what a museum curator can do, and it’s stunning.

The focus is also now turning to black feminist intellectuals, like Saidiya Hartman, who writes about the afterlife of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and who was just awarded a MacArthur “genius grant.” So many contemporary artists and scholars have been changed by the book “In the Wake: On Blackness and Being,” by Christina Sharpe, which examines the legacy of black death in the context of chattel slavery. Before, you would hear people talk about and quote Audre Lorde as if black feminist thought were something in the past, and not happening now. There has been some focus on black radical thought, but there has never been a focus on black feminist theory, which seems to be starting to happen. And I’m really happy about it.

Leigh, Simone, Amy Sherald, Lorna Simpson, and Jenna Wortham. “I Want to Explore the Wonder of What It Is to Be a Black American.” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 8, 2019.

**Lorna Simpson:** This is a moment, but I think this is also a moment that has been in the making. In the late '80s and '90s, commercial galleries did not focus on works by artists who were not European or white. The Studio Museum in Harlem and Just Above Midtown (JAM) were interested in cultivating and presenting work by artists that you could not see in other venues. JAM showed the work of the black conceptual artist David Hammons, and for a young artist like me, seeing his work was an amazing, emboldening experience. The Studio Museum gave so many young curators and artists opportunities to write and exhibit work. The curators Kellie Jones and Okwui Enwezor provided the same kind of support for exhibitions that we see happening right now. In order to think about the artists working today, you also have to think about the work of all these others who came before. Yes, this is an important moment, but it reflects the previous changes that were made within institutions. We have to also see this not just as a moment of visibility for black artists but also one of historically white institutions finally dragging themselves into the 21st century.

**Wortham:** I can see and feel that we're being fed in a different way, and it's so nourishing. At the



"Dunham" (2017), by Simone Leigh. Farzad Owrang/Luhring Augustine

Leigh, Simone, Amy Sherald, Lorna Simpson, and Jenna Wortham. "I Want to Explore the Wonder of What It Is to Be a Black American." *The New York Times Magazine*, October 8, 2019.

same time, visibility is really complicated, because it's not just black people who are hungering for these works and shows and images. There has always been a deep desire for those outside the black American experience to consume it and to rely on it for a larger understanding of the American narrative. Do you feel that heightened interest and attention from white audiences, and how does it impact how you think about your work and practice — if at all?

**Sherald:** Because I was a late bloomer, and started to think about the work that I wanted to make when I was in my mid-30s, I was looking at the conversations that we as black artists were having in the 2000s, and thinking about how I could participate in those conversations. To make myself relevant, I had to think about what conversation I was going to bring to the table. I didn't see any work that was about stepping away from the public identity of blackness. When I watched the movie "Big Fish," an American fantasy drama, I realized I'd never seen black narratives that had frivolity, that weren't heavy and serious, that didn't show us running for our lives, struggling for our lives. And I realized that I didn't want to make work that was necessarily didactic, but instead was just about everyday blackness.

I think my work represents and connects to the journey that I'm on as a woman and as a black woman, and as a Southern black woman, because that's a separate identity as well, and trying to shed all these external directives — from social norms, from expectations from my family, from my all-white school, from religion and popular culture — that influenced how I think about myself. My work was a way of processing an identity that was given to me. Being told whom to worship, what to wear, how to act in front of white people. All those were things that were projected on me. A lot of my identity was performed. I realized that I wanted to do away with all that, and then I tried to figure out who I really was — who am I outside of all of these things?

I think that's essentially what my paintings are about. A reflection of something other than what's projected out in the world. I'm focused on the way that we experience ourselves, our interiority. It's that private journey, the interior space, and stepping away from the public journey of blackness, and how people consume who we are, what we make, food, culture and all of that.

Elizabeth Alexander just wrote a book called "The Black Interior," and there's a line that says, "Tapping into this black imaginary helps us envision what we are not meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty." Kevin Quashie, a professor of black cultural and literary studies at Brown, published a book about the power of stillness called "The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture." They gave a vocabulary to my work — I knew what I was making, but my language is visual. They helped explain me to myself.

When it comes to audience, I don't think about the public generally, but I do think a little bit about the black public, because I want my work to be a gift to them. I was given such a gift in the sixth grade, when I walked into a museum in Columbus, Ga., and saw the Bo Bartlett painting "Object Permanence," which is a self-portrait of himself as a black man, and experienced the power of seeing a painting of a person who looked like me. I essentially built my career around that moment and creating an inflection point for someone else.



"If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (2019), by Amy Sherald. Joseph Hyde/Hauser & Wirth

**Simpson:** There is the business of art, and then there's the making of it. I never had an agenda directed at an audience that I needed to address in a particular way. Viewers don't always see what I see in the work; therefore, I never felt that I could proceed in a way that would anticipate what the viewers would need or not need. I have no idea what people are going to feel or get from my work. For me, it has been really important throughout my career to realize that I just make the work that I make, and that's it. If the things that I experience in life come into the making of the work, then that is enough.

**Wortham:** Simone, I'm curious to hear you speak on this. With your work in particular, there are so many references embedded in the show titles that seem to be speaking directly to an audience, like "The Waiting Room," a reference to a black woman named Esmin Elizabeth Green, who died while waiting for treatment at Kings County Hospital Center in New York in 2008. Or "Loophole of Retreat," which refers to a chapter in the book "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," written by Harriet Jacobs, an African-American woman who escaped enslavement by spending seven years

hiding in a tiny attic. To me, it feels like an encoded system of links designed to draw viewers from point to point, like a hidden map embedded within the work for black people to feel seen and acknowledged, even if they are encountering the work in a space filled with mostly nonblack people.

**Leigh:** When I would give talks or have speaking engagements, like at the Creative Time Summit in Venice in 2015, I would announce that I was making my work primarily for black women. And people thought I was out of my gourd. Even my mentor, the civil rights activist and art collector Peggy Cooper Cafritz, was like, “You can’t say that, what’s wrong with you?” She was wanting to protect me. I didn’t feel like I was taking a big risk at that point. Being largely ignored for so many years of my career gave me freedom to grow and be bold, to build confidence around my thoughts. I told Peggy it was too late. I had already been saying it for years. What I didn’t expect was that it would start to function as a call. It brought a lot of people into my life who could see that I was trying to do something different. It helped me build a community around myself. It’s not an original idea. Toni Morrison set a model for this mode of working, prioritizing black audiences, and black women in particular. But in art, which is so dependent on spectatorship, calling for a black audience seemed outrageous.

**Wortham:** Did it deter commercial interest or turn white collectors away from buying your work?

**Leigh:** It didn’t impact their interest, but I was called out by a collector during a talk once. Now I’m celebrated for it.



“Brick house” (2019), BY SIMONE LEIGH. Timothy Schenck/High Line

Leigh, Simone, Amy Sherald, Lorna Simpson, and Jenna Wortham. “I Want to Explore the Wonder of What It Is to Be a Black American.” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 8, 2019.

When we talk about black radical movements in history, women usually fail to appear. I chose the title “Loophole of Retreat” for my exhibition and also for a conference that I organized earlier this year with Saidiya Hartman and Tina Campt, a feminist theorist of visual culture and contemporary art, because it’s a description of a point of view of a woman who was incarcerated, while hiding in a cramped crawl space above her master’s house. Yet she recognized that she held a certain kind of power, because she was able to observe so much. I was thinking about the ways women have stepped out of line and resisted, despite our de facto incarcerated states of being, and the way that has not been widely recognized. The conference did not have a specific topic — it was an intellectual free-for-all. The point was to focus on our agency. Our point of view from a position of power. I am not interested at all in whiteness studies or describing racism and why it happens. I was trying really hard to have the audience focus on these women as authors, their scholarship, their contributions.

**Sherald:** That’s making me think of when I do talks, and a white person asks me why I don’t paint white people, and I have to say —

**Simpson:** That’s a Toni Morrison question! Charlie Rose asked her in the late ’90s about her narratives and why she didn’t include white characters. Other interviewers asked her that question, too. Watching that broadcast, I can see she positions herself brilliantly in terms of understanding that you do not have to compromise your subject because it pertains to African-Americans. There need not be an apology or an explanation. I can’t do it as brilliantly as Toni Morrison, but she said you would never ask a male white writer that question about his work. It’s a question that was posed in the past and is being posed again, and it’s a question that has nothing to do with you or your work as an artist. The question should be: Why are we still being asked this?

**Sherald:** I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am surprised that some people don’t understand the structures that are set in place for them, the reflections of themselves that they take for granted.

**Leigh:** Yes, when people talk about statuary, and they say, “There’s too much of it, and we don’t need any more of this kind of art,” they’re not really considering who was represented in that statuary.

**Sherald:** Like when you’re walking up the street, and there are sculptures of white men on horses. For others, that emboldens their identity. But there’s always a little part of me that doesn’t feel good enough. And I think it’s subconsciously because of that lack of imagery. So my response to those white people asking why I don’t paint white people is always: “Because you guys have done a great job of perpetuating your own image of yourself. If I can’t pick my own ideal, then who am I? Who am I to offer up a figure into art history that doesn’t look like myself?”

I’m beginning to search for iconic American photographs that compel us to look at our country’s biggest moments from a historical perspective that felt incomplete to me. Like the figure of the man on the construction beam in my painting “If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it” — a line from Toni Morrison’s book “Song of Solomon.” I was thinking about the Charles Ebbets photograph of a group of men sitting on a beam in midair eating lunch taken during the construction of Rockefeller Center. That building represents American productivity and industry. And just adding



"Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama" (2018), by Amy Sherald. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

his presence alone speaks volumes.

**Leigh:** I've never heard a white artist be accused of their work being too white. Not one time.

**Sherald:** For me, it comes down to painting the work that I want to see exist in the world. I understand my power as a figurative painter and someone who makes images. Because images are how we experience one another. My paintings are also an expression of humanity. At the Paris Exposition in 1900, W.E.B. Du Bois contributed hundreds of photographs featuring everyday African-Americans to the American Negro exhibit, in addition to charts, graphs and books intended to demonstrate the development and progress of blacks at that time. He showed images of black people in the South, to represent who we really are. The idea was to combat racist propaganda.

It's important, because there's no neutrality to our existence. Being black is still very political despite our highly nuanced existence. I want to show that there isn't one kind of black identity.

When I went to college — I went to Clark Atlanta University, a historically black university — I

shaved my head. I started dressing like a goth chick. I was having an experience that's outside of what people would consider the black experience. When I found my first model — she embodied her own identity. She was wearing vintage clothes, had an Afro and was six feet tall. She was not controlled by what people thought a black person should be. Those were the experiences of black identity that I was trying to expound upon. We are all different kinds of people, and I'm trying to capture that in my work. I want to explore the wonder of what it is to be a black American. And the complexity of that identity. I want the everydayness of the people to psychologically stay with you and change how you interact with others.

**Wortham:** And how do you imagine the work transforming those who encounter it?

**Sherald:** I think about those seventh-grade black students on a field trip to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston who were harassed by visitors and museum staff. People have ideas about what blackness is, and they were projecting it onto these kids. I would like to think that because my images will hang in places like that, they might effectuate something positive by their presence alone. We as black people still have the power to shift spaces.



“Source Notes” (2019), by Lorna Simpson. James Wang/Hauser & Wirth

Leigh, Simone, Amy Sherald, Lorna Simpson, and Jenna Wortham. “I Want to Explore the Wonder of What It Is to Be a Black American.” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 8, 2019.

**Simpson:** Can I make a comment? This is kind of the elephant in the room. Amy, you painted Michelle Obama, *royalty in America*. That is a seminal work of an iconic person. The two portraits of the Obamas — the president was painted by Kehinde Wiley — are the first paintings of their sort that will exist at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. There was a lot of weight on that painting: exterior expectations of what a portrait of Michelle Obama should be, the historical importance of the presidency and of her as a first lady. With those pressures in mind, it takes a certain amount of bravery to make what you want to make and not just go the route of people's expectations. On every freaking level, that is unusual. You're giving people the opportunity to see differently than is expected, both in the color palette you use and the context of the other paintings in the hall. And it is quite wonderful.

**Sherald:** Thank you. And maybe that's why in my portraits I paint the skin gray. Maybe that's so that viewers don't necessarily immediately think about race. I have had conversations with black people who say that they experience themselves differently when they look at the work. There was a sense of ownership that comes from having someone like Michelle Obama in a space like the National Portrait Gallery. I'm thinking about Parker Curry, the little girl who was photographed looking at the painting. For Michelle, yeah, I wanted to represent her interiority. It's really about filling these historical gaps, and offering a corrective narrative.

