

SIMONE LEIGH

ACCESSIBILITY BROCHURE

Audio and Visual Descriptions

HIRSHHORN

 Smithsonian



CONTENTS

Exhibition Entrance	6
Simone Leigh	6
Wall Text	6
Exhibition Resources	8
Visual Description	9
GALLERY 1	10
<i>Cupboard</i>	10
Wall Text	10
Visual Description	10
<i>Breeze Box</i>	11
Visual Description	11
<i>Brooch #2</i>	11
Visual Description	11
GALLERY 2	12
<i>Sharifa</i>	12
Wall Text	12
Visual Description	12
<i>Conspiracy</i>	13
Synchronized Captions	13
Visual Description	13
Transcript	18
Timed Audio Description	20
GALLERY 3	41
<i>Vessel</i>	41
Visual Description	41
<i>Bisi</i>	42
Wall Text	42
Visual Description	42

<i>Herm</i>	43
Visual Description	43
GALLERY 4	44
<i>Jug</i>	44
Wall Text	44
Visual Description	44
<i>Sentinel</i>	45
Visual Description	45
<i>Untitled</i>	45
Visual Description	45
<i>Head with Cobalt</i>	46
Visual Description	46
GALLERY 5	47
<i>Anonymous</i>	47
Visual Description	47
<i>Jug</i>	48
Wall Text	48
Visual Description	48
LERNER ROOM	49
GALLERY 6	50
<i>Breakdown</i>	50
Synchronized Captions	50
Visual Description	51
Transcript	51
<i>Slipcover</i>	62
Visual Description	62
GALLERY 7	63
<i>Cupboard</i>	63
Visual Description	63
<i>Sentinel IV</i>	63
Visual Description	63

GALLERY 8	64
<i>Village Series</i>	64
Visual Description	64
<i>Cowrie (Pannier)</i>	64
Visual Description	64
<i>my dreams, my works must wait til after hell...</i>	65
Synchronized Captions	65
Wall Text	65
Visual Description	66
Sound Description	67
GALLERY 9	73
<i>Sphinx</i>	73
<i>Sphinx</i>	73
Visual Description	73
<i>Martinique</i>	74
Wall Text	74
Visual Description	74
<i>No Face (House)</i>	75
Visual Description	75
GALLERY 10	76
<i>102 (Face Jug Series)</i>	76
Visual Description	76
<i>Overburdened with Significance</i>	77
Wall Text	77
Visual Description	77
<i>White Teeth (For Ota Benga)</i>	78
Wall Text	78
Visual Description	78
OUTDOOR PLAZA	79
<i>Satellite</i>	79
Wall Text	79

Exhibition Entrance

Simone Leigh

Wall Text

SIMONE LEIGH

Simone Leigh (b. 1967, Chicago) represented the United States at the 2022 Venice Biennale, one of the largest and most important contemporary art exhibitions in the world. Selections from Leigh's landmark Venice presentation make their US premiere as part of this exhibition, joined by key works from throughout her career, providing a holistic understanding of the artist's production in sculpture and video. Three of Leigh's newest works in bronze are also unveiled for the first time in this Hirshhorn presentation.

For more than two decades, Leigh has embraced a polyphonic artistic vocabulary that elaborates on Black feminist thought, an intellectual tradition that values and centers the experiences of Black women. Informed by a rigorous attention to a wide swath of historical periods, geographies, and artistic traditions of Africa and the African diaspora, Leigh often combines the female body with domestic vessels or architectural elements to point to unacknowledged acts of labor and care, particularly among and for Black women. Author and scholar Saidiya Hartman has described the artist's address of the Black feminine as an "architecture of possibility," creating space where these issues may be imagined and explored. Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation"—a strategy that invites historians, artists, and critics to creatively fill in the gaps of history—provides a resonant framework for approaching Leigh's work. "In order to tell the truth," Leigh proposes, "you need to invent what might be missing from the archive, to collapse time, to concern yourself with issues of scale, to formally move things around in a way that reveals something more true than fact."

Clay forms the basis of most of Leigh's artworks, even her bronze sculptures, which she first models in clay. The artist pushes the medium's possibilities through scale and method, challenging conventional hierarchical fine-arts histories, which still attach to material associations around women's labor, decoration, domestic crafts, and utility. This exhibition traces the artist's unique visual language through signature motifs, including cowrie shells, braiding, rosettes, face vessels, and eyeless faces. Through Leigh's re-performing of these forms in varying materials and scales, new structures of thought and meanings emerge, each consistently centering the experiences and intellectual labor of Black femmes.

This exhibition is organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and Eva Respini, Deputy Director and Director of Curatorial Programs, Vancouver Art Gallery (Barbara Lee Chief Curator at the ICA/Boston), with Anni A. Pullagura, Assistant Curator, ICA/Boston. Its presentation at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden is coordinated by Associate Curator Anne Reeve, with support from Curatorial Assistant CJ Greenhill Caldera.

Simone Leigh represented the United States at the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia in 2022. Her US Pavilion exhibition, *Sovereignty*, was commissioned by ICA/Boston in cooperation with the US Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Simone Leigh is organized by ICA/Boston and will tour jointly to the California African American Museum and Los Angeles County Museum of Art from June 2024 to January 2025. The exhibition is accompanied by a major publication.

Simone Leigh is presented at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden through the generous lead support of Sandra Masur and Scott Spector. Major support has been provided by Eric and Cheryl McKissack, Bridgitt and Bruce Evans, and Kimberly and Reuben Charles. Additional funding was provided by the Hirshhorn International Council and Hirshhorn Collectors' Council.

This project received Federal support from the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative Pool, administered by the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum and the Smithsonian Women's Committee.

Exhibition Resources

Explore the exhibition onsite and online through a variety of programs and resources.



Any exhibition results from the sustained labor of colleagues working both within and outside the museum's walls. The Hirshhorn would like to thank our partners at ICA/Boston and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and California African American Museum (CAAM), as well as the dedicated professionals and Hirshhorn staff members whose combined efforts contributed to the presentation of *Simone Leigh*. Finally, we offer profound thanks to the artist and her studio for their generosity and support.

Visual Description

The exhibition *Simone Leigh* spans the entire outer-ring gallery of the Hirshhorn's third floor. The galleries have 15-foot-high walls, with exposed 3-foot-deep coffered ceilings. The entrance wall is neutral gray in color, and the floor in the escalator lobby is speckled black-and-white terrazzo.

The exhibition title, *Simone Leigh*, is prominently located to the left of the exhibition entrance, displayed in large black capital letters in the middle of the wall. The didactic (informative) text appears to the right of the entrance. Credit text is located on the right adjacent wall, and the staff acknowledgment is near the exhibition exit, across the escalator lobby.

