

Simone Leigh

*I ran to the rock to hide my face the rock cried out no hiding place*

February 6 – March 26, 2016

At the center of Simone Leigh's digitally projected 3-channel video installation, *Waiting Room* (2016), an unidentified woman is depicted from the neck up, emerging from the lip of a large terracotta vessel, spinning as though situated atop an unrelenting, ever-rotating pottery wheel. To the right, the woman (portrayed by cultural anthropologist and dancer Aimee Meredith Cox, formerly of the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble) is seen in a still, uncertain state of tranquility or repose; she closes her eyes and slowly revolves her neck from side-to-side to the beat of a pensive soundscape of drums and flute composed by Kaoru Watanabe, the projected image allowing for a chest-up view of her within the vessel. To the left, the image is fuller still and reveals the woman-sized scale of the container; her expression remains composed yet ambiguous, simultaneously serene and weary within this terracotta second skin.

*What could she be waiting for?*

The time of terracotta sculpture is slow, deep, and long. Both in its process of making and its appearance throughout known human history, clay-based earthenware production, particularly of human-scale figures and forms, occupies a crucial position within our collective and historical understanding of labor and cultural evolution. Including the so-called "Terracotta Army" of the Qin Dynasty (210-209 BCE) found buried in the Shaanxi province of China in 1974, and the myriad life-sized sculptures (500 BCE - 200 CE) of the Nok people of Northern Nigeria excavated in 1943, of the many insights into our shared humanity these ancient terracotta artworks and artifacts can relay to us encountering them in the present, perhaps the most basic and profound of lessons is about persistence. Or, in other words: *survival*.

After all, that is just what these terracotta forms and figures have managed to do, and for millennia.

References to time (deep time, the pre-historic, the recent past, the imagined future, and even the infinite) appear throughout Leigh's solo-exhibition, *I ran to the rock to hide my face the rock cried out no hiding place*, at the H&R Block Artspace of the Kansas City Art Institute. Layered and conflicting temporalities are implicit within the varied materials with which Leigh works, including the glitchy *now* of high-def durational digital media and the hard, slow, sturdy *then* of earthenware ceramic production. This is to suggest that of the many aesthetic strategies at play within Leigh's exhibition, that of the *hauntological* - of the past, of many pasts, existing within the present - looms large.

For Leigh, born in Chicago to Jamaican parents in 1968 and now based in Brooklyn, the imagery of *Waiting Room* was partially inspired by legends of survival and resistance surrounding Queen Nanny of the Maroons. A spiritual leader and Jamaican National Hero, Nanny was sold from her native Ghana into slavery in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and sent to Jamaica to work a plantation on Saint Thomas Parish. Escaping slavery, Nanny organized and led an autonomous, free village known as Nanny Town at the top of the neighboring Blue Mountains. From this strategic vantage point, Nanny led resistance efforts against British colonizers, raiding plantations of resources, and freeing many other people, returning them to a way of life at Nanny Town resembling traditional Ashanti society in Africa. Of the many legends surrounding Queen Nanny, one is that she hid runaway slaves in large pots not too dissimilar from that appearing in Leigh's video installation.

The tripartite relationship between the black female body, vessel, and commodity is a motif that recurs in Leigh's own artwork and in the art and craft traditions of both the American South and Sub-Saharan Africa, locales forever connected and separated by the traumatic history of the

transatlantic slave trade. These include the ceramic face jugs produced in Georgia and the Carolinas by black artists from the 18<sup>th</sup> century up to today, and figurines of laboring women carved from one continuous piece of wood ubiquitous throughout the many histories of African art (Makonde, Yoruba, and others). Leigh picks up this artistic tendency to collapse body, vessel, and commodity in order to re-instantiate, re-imagine and re-engineer their potential meanings and significance within the context of the present.

Appearing within several of Leigh's exhibitions and installations over the years are her exaggerated stoneware cowries (shells that were used as currency in the slave-trade), for which Leigh has molded clay around the exterior of a watermelon (itself loaded with contentious symbolic content), shaped the material so as to render a zig-zagging orifice opening, and fired with porcelain glazes that lend each individual object its own idiosyncratic set of surface elements and imperfections. Represented in this exhibition by a suspended cluster of stoneware and porcelain works fired over the course of several days in an atmospheric kiln in Missouri, *Untitled, Kansas City firing* (2016), Leigh's cowries are undeniably bodily and charged with the psychological and historical vectors of race and sexuality.