**Simpson:** See, that's kind of cool though.

**Sherald:** I make these images of things that we normally do but we don't get to see in spaces like museums. Like black people going to the beach in the painting "*Precious Jewels by the Sea*," which shows a sunny day with two couples in their late teens having a picnic and enjoying themselves against a broad blue sky. It makes me think about my mother. She didn't know how to swim, and she didn't like going to the segregated black beaches because she wanted to go to the prettier white beaches. It makes me think about how much things have changed generationally. My friends' kids go to Martha's Vineyard every year. They see that, and it's totally normal for them. So it's really just about creating American narratives about American people — while critiquing it at the same time. This painting, and all of them, are about expressions of freedom.

**Wortham:** Did any of that resonate for you, Simone? Are you working out questions of selfhood and identity in the construction of your sculptures?

**Leigh:** I make figurative sculpture, but I do think of it in more formal terms, in that I'm not doing portraiture or representing anyone in particular — but maybe many people, maybe a state of being. In 2016, for the "*Anatomy of Architecture*" series at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, I was working in a tradition of thinking about the status of women. By associating the body with the idea of a dwelling, refuge, container, tool, even loophole of retreat. I'm working in a long tradition of associating women's bodies with architecture or vessels like Louise Bourgeois's "*Femme Maison*," Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's "*Womanhouse*" and Magdalene Odundo's pots. I'm also drawing on traditions of building in Africa, specifically Mousgoum architecture in Cameroon.

**Wortham:** Something that comes up frequently in your work, Simone, is networks of care, the well-

being of black women and the histories of activism around wellness in black communities.

**Leigh:** When I did the “Free People’s Medical Clinic,” a 2014 exhibition in Weeksville — a Brooklyn community established by free blacks in 1838 — that offered workshops in herbalism and free H.I.V. and blood-pressure screenings, I discovered this group called the United Order of Tents. It was a secret society started in 1867 by formerly enslaved women, and I started to see a real value in not making everything visible. Most artists are trying to get as much visibility for their work as possible. I wanted to think about no visibility as a strategy. There are so many examples in history where people have had to go underground, because it was unsafe to be public. After Nat Turner’s rebellion, churches were banned in Charleston, S.C. — so for more than 30 years, Mother Emanuel Church, one of the oldest black churches in this country, met underground until after the Civil War. I like the strategy of working in that way, so I did a New Museum project called “Home Economics” with Aimee Meredith Cox and Karen Rose. It involved 15 girls. No one saw this work; it happened on the days the museum was closed.

**Wortham:** Lorna, how have themes of identity and expression shifted in your work over the years?

**Simpson:** As Amy and Simone are saying, there is this kind of sociopolitical side of the lives that we lead every day, in terms of the way people interact and speak and expectations and lack of expectations. But at the same time, there’s this whole interior world to explore. My recent paintings that were shown at Hauser & Wirth earlier this year come out of the experience of living in America. I was weaving figures and characters into a harsh and unforgiving landscape that is blue and icy, and it looks vacant and beautiful but somewhat terrifying. I feel like we’re all doing that in different ways, mapping our experience of being American and living in America and figuring out what identity is.

The project of my earlier work, from the ’80s and the ’90s, was really a project about interrogating identity. I liked to present the backs of figures, because it represented a refusal of engagement with a quote-unquote audience. You were confronted with this image that seemed kind of like a portrait, although you couldn’t see who it was, which creates a certain amount of distance. In one image from 1986, a woman has on a shift dress, and she’s holding a silver jug in one hand and a plastic container in the other, and water is pouring out of them, and underneath there’s a brief proselike narrative about disappearances and being believed and telling your account: “She saw him disappear by the river, they asked her to tell what happened, only to discount her memory.” The text was meant to confuse or be in contradiction with the image, in a way. That’s actually what we’re currently struggling with in this country: that there is no truth, or that the truth can be dismissed.

There’s another piece called “Wigs” that is talking about gender and sexuality. I went out and bought as many different wigs as I could to talk about the construction of identity, race, sexuality and gender, hung them and photographed them. It was 1994, and there was so much societal pressure toward conformity around language and lifestyle. There are texts that refer to how the state controls us, with dress codes and registering our “true” gender at the time of death. The use of “he” and “she” and the societal appetite for black and white confirmations. “Wigs” questions all of that, and shows how language is a trap, and how the imposition of societal language can upend the

lives of people. “Wigs” was a deconstruction of identity, a way to make it more open — no one and nothing should have to fit into one way of speaking or identifying.

But the way “Wigs” was reviewed was like, “Oh, it’s about the way black women wear their hair.” But there was so much more there than this general narrative about blackness — there are also very specific things about humanness. I am making the assumption, much like the way Simone and Amy do in their work, that the presentation of a black subject is not inhibiting in any way regardless of the audience. Very early on I understood that. That I had to take a stance, that if Kiki Smith can have a flayed-body sculpture whose skin is Caucasian, and I am supposed to resonate with that work and understand why she is doing that, then I am expecting the same thing for me and my work. That just as the Caucasian figure in contemporary art is seen as universal, the black figure of African descent should be, too. It should not be seen only as something related to the black experience or be described as an “urban” piece.

**Wortham:** We started off this conversation talking about this particular moment in the art world. But how are you each thinking about longevity and the legacy you’d like to leave in the world?

**Simpson:** I have never really thought of my career as something that I’m planning out in decades. It’s a far more interesting life to not know what the next thing is going to be, exactly. I love changing my mind. And I love doing things that may seem unexpected from the outside. So I think the legacy of the work is just to continue making work the way that I choose. And now I have the great privilege of being able to do whatever I want.

**Sherald:** I’ve always felt that a legacy was sealed as soon as you have work being acquired by museum institutions. That’s the beginning of the work living its life throughout art history. Also, I’m inspired by artists who have taken their success and utilized it in a way that creates legacy outside of their work. Mark Bradford opened Art & Practice, an art and community space in Los Angeles. Kehinde Wiley established an artist residency in Senegal. I’d like to do something along those lines.

**Leigh:** I think that my most important legacy right now is the long-term ongoing relationships I have with mentors, mentees and other artists and intellectuals. For example without the scholarship of Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, who writes about black utopias, I would cease to exist. Also, the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art is collecting my letters. And so I’ve had to think, What are my letters? I’m like, Text messages? Email?

But what I’m hoping is that in the course of art history, I made a contribution, and that people recognize it. Mostly, I’ve appreciated the opportunity to make my work. That’s really all I ever wanted.

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*This conversation has been edited and condensed.*

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# GARAGE



GARAGE MAGAZINE ISSUE 17

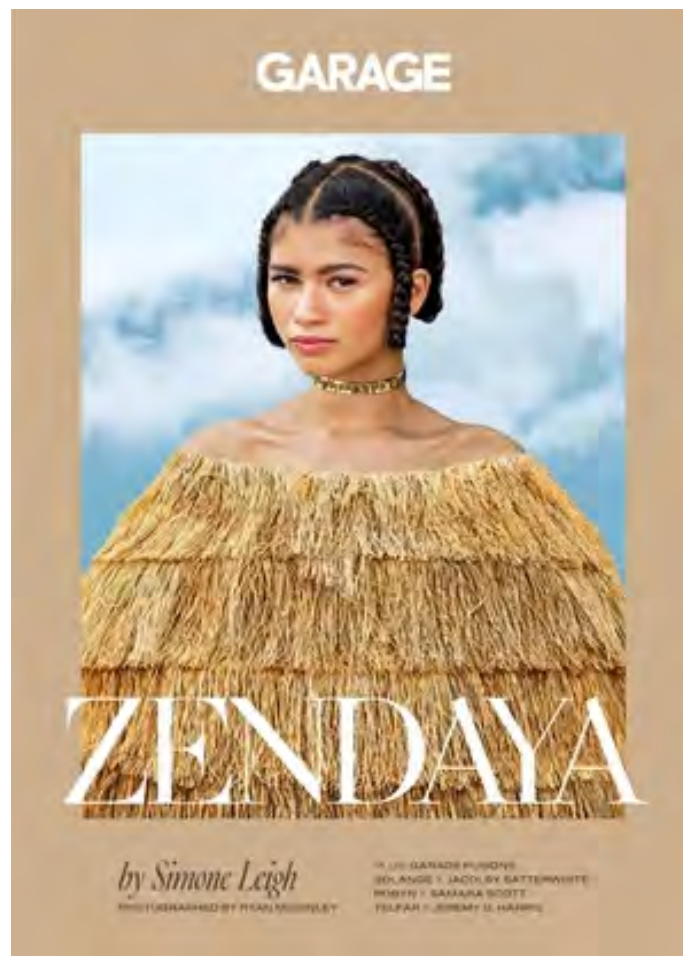
By THELMA GOLDEN; photos by RYAN MCGINLEY | Sep 7 2019, 7:15pm

## Zendaya and Simone Leigh Are Going Beyond Beauty

In conversation with Thelma Golden, Director and Chief Curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem, Artists Simone Leigh and Zendaya come together to create a new vision of black womanhood. Photographed by Ryan McGinley.

Golden, Thelma, Simone Leigh, and Zendaya. "Zendaya and Simone Leigh Are Going Beyond Beauty."  
*Garage Magazine*, September 7, 2019.

The artist Simone Leigh's work is built upon black female subjectivity. Throughout her practice, these ideas have manifested themselves in a wide variety of mediums and materials: There are her well-known sculptures and ceramics, as well as her social participatory work such as 2016's *The Waiting Room*, which mimics the historic Free People's Medical Clinic of the Black Panther Party, and provided public and private health care sessions on the fifth floor of the New Museum. Now, GARAGE has paired Leigh with the actress and performer Zendaya to bring her work to life in a different way. Taking inspiration from *Brick House*, Leigh's 16-foot-tall sculpture currently on display at New York City's High Line, as well as her ongoing *Cupboard* series, Zendaya both wears Leigh's work and becomes her women. The 23-year-old actress, who's interested in expanding the canon of characters that young black women are allowed to play in Hollywood, fits perfectly within the larger narrative of Leigh's work. Together, they take up space and demand to be seen and heard. This portfolio of images, photographed by Ryan McGinley, is the result of their collaboration, a new vision of black womanhood within the pages of a fashion magazine. We also brought Leigh and Zendaya together with Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, to have a frank conversation about creativity and the importance of uplifting the stories of people of color. - *Laia Garcia-Furtado*



Golden, Thelma, Simone Leigh, and Zendaya. "Zendaya and Simone Leigh Are Going Beyond Beauty." *Garage Magazine*, September 7, 2019.

**Thelma Golden:** *I'm thrilled to be talking to both of you. Where I want to start is to ask both of you to talk about your expectations, hopes, and desires for this collaboration.*

**Simone Leigh:** I kept on thinking about [Isamu] Noguchi and Martha Graham and the way he created sculpture for her, which has been interesting to me for a while. I've been making different kinds of apparatus with my long-term collaborator Aimee Meredith Cox, and I've been thinking about this kind of collaboration with another artist where the sculpture will augment her body or can be happening adjacent to her body, but it was important for me in this shoot for the sculpture not to become backdrop or decoration. Also, I was very inspired by the role I feel like Zendaya has in our world right now, which is so necessary.

**Zendaya:** When the opportunity presented itself, I was obviously extremely excited. Even though we do art in different forms, there's so much inspiration that could be gathered just by meeting someone



DRESS BY VAQUERA, EARRINGS BY CARRIE BILBO

Golden, Thelma, Simone Leigh, and Zendaya. "Zendaya and Simone Leigh Are Going Beyond Beauty."  
*Garage Magazine*, September 7, 2019.



LEFT: BRICK HOUSE, 2019, BRONZE RIGHT: CUPBOARD VIII, 2018, STONEWARE, STEEL, RAFFIA, ALBANY SLIP

and seeing their art, and seeing their work, and being able to be a small part of it. I don't think I had any expectations, I just felt like it was going to be inspiring and refreshing. I don't think I know very many people who do what she does, so meeting Simone and seeing her work and feeling like I was in some way becoming a part of her creation was magical and special. I felt very moved by it, and excited to be a part of something that was a different art form from my own, learn a little bit, step back, and just kind of be a part of what she sees for her pieces. I'd never really done anything like that before.