The entrance to the exhibition is off-center in the entrance wall, to the right of the exhibition title. *Cupboard*, the first work in the exhibition, is spot-lit and centered in the gallery just beyond the open entrance threshold.

The work is a towering bell-shaped sculpture. At the top center of the sculpture is a large white ceramic oval shaped like a cowrie shell, with a slit crevice down its center that has jagged, toothlike edges. The shell is more than a foot tall and appears as though it could be the head of a figure whose body is hidden in raffia, the dried leaves of a raffia palm tree. The long, thin, tan, dried leaves are layered around the sculpture starting just below the cowrie shell and extend outward in a bell shape all the way to the floor, like a large skirt.

The wall behind the sculpture is the same neutral gray color as the entrance wall, though it appears darker due to the dramatic lighting. The floor is light slate gray. These wall and floor colors remain consistent throughout the exhibition.

GALLERY 1

Cupboard

2022

Stoneware, raffia, and steel armature

Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland

Wall Text

Cupboard, a towering bell-shaped form covered in raffia (the dried leaves of a raffia palm tree), invokes both vernacular architecture and women's dress. As references for this domelike form, Simone Leigh has pointed to the 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition, which established the hut within a colonial iconography. Effectively reenacting the colonialist project while it was still ongoing, France mounted the exposition to display the cultures and peoples of lands then under colonial control. In *Cupboard*, Leigh brings these varied histories to light in a form that recalls gathering places or dwellings, topped here by a cowrie shell, another of the artist's recurring motifs.

Visual Description

Standing over 10 feet tall, nearly twice the height of an average person, *Cupboard* is a towering bell-shaped sculpture. At the top center of the sculpture is a large white ceramic oval shaped like a cowrie shell, with a crevice down its center lined with jagged toothlike edges. The shell is more than a foot tall and seems as though it could be the head of a figure whose body is hidden in the raffia, the dried leaves of a raffia palm tree, that covers the work. The long, thin, dried tan leaves are layered around the sculpture, starting just below the shell-like shape and extending outward all the way to the floor, like a wide skirt.

The sculpture is spot-lit and centered in the gallery, taking up most of the space but leaving enough room for viewers to fully circumnavigate the work.

Breeze Box

2022

Stoneware

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Visual Description

A stoneware sculpture sits on a large, square pedestal at about waist height. The pedestal is white, with wood grain running through it. The sculpture is a box with a figure's head on top of it, seen in right profile and slightly off-center. The surface is rough, reflective, and earthy green and brown in tone. The left corner of the box has been torn away, revealing a curved, bell-shaped base beneath the bust. The left side of the box has an intricate symmetrical pattern of square, oval, and triangular openings. The figure has short, cropped hair and has indentations where eyes would be.

Brooch #2

2008/2023

Colored porcelain, terracotta, lab apparatus, steel, and platinum luster

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Visual Description

A large circular sculpture is mounted on a solid neutral-gray wall. The silver metal disk has two rows of 19 evenly dispersed metal arms with clamps extending around its entire circumference. Each clamp holds a porcelain plantain in various shades of black, gray, tan, brown, and beige, and pale pink. The center of the piece holds a honeycomb configuration of 19 symmetrical, round orange objects with golden nipple-shaped caps or tips. The elements are configured as if composing a giant brooch pinned to the wall.

GALLERY 2

Sharifa

2022

Bronze

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Wall Text

Sharifa is Simone Leigh's first portrait. Sculpted after writer Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, this colossal bronze stands twice as tall as its model. Two of Leigh's signature formal strategies are present: the abstraction of the body and the evocation of the body as architecture. A foot protruding from the long skirt conjures the tradition of Egyptian statuary. The figure's downward gaze evokes strategies of refusal and opacity that feed the creative possibilities—and necessity—of Black women's interior worlds.

Visual Description

Standing twice as tall as an average human, a solid black sculpture of a woman leans back against a solid gray wall. The work is spot-lit, casting shadows of the towering figure on the generous wall space to either side. The figure's hair is parted down the middle and pulled up off her neck. Her head and neck bend forward, shifting her gaze toward the floor. Her breasts are outlined on her chest, and her hands rest, palms downward, on her thighs. She appears to wear a floor-length skirt, and her upper right leg is outlined as though it is held forward, away from the wall. A square foot protrudes from the bottom right of the sculpture.

Simone Leigh and Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich

Conspiracy

2022

16mm and 8mm film (black and white; sound; 24:00 min.)

Courtesy the artists and Matthew Marks Gallery

Synchronized Captions

Scan to access captions and personal audio.



Visual Description

A black-and-white video is projected onto the gallery wall, taking up the entire wall space. It opens with an overhead shot of sculpting tools and slowly pans to a potter's wheel. Two hands enter the frame and begin to add and work with clay set on the spinning wheel, documenting Leigh's practice as a sculptor.

A shot of the top of a person's extended hands emerge from the bottom of the screen, with all fingers held closely together. The hands touch at the index fingers. They are held still except for the slight movement necessary to hold them in place. The background is completely black.

The hands descend past the bottom of the frame and emerge again and again, holding tightly to various sculpting tools and twisting, manipulating, and demonstrating them in their grasp.

A sculpture of a headless female torso is seen from the waist up. It is centered in the frame and sits on a platform inside a brick enclosure. The torso is bare, with a defined navel and pointed breasts. The figure's arms are bent, with its hands cupped under each breast. A man enters the frame and bends down in front of the sculpture. Flames begin to emerge around the platform, and it becomes apparent that the enclosure is a kiln. He exits the frame, and the camera remains steady on the sculpture, surrounded by small flames.

An oval-shaped object wrapped in plastic sits on a pedestal. Its features are indistinguishable. The camera slowly zooms in until the pedestal is no longer in view, then cuts to a bust sculpture set against a plastic backdrop. The face has indentations where eyes would be. The surface of the face and neck is smooth, and the neck is long and slender. Many tiny individual rosettes, each the size of a pencil eraser, completely cover the top of the figure's head. A column of rosettes protrudes from the crown of the head. From the left side of the frame, an unseen person extends their right arm to spray the sculpture with gentle, even, up-and-down motions. The arm then drops out of view, and the camera zooms in closely on the figure's face.

A composed older woman is reading a publication called *Exposition*. Her gray-streaked black hair is coiffed, short, and curly, and she wears dangling rectangular earrings. A number of objects wrapped in plastic sit on a table behind her.

A woman wearing safety glasses stands behind a large sculpture. The room in which she stands is large, with high ceilings, and other sculptures are visible in the background. The focal sculpture is wrapped in plastic and secured in rigging, but its form is apparent: it is a headless, armless female torso set atop a large, bell-shaped base. A lift turns on and raises the sculpture off the ground as the woman observes. As the sculpture is suspended in the air, two men enter the frame and place a wooden plinth underneath it and leave the frame. The sculpture is lowered to rest on the plinth, and the woman exits the frame. The camera remains steady on the sculpture.