Writing on Leigh's artwork for *BOMB* magazine in the spring of 2014, artist and writer Malik Gaines suggests that the "nodes of commodity exchange, symbolic language, and phenomenological embodiment constitute a triangle-trade of diasporic life - a kind of triple-sense-of-self described by Frantz Fanon - and while Leigh's sculptures may be read as complete autonomous objects in the Euro-American modernist sense, an archipelago of subjectivity and imagination surrounds them."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the very process of hand-forming and atmospherically firing ceramic objects mirrors the kind of post-modern theories of identity that Gaines references, one that must constantly negotiate oscillations from exteriority to interiority. While it would, perhaps, be too literal to suggest that the vessels and sculptures Leigh produces operate as proxies for actual human beings, her earthenware sculptures nevertheless possess content that transcends the physical and implies something historic, something spiritual, something invisible, yet ever-present.

Situated just adjacent to the *Waiting Room* video installation, Leigh has installed a set of nine terracotta water pots. Detailed on their surfaces with only the gorgeous black residue of kiln ash from pit firing, the pots are arranged on the floor within a small corridor of mirrors just large enough to allow a viewer space to walk among the vessels. Titled *Three Way, Water Pots* (2016), the installation provides an endless, ever-multiplying array of views of the vessels while also demanding of its viewers a self-conscious experience of apprehension. We are confronted with ourselves encountering the objects, reflected in the visual field before us *ad infinitum*.

An ever-mutating tableau of bodies, vessels, and commodities suspended in the non-space of a mirrored reflection, Leigh's installation manifests sensations of repetition and dislocation, sending our image throughout space in a countless number of directions. Such sensations find their material counterpart in *Wall* (2016), a large-scale sculptural installation of upwards of 80 plaid plastic bags affixed over a topsy-turvy steel armature. Appearing like the underside of a capsized ship, close inspection of the patchwork plastic surface of *Wall* reveals small "Made in China" stickers dotting each bag, laying bare the global significance of this familiar, omnipresent material.

Colloquially known as "Ghana Must Go" bags, these large and lightweight woven plastic sacks have reached nearly iconic status as symbols of forced and compelled global migration. The bags appeared on the international stage in the mid-1980s, when Nigeria expelled millions of West African refugees, primarily from the neighboring country of Ghana, from its borders after decades upon decades of strained Nigerian-Ghanian relations, economic turmoil, and corresponding migrations. Provided with

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<sup>1</sup> Gaines, Malik. "Simone Leigh," *BOMB Magazine*, Spring 2014.

these cheap, mass-manufactured plastic bags, millions of immigrants packed all of their belongings within them and began their long journey back to Ghana. The bags, featuring an array of checkered patterns and color schemes suggestive of Scottish tartans, have since become synonymous with the image of global migration. Further complicating the cultural implications of the bags, they would later appear in the designs of such major label French fashion houses as Celine and Louis Vuitton, driven no doubt by the high-end fashion industry's insatiable hunger for appropriation and ruthless disregard for context.

The cultural history of the “Ghana Must Go” bags is as dizzying and layered as the woven plastic material itself, an effect of the plaid patterning that Leigh exaggerates through scale, density, and repetition within *Wall*. Like the ability of Richard Serra’s controversial 1981 steel sculpture *Tilted Arc*, an artwork with formal similarities to Leigh’s *Wall*, to redefine the space in which it existed, Leigh employs the phenomenon of the “Ghana Must Go” bags to similar effect, inspiring questions about how we move through space, how the mass migration and forced movement of countless millions could reorient or redefine our overly fixed senses of place, border, inhabitant, and identity.