***TG:** Both of you—Zendaya in the roles that you have picked and, as Simone said, the role that you occupy in the world; and Simone, of course, in your path as an artist—clearly get a lot of inspiration from really inhabiting a sense of what the possibility of roles for women are and can be. Can you talk a little bit about that?*

**Z:** I'm an actress, so I have this gift of being able to tell people's stories and to take on people's pain and happiness and whatever it is they go through, so that it can be reflected, and somebody in the world can see themselves within these characters that I'm able to play. They can think, "Oh my gosh, I'm not the only one in the world that is feeling this." It makes you feel less lonely. I think that that's something

really, really special, something that I've really just become more in tune with for *Euphoria*. To me, the role had so many layers and so much depth and so many things for me to play with. There was a character that, I think, never comes around for anybody, especially not a woman. You know what I'm saying? Definitely not a black woman. I think that in itself was exciting for me to take on.

*TG: Simone, your important and significant body of work has completely shifted the idea of what it means to create the image of women, of black women, in the long history of sculptural form. Can you talk about the inspiration for that, and perhaps how you imagine and create in a way that's so informed by power and beauty?*

**SL:** I entered the art world at a time that it was not into beauty. It was interesting. I think that my work in art began with discovering a really beautiful Nigerian water pot, that was made by Ladi Kwali. Then, because I had just a philosophy and cultural studies background, I started to think about the means of production, the knowledge, everything that happens around that object. Typically with water pots, the labor is done by anonymous, mostly black women in Africa. It set me on this journey of thinking about how much labor has been accomplished, how many countries, cities, hospitals are fueled by the labor of black women, and at the same time, they're denigrated. I feel very lucky to be in a position to represent the strength and beauty of women. What's been difficult is walking this line where I don't want to essentialize the black femme experience. That's one of the reasons why Zendaya's work is really exciting, because it's so atypical of a role that would be given to a young black woman.

*TG: Simone, you have been exemplary, singular in the way in which you have centered the intellectual labor of black women thinkers in the world. Can you talk about some of those important points of inspiration for you within the essential canon of intellectual thought of black women in the 21st century?*

**SL:** Thank you. I realized at a certain point, as I was trying to make better work and push the work further, that I was relying more and more on the scholarship of black women intellectuals, and also noticing that they, as well, were laboring anonymously. People in the academy may not feel that way, but in general I was noticing, especially in art, a complete absence of knowledge of these large bodies of work that are now into their third or fourth generation. If you think about the Nardal sisters, who did a lot of the work to create Negritude in the '30s in Paris, it's really been years and years of work. It started with wanting to cultivate an audience for people who could understand the symbols and signs in my work more. It also started as just a desire to keep up with cultural studies as more and more work was being done, to understand really what's happened to us over the last 400 years.

I started to feel really supported by some of these ideas, like Saidiya Hartman’s idea of “critical fabulation.” It’s something that really is helpful for me every day that I’m making artwork. Christina Sharpe has been really impactful in my life, and many of my colleagues as well. I was really delighted and thrilled. I really feel like the most important thing I’ve done in my career was the *Loophole of Retreat* conference [Leigh’s 2018 Hugo Boss Prize show at the Guggenheim], where those women were gathered, and also where Annette Richter, the great-great-granddaughter of the founder of the United Order of Tents, was able to come and tell her story. I’ve been really happy about creating an audience and being a part of making this history more visible.

*TG: We are grateful to you for that, because that day was important for us all, and I think it’s resonated in being able to lift up these voices. Zendaya, if you could pick any person to portray, is there a role that you absolutely would be thrilled to have the opportunity to play?*

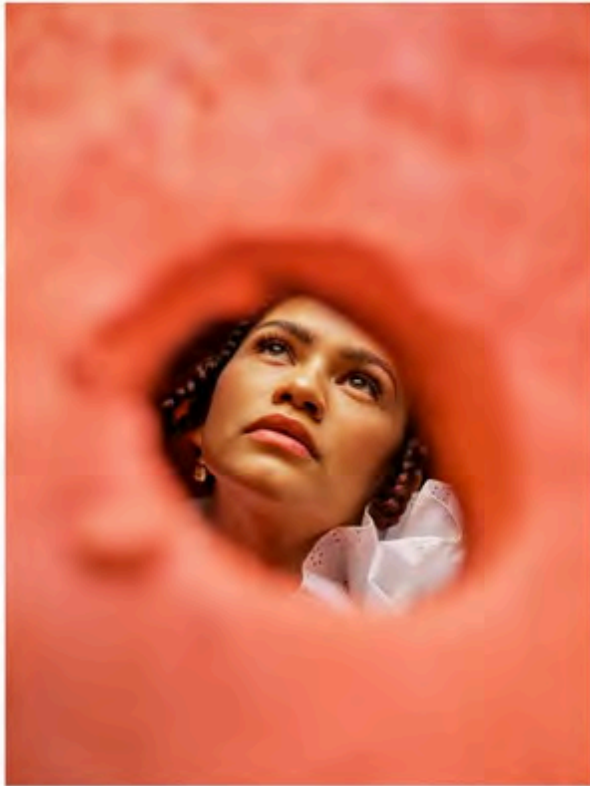
**Z:** I don’t know. People often ask that, and I think the beauty of being an actor is to be able to literally be anybody. At this point, I want to look for things that are going to continue to push me in different ways, whether it’s being pushed in a comedic way, whether it’s being pushed in a dramatic way. I just want to continue to expand myself and see what I can be capable of and who I can transform into. It’s scary and it’s hard and it’s terrifying, and that, I think, is the beauty in all of it—just kind of being a little bit terrified and getting to the other side. I want to continue to be put outside of my comfort zone, because comfort is the enemy of progress.

*TG: It seems that what you are saying is that you are embracing all possibility, and you’re also leaning into risk and taking chances in relation to your creativity. That’s something you share with Simone, who I’ve had the pleasure of watching since the time she was an artist in residence here at the Studio Museum. She has always been fearless in her ability to both imagine and execute her work through the full extent of possibility. I would say that’s a space that you both have occupied as artists, that manifests in the work that is out in the world representing both of you.*

**Z:** I think, just as someone who admires art, I feel like I don’t even know if I’m creative enough. I’m an actor, so I get to make things come to life that are already on paper. I can execute it well, but the freedom of allowing yourself to be creative, and then executing it, is fearless. That act alone, that fearlessness of putting your art out there is just so scary. For me, I can hide behind the fact that I’m playing a character. I’m playing someone else. Somebody else wrote this. It’s different, but that is, I think, another level of vulnerability.



DRESS BY LOUIS VUITTON, NECKLACE BY TIFFANY & CO.



LEFT: EARRING BY TIFFANY & CO. RIGHT: TOP BY RODARTE, NECKLACES AND EARRINGS BY TIFFANY & CO.

Golden, Thelma, Simone Leigh, and Zendaya. "Zendaya and Simone Leigh Are Going Beyond Beauty."  
*Garage Magazine*, September 7, 2019.



***TG:** Zendaya, you grew up in Oakland, and Simone, you are from Chicago. Can you talk about the way those particular places and, more generally, your sense of community informs your work?*

**Z:** I think there's so much culture and there's so much history in Oakland. Many of my aunties were Black Panthers, so they held meetings in the house that I grew up in. Just knowing the history, being aware of it, being taught it, it's special. I think it's something that people who are from Oakland or grow up in Oakland and have those roots and those histories, it's a thing that you carry with you. I'm lucky to have that, and to have that knowledge that has been given to me. It's just a very special place. It's gone through a lot of changes. A huge issue right now in my hometown is gentrification and how that's affecting everything. When I go back, I barely recognize where I used to live; the community and the people aren't there anymore. I try my best, and I want to continue to have a connection to Oakland and to my peers in Oakland, many of whom are activists and are really on the ground doing work. I think, for me, my job as someone from there is to give back to my community, but also to uplift my peers who are there. I personally think that being from Oakland is cool. You know what I mean? You just have a cool thing about you because you're from this town.

**SL:** I grew up in the South Side of Chicago, and Chicago is incredibly segregated. I don't think people can even imagine how segregated Chicago is. Maybe it's changed a little bit, but not much. I was in what's called a white-flight neighborhood. It was similar to the neighborhood depicted in Gloria Naylor's book *Linden Hills*. I was so happy when that book came out, to sort of see myself for the first time. We were really the beginning of the first black, middle class, African migration in Chicago. The world had broken open. People were reinventing themselves left and right on our block. There were people who became Buddhists, people who became Muslims. There were a lot of black Jews in Chicago. There was also already many, many years of activism, like Operation PUSH. Everyone was black—the nurses, the teachers, the doctors, the bankers. Everyone was black, so I grew up feeling like my blackness didn't pre-determine anything about me. It was very good for my self-esteem. I still feel lucky that I grew up in that crucible.

"I think that recently as my work has become a lot more visible, I've been more aware of the responsibility that comes with success."

**SIMONE LEIGH**

*TG: Sounds like you were both deeply, creatively nurtured. You both have mentioned activism and those of us who witness your work sort of understand that idea of activism is important to both of you. Can you define a little of the space of how you define your own activism through your work and in your life? I know that's big. You can take it any way you want to.*

**Z:** It's a big question. I go back and forth with the word "activist" because sometimes I don't feel like I deserve the title. Activists are people who do the work every day, and it's their life. I feel like I am a platform, a help, a tool, or a resource. I really struggle with the term activist because I just don't feel like I deserve it, to be honest. I come from two parents who are educated, and who are teachers and who have constantly given. My mom, for example, has given in her entire life and career—all she did as a teacher was give and give and give. To me, that's what you're supposed to do. You're supposed to do right by people. You're supposed to help people when you can. You're supposed to uplift people when you can. Through my work, I'm just allowing people's stories to be told. Hopefully, one day I'll be able to be in a position where I can open doors for people who look like me—and for people who don't look like me.

For example, I was on a panel with Ava DuVernay where she was talking about her work and what she's



DRESS BY Y/PROJECT, EARRINGS BY TIFFANY & CO.

able to do. I hope to be in a position where I can open those doors, because [the problem] is not a lack of talent, it's a lack of opportunity. We know that the talent is there in our community and within our people. It's just the lack of opportunity to be able to even get through the door. To me, that's not anything but doing the right thing. You know what I mean? To me, that's just what you're supposed to do. I want to let my art speak for itself, and continue to be and do projects and things that I love. I think sometimes the point of having a platform at all, to have all these people and followers, it's just to really step off of it and allow other people to use it. I've been finding more of my purpose in that way, because I feel like everything you do, especially when it comes to this industry, you have to have a purpose, and you have to have a reason for why you're doing it, or else you just go crazy.

**SL:** I really second everything that Zendaya is saying. I'm also very shy about describing myself as an activist. I have so many friends and colleagues that have developed their lives at Center for Constitutional Rights and places like this. I feel uncomfortable sometimes with the term. I do feel a sense of personal responsibility. The way it relates to my work is, at a certain point, I realized that I would have to work in an auto-ethnographic way, meaning doing the research that I would need to make the work. There's a long tradition of this. Nancy Elizabeth Prophet had to do it, and Zora Neale Hurston had to do it—become both the anthropologist and the novelist and the poet. Katherine Dunham had to do it. She got a

master's in anthropology and wrote several books and did her fieldwork in Haiti before she created the first or the largest, I don't know, African-American modern dance.

Recently, I saw the Toni Morrison film *The Pieces I Am*. I was surprised I didn't know about the history where she decided to start publishing other black authors, like Angela Davis and Toni Cade Bambara; that she published a lot of them for the first time. It also reminds me of you, Thelma, where you're building the museum and being the director of the museum at the same time. This is how we do.

“I want to just continue to explore whatever facet of my abilities that I can. I want to be pushed. I want to continue to push outside of my comfort zone because comfort is the enemy of progress”

**ZENDAYA**

*TG: Thank you, Simone. I'm glad you brought that up about Toni Morrison, because I was lucky to know that history of her through my career, and it was a great inspiration, the idea of how you create space for people. I think it's an indication of your humility that you don't claim the term "activist," but I think you both are conscious about the way you work, and how your work lives in the world. Is there anything you want to ask each other?*

**Z:** You know how I was just saying everything has to be done, or you have to do things with purpose? What do you feel like, with your art and what you create, what do you feel like is your purpose? What do you hope that the world or that people are able to connect with or take from your work? What do you feel like that impact is, or what do you want that impact to be?