Two people walk or stomp on thick clay in bare feet. Only their feet and ankles are in the frame, and they exit and enter the frame as they walk around each other.

A shot of the suspended sculpture from the previous scene now shows it sitting on a large cart. The object is centered and turned in right profile. The woman and one of the men from the previous sculpture-lifting scene enter from the right side of the frame and pull the cart away, revealing Simone Leigh working with clay on a long workbench behind it. The camera zooms in on the artist, then cuts to a closeup of her hands. She is braiding long, cylindrical ropes of clay. A completed braid rests in the foreground.

A pair of hands in closeup are washed and scrubbed with a brush and sponge in a basin of water. Long hair dangles into the frame from above. The hands pull away, and the camera remains static, focusing on tools floating in the murky water.

A barefoot woman in a white dress with lace on the collar and cuffs bends over at the waist. Her legs are straight, and her arms reach toward a white cloth on the ground.

She holds this position, except for the slight movement inherent to the effort of remaining still.

A closeup of a face made out of clay is seen. Only the eyes, nose, and mouth are in frame in the front-angled view.

A straight-on closeup view of the same clay face is seen, now with its ears visible.

A front-angled closeup of a real human face is seen. The person is a Black woman. Her eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, and left ear are in frame. Her ear is pierced, but she is not wearing an earring. She blinks softly. She gazes straight ahead.

A straight-on closeup view of the same person is seen. Her curly black hair is cut just above her ears and at the nape of her neck. The very tips of a white lace collar peek into the bottom of the frame. She is still, and she gazes straight ahead, directly into the camera. She blinks softly.

A person's left arm and hand emerge from the bottom of the frame, holding a metal saw. An outstretched right arm and hand follow closely behind. The left arm and hand move up and down over the right arm, the saw making a scraping gesture without touching the skin.

The hands emerge again. The left hand holds a round wooden object with carved lines that meet in its center. The right hand holds a wooden board with a handle. The hands clap the two objects together four times and drop out of the frame.

The right hand emerges holding a smooth wooden tool and makes a back-and-forth gesture, as if slapping the air. The left hand emerges holding the stem of a white flower.

A person's left hand enters the frame from the top right corner. It holds a round wooden paddle and taps a surface with an even cadence, leaving slight markings. The camera zooms out, revealing the surface to be a large cylinder made of clay set on a large cart. Two people enter the frame and pull the cart away as a man enters the frame.

The camera pans to a woman working on a sphinx sculpture at a workbench. Behind her on the wall is a blown-up vintage photograph of a young Black woman sitting at a table wearing a long ruffled dress with a full skirt. Her palms are together, and her arms are bent toward the left side of her face, as if miming sleep. Her face is stoic. An upside-down horseshoe rests on her lap. A face jug sits on the bench in front of her and holds a single flower.

The man approaches the workbench and begins to work on the piece in progress that sits on it. The woman walks away from the bench, and the camera follows her. She walks outside through an open doorway, where a large sculpture sits just past the threshold. The upper body of a female figure sits on top of a large, bell-shaped full raffia skirt. Her palms are together, and her arms are bent toward the left side of her face, as if miming sleep. The woman adjusts the raffia skirt as it blows slightly in the wind. Simone Leigh enters the frame, and they both wheel the sculpture out of the frame.

A closeup of the figure's head is seen. There are no eyes, only indentations where eyes would be. The camera zooms out to reveal Simone Leigh and the other woman straightening the skirt again. The sculpture is now on a rocky beach close to the water. The artist and the other woman exit the frame in opposite directions. Simone Leigh enters the frame again, holding a torch. She lights the raffia skirt of the sculpture on fire, circling it and lighting as she goes. It becomes completely engulfed

in flame and dark smoke. The camera cuts to the old woman, who is looking on, then to the woman who assisted the artist in moving the sculpture, and then to Simone Leigh. All stoically watch the sculpture burn. The camera cuts back to the burning sculpture, which has deteriorated further in the smoke and flame. It continues to burn until little is left of the object. The smoke and flame subside, but the metal armature that supported the raffia skirt remains.

Credits roll.

Transcript

- ♪ Now journey ♪

- [Jack] The key figure in early allegory is the corpse. In late allegory, it is the souvenir. In Black North America, the last used objects of the dead are also believed to be specially charged with traces of the spirit. One can chart the continuation of this belief from plantation times. Graves were decorated with the last article used by the departed. The Congo believe that the deposit of such objects safely grounds the spirit, directing the spirit to the tomb. In the case of the burial site, the coffin and the mound are the obvious containers. The soul of the deceased is the spark. In addition to the tombstone, there are decorative objects. Plates and cups and drinking glasses are frequently selected for placement on the surface of a tomb. It is believed that the last strength of a dead person is still present within that sort of object. Spirit-embodiment materials include cemetery earth, considered at one with the spirit of the buried person. Taken from riverbeds or powdered cam wood, the reddish color traditionally signifies transition and mediation. Spirit-embodiment materials are usually wrapped or concealed in a charm. But such objects as mirrors, or pieces of porcelain, may signify power, the flash and arrest of the spirit. A somewhat heavy bag of raffia, tied at the neck with a cord, exemplifies the outward simplicity and inner complexity of Congo charms. When it is unwrapped, it reveals its medicines, like looking through clear water at the pebble-strewn bottom of the river.

- [Narrator] The day of the wedding, the old one gives her first bomb bath. It is intended, this bath is to remove everything, mental, spiritual, and physical. It is a medicinal sweating tub, to open the pores, and stimulate the candidate, generally. Immediately after the virgin leaves the bath, she's covered and sweated for a long time. Now the subtleties begin. Jamaica has a grass called couscous. The sweet scent from its roots is the very odor of seduction. Days before, the old woman has prepared an extract from these roots in oil. And it is at hand in a bowl. She massages the girl from head to foot with this fragrant unction. The toes, the fingers, the thighs, and there's a special emotional treatment for every part of the body. When the massage is over, she returns to the breasts. They are bathed several times in warm water in which something special had been steeped. After, they are massaged ever so lightly, with the fingertips dipped in couscous. This fingertip motion is circular, and moves towards the nipple. The breasts stiffen and point while the rest of the body relaxes. She's revived by a mere sip of rum. She's in a twilight state of awareness. The old woman took a broad white band of cloth, and wound it tightly about the loins of the girl, well below the navel. She circled the body with the band four times, and then secured it with safety pins. They put the wedding clothes on the girl. The old woman was almost whispering that she was the most important part of all creation. She must not make war with her destiny. Take a breath. Let it go. Take a breath. Let it. ♪ Go ♪ ♪ Don't get scared ♪ ♪ That sound ♪ ♪ You heard ♪ ♪ Ain't nothing ♪ ♪ But nature ♪ ♪ And ♪ ♪ Her children ♪