Allusions to Ghanaian refugees and Jamaican heroes are emblematic of Leigh’s broad conceptual art practice, which often addresses the social and political histories of the Global South and diasporic subjects through a poetic blend of ethnographic research and traditional making. In so doing, Leigh pays tribute to non-Western artistic practices, formal innovations, and iconography within the history and trajectory of Modern art, whose gatekeepers and experts have so frequently neglected to position African and diasporic arts as central within the developments of Modernism all along. Leigh’s creative work and aesthetic products go well beyond common critique of the white, male, Eurocentricity of Modernism and begin to do the actual reparative work of inclusion and care for other important histories.

In the short essay “Everyone Wants to be Subaltern” written for *The Brooklyn Rail* in 2013, Leigh argues for the development of artistic “antidotes to colonial anthropology,” inspired by Suzanne Lacy’s *University of Local Knowledge* in Bristol, England, which created an archive of information sourced from area inhabitants. Leigh writes: “I imagine a future where auto-ethnographic initiatives documenting ‘local forms’ of craft and vernacular knowledge would exist across the world. This archive would be accessible to artists.”<sup>2</sup>

The skill-sharing, ground-up ethos of which Leigh speaks certainly guided the principles of her 2014 public art project in Brooklyn, *Free People’s Medical Clinic*, a holistic health, healing, and community gathering space she organized inspired by the populist healthcare legacies of the Black Panther Party and the United Order of Tents, founded in 1867 and described by the artist as “a secret society of black nurses who have been meeting in private to do good work and serve their communities.”<sup>3</sup> Formally, the same spirit is implicit within the architectural design of Leigh’s most recent hut-like sculptural work, *Cupboard IV* (2016), which greets visitors at the entrance of her Artspace exhibition.

Inspired by a mélange of transnational cultural influences as varied as Cameroonian mud huts, Victorian-era hoop skirts, and the offensive novelty architecture of Mammy’s Cupboard - a roadside restaurant in Natchez, Mississippi, built in 1940 to resemble a giant Aunt Jemima - Leigh’s raffia-wrapped, steel-frame *Cupboard IV* structure features an arrangement of her cowries at its top and closely resembles the itinerant grass house dwellings of tribal, semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer societies of pre-colonial Africa and North America. Historian Elizabeth Weatherford, writing in 1977 for the radical anti-capitalist feminist publication *Heresies*, argues that such designs are emblematic of what she terms “traditional women’s architecture”; “The dwelling the women construct usually consists of

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<sup>2</sup> Leigh, Simone. “Everyone Wants to be Subaltern,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 5, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Bradley, Rizvana. “Going Underground: An Interview with Simone Leigh,” *Art in America*, August 20, 2015.

a framework woven like an inverted loose basket, covered or thatched with available materials such as large leaves, bundles of grass or woven mats. They are round, ovoid, or conical, with no edges or planes to interrupt the flow of space. Their size and shape maximizes physical and psychological contact among the dwellers.”<sup>4</sup>

Nomadic and intimate, worldly and inclusive, guided by designs that honor local, women’s, and traditional craft histories, the architecture of Leigh’s *Cupboard IV* encapsulates the ethics of her art practice, which will stretch even further in forthcoming projects to include public performance and site-specific public installations. Staging encounters with objects, images, and materials brimming with subtext and loaded with complicated global histories and meanings, Leigh’s artwork perpetuates stories, legends, folk-tales, lives, and experiences all too often excluded or hidden from global art and culture increasingly overly determined by American media. In this, Leigh’s work is quietly radical, inspired by the traumas, tragedies, and triumphs of our pasts and compelled onward by the project of justice.

Danny Orendorff

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<sup>4</sup> Weatherford, Elizabeth. "Women's Traditional Architecture," *Heresies* (Vol. 1, No. 3, May 1997). P. 35

## **Exhibition Checklist**

*Three Way (Water Pots)*, 2016  
terra cotta and mirror

*Cupboard IV*, 2016  
steel, stoneware, porcelain, and raffia

*Wall*, 2016  
steel and plastic

*Untitled (Kansas City woodfire)*, 2016  
stoneware and porcelain

*Waiting Room*, 2016  
3-channel video installation  
3:13 minutes

*Cacophony*  
Studio

*Uhura*, 2008  
video

*Uhura (back and forth)*, 2009  
video  
5:02 minutes

*Uhura #3*, 2012  
video  
5:04 minutes

Photos: E.G. Schempf

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