*TG: That's a good one.*

**SL:** I think that recently as my work has become a lot more visible, and also because of my mentors like Thelma and Peggy Cooper Cafritz in D.C., I've been more aware of the responsibility that comes with success. I've tried to make space for other artists whenever I can and shine a light on other artists and intellectuals when I can. There's the problem of describing anything as being a first, because it erases all the work that people have already done. I do feel a great sense of responsibility, and it's a pure pleasure. It doesn't feel oppressive to me at all. I feel like this is the work that I'm here to do. As things go forward, I feel more and more like I've found my place, which is really lovely for me, because I was always a very awkward black woman. I'm really happy that I have some usefulness and something to contribute.

**Z:** That's beautiful.

**SL:** My question for you, Zendaya, is when you realize the responsibilities of representation, and the expectations that especially women of color may bring to what they feel like you could do, or how you might be able to help or push us forward, how do you manage that, not becoming overwhelming and not stifling your creativity?

**Z:** Being that I am still 22, it's something that I'm navigating and I'm figuring out as I go, because, again, I want to be aware. I want to be an advocate, and I want to be a change-maker. I want to be part of the active change that I want to see. But I also have steps that I have to take in order to make those things happen as well. I have to get to a place where I can make those changes happen. It's kind of one of those things where, internally, I want everything to happen all at once and happen fast. I have to be okay with taking the steps to get there, which is hard for anyone, especially since I'm a Virgo, to be honest with you. I want it done. I want the change. I want to be able to do this. It doesn't necessarily happen that quickly, and I can't also allow that to stop me from being creative.

I just allow myself a little bit of space. I think many young people my age feel like there's almost so much that we need to fix right now that it can be overwhelming. I think there's a certain layer of heaviness to that. It can kind of feel hopeless, like "Oh my God, everything seems wrong right now." There's so much work that has to be done, and my generation is having to do that work. I'm trying to find the balance between being able, at every opportunity I can, to open those doors and start the conversations, and also do the work from the inside. It's about being able to get into those rooms and start making those changes from the inside, and opening up those conversations, because that's what needs to be done. But it's also about not letting this feeling of wanting to fix everything all the time and make everything better just weigh on me too much to where I can't enjoy anything. You know what I mean? That's kind of the balance that I'm honestly still trying to navigate and figure out, because it's hard.

**TG:** *I have no doubt, and I'm sure Simone agrees, that you will do it.*

*Hair Marty Harper at The Wall Group, Makeup Raisa Flowers, Manicure Isadora Rios at MAM, Set Designer Robert Sumrell at Walter Schupfer, Movement Director Luisa Opalesky, Tailor Laura Cortese at Christy Rilling Studio, 1st Photo Assistant Jordan Strong, Photographers Assistants Chad Crews, Nate Margoli, and Lance Charles, Digital Tech Travis Drennen, Fashion Assistant Jared Ellner, Hair Assistant Anthony Perez, Makeup Assistant Keyanna Morrison, Set Design Assistants Andre Pagan, Hue Hallums, Claudette Martinez, Alberto Torres, John Ruiz, Mauro Baicco, Dietrich Teschner, Morgan Zilm, and Sal Lombardo, Production One Thirty-Eight Productions, Post Production Two Three Two*

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# FRIEZE

## ‘What We Carry in the Flesh’: The Majestic Bodies of Simone Leigh

From the High Line Plinth to the Whitney Biennial and the Guggenheim, the artist’s sculptures celebrate the architecture of the Black female body

BY RIANNA JADE PARKER IN PROFILES | 04 JUN 19



At a recent cultural event in London, I overheard someone say, ‘Her skin was like porcelain and alabaster,’ a comment naturally intended as a compliment. To whom exactly they were referring, I couldn’t be sure, but I imagined she was carved by a deity: soft, graceful and full of beauty. It also felt fair to assume that her skin was much lighter than my own. I struggled to think of a statuesque monument of a Black woman who was memorialized for her allure alone, rather than her service to society or resistance to prejudices.

The artist Simone Leigh has sought to change that with *Brick House* (2019), her 16-foot-high bronze sculpture, which will be unveiled on 5 June as the inaugural commission

for the High Line Plinth. Sculpted in the image of a Black woman, the figure casts her gaze resolutely down New York's 10th Avenue. Her eyes are sunken, but her lips are full and accentuated; her afro is bordered by long thick cornrows with a cowrie beaded on the end of each braid. Her torso is shaped like a lemonade jug and clothed in a skirt adorned with fabric piping. 'I've been thinking about the labour of Black women, what forms of knowledge they carry, and what kinds of labour they are involved in that's not valued,' Leigh explains in a video statement on the Guggenheim website. With 9,000 pounds of clay, the artist modelled the bell-shaped bodice of *Brick House* as a cultural repository of Black female experience.

Born in 1967 in Chicago to Jamaican parents, Leigh completed her BA in Art and Philosophy at Earlham College before moving to New York with her daughter, where she has remained for the last 25 years. It was there she began making the figurative work in ceramic for which she is best known, and which offers a compelling precedent for *Brick House*. The bust *Kingston* (2013), for example, features an asymmetrical hairstyle made of small rosettes atop an elongated face and neck with facial details abstracted by a white veil of glass beads. *Georgia Mae* (2017) shows off her perfectly constructed bell-shaped torso; *You Don't Know Where Her Mouth Has Been* (2012),



Simone Leigh, *Brick House*, 2019. A High Line Plinth commission. Courtesy: the High Line; photograph: Timothy Schenck Parker, Rianna Jade. "What We Carry in the Flesh": The Majestic Bodies of Simone Leigh." *Frieze*, June 4, 2019.



Simone Leigh, *Brick House* (detail), 2019. A High Line Pinth commission. Courtesy: the High Line; photograph: Timothy Schenck

meanwhile, is a chandelier of watermelon-size cowrie shells, the world's first currency, traded between – and for – Africans.

For years, curators and collectors ignored or dismissed such work, regarding ceramics as craft unfit for blue-chip galleries or museum shows. Yet their disregard gave Leigh the space and time to mature as an artist unbounded by artificial distinctions between craft and 'high art'. The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s understood 'women's work' as physical evidence of socially transformative ideas: AfriCOBRA collective member Jae Jarrell, for instance, produced wearable garments, such as *The Revolutionary Suit* (1969), from tweed and suede; Faith Ringgold employed fine needlework she learned from her mother to create colourful narrative quilts, such as *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983).

In addition to the recently completed *Brick House*, Leigh opened 'Loophole of Retreat', her Hugo Boss Prize exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, on 19 April. She has also been awarded a 2019 United States Artist fellowship, and her work is currently included in the Whitney Biennial. Increased demand has enabled Leigh to move from ceramics to the more costly clay-modelling technique, which allows for

a more relaxed working pace. She employed this process to produce *Brick House*, the largest work in Leigh's 'Anatomy of Architecture' (2016–ongoing) series, which merges the human body with tropes from African vernacular architecture.

The sculpture is not intended to compliment the idea that Black women are innately strong and invulnerable; rather, the artist hopes to invoke the varied architecture of female bodies, such as those belonging to athletes Caster Semenya and Serena Williams, who are often mocked as being too large or too strong, as though that makes them lesser women. The bodice of *Brick House* (2019) is informed by the homes of the Batammaliba people in Togo, whose name translates to 'those who are the real architects of earth'; dome-shaped structures built by the Mousgoum people in Chad and Cameroon known as teleuk; and a soul-food restaurant in Mississippi, Mammy's Cupboard, built in the form of a Black mammy. According to Leigh, 'architecture is a text that we can read to understand the ontological, philosophical, and psychological expressions of a culture.'

Though her principal medium has long been ceramics, Leigh has made significant works in video, installation and performance, as well as works of generously inclusive



Simone Leigh, 'The Hugo Boss Prize 2018: Simone Leigh, Loophole of Retreat', 2019, exhibition view, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA. Photograph: David Heald © 2019 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Parker, Rianna Jade. "What We Carry in the Flesh": The Majestic Bodies of Simone Leigh." *Frieze*, June 4, 2019.



'The Whitney Biennial 2019', 2019, exhibition view. From left to right: Dicko Chan, *Untitled*, 2018; Emerson Ricard, *Untitled*, 2018; Simone Leigh, *Stick*, 2019; Janiva Ellis, *Uh Oh, Look Who Got Wet*, 2019; Simone Leigh, *#8 Village Series*, 2019. Photograph: Ron Amstutz

social practice. *The Free People's Medical Clinic* (2014) offered healthcare from a Bedford-Stuyvesant brownstone free of charge. *The Waiting Room*, presented at the New Museum in 2016, was dedicated to 49-year-old Esmin Elizabeth Green, who died after 24 hours of waiting, neglected, in a New York City hospital receiving room. The space offered community acupuncture, lessons in herbalism and guided meditations. Over three months, this work continued to expand on Leigh's desire to offer immediate care and attention to othered bodies through alternative notions of medicine as an alternative to the American healthcare system.

An artist residency at Tate Exchange in 2016 which resulted in the programme 'Psychic Friends Network' further illustrated Leigh's pledge to activate spaces for communal preservation. Over the course of a week, Leigh hosted free intergenerational workshops (including an evening to meditate on ageing with Lorraine O'Grady), forums that addressed desire and healing, doily-making classes and a collective listening session. The popular residency closed with an entrancing dance performance, *Aluminum* (2016), in collaboration with New York-based choreographer Rashida Bumbray. Beginning

Parker, Rianna Jade. "What We Carry in the Flesh': The Majestic Bodies of Simone Leigh." *Frieze*, June 4, 2019.

barefooted in the Tanks at Tate Modern, Bumbray led the growing audience up the spiral staircase singing an African-American spiritual, 'Lay Down Body'. Leigh, gliding close behind, became the second voice in the call and response song, repeating the names of Black people murdered by the state: Mark Duggan, Alton Sterling, Sarah Reed, Sandra Bland. Lifting up her red-chequered dress, Bumbray revealed large silver South African ankle-shakers and began to sharply execute a variety of African dance forms – stomps, taps and hoofs – against the concrete floors. Shuffling in counter-clockwise and forward circles, drumming up symbolic communication with their ancestors, the artists were then met by a young flautist and trumpeter on the museum's fifth floor, against a panoramic view of London. In Leigh's words, the performance 'refers to ritual as knowledge transfer', indicating the power of performance as a tool of collective memory and cultural criticism, both within and outside of institutional spaces.

There is a bodily archive of histories and languages that we carry 'in the flesh', according to scholar Hortense Spillers in her essay 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book' (1987) – one that we can use to reconstitute ourselves. Black female flesh, Spiller formulates, comprises 'layers of attenuated meaning, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order'. As Black women have been oppressed, their opportunities for social and political self-identification have been shrouded from view. Leigh's work helps to uncover them, reminding us 'who are the real architects of earth.'

*Main image: Simone Leigh, Sentinel, 2019, installation view, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA.*

*Courtesy: the artist and Lühring Augustine, New York; photograph: David Heald © 2019 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation*

*'The Hugo Boss Prize 2018: Simone Leigh, Loophole of Retreat' runs at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA, through 27 October 2019. Brick House will remain at the High Line Plinth, New York, USA, until September 2020. 'The Whitney Biennial 2019' runs at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA, through 22 September 2019.*

## RIANNA JADE PARKER

Rianna Jade Parker is a writer, curator and researcher. She is a founding member of the interdisciplinary collective Thick/er Black Lines and a contributing editor of *frieze*. Her book *A Brief History of Black British Art* is forthcoming from Tate Publishing. She lives in London, UK.

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## THE ART NEWSPAPER

Artist interview // Interview

# Simone Leigh, now in the spotlight, contemplates the theme of invisibility

With three presentations scheduled this spring in New York, the Brooklyn-based artist talks about her commitment to representing the experience of black women

**Nancy Kenney**

24 April 2019

The Brooklyn-based artist Simone Leigh is known for sculpture, video, performance and social projects that focus on race, history and gender, but above all on the black female experience. Her art, executed in materials like ceramics, raffia and bronze, is inspired by ancient African and African-American objects as well as ethnography, the history of architecture, feminist criticism and chronicles of political resistance.

Her social projects range from *Free People's Medical Clinic* (2014), in which nurses, yoga and massage instructors and others provided services in a house in Brooklyn, to *The Waiting Room*, an exhibition at the New York's New Museum that created a healing centre. Last autumn the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum awarded Leigh the Hugo Boss Prize, which has culminated in a solo show at the Guggenheim that opened on 19 April. She has also created a colossal piece, *Brick House* (2018-19), that is on view at the elevated linear park in Manhattan known as the High Line, and she is among the artists in the Whitney Biennial (17 May-22 September).