Timed Audio Description

00:00:00,000 --> 00:00:02,333
(no audio)

00:00:08,970 --> 00:00:11,970
(babbling randomly)

00:00:18,051 --> 00:00:21,884
(continues babbling randomly)

00:00:26,438 --> 00:00:30,271
(continues babbling randomly)

00:00:34,992 --> 00:00:37,325
(no audio)

00:00:40,691 --> 00:00:44,524
(continues babbling randomly)

00:00:50,457 --> 00:00:54,290
(continues babbling randomly)

00:00:57,729 --> 00:01:01,562
(continues babbling randomly)

00:01:06,955 --> 00:01:10,788
(continues babbling randomly)

00:01:15,984 --> 00:01:19,817
(continues babbling randomly)

00:01:25,243 --> 00:01:29,076
(continues babbling randomly)

00:01:33,999 --> 00:01:37,832

(continues babbling randomly)

00:01:42,886 --> 00:01:46,719

(continues babbling randomly)

00:01:51,963 --> 00:01:55,796

(continues babbling randomly)

00:02:00,688 --> 00:02:04,521

(continues babbling randomly)

00:02:08,720 --> 00:02:12,553

(continues babbling randomly)

00:02:17,936 --> 00:02:21,769

(continues babbling randomly)

00:02:26,971 --> 00:02:30,804

(continues babbling randomly)

00:02:36,048 --> 00:02:39,881

(continues babbling randomly)

00:02:45,030 --> 00:02:47,363

(no audio)

00:02:50,987 --> 00:02:54,820

(continues babbling randomly)

00:03:00,029 --> 00:03:02,362

(no audio)

00:03:05,221 --> 00:03:09,054

(continues babbling randomly)

00:03:11,387 --> 00:03:15,220

(continues babbling randomly)

00:03:21,375 --> 00:03:25,208

(continues babbling randomly)

00:03:32,399 --> 00:03:34,732

(no audio)

00:03:37,563 --> 00:03:39,646

(groans)

00:03:43,978 --> 00:03:46,061

(groans)

00:03:50,596 --> 00:03:52,763

(humming)

00:03:59,953 --> 00:04:02,953

(humming continues)

00:04:08,849 --> 00:04:11,849

(humming continues)

00:04:17,873 --> 00:04:20,873

(humming continues)

00:04:26,916 --> 00:04:30,689

(bass string music)

00:04:30,689 --> 00:04:33,356

(jazz scatting)

00:04:39,963 --> 00:04:43,463

(jazz scatting continues)

00:04:49,019 --> 00:04:52,519

(jazz scatting continues)

00:04:58,016 --> 00:05:01,516

(jazz scatting continues)

00:05:07,088 --> 00:05:10,588

(jazz scatting continues)

00:05:16,061 --> 00:05:19,561

(jazz scatting continues)

00:05:24,992 --> 00:05:28,492

(jazz scatting continues)

00:05:33,963 --> 00:05:37,463

(jazz scatting continues)

00:05:42,992 --> 00:05:46,492

(jazz scatting continues)

00:05:52,048 --> 00:05:55,548

(jazz scatting continues)

00:05:56,404 --> 00:05:58,904

♪ Now journey ♪

00:06:00,747 --> 00:06:04,247

(jazz scatting continues)

00:06:10,036 --> 00:06:13,536

(jazz scatting continues)

00:06:18,033 --> 00:06:20,533

(music fades)

00:06:27,059 --> 00:06:29,309
(no audio)

00:06:36,030 --> 00:06:38,780
(flames roaring)

00:06:45,022 --> 00:06:47,730
(no audio)

00:06:47,730 --> 00:06:48,630
- [Jack] The key figure

00:06:48,630 --> 00:06:50,853
in early allegory is the corpse.

00:06:52,710 --> 00:06:55,263
In late allegory, it is the souvenir.

00:07:00,090 --> 00:07:02,840
(erratic music)

00:07:05,340 --> 00:07:09,270
In Black North America, the
last used objects of the dead

00:07:09,270 --> 00:07:11,460
are also believed to be specially charged

00:07:11,460 --> 00:07:13,023
with traces of the spirit.

00:07:16,170 --> 00:07:17,760
One can chart the continuation

00:07:17,760 --> 00:07:20,750
of this belief from plantation times.

00:07:20,750 --> 00:07:24,210
(sprayer spraying)

00:07:24,210 --> 00:07:25,470
Graves were decorated

00:07:25,470 --> 00:07:27,903
with the last article
used by the departed.

00:07:30,510 --> 00:07:33,630
The Congo believe that the
deposit of such objects

00:07:33,630 --> 00:07:37,893
safely grounds the spirit,
directing the spirit to the tomb.

00:07:42,402 --> 00:07:45,235
(tribal scatting)

00:07:51,665 --> 00:07:55,332
(tribal scatting continues)

00:08:01,123 --> 00:08:04,790
(tribal scatting continues)

00:08:09,891 --> 00:08:13,558
(tribal scatting continues)

00:08:16,723 --> 00:08:19,390
(winch humming)

00:08:26,259 --> 00:08:28,260
In the case of the burial site,

00:08:28,260 --> 00:08:31,203
the coffin and the mound
are the obvious containers.

00:08:34,995 --> 00:08:37,245
(no audio)

00:08:38,220 --> 00:08:40,743
The soul of the deceased is the spark.

00:08:43,710 --> 00:08:46,377
(winch humming)

00:08:53,100 --> 00:08:54,600
In addition to the tombstone,

00:08:54,600 --> 00:08:56,370
there are decorative objects.

00:08:56,370 --> 00:08:59,010
Plates and cups and drinking glasses

00:08:59,010 --> 00:09:00,900
are frequently selected for placement

00:09:00,900 --> 00:09:02,373
on the surface of a tomb.

00:09:04,620 --> 00:09:07,650
It is believed that the last
strength of a dead person

00:09:07,650 --> 00:09:10,233
is still present within
that sort of object.

00:09:12,109 --> 00:09:14,859
(clay squishing)

00:09:21,059 --> 00:09:24,642
(clay continues squishing)

00:09:30,053 --> 00:09:33,636
(clay continues squishing)

00:09:36,390 --> 00:09:39,720
Spirit-embodiment materials
include cemetery earth,

00:09:39,720 --> 00:09:43,620
considered at one with the
spirit of the buried person.

00:09:43,620 --> 00:09:46,740
Taken from riverbeds or powdered cam wood,

00:09:46,740 --> 00:09:49,260
the reddish color traditionally signifies

00:09:49,260 --> 00:09:51,213
transition and mediation.

00:09:53,550 --> 00:09:55,290
Spirit-embodiment materials

00:09:55,290 --> 00:09:58,290
are usually wrapped or
concealed in a charm.

00:09:58,290 --> 00:10:02,160
But such objects as mirrors,
or pieces of porcelain,

00:10:02,160 --> 00:10:05,883
may signify power, the flash
and arrest of the spirit.

00:10:07,953 --> 00:10:12,000
(clay continues squishing)

00:10:12,000 --> 00:10:14,100
A somewhat heavy bag of raffia,

00:10:14,100 --> 00:10:16,200
tied at the neck with a cord,

00:10:16,200 --> 00:10:18,660
exemplifies the outward simplicity,

00:10:18,660 --> 00:10:21,810
and inner complexity of Congo charms.

00:10:21,810 --> 00:10:25,110
When it is unwrapped, it
reveals its medicines,

00:10:25,110 --> 00:10:26,850
like looking through clear water

00:10:26,850 --> 00:10:29,103
at the pebble-strewn bottom of the river.

00:10:31,217 --> 00:10:34,800
(clay continues squishing)

00:10:40,350 --> 00:10:41,790
- [Narrator] The day of the wedding,

00:10:41,790 --> 00:10:44,043
the old one gives her first bomb bath.

00:10:46,320 --> 00:10:50,730
It is intended, this bath
is to remove everything,

00:10:50,730 --> 00:10:52,893
mental, spiritual, and physical.

00:10:56,250 --> 00:10:59,940
It is a medicinal sweating
tub, to open the pores,

00:10:59,940 --> 00:11:01,893
and stimulate the candidate, generally.

00:11:05,340 --> 00:11:08,070
Immediately after the
virgin leaves the bath,

00:11:08,070 --> 00:11:10,443
She's covered and sweated for a long time.

00:11:14,100 --> 00:11:16,740
Now the subtleties begin.

00:11:16,740 --> 00:11:19,500
Jamaica has a grass called couscous.

00:11:19,500 --> 00:11:23,493
The sweet scent from its roots
is the very odor of seduction.

00:11:26,730 --> 00:11:29,280
Days before, the old woman has prepared

00:11:29,280 --> 00:11:32,040
an extract from these roots in oil.

00:11:32,040 --> 00:11:33,783
And it is at hand in a bowl.

00:11:34,710 --> 00:11:36,390
She massages the girl

00:11:36,390 --> 00:11:38,973
from head to foot with
this fragrant unction.

00:11:42,570 --> 00:11:45,660
The toes, the fingers, the thighs,

00:11:45,660 --> 00:11:47,700
and there's a special emotional treatment

00:11:47,700 --> 00:11:49,383
for every part of the body.

00:11:51,990 --> 00:11:55,863
When the massage is over,
she returns to the breasts.

00:11:56,790 --> 00:11:59,790
They are bathed several
times in warm water

00:11:59,790 --> 00:12:02,373
in which something
special had been steeped.

00:12:06,120 --> 00:12:09,210
After, they are massaged ever so lightly,

00:12:09,210 --> 00:12:12,060
with the fingertips dipped in couscous.

00:12:12,060 --> 00:12:14,460
This fingertip motion is circular,

00:12:14,460 --> 00:12:16,740
and moves towards the nipple.

00:12:16,740 --> 00:12:18,720
The breasts stiffen and point

00:12:18,720 --> 00:12:21,316
while the rest of the body relaxes.

00:12:21,316 --> 00:12:25,530
(rain falling and water flowing)

00:12:25,530 --> 00:12:28,473
She's revived by a mere sip of rum.

00:12:29,340 --> 00:12:31,833
She's in a twilight state of awareness.

00:12:34,920 --> 00:12:37,950
The old woman took a
broad white band of cloth,

00:12:37,950 --> 00:12:40,590
and wound it tightly about
the loins of the girl,

00:12:40,590 --> 00:12:42,153
well below the navel.

00:12:44,400 --> 00:12:47,610

She circled the body
with the band four times,

00:12:47,610 --> 00:12:49,713

and then secured it with safety pins.

00:12:53,610 --> 00:12:56,103

They put the wedding clothes on the girl.

00:12:57,390 --> 00:13:00,240

The old woman was almost whispering

00:13:00,240 --> 00:13:03,903

that she was the most
important part of all creation.

00:13:05,760 --> 00:13:09,496

She must not make war with her destiny.

00:13:09,496 --> 00:13:11,746

(no audio)

00:13:19,001 --> 00:13:21,251

(no audio)

00:13:28,025 --> 00:13:30,275

(no audio)

00:13:37,107 --> 00:13:39,940

(humming quietly)

00:13:44,755 --> 00:13:47,172

(calm music)

00:13:54,048 --> 00:13:57,298
(calm music continues)

00:14:00,552 --> 00:14:01,719
Take a breath.

00:14:02,976 --> 00:14:06,226
(calm music continues)

00:14:08,994 --> 00:14:12,244
(calm music continues)

00:14:13,725 --> 00:14:15,174
Let it go.

00:14:15,174 --> 00:14:17,924
(erratic music)

00:14:22,449 --> 00:14:23,793
Take a breath.

00:14:23,793 --> 00:14:27,293
(erratic music continues)

00:14:29,121 --> 00:14:29,954
Let it.

00:14:32,357 --> 00:14:37,357
♪ Go ♪

00:14:39,639 --> 00:14:42,556
♪ Don't get scared ♪

00:14:51,107 --> 00:14:56,107

♪ That sound ♪

00:14:56,471 --> 00:14:58,804

♪ You heard ♪

00:15:07,227 --> 00:15:12,227

♪ Ain't nothing ♪

00:15:13,254 --> 00:15:18,254

♪ But nature ♪

00:15:20,777 --> 00:15:24,171

♪ And ♪

00:15:24,171 --> 00:15:26,754

♪ Her children ♪

00:15:28,251 --> 00:15:31,751

(erratic music continues)

00:15:38,054 --> 00:15:41,221

(erratic music fades)

00:15:42,791 --> 00:15:45,791

(tribal drum music)

00:15:51,995 --> 00:15:55,828

(tribal drum music continues)

00:16:01,023 --> 00:16:03,356

(no audio)

00:16:05,108 --> 00:16:07,691
(wind blowing)

00:16:14,025 --> 00:16:16,275
(no audio)

00:16:23,037 --> 00:16:25,287
(no audio)

00:16:32,023 --> 00:16:34,273
(no audio)

00:16:40,930 --> 00:16:43,180
(no audio)

00:16:50,033 --> 00:16:52,283
(no audio)

00:16:58,987 --> 00:17:02,004
(waves lapping)