Simone Leigh, the winner of the Hugo Boss Prize  
David Heald/© The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Kenney, Nancy, and Simone Leigh. "Simone Leigh, now in the spotlight, contemplates the theme of invisibility."  
*The Art Newspaper*, April 24, 2019.

**The Art Newspaper: With your solo show at the Guggenheim, the installation on the High Line and the Whitney Biennial, are you taking the barrage of attention in stride?**

Simone Leigh: I feel that I've arrived here through a lifetime of critical inquiry and hard work. In recent years, as I've been able to accomplish things my foremothers would have only dreamed of, my way of coping with my success is to focus on the responsibilities that it engenders.

**In your youth, when did you realise that you were going to become an artist?**

I don't have a memory of ever wanting to be an artist. When I was in college studying philosophy and cultural studies, I remember being really taken with the works that I saw photographed in a book called *Nigerian Pottery*, and it led me to think about the anonymous labour of women and also the way African objects and material culture are categorised. I continue to be interested in these sorts of things. I think of black women and femmes as a kind of material culture.

**Most of the ceramics in your recent solo show at Luhring Augustine last year were female busts and bodies. In one piece, the top half is a woman with no face; another was a face jug, with a nose and lips but no eyes or ears. Is this a way of declining the gaze of the observer?**

No, it's a way of abstracting the figure because as I work I imagine a kind of experience, a state of being, rather than one person. I toggle back and forth between abstraction and figuration.



Brick House, 16ft tall, before it was installed on the High Line in New York  
Timothy Schenck

Kenney, Nancy, and Simone Leigh. "Simone Leigh, now in the spotlight, contemplates the theme of invisibility."  
*The Art Newspaper*, April 24, 2019.



Simone Leigh's *No Face (Pannier)* from 2018  
© Simone Leigh; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

### **Do face jugs evoke a certain tradition?**

Face jugs are part of the early material culture of African-Americans. They represent a particular type of creolisation between West African and American cultures. Face jugs are a kind of power object. While they are handmade, they also have power. They act: they are something beyond being a container or vessel.

### **There are forms that recur in your work, like the cowrie shell and a dome shape. Do they have a specific meaning?**

I would describe the cowrie shell as a stand-in for the female body, or a body in general, or a representation of an absence as well as a presence. With the dome, I was thinking both of the skirts in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and also the skirts that you see women use in the Afro-Brazilian religious tradition *candomblé*—the agency embodied in those skirts. There's another dome-shaped structure that recurs in my work in the form of some architectures that I've been interested in, including Mousgoum buildings in Cameroon and other West and North African architectures.

Ironically, in the *Cupboard* series of works I refer to a place in Mississippi called Mammy's Cupboard, which is a restaurant in the form of a mammy, and the skirt is where the patrons would enter to eat. I thought

the symbolic violence in this gesture of going in to eat in someone's skirt was really stunning, and that it symbolically tells a larger story about the experience of black women and femmes. I have been interested in the symbolic parts of that building since I encountered it in an Edward Weston photograph.

***Free People's Medical Clinic, held in a house in Brooklyn, offered HIV and blood-pressure screenings, modern dance, lessons in herbalism, and yoga and massage sessions in an apparent effort to reach out to black women. How did this fit into your art-making?***

The clinic, a re-creation of a Black Panther Party initiative, was not intended to reach out to help black women; that was a misunderstanding. It was more a display of the labour of black women and the knowledge of black women who work in forms of knowledge like herbalism that go under the radar because these modes are not easily capitalised upon. The clinic was, rather, to display the work that was already going on in the community—that self-determinative work.

“

**As I work I imagine a kind of experience, a state of being, rather than one person**

**I've read that your social projects were also inspired by the United Order of Tents, founded by former slaves.**

It's a 152-year-old organisation of black women—nurses and others who gathered together to support each other. I've been very interested in them because of their longevity, and also their secrecy. For me, they represent a style or mode of resistance, which is to do your work without visibility, as opposed

to trying to create as much visibility as possible—what many artists strive for. Since encountering them I've been thinking about them and other African-American organisations which use secrecy as a way of protecting themselves—for example, the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, where nine people in bible study were shot down. In reaction to Nat Turner's slave rebellion, in 1834 Charleston outlawed all-black churches; the AME congregation met in secret until the end of the Civil War. I know that that particular church had to go underground for 35 years after black churches were banned in the state. So I think the status of gathering and organising and thinking underground has been an important tool that African-Americans have employed to survive and to thrive.

**In 2016, you staged *The Waiting Room* at the New Museum, which offered free acupuncture classes and massage sessions with a series of health and wellness lectures, blurring the line between bodily and spiritual health.**

We created a magazine for the waiting room at the Free People's Medical Clinic that several scholars contributed to. Naomi Jackson wrote about Esmin Green, who died after trying to check herself into Kings County Hospital: after waiting for 24 hours, she collapsed and died. I just can't believe that she sat there until she died. *The New York Times* wrote of the incident: "Waiting may have killed her." And I think it speaks to a kind of strength and fortitude that's asked of black women constantly—a kind of strength that is actually a death sentence. When the New Museum suggested a restaging of the work, I decided to focus on the status of waiting: this project became *The Waiting Room*.

## Have you created specific pieces for the Guggenheim show?

I am creating a new body of work, which includes two new bronzes, and also a sound installation that is related to a film I'm making during the run of the show.

***Brick House*, your installation for the High Line, is a 16-foot-tall bust of a black woman whose torso is conflated with the form of what might be a skirt or clay house. What was it like working at that scale?**

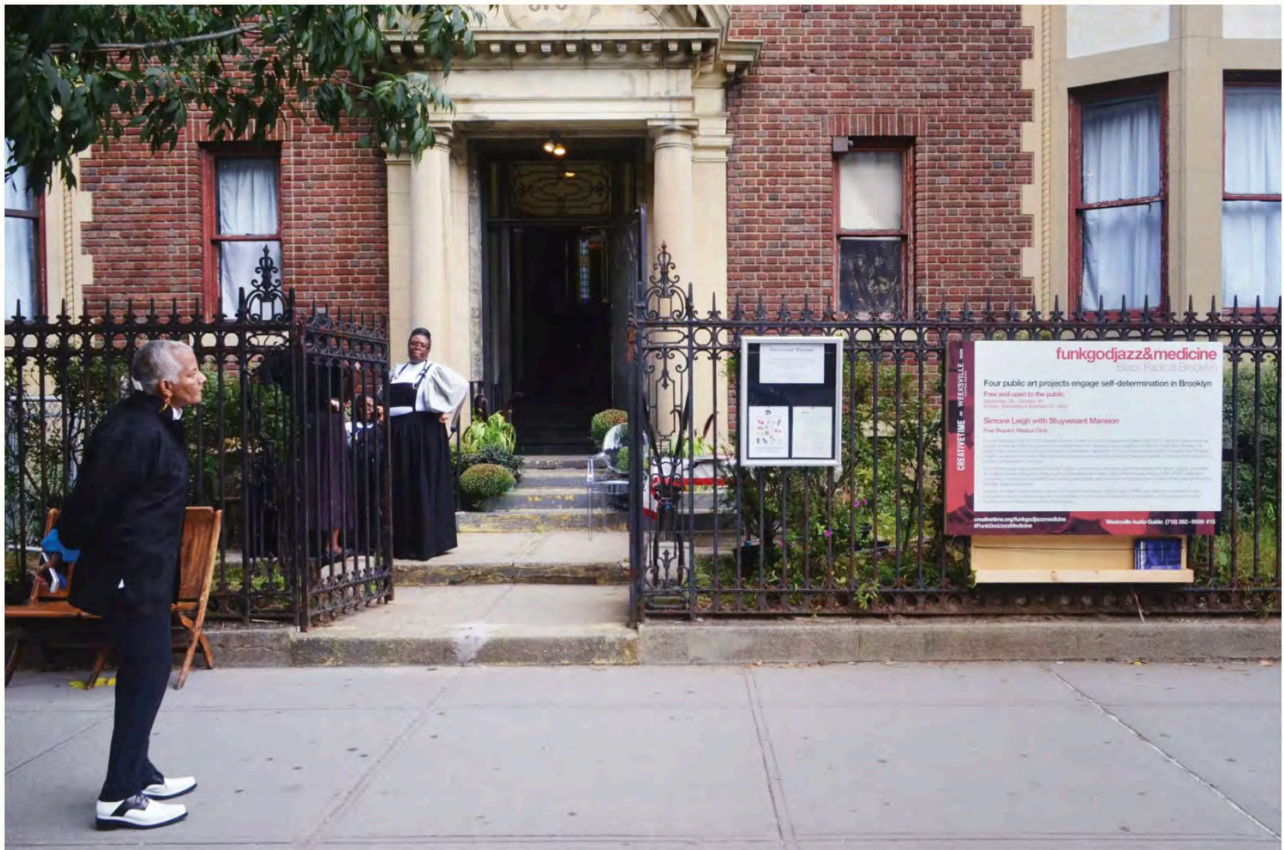
I love working at this scale—it has made me so happy. It involves using your entire body and mind in the creation of the work. It's thrilling.

**It forms a stark contrast to its urban surroundings, such as billboard ads.**

I thought it might be appropriate to have a sculpture that considers beauty as its subject matter in this setting. I was thinking about representation of a kind of femininity that I'm more interested in: a femininity that's based on being solid as opposed to fragile, as well as the complex history of art represented in the sculpture. Benin bronzes were a touchstone in the creation of the work.

## Three key works

### Free People's Medical Clinic (2014)



Free People's Medical Clinic (2014)

© Simone Leigh; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine

Kenney, Nancy, and Simone Leigh. "Simone Leigh, now in the spotlight, contemplates the theme of invisibility." *The Art Newspaper*, April 24, 2019.

“It became a platform for which the idea of black pain was taken into consideration and the history of the black body in the US in medicine was taken into consideration, for obvious reasons. But my intention in the work was not to engage in any sense that there was a group of black women that needed my help or support. It was, rather, to display the work that was already going on in the community.”

### **A Particularly Elaborate Imba Yokubikira, or Kitchen House, Stands Locked Up While Its Owners Live in Diaspora (2016)**



A Particularly Elaborate Imba Yokubikira, or Kitchen House, Stands Locked Up While Its Owners Live in Diaspora (2016), presented by the Studio Museum of Harlem in Marcus Garvey Park in New York  
© Simone Leigh; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine

“This was my first commission to do a public sculpture, which was organised by the Studio Museum in Harlem. My intention was to create structures based on an imba, which is an important kind of building in Shona culture. As I was making those forms in my studio—the maquettes—I really sort of enjoyed the way they were torso-, skirt- and building-like all at once, and I started to combine them with the figurative pieces I was working on.”

## Head With Cobalt (2018)



Head With Cobalt (2018)  
© Simone Leigh; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine

“Many times I am thinking about disparate histories when working on a single sculpture. In this case I was thinking of a bronze created in 200BC, described as *Vase and lid in the form of a Nubian boy*, which I encountered in the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, as much as I was thinking of American vernacular art such as face jugs.”

## Biography

Born in **1967** in **Chicago** to Jamaican parents, Leigh graduated in **1990** with a major in art and a minor in philosophy at **Earlham College** in Richmond, Indiana. She lives and works in **Brooklyn**.

## MILESTONES

Leigh was artist in residence at **Hunter College** in New York in **2008-09** and at the **Studio Museum** in Harlem in **2010-11**. In **2014** she presented *Free People’s Medical Clinic*, sponsored by **Creative Time** and the **Weeksville Heritage Center**, in Brooklyn. *The Waiting Room* was installed at the **New Museum** in **2016**, the same year that *Psychic Friends Network* appeared at Tate Modern in London and she was the focus of a solo show at the **Hammer Museum** in Los Angeles. In **2018** she had a solo show at **Luhring-Augustine** in New York and received the **Hugo Boss Prize**, administered by the **Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation**.

Kenney, Nancy, and Simone Leigh. “Simone Leigh, now in the spotlight, contemplates the theme of invisibility.” *The Art Newspaper*, April 24, 2019.

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## The New York Times

# An Artist Ascendant: Simone Leigh Moves Into the Mainstream



The artist Simone Leigh working on her sculpture "Brick House," which will be displayed on the High Line in Manhattan starting in April. Michelle Gustafson for The New York Times

**By Robin Pogrebin and Hilarie M. Sheets**

Aug. 29, 2018

The sculptures were hard to miss at the 2016 Art Show in the Park Avenue Armory — an arresting line of ceramic female busts with rosette heads and raffia torsos, both majestic and ethereal, figural yet abstract.