00:17:02,004 --> 00:17:04,587
(wind blowing)

00:17:08,500 --> 00:17:11,083
(gulls cawing)

00:17:17,969 --> 00:17:21,386
(wind continues blowing)

00:17:27,057 --> 00:17:30,474
(wind continues blowing)

00:17:36,038 --> 00:17:39,455
(wind continues blowing)

00:17:45,041 --> 00:17:48,458
(wind continues blowing)

00:17:52,000 --> 00:17:55,954
(wind continues blowing)

00:17:55,954 --> 00:17:58,704
(waves crashing)

00:18:05,042 --> 00:18:08,542
(waves continue crashing)

00:18:14,002 --> 00:18:17,502
(waves continue crashing)

00:18:23,015 --> 00:18:26,515
(waves continue crashing)

00:18:31,996 --> 00:18:35,496
(waves continue crashing)

00:18:41,021 --> 00:18:44,521
(waves continue crashing)

00:18:49,986 --> 00:18:54,986
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:18:59,008 --> 00:19:04,008
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:19:07,981 --> 00:19:12,981
(flames roaring as
waves continue crashing)

00:19:17,010 --> 00:19:22,010
(flames roaring as
waves continue crashing)

00:19:26,045 --> 00:19:31,045
(flames roaring as
waves continue crashing)

00:19:35,014 --> 00:19:40,014
(flames roaring as
waves continue crashing)

00:19:44,039 --> 00:19:49,039
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:19:53,042 --> 00:19:58,042
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:20:02,034 --> 00:20:07,034
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:20:10,962 --> 00:20:15,962
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:20:20,029 --> 00:20:25,029
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:20:29,031 --> 00:20:34,031
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:20:38,013 --> 00:20:43,013
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:20:47,066 --> 00:20:52,066
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:20:55,989 --> 00:21:00,989
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:21:05,010 --> 00:21:10,010
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:21:14,020 --> 00:21:19,020
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:21:23,042 --> 00:21:28,042
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:21:31,991 --> 00:21:36,991
(flames crackling as
waves continue crashing)

00:21:41,984 --> 00:21:45,484
(waves continue crashing)

00:21:50,994 --> 00:21:54,494
(waves continue crashing)

00:22:00,029 --> 00:22:03,529
(waves continue crashing)

00:22:09,082 --> 00:22:12,582
(waves continue crashing)

00:22:18,135 --> 00:22:21,135
(random vocalizing)

00:22:26,973 --> 00:22:31,556
(erratic music with random vocalizing)

00:22:36,017 --> 00:22:41,017
(erratic music with random
vocalizing continues)

00:22:44,978 --> 00:22:49,978
(erratic music with random
vocalizing continues)

00:22:53,991 --> 00:22:58,991
(erratic music with random
vocalizing continues)

00:23:03,022 --> 00:23:08,022
(erratic music with random
vocalizing continues)

00:23:12,035 --> 00:23:17,035
(erratic music with random
vocalizing continues)

00:23:20,731 --> 00:23:25,731
(erratic music with random
vocalizing continues)

00:23:30,030 --> 00:23:35,030
(erratic music with random
vocalizing continues)

00:23:39,016 --> 00:23:41,266
(no audio)

00:23:48,032 --> 00:23:50,282
(no audio)

00:23:56,992 --> 00:23:59,242
(no audio)

00:24:06,019 --> 00:24:08,269
(no audio)

00:24:14,996 --> 00:24:17,246
(no audio)

00:24:24,003 --> 00:24:26,253
(no audio)

00:24:33,016 --> 00:24:35,266
(no audio)

GALLERY 3

Vessel

2023

Bronze

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Visual Description

Vessel is a large bronze sculpture with a female head that sits on top of a hollow, oval-shaped body. It has a shiny, smooth black surface and is positioned at an angle near the left back corner of the gallery. There is enough space around the sculpture to circumnavigate it. The head has no eyes but faces straight forward with lips closed. Her hair is shaped into a bob flipped out dramatically at the ends, and she has bangs. She has an elongated neck that connects at the base to the long, thin, hollowed-out oval shape of the body. A single right ankle and bare foot protrude from the bottom center of the oval shape, on which the sculpture stands.

Bisi

2023

Bronze

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Wall Text

On public view for the first time, *Bisi* melds the female body with references to nature, architecture, and feminine attire. The artist shaped *Bisi*'s lower half to house her own (Leigh's) body, and much as a child might take shelter behind a protector's skirts, the cavernlike niche feels primed to safeguard or frame a precious object. The work is serene and imposing, a gathering place, both open space and fortress. To stand before it is to consider one's own relationship to the spaces of nurturing and care that Black women have been called upon to provide.

Visual Description

An over-life-size sculpture with a shiny, smooth black surface is positioned centrally against a neutral gray gallery wall. The upper third of the sculpture is the torso of a female figure with short cropped hair and well-defined breasts and nipples. She has no eyes but faces straight forward with a neutral expression. Her neck is long, and her arms are cut off just below the shoulders. Below her waist, where her hips would begin, the sculpture flares outward slightly and then straight down in a bell shape, like the shape of a long, straight skirt. The front of this bell-shaped base is hollowed out to create a cavern large enough that a person could stand inside it.

Herm

2023

Bronze

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Visual Description

A female figure seen from the waist up protrudes from a tall, pedestal-like rectangular base. The surface of the sculpture is entirely black, smooth, and shiny. The torso of the woman is bare, and her arms are cut off at the shoulders. She has short cropped hair and has indentations where eyes would be. A right leg protrudes from the back of the rectangular base, visible from the calf downward. The heel of the foot is lifted off the ground, and only the toes make contact with the floor, as if walking. There is a slit in the front of the base where genitals would be.

GALLERY 4

Jug

2019

Bronze

Collection of Charlotte and Herbert S. Wagner III

Wall Text

Jug combines forms associated with vessels, architecture, and the body. The artist once described this approach through the term *skeuomorph*, an object in which aspects of a previous or original form remain in the new interpretation. Here, a large-scale jug composes the bell-shaped skirt, while a woman's torso stands in for the vessel's mouth. This composite form carries a sense of strength and permanence, appearing, in the artist's words, "as something solid and enduring." With her figurative sculptures, Leigh's use of abstraction allows the artist to explore states of being rather than representative portraits.

Visual Description

A large, smooth, matte-black sculpture combines the head and torso of a woman with the base of what looks like a large jug or a bell-shaped skirt. The woman's torso sits at the center of the sculpture. Her chest is bare, and her arms are cut off just below the shoulders. Her head is bent slightly forward at the neck, with her face looking forward and slightly downward. She has afro-style hair and no eyes. Starting at the woman's waist, the bell-shaped base tapers out and down to the ground. A rounded handle sits at the upper left of the jug, where the woman's left hip would be.

Sentinel

2019

Bronze

Private collection, Boston

Visual Description

A black sculpture combines the head of a woman and a corrugated or ribbed arched vessel. The head has a long neck and afro-style hair. She has a nose and mouth but no eyes, and faces directly forward. The base of her neck is connected to the top left side of the base structure. The base is an enclosed arch, and its surface is shaped into evenly spaced wavy folds or alternating furrows and ridges to create a ribbed effect running vertically across the surface.

Untitled

2023

Stoneware

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Visual Description

Sitting on top of a tall square base is a 2-foot bust of a woman painted vibrant yellow. The top of her head is covered entirely with many tiny individual rosettes. She has a nose and mouth but no eyes, and she faces directly forward, with a neutral facial expression.

Head with Cobalt

2018

Porcelain

Warren and Maxine Eisenberg

Visual Description

Standing about a foot tall on a pedestal, a slightly textured, dark blue ceramic sculpture combines a head with a vase. The neck of the figure serves as the base of the vessel. The center of the vase is the head, with a face with a neutral expression and no eyes. A round open vase top protrudes from the center of the head, flaring slightly outward. A handle emerges at the back of the head, connecting the base of the neck to the top rear portion of the figure's head.

GALLERY 5

Anonymous

2022

Stoneware

Private collection, Boston

Visual Description

A large, human-size sculpture stands in the center of the gallery, facing the white *Jug* sculpture, which is covered with cowrie shell shapes. This sculpture is entirely white and glazed, so it both shines and reflects light. Small bubblelike holes dapple the surface of the sculpture, which depicts a woman who wears a dress with puffy, ribbed shoulders and sleeves that bell out around her wrists, with a wide, rounded shape as a skirt. Her arms are folded across the front of her body, with her hands meeting in a gesture of prayer next to her left cheek. She bends slightly forward, with her face meeting her hands. Her hair is twisted into a bun on top of her head.

Jug

2022

Stoneware

Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston

Acquired through the generosity of Susana and Clark Bernard, Adelle Chang and Eddie Yoon, the Miller-Coblentz Family, Grace Colby, Fotene Demoulas and Tom Coté, Mathieu O. Gaulin, Jessica Knez and Nicolas Dulac, Christine and John Maraganore, and the Acquisitions Circle

Wall Text

Jug references the history of so-called face jugs, made by Black American potters in Edgefield County, South Carolina—a center of stoneware production roughly between the late 1850s and the 1880s. Eyes, noses, ears, and mouths were shaped onto vessels whose significance and makers’ identities remain largely unknown. In her interpretation, Simone Leigh abstracts the face with representations of cowrie shells made from watermelon molds. Cowrie shells have a diverse, complicated history and are a common motif in Leigh’s work. A Benin myth recounts the toothlike cavities of cowrie shells suckling at human flesh, while other associations are tied to precious rituals marking death and new life. For centuries, the shells were currency and sources of wealth across Africa, South Asia, and East Asia.

Visual Description

A large white jug, approximately the height of an average human, sits in the center of a gallery. The jug has a rounded white handle at the top, near a spout that also emerges from the top of the jug form. The center of the sculpture is dark and hollow. The side of the jug opposite the spout is covered with watermelon-sized ceramic cowrie shells molded into the side of the vessel. Each cowrie shell has a jagged slit through its middle. The jug is bright white, shiny, and smoothly glazed. Small bubble holes dapple its surface.

LERNER ROOM

The Lerner Room is a reading resource room with plush black leather couches, gray carpet, and curved white bookshelves. A large floor-to-ceiling window overlooks the National Mall.

The Hirshhorn is thankful to partner with Sankofa Video, Books & Cafe, whose generosity and care made this reading room possible. Find these and additional recommended titles at Hirshhorn.si.edu and Sankofa.com.

GALLERY 6

**Liz Magic Laser and Simone Leigh,
in collaboration with Alicia Hall Moran**

Breakdown

2011

Single-channel video (color; sound; 9:00 min.)

Courtesy the artists and Matthew Marks Gallery

Synchronized Captions

Scan to access captions and personal audio.



Visual Description

The video opens on an empty, dimly lit theater balcony. A Black woman in a black dress with a bob haircut walks calmly down the steps of the aisle. The shot cuts to show her from the knees up, facing the camera, with her head hung low. She jerks her hands up to her face as she cries and begins to sing. Her face and body contort, moving through a wide range of deeply felt emotions that match her vocal gymnastics. At the five-minute mark, the shot changes so she is backlit by the theater's hanging white-candle chandelier, which is blurred in the background. Around seven minutes, the scene fades to black as she pauses her song. When the image returns, it is a long shot of her singing farther up in the balcony aisle, barely visible in the darkness. Her arms gesture and her body wobbles and leans as if she might fall. At the end of her song, she walks up the stairs, exiting the balcony as the screen again fades to black.

Transcript

Female Vocalizes:

00:00:00 --> 00:00:17

[descending echoing footsteps, gradually growing louder]

00:00:27 --> 00:00:30

[decisive final footsteps]

00:00:40 --> 00:00:44

[high piercing note]

♪ Oh my God! ♪

00:00:45 --> 00:00:49

[singing, sobbing]

♪ I'm so sorry ♪

00:00:49 --> 00:00:52

♪ Please, strike that, ♪

00:00:52 --> 00:00:54

♪ please, don't. ♪

00:00:54 --> 00:00:57

♪ please, don't. ♪

00:01:02 --> 00:01:05

♪ please don't look. ♪

00:01:05 --> 00:01:06

♪ erase... ♪

00:01:07 --> 00:01:09

♪ erase... ♪

00:01:10 --> 00:01:11

[whispered]

♪ erase... ♪

00:01:12 --> 00:01:14

♪ ...erase. ♪

00:01:26 --> 00:01:36

[operatic singing]

♪ I mean, it's just... ♪

00:01:36 --> 00:01:41

[voice breaking]

♪ Everything ♪

00:01:41 --> 00:01:55

♪ It's just everything ♪

00:01:59 --> 00:02:01

♪ You know, it's just ♪

00:02:01 --> 00:02:10

[rising, cresting, falling]

♪ It's just like, it's ... it's just like...it's... it's just ♪

00:02:10 --> 00:02:19

♪ Everything! It's just everything ♪

00:02:19 --> 00:02:22

[sobbing, singing]

♪ It's just like, it's just– ♪

00:02:22 --> 00:02:23

♪ It's just, it's ♪

00:02:23 --> 00:02:27

[rising]

♪ too-oo-oo ♪

00:02:27 --> 00:02:35

♪ It's just too much ♪

00:02:38 --> 00:02:40

[shouting]

♪ It's just! ♪

00:02:47 --> 00:02:52

[deep breathing]