Pogrebin, Robin, and Hilarie M. Sheets. "An Artist Ascendant: Simone Leigh Moves Into the Mainstream." *The New York Times*, August 29, 2018.

That may have been the moment when Simone Leigh, the Chicago-born artist behind those sculptures, moved into the mainstream, since the busts quickly sold out — including to the prominent collector Glenn Fuhrman, making other buyers take notice.

Ms. Leigh’s career has taken off since then. She moved from a modest gallery (Tilton) to a larger one (Luhring Augustine) and saw her work acquired by important museums, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York; the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; and the Pérez Art Museum Miami.

Since October, when she won the Studio Museum in Harlem’s Wein Artist Prize, she’s been checking off firsts. November: The first time one of her pieces sold at a major auction, at Sotheby’s.



The towering sculpture, which will be cast in bronze, depicts an African-American woman with braids whose torso evokes a skirt-like house. Michelle Gustafson for The New York Times



A rendering of how “Brick House” will be displayed on the High Line. Simone Leigh/James Corner Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro, via The City of New York

December: She was shortlisted for the Guggenheim’s 2018 Hugo Boss prize. On Sept. 8, she opens her first significant solo New York gallery show, at Luhring Augustine. And she has been selected as the inaugural winner of the High Line’s new series of large-scale commissions, which will be unveiled in April.

“She’s driving a cultural shift at large where black women are being acknowledged as aesthetic leaders,” said Rashida Bumbray, a curator who has worked closely with Ms. Leigh. “It feels like a moment, but it is really just that the wool has been lifted from everyone’s eyes.”

At 50, the artist is hardly an emerging talent — her work has been presented by the New Museum, Creative Time and the Kitchen. The daughter of Jamaican missionaries, Ms. Leigh has steadfastly explored the experiences and social histories of black women through the ceramic tradition for more than 25 years. But the medium — and the artist — were long overlooked by the art world.

“I was told by everyone I knew in ceramics there was no way I would ever be included in the contemporary art space,” said Ms. Leigh, perched on a small couch at her studio in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, the only place to sit without getting coated in clay.

Her work didn't quite fit into any single category, given its multilayered references to African traditions, feminism, ethnographic research, post-colonial theory and racial politics.

"Because I was largely ignored, I had a long time to mature without any kind of glare, which worked out for me quite well," said Ms. Leigh, a regal presence with dangling silver earrings framing her round face. With her newfound success, she said, "I'm more concerned with having the space and the time to be creative."

Testifying to the current demands on the artist, including a gallery debut, were the many sculptures crowding every surface of her studio on this hot July day (no air conditioning). The project for the High Line — to be displayed on a plinth anchoring the newest section of the elevated park known as the spur — had been dominating her attention: At 16 feet tall, the sculpture is by far the largest she's ever created, as big as the plinth would allow.

The towering bronze sculpture, titled "Brick House," depicts an African-American woman with braids whose torso evokes a skirt-like house.



New sculptures by Ms. Leigh that conflate women's heads with pitchers and vases. Simone Leigh/Luhring Augustine, New York: Photo by Farzad Owrang

“It’s an icon, it’s a goddess — this very powerful feminine presence in a very masculine environment, because all around you, you have these towering skyscrapers and cranes,” said Cecilia Alemani, the director and chief curator of High Line Art. “It’s very rare that in the public sphere you see a black person commemorated as a hero or simply elevated on a pedestal.” (In New York, Ms. Leigh’s goddess will be in good company with statues of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and Duke Ellington, among others.)

Ms. Leigh said she thought “it would be a great opportunity to have something about black beauty right in the middle of that environment.”

She named the piece in part after the Commodores song of the same title, which she listened to on the radio as a child. “It was a celebration of black womanhood that we hadn’t really heard,” Ms. Leigh said. “That was what was resonant about it — not necessarily a male gaze but that beauty was associated with mightiness and strength, as opposed to fragility. Being solid.”

Ms. Leigh said she was fortunate to be able to work on a full-scale clay model at a Philadelphia foundry, rather than the more typical approach of having her small model 3D-scanned, blown up to size and cast in bronze.

“It allows you to make adjustments,” she said.

The most significant change she made was angling down the figure’s skyward gaze. “Her whole attitude, whether she was looking extremely proud or extremely humble,” said Ms. Leigh, “was going to be expressed in the tilt of the chin.”



The Commodores-Brick House Video by merlotje

Another change was the hair, which morphed from rosettes to cornrows. The hairstyle was inspired by the character Thelma from the 1970s TV show “Good Times,” which Ms. Leigh described as “an extremely problematic show,” adding, “but it’s one of the earliest representations of black women I knew.”

“I really like the way they read as cornrows but also to me look like flying buttresses — an older architectural detail,” she added of the braids. “They’ve probably become the most important part of the sculpture right now.”

As in most of Ms. Leigh’s sculptures, the head’s eyes are erased. “When I first started making this, I was trying to abstract the face entirely,” she said. “Gradually, I wanted some African features, to be a little bit more specific.”

The torso echoes the bullet-shaped domed houses of mud and grass that were the traditional dwellings of the Mousgoum communities in Cameroon, and were reproduced at the 1931 International Colonial Exposition in Paris.



“I was told by everyone I knew in ceramics there was no way I would ever be included in the contemporary art space,” said Ms. Leigh. Michelle Gustafson for The New York Times



A view of Ms. Leigh's exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2016. Brian Forrest/Hammer Museum

The notion of the hut as a primitive dwelling “has been used to humiliate us for years and years,” she said, “when they are actually really quite beautiful and sophisticated objects.” Ms. Leigh added, “I’ve often used that kind of charged image in my work, objects like watermelons or cowrie shells.”

The High Line project has been “generative,” Ms. Leigh said, feeding the work for her Lühring Augustine show.

The new sculptures for that show conflate women’s heads with pitchers and vases, inspired by historical objects like African-American face jugs that “fuse the black body with a tool,” said Ms. Leigh. In her hands, however, the shape of a water pot may serve as a crown.

To produce them, Ms. Leigh went to Maine for its wood salt kilns. The sculptures are fired as many as five times, a process that requires at least nine people to monitor the process on four-hour shifts. “There’s an unpredictability to the result,” Ms. Leigh said.

Lauren Wittels, the senior director of Lühring Augustine, noted “the physical presence” of Ms. Leigh’s sculptures. “It’s almost like looking at another human,” she said, “they have so much pathos about them.”

The exhibition will also feature a 25-minute video installation produced this year and commissioned by the Berlin Biennial, which Ms. Leigh likened to an episode of the television show “M.A.S.H.,” with “inside jokes to black women,” she said. “I feel like we need a comedy now because we’re in such desperate times.”

Many of the video’s black female performers appeared in “Free People’s Medical Clinic” with Creative Time in 2014, in which Ms. Leigh turned a Bedford-Stuyvesant brownstone into a walk-in health center, modeled on those opened by the Black Panthers in the 1960s.

Ms. Leigh followed the clinic project with “Waiting Room” at the New Museum in 2016, which looked at various healing environments and explored the social inequalities in health care.

“In each of her forays into wellness,” the curator Helen Molesworth wrote in *Artforum* in March, “Leigh subtly demands that the field of medicine, as currently constructed by the white, colonialist West, broaden to address the specific concerns and health issues of black women.”



A scene from the 2011 short video “Breakdown,” directed by Ms. Leigh and the artist Liz Magic Laser. Simone Leigh/Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Pogrebin, Robin, and Hilarie M. Sheets. “An Artist Ascendant: Simone Leigh Moves Into the Mainstream.” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2018.



A maquette of “Brick House.” Michelle Gustafson for The New York Times

The artist said she’s moved on from that kind of overtly activist art, but she remains deeply interested in female African-American traditions and in women “who, for whatever reasons, have been left out of the archive or left out of history,” she said. “I still think there is a lot to mine in terms of figuring out the survival tools these women have used to be so successful, despite being so compromised.”

She has long asserted that black women are her primary audience, a position some consider controversial.

Ms. Molesworth, in her essay, said she has come around to Ms. Leigh’s point of view, having once been put off by it. “Given the lack of any such systematic inclusion of black women in the fields of Western culture,” she wrote, “this recalibration seems both deeply necessary and positively exhilarating.”

Despite Ms. Leigh’s formal engagement with sculpture, she never went to art school but instead earned her bachelor’s degree in art and philosophy at Earlham College in Indiana.

When she first moved to New York, she worked in an architectural ceramics firm, reproducing tiles for the subway. She lived in Williamsburg, married her roommate, got a Volvo and a brownstone and “was really unhappy.”

They divorced and shared custody of their daughter, Zenobia, now 22 and interested in photography.

Ms. Leigh said she felt as if her career really started in 2010 with a residency at the Studio Museum. Thelma Golden, its director, said she was struck by Ms. Leigh’s “commitment to her medium, the way she was invested in clay — its history, its connection to African Art and African-American art.”

The artist’s work now sells for \$40,000 to \$125,000.

In 2016, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo., included her sculptures in a group exhibition. “They have a fabulous presence,” said Julián Zugazagoitia, the museum’s director, “something both so contemporary and ancestral.”

Also that year, Ms. Leigh had a solo exhibition at the Hammer. “Her approach to social practice — which insists that institutions expand their purview to create more space for a diversity of representations of black women,” said Ann Philbin, the museum’s director, “have encouraged museums to be more attentive to the needs of these audiences.”

Among her many loyal collectors is Mr. Fuhrman, who keeps the bust he bought at the Art Show, the annual fair of the Art Dealers Association of America, prominently displayed in his living room. The sculpture sits alongside works by Cy Twombly, Cindy Sherman and Jenny Saville. “It gets comments as much as any work that we have,” Mr. Fuhrman said. “It’s just a beautiful thing.”

***Correction: Aug. 31, 2018***

*An earlier version of this article erroneously attributed a distinction to the artist Simone Leigh’s sculpture, “Brick House,” for the High Line in Manhattan. It is not her first public project; she previously displayed sculptures in Marcus Garvey Park in Manhattan from 2016 to 2017.*

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## ARTFORUM

# ART IS MEDICINE

Helen Molesworth on the work of Simone Leigh



**Giovanna Fischer at Simone Leigh's *Free People's Medical Clinic*, 2014, Stuyvesant Mansion, Brooklyn, New York, September 20, 2014.**

**BEFORE MY ENCOUNTER** with Simone Leigh's work, I had never heard of the United Order of Tents. Founded in 1867 by former slaves Annetta Lane and Harriet Taylor, the Tents is a secret society of black women whose focus was nursing, and they are the oldest continually existing sorority of black women in the United States. Today, the organization continues to pursue its mission of nursing and healing members of the black community by providing a variety of additional services, from aid in securing mortgages to assistance for building housing for the elderly to ensuring proper burial services for the dead. We know that

Molesworth, Helen. "Art is Medicine." *Artforum* 56, no. 7, March 2018.

members of the Tents are called Sisters and that those who have performed exemplary service are referred to as Queens, but beyond that, very little is known about the society's inner workings. Leigh has cited the Tents as an inspiration for her own work, and it's easy to see the parallel, not only because Leigh, too, has focused on practices of care, but also because much of Leigh's art is, if not exactly secret, not exactly public, either.

This was very much the case with Leigh's installation/social-practice project *The Waiting Room*, 2016, presented at the New Museum in New York. The title of the work alludes to the real-life, not-at-all-fake-news account of Esmine Elizabeth Green, a black woman who, in 2008, sat in the emergency-room waiting area at Kings County Hospital Center for twenty-four hours and died on the floor, of a blood clot that had worked its way up from her legs to her lungs. She was never seen by a doctor. Green's case is unusually appalling, but structurally it is decidedly not an isolated event, given the invisibility of black pain in our medical system. The statistics on black women's health issues are harrowing in their starkness. According to the CDC, black women die in childbirth at three to four times the rate of white women. Black women are 35 percent more likely to develop heart disease than white or Hispanic women and are almost twice as likely as white women to be diagnosed with diabetes. The litany of disparities could continue for pages. Suffice it to say, Leigh's interest in the historical denial of black women's bodies—their experience, their suffering, their pleasure, their knowledge—galvanized her to create *The Waiting Room*. It was not a



**Entrance to Simone Leigh's *Free People's Medical Clinic*, 2014, Stuyvesant Mansion, Brooklyn, New York. Photo: Jackson Brady.**



Headquarters of the United Order of Tents, Brooklyn, New York, 2014. Photo: Garrett Ziegler.

particularly visual event. Mostly what I recall is a gallery whose focal point was a large cabinet lined with glass jars luxuriously filled with herbs and dried flowers. This relatively empty room suggested that the real work lay elsewhere, namely, in the workshops on such topics as complementary medicine, folk-healing traditions, acupuncture, and meditation. Many of these events occurred while the museum was closed to the public, notably *Home Economics*, a program, designed specifically for fifteen black schoolgirls, that investigated ways to address the holistic needs of black women in relation to wellness and the medical establishment. However, you will not find a plethora of photos of happy museum visitors attending the workshops and events she organized. The scarcity of documentation is a choice, and a pointed one. Leigh's programming was neither an offering to the archive nor a feel-good tonic for the general public; her concerns were exclusively directed toward her work's primary audience, black women.

**Leigh's programming for *The Waiting Room* was neither an offering to the archive nor a feel-good tonic for the general public; her concerns were exclusively directed toward her work's primary audience, black women.**

*The Waiting Room* built on, and in some respects continued, Leigh's 2014 Creative Time project *Free People's Medical Clinic*, curated by Rashida Bumbray. Located in the historical Weeksville neighborhood of Brooklyn, a settlement founded by free blacks in 1838, the *Free People's Medical Clinic* offered HIV and blood-pressure screenings, modern dance, lessons in Caribbean herbalism, and more. In each of her forays into wellness, Leigh subtly demands that the field of medicine, as currently constructed by the white, colonialist West, broaden to address the specific concerns and health issues of black women (an expansion

mandated by the exclusion of black women from being the subjects of medicine as it has been traditionally conceived). Both *The Waiting Room* and *Free People's Medical Clinic* identified wellness as encompassing practices habitually not considered under the rubric of medicine, such as the knowledges that emanate from sources as disparate as folk songs and the philosophical work of black feminist theorists like Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman (to name only two). *Free People's Medical Clinic* was also a direct nod to the legacy of the Black Panther Party's neighborhood activism and to Dr. Josephine English, one of the first African American ob-gyns in New York, whose home served as the project's base. This complex layering of historical allusions and contemporary events is a hallmark of Leigh's work. *The Waiting Room* was on view at the New Museum during the fateful summer week when Philando Castile and Alton Sterling were murdered by police. Leigh's response, inspired by the ethos and tactics of the Tents (recall that they were established both to heal and to bury the dead respectfully), was to mobilize and quickly convene a group of black women artists, who would ultimately become Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter. Upward of one hundred members met privately for weeks, without the museum's staff, to plan a day of activities to take place at the New Museum on September 1, 2016. This time and space were to be primarily for the people that occupy the center of Leigh's practice—black women. What was on the table was a takeover, a claiming of the space of the museum, with no sense of apprehension or apology, for a group of people it has historically barely registered—whether as subjects, artists, visitors, or employees. To be honest, there was a time I would have felt Leigh's call for exclusively black women to organize this event "problematic" (I suppose I would have argued that it was "essentialist," while sidestepping my feelings of being left out), but I no longer do. This is partly because of Leigh's forthright insistence that black female subjectivity is



Alicia Le'Von Boone, Zahara Marion Pearl Shabazz, and Paloma McGregor with Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter, New Museum, New York, September 1, 2016. Photo: Madeleine Hunt-Erlich.

the historical framework of her practice, that black women are its subject matter, and that black women are the work's privileged audience. Given the lack of any such systematic inclusion of black women in the fields of Western culture prior to this moment, this recalibration seems both deeply necessary and positively exhilarating. Indeed, the assertion of this entitlement seems like an extension of Rosa Parks's fundamental act of resistance: space claiming. Considering it as such, I began to recalibrate my own "feelings" about pointedly being left out of an organizing meeting. Why? Because I understand Leigh's need for exclusion as bound to the Tents' use of secrecy—it's part of the strategy that enables her to do the work of placing black women at the center of her practice. Surely the Tents would not have survived had white women been invited to attend, and surely the Tents have produced a body of knowledge that owes its very longevity to its exclusive privileging of black female subjectivity. To be situated outside of the main event, to be refused entry, to be placed in a position of radical unknowing—these are deeply interesting aspects of Leigh's work for me as a white woman. And perhaps more to the point, this is the position from which I must engage with the work, and it is demonstrably different from the place I typically occupy, marked as it is by my status as insider, learned, knowledgeable, comfortable. For centuries, all of culture's agents—its makers, benefactors, and audiences—have been presumed to be white men, and for centuries, Leigh's primary audience, black women, were denied a place in this hegemonic structure. This was not a victimless crime. There are ramifications. And one of them, Leigh suggests, is a profound need for intimacy and privacy, for secrecy, for going underground. In an era of selfies and social media, the same era that witnessed 53 percent of white women voting for Donald Trump, looking back at the logic of privacy that protected the Tents offers very particular possibilities. Similarly, in an era when Harriet Tubman is denied her place on our most public currency, the power of underground networks might be conducive to the difficult and iterative work of decolonizing one's mind.

**I've come to see Leigh's ceramic female figures as sentinels holding space for a culture that is very much in the making, a culture in which whiteness is neither the center nor the frame.**

And yet, some of Leigh's work is decidedly above-ground, marking space and taking up room, fully participating in the symbolic cultural value of Art. Her discrete sculptural art objects operate in tandem with her social-practice work, a call-and-response that engages a dynamic of hiding in plain sight, of being in public while managing privacy. These objects fall loosely, but not exclusively, into three categories: ceramic-rosette-festooned heads of black women; large ceramic forms in the shape of cowrie shells; and large-scale architectural domes. The portrait busts are as anonymous as they are sensuous. The ceramic rosettes that form their hair are as nonnaturalistic as the palette of Rihanna's Fenty Beauty lipsticks: a dry cobalt blue, a shiny and seductive oyster pink, etc. This stylized hair is gloriously coiffed, and one imagines every rosette's meticulous and repetitive placement on each figure's head. These silent figures are similar without being generic, and the proliferation of style within a constrained set of forms is offered with all the complexity of a Sol LeWitt wall drawing. The figures don't have eyes per se; instead the forms register the eyes as a depression, each eye about the size of the thumb that made it. The texture of these gentle depressions, the smoothness caused by a thumb rubbing their surfaces over and over again, makes them a ravishing combination of the iconic and the indexical. Their lack of eyes might seem to invite viewers to regard them in a classically colonializing manner: You can look and they cannot look back. But this is not the sensation I have when looking at them. I feel as if it is I who cannot "see" them. They do



View of “**Hammer Projects: Simone Leigh,**” 2016–17, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Background: *Cupboard VI*, 2016. Center: *Aluminum*, 2016. Rashida Bumbray. Photo: Brian Forrest.

not, importantly, “refuse” my gaze (because that dynamic would still place me at the center of the event). Rather, their lack of eyes counterintuitively means they are “unseeable,” and hence unknowable, to me. They remain self-possessed, looking inward, contemplating and thinking things that I cannot fathom. Here, too, I’m reminded of the logic of the secret as an age-old strategy for contesting being named and controlled by a hostile other. I suppose it should go without saying that this claiming of the right to privacy feels deeply germane to our current moment.

Interiority is also at play in Leigh’s ceramic sculptures of oversize cowrie shells, each the scale and shape of the watermelons Leigh uses as a mold to generate them. Salt-fired to produce an array of extraordinarily haptic glazes that are a perfect marriage of color and texture, they evoke scarification, ritual, and exchange. Their shape is open to extreme slippage—eyes, vaginas, bellies, shells, sculpture, objets d’art. They lay claim to craft, technical sophistication, and tradition. The gestalt of these pieces is fast and rich, and I sense the feel, the weight, the process all at once. The cowrie sculptures are deeply truthful to their source. Like shells found on a beach, they feel like a gift from the world. And, as with real shells, their interiors are unavailable to vision, and your pinky will get stuck for sure as you run your fingers surreptitiously along their toothed edges.

**An overconfidence in the power of critique might be a vestige of privilege. I confess that more days than not I find myself wondering whether the whole damn project of collecting, displaying, and interpreting culture might just be unredeemable.**

Commensurate with the repetition found in her ceramics and her social-practice work, Leigh's oeuvre is punctuated by an architectural form that is an ineffable mixture of the infamous "decorated shed" (to cite Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi's favorite type of vernacular architecture); the 1940s-era restaurant Mammy's Cupboard in Natchez, Mississippi; and the dwellings of the Musgum people of Cameroon. These bell-shaped volumes, which are echoed in the rounded torsos of Leigh's portrait heads, are frequently life-size and adorned with concentric layers of raffia suggestive of women's clothing—whether Victorian crinoline hoop skirts, the flapper garb of Josephine Baker, or a nurse or cook's apron. Leigh's room-scale, dome-shaped sculptures produce a twinned sensation of limit and possibility. In her 2016 exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, a monitor inside the dome was showing *Aluminum*, 2016, in which Bumbray (who is a dancer and choreographer as well as a curator) appears in a floor-length gown, wearing anklets adorned with the tops of cans—jewelry Leigh purchased at the *muthi* (traditional medicine) market in Durban, South Africa. Bumbray dances gloriously, furiously, religiously. She dances as if her life depends on it. She dances her energy into the space of a future we can't see, disturbing and animating particles from atoms to muons. On entering these sensuously surfaced huts, I always feel like I missed whatever it was that happened there. The video is a residue of what occurred before I arrived. The video is a promise of something that will transpire after I've left. For me, these mild acts of aesthetic refusal start to engage the limits of empathy: I can't have it all. I can't know it all. Not everything is available to everyone, not even to a privileged gatekeeper of culture such as myself. Such are the ongoing fantasies of the colonialist mindset. The museum, the Western institution I have dedicated my life to, with its familiar humanist offerings of knowledge and patrimony in the name of empathy and education, is one of the greatest holdouts of the colonialist enterprise. Its fantasies of possession and edification grow more and more wearisome as the



Ingredients for Karen Rose's "Herbs for Energy and Pleasure" workshop from Simone Leigh's *The Waiting Room*, 2016, New Museum, New York, July 9, 2016. Photo: Maria Koblykova.



**A member of the Black Nurses Association tests Nit Ra Sit's blood pressure at Simone Leigh's *Free People's Medical Clinic*, 2014, Stuyvesant Mansion, Brooklyn, New York, September 20, 2014. Photo: Shulamit Seidler-Feller.**

years go by. Leigh's work intimates the increasingly discomfiting possibility that an overconfidence in the power of critique might itself be a vestige of privilege. I confess that more days than not I find myself wondering whether the whole damn project of collecting, displaying, and interpreting culture might just be unredeemable.

**What was on the table was a takeover, a claiming of the space of the museum, with no sense of apprehension or apology, for a group of people it has historically barely registered—whether as subjects, artists, visitors, or employees.**

Leigh's work makes it plain that I can't enter into its field of knowledge, when it suggests that my very capacity for sight and empathy and knowledge is bounded and limited. Such acts of aesthetic refusal are not new. Hilma af Klint mandated in her will that her abstract work not be exhibited publicly until at least twenty years after her death. Marcel Duchamp worked on *Étant Donnés* in secret for twenty years (1946–66), letting no one but his wife Teeny open the secret door in his studio. It was during these two decades that he opined that the artist of the future would do well to go underground. But going underground doesn't mean decamping. Even as Leigh refuses certain aspects of visibility and publicity, and insists on the right to private assembly, her work also lays claim to space. Her work's occupation of spaces both literal (taking over the museum) and metaphorical (the synthesis of body and architecture) is not a possessive "claiming" of space. Rather, her work—in both its sculptural and social-practice formations—is bound up with new ways of thinking about things, new ways of claiming or holding space.

For the past few years I've heard people use the phrase "holding space," and I confess I've chalked it up to a general decline in grammatically correct English. That changed when I heard Patrisse Cullors talk about "holding space" in the context of a Black Lives Matter event. When Cullors used the phrase, it seemed clear she was pointedly avoiding the semantic trap of asserting power through spatial dominance. She was offering something much gentler, and something much more powerful in its gentleness. Holding is an act that implies weight and assistance, an act of touching and proximity, a gesture of binding rather than division. Holding is also temporary. No one holds forever. Holding is tiring. Holding is provisional. One of the most famous acts of resistance in the history of the civil rights movement, Parks's refusal to give up her seat to a white person on a segregated bus, was an act of holding in this sense. Generations of schoolchildren, myself included, were taught that the reason Parks wouldn't give up her seat was that she was tired. And that is doubtless true. But, of course, her not getting up was also a form of displacement. When Parks wouldn't give up her seat she was refusing to make room for whiteness. She was holding the space for black subjectivity. Her action reimagined space; she was reshaping rather than territorializing. Leigh's work helps me to see that the logic of the secret has that force. Part of the predicament of whiteness is its constant demand that everyone "else" legitimate themselves in the face of it. One of the (many) implicit effects of Leigh's oeuvre is to intimate that there may be much to learn from listening to silence, for in that quietude is the profound realization that the dream of equality mandates a set of massive adjustments to some of our mostly deeply held beliefs. I've come to see her mute ceramic female figures as sentinels holding space for a culture that is very much in the making, a culture in which whiteness is neither the center nor the frame. Her figures are not giving up their secrets. They are not there for the taking. They



**Simone Leigh, *Untitled*, 2013, salt-fired stoneware, 17 1/8 × 7 1/8 × 9 1/8".**

cannot be occupied, colonized, co-opted, or subjugated. Their existence indicates a set of possibilities and limitations—of empathy, of knowledge, of rationality. The rosettes that adorn their heads speak to the repetition of handwork, to the eons of women who have sat at tables rolling and pinching clay, bread, vegetables, hair; they situate themselves in the *longue durée* of craft; they evince the meditative state that may have accompanied their making. (Was their laughter at that table? Were there tears? Undoubtedly there were deep exhalations of breath. When will we see these activities and gatherings as a form of medicine?) The ceramic heads, the architectural sculptures, and the social-practice work all partake of the ongoing transmission of knowledge—oral and aural—between generations of black women. There may come a time when the strategy of the secret is no longer needed, but clearly that future has not yet landed on our shores. Now, it seems, there is a need for black women to ensure that the knowledges they carried over the ocean, protected in the hulls of ships, guarded in fields, and nurtured in city apartments remain secret. For to be secret, to be underground, is one strategy against the constant colonialist imperative to name, and the longer one can stave off the naming, the better a shot one has at not being subject to the subjection, the co-optation, and the control that are the hallmarks of the colonialist mind-set. Leigh's workshops for black women and her sculptural sentinels leave me to do my own homework (to learn, for instance, as much about the United Order of Tents as I know about Jonas Salk, to understand that Musgum architectural feats are as world-transforming as flying buttresses, to see the knowledge produced by black feminism as a form of medicine as well as a form of philosophy). And while I learn these things as a counterbalance to the colonialist Western history I carry in the very structure of my thought, I know that deep down I also find myself wistful, wishful, hoping that one day the silent sentinels will speak, and that I might be ready to listen.

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# SIMONE LEIGH

## FOR HER OWN PLEASURE AND EDIFICATION

by Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts

The first words I ever heard Simone Leigh say were “My primary audience is black women.” Inevitably, these weren’t the first words; there had to have been “Hello” and perhaps also “My name is . . .” But those didn’t stay with me by way of introduction.

I had entered a conversation already under way, a few people joined together to make a small circle within a crowded gallery, the kind that forms in such spaces when one actually wants to hear what the others are saying. When she spoke, did the room clear? Its sounds hush? Its very shape change? Setting aside all exaggeration, I can say for sure that the dimensions of that room as it remains now—in my mind—were defined by what she said. This was the ground on which we met. Her simple statement threw into contrast all that was happening around us, in that province which imagines itself as a world. This was not a thing said then; this was not a thing said publicly. This was not so many years ago.

I had entered that space under the watch of Uhura,

as depicted in *Back and Forth* (2008), guarding the gallery’s entrance while caught in an infinite loop, forever hailing frequencies open on the bridge of the USS *Enterprise*—enacting the limitations of her utterances as juxtaposed with the force of her presence from 1966 to now. Elsewhere in the gallery, also presiding from above, was *trophallaxis* (2008–17), an assemblage of black ceramic orbs with golden tips hanging in the position of a chandelier, emitting light from reflections on paint and metal antennae rather than incandescence. Though, given the forms’ resemblance to munitions, one could imagine *trophallaxis* as an arsenal or doomsday device; she gave no clue as to her utility. Indeed, the suspended cluster was more a being than an object, perhaps taking measure of who was in the room, making note of who was looking—what was being looked at was looking back at you.

Among other of her roles, Simone Leigh is a ceramicist; she expertly wields earth, water, fire, air, and time. Her mastery follows an ancient reckoning with the

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Rhodes-Pitts, Sharifa. “For Her Own Pleasure and Edification.” In *The Hugo Boss Prize 2018*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2018.

elements toward the aim of enclosing space. One creates a structure in order to bring about a void; the shape of the thing depends both on what it is designed to bear and on who will bear it. The interior space of these utilitarian objects is often unremarked upon when we encounter them not in use. But they are forever invoking the shape of the bodies that once would have formed the vessels, drawn the water to fill them, planted and harvested the grains stored in them, hauled them, sealed them up and set them aside to let time and air transform the contents. We find them as Simone did: alone, emptied, as artifact.

But Leigh's encounters inevitably depart from any fealty to origins and begin to have a conversation with themselves across the scope of her work, speaking in what is called vernacular. (Let us agree that this means the ways people speak when they want to be understood first and best by the people to whom and about whom they are speaking.) Simone takes the language, images, and knowledge contained in forms and extends them. Therefore the pot may also be a woman, and the woman may also be a house, and that house may also be a cage. It may have a door, but perhaps one hovers at the threshold. Or its doors may be shut up—none may enter. In the collage *Landscape (Anatomy of Architecture series)* (2016), Mammy's Cupboard, the Mississippi roadside restaurant where patrons enter through a door in Mammy's skirts, is juxtaposed with anthropomorphic structures from the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, wherein the material culture of colonized peoples was imported to the metropole, as the spoils of war. Leigh shows us both their distance from each other and their proximity. As recurring touchstones for Leigh's work, they enact ways of building worlds and being in the world. We are living in the world created by the vision that gave us both the colonial exposition and the door in Mammy's skirts, a vision whose progress the humanist Sylvia Wynter calls an unparalleled disaster for our species.<sup>1</sup> Both shapes recur in Leigh's structures, transformed, two among the encyclopedic array of references by which Simone traces forward the alternative ways of being immanent in form.

Later I returned to the same gallery where Leigh and I had met, this time projected onto a wall, dressed as Uhura, sitting at the controls, like that previous Uhura performing in a loop (*Uhura [Tanka]*, 2012). At Simone's direction, my body passed quite easily from woman to earth, water, fire, air, time. Other of Leigh's friends and associates have appeared this way, as oneself and something beyond oneself, as source and emanation (I could also say: as material), creating space. There was Aimee contained by a large clay pot (*Untitled [The Waiting Room Series]*, 2016), or serving as the template that would become a pot (*Dunham*, 2017); Rashida wearing South African shakers around her shins and dancing down the staircase of Tate Modern in *Aluminum* (2016); Alicia's TV-sitcom enervation as aria in *Breakdown* (2011), a video made in collaboration with Liz Magic Laser; and the silent, diaphragmatic breathing of Kenya, back bared, head covered with gravel in *My Dreams, My Works, Must Wait till After Hell*, Leigh's 2012 video collaboration with Chitra Ganesh.

Some years later, in another gallery, I walk around Simone's *Cupboard VII* (2017), holding her hand. We are singing with ourselves to ourselves with Cecily, standing beneath a daughter of *trophallaxis*. After a few circuits I thrust my head into the structure through its raffia cladding. I dance. My head has gone through the wall; I am self-contained; my self is contained. My head has become a house and the house is singing. Rashida is inside singing. From the outside she cannot be seen and yet none can escape her presence. There is no visible entrance. We are inside an interiority, we have traced a circle around it and then we became it.<sup>2</sup>

I often tell Simone she is my favorite writer. This reputation rests entirely on the 2013 essay "Everyone Wants to Be Subaltern," in which she succinctly demolishes the category of identity as it has operated in contemporary art during the last thirty-odd years. For a moment it may seem that she stands alone in that clearing, but whoever is willing may join her; it is a collective work. She beckons: "We will also be able to gaze inwardly."<sup>3</sup>

What is the view from there? Gazing inwardly, Leigh sees Esmine Elizabeth Green, dying after a twenty-four-hour wait in Kings County Hospital Center in Brooklyn, unattended, unseen. Also: the sandbag fortifications built to protect the free medical clinics established by the Black Panther Party. Alongside free breakfast for schoolchildren, these were undertaken with hopes of a longer view; known as the "survival programs," such was the work necessary in advance of revolution. The inward gaze also takes in one hundred fifty years of the United Order of Tents, the clandestine organization of black nurses—invoked not simply as history or even tradition but as strategy.

Maybe this same inward gaze accounts for the unseeing eyes of Leigh's busts, an ongoing series whose proliferation suggests a repopulation imperative. Typically appearing on an intimate scale, these sculptures, which Leigh refers to as maquettes, suggest the plinth—monumental figures visible across the great distance of an interior plain. Though without eyes, they are not without affect. How many emotions can be read from the tilt of a chin, the slope of a nose, and the many varieties of coiffure styled from hundreds of miniature hand-rolled porcelain rosettes? Sometimes they have no face; there is an abundance of roses where the face should be; maybe they have seen too much. Perhaps through their unseeing eyes we might comprehend the riddle of private and public and publics winding across Leigh's multiple arenas of engagement. Perhaps it is a riddle Leigh answers as easily as she sometimes offers an entry and elsewhere seals it up.

In 2014, *Free People's Medical Clinic* offered real healing services from acupuncture to yoga, blood-pressure screenings, and HIV counseling, even as Leigh declared herself impatient with the "post-colonial fantasy" of "a mock NGO pretending to rescue Black people from some abject situation."<sup>4</sup> Neither social sculpture nor a dream of socialized medicine, in the crowded field of public-facing artistic enterprises, few seemed attentive to how the setting mixed private and public. The project was sited at Stuyvesant Mansion, the former home and medical

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practice of Dr. Josephine English, the first black female ob-gyn in New York. Leigh inhabited and transformed that space not just via the wondrously orchestrated activities but by the still, unobtrusive corners, thresholds, vignettes that whispered the language of materials recognizable from her studio. A glass-fronted cabinet holding vintage apothecary items was also filled with Leigh's signature watermelon-shaped cowrie shells. Elsewhere the hearth of an ornate fireplace overflowed with gravel.

At the New Museum in 2016, *The Waiting Room* continued these interrogations. There Leigh enacted her basic imperative: creating a structure, provoking a void. The shape was transformed by what it could bear. Leigh galvanized a convening of more than one hundred of her peers under the banner Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter; their daylong museum takeover extended to iterations in London and Los Angeles. But alongside this collective, communal action were private sessions

held behind closed doors, when the museum was not open to the public.

Meanwhile, Leigh continues rolling miniature roses between her fingers—a small, ongoing labor. Before the glaze, before the fire, I notice her fingertips earthen with wet clay. It is a daily activity, a feeling taking shape in her hands. I think of a quote Simone shared with me from the Parisian diary of Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, the first black woman to graduate from the Rhode Island School of Design. She was abroad and alone, destitute but convinced: “I remember how sure I was that it was going to be a living thing, a master stroke, how my arms felt as I swing them up to put on a piece of clay.”<sup>5</sup>

I think about how far Nancy Elizabeth Prophet had to go. I spoke to Simone once when she was about to travel, at last a trip unattached to any outcome. She said it was to be a journey undertaken “for [her] own pleasure and edification.”

- 1 Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, To Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 9–89.
- 2 Performance featuring Simone Leigh, Cecily Bumbray, Rashida Bumbray, and Samora Abayomi Pinderhughes for the opening night of *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon*, New Museum, New York, September 26, 2017. The installation, comprising three sculptures, and the opening-night performance are collectively known as *Signs and Grips*.
- 3 Simone Leigh, “Everyone Wants to Be Subaltern,” *Brooklyn Rail*, February 5, 2013, <https://brooklynrail.org/2013/02/artseen/everyone-wants-to-be-subaltern>.
- 4 Quoted in William J. Simmons, “Artists at Work: Simone Leigh,” *Interview*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/artists-at-work-simone-leigh>.
- 5 Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, “Diary: Paris, France” (1922), Brown Archival and Manuscript Collections Online, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, Providence, RI, p. 4, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:786295/>.

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