00:02:55 --> 00:02:58

[lower, longer, soulful]

♪ Oh ♪

00:02:58 --> 00:03:04

♪ God ♪

00:03:07 --> 00:03:10

♪ Oh ♪

00:03:10 --> 00:03:15

[wailing]

♪ God ♪

00:03:21 --> 00:03:26

[pitch rising]

♪ Oh how, how, how ♪

00:03:26 --> 00:03:31

♪ Am I going to go to the ball game? ♪

00:03:33 --> 00:03:38

[operatic scales, ever higher]

♪ How am I going to go to the ball game?! ♪

00:03:38 --> 00:03:41

♪ I don't want to go to the ball game! ♪

00:03:42 --> 00:03:45

♪ I don't want to go to the ball game! ♪

00:03:45 --> 00:03:47

♪ How am I gonna go to the ball game?! ♪

00:03:47 --> 00:03:51

[gradually quiets to a whimper]

♪ Well, I don't want to go to the ball game... ♪

00:03:59 --> 00:04:06

[operatic scale to peak volume and pitch]

♪ Why do I have to go to the ball game? ♪

00:04:08 --> 00:04:16

[smooth, drawn out]

♪ Because I've always done it ♪

00:04:16 --> 00:04:23

♪ I've always done it ♪

00:04:24 --> 00:04:33

♪ And I've been performing my whole life ♪

00:04:36 --> 00:04:44

[operatic crescendo into jazzy finish]

♪ Performing my whole life ♪

00:04:51 --> 00:04:53

♪ Because... ♪

00:04:56 --> 00:04:57

[whimpering]

♪ I don't wanna go to the ball game ♪

00:04:57 --> 00:04:59

♪ I don't wanna go to it but I have to go to the ball game! ♪

00:05:01 --> 00:05:09

[resumes operatic tone]

♪ Because I've always done it ♪

00:05:09 --> 00:05:14

♪ I've always done it ♪

00:05:14 --> 00:05:19

[dramatic rising scales]

♪ I don't want to go to the ball game ♪

00:05:19 --> 00:05:24

[high pitch and intensity]

♪ Oh, why do I have to go to the ball game? ♪

00:05:24 --> 00:05:31

[softly]

♪ Because I've always done it ♪

00:05:33 --> 00:05:42

♪ Ah yes, I've always done it ♪

00:05:46 --> 00:05:50

♪ I've been performing ♪

00:05:50 --> 00:05:53

♪ My whole life ♪

00:06:02 --> 00:06:08

♪ [soft hummed vocalizations] ♪

00:06:08 --> 00:06:15

[jazz scat]

♪ Zzzzzz ♪

00:06:16 --> 00:06:31

♪ Hee...heey...Whooo...bbzzzzzzz ♪

00:06:32 --> 00:06:35

♪ Oooooh...Ooohhh ♪

00:06:35 --> 00:07:05

♪ Mhmmmm...Mhmm... ♪

00:07:20 --> 00:07:23

♪ No metaphors ♪

00:07:25 --> 00:07:27

[heavy sigh]

00:07:28 --> 00:07:31

[low, bluesy]

♪ No grunts ♪

00:07:37 --> 00:07:46

[rising pitch and volume]

♪ No wiggles in the darkness of her soul ♪

00:07:55 --> 00:07:58

♪ No grunts ♪

00:08:00 --> 00:08:03

♪ No metaphors ♪

00:08:05 --> 00:08:19

[slowing, descending]

♪ No wiggles in the darkness of her soul ♪

00:08:26 --> 00:08:28

[echoing footsteps recede]

Slipcover

2006/2023

Porcelain, steel, and plastic slipcover

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Visual Description

A nearly 3-foot-square black metal frame is fixed to the wall. The frame extends about 6 inches from the wall. Inside the frame, different-colored porcelain casts in the shape of plantains hang by their top ends and overlap in five uneven rows. The plantains are various shades of black, gray, tan, brown, beige, and pale pink. A clear plastic slipcover covers the entire front of the frame, reflecting light where the plastic bunches and creates ripples.

GALLERY 7

Cupboard

2022

Bronze and gold

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Visual Description

A large figure with the torso of a woman is affixed to a wide, overshaped bronze skirt cast from raffia leaves. The entire form is covered in brilliantly reflective gold leaf. The figure has short cropped hair and no eyes. Her face is pointed directly forward. Her arms are cut off at the shoulders, and her bare breasts project from her chest. Her straight torso meets the center of a wide, rounded skirt that looks like it was molded from branches of long, thin leaves. Rounded branch ends lay across the top of the skirt around the torso's waist, with layers of long, thin leaves cascading to the ground.

Sentinel IV

2020

Bronze

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Visual Description

A tall, thin black sculpture stands over twice the height of a tall human. The sculpture has the shape of a very thin female figure, with a slightly protruding behind and hips and two small bare breasts. Long, straight, thin legs, with no space between them, extend from the hips to the ground at the front and back of the sculpture, going straight into the floor at a single point. The figure has no arms or shoulders. At the top end of an elongated and slightly bent neck, a round, satellite dish-shaped half-sphere sits where a head would be.

GALLERY 8

Village Series

2023

Stoneware

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Visual Description

A large bell-shaped sculpture sits directly on the floor of a large gallery. The sculpture is brown and has a slightly rough texture. The top center of the sculpture bunches together slightly, as though creating the handle of a bell. There is a small opening at the very top of the sculpture. At equidistant intervals, four large braids run from the top of the sculpture almost to its base.

Cowrie (Pannier)

2015

Terracotta, porcelain, and steel

Collection of Jonathan and Margot Davis

Visual Description

A steel armature of approximately hip height creates the hollow frame of a bell-shaped dome. A large, vertically aligned ceramic cowrie shell is affixed to the top center of the dome. The shell is a mottled tan and black color and has a large, jagged slit running down its center.

Girl (Chitra Ganesh + Simone Leigh)

my dreams, my works must wait till after hell...

2011

Single-channel video (color; sound; 7:14 min.)

Courtesy the artists and Matthew Marks Gallery

Synchronized Captions

Scan to access captions and personal audio.



Wall Text

Girl is a moniker for this collaboration between Simone Leigh and multimedia artist Chitra Ganesh. The duo made this video featuring the artist Kenya (Robinson), whose incredible stillness is only occasionally interrupted by her subtle breathing. Set to a melancholic score by composer Kaoru Watanabe, the video projects the figure at larger-than-life size directly onto the gallery wall, heightening the tension at play between object and subject, spectacle and performance.

The artwork's title is drawn from the titular poem by Gwendolyn Brooks that describes a laboring artist's uncertain future:

I hold my honey and I store my bread
In little jars and cabinets of my will.
I label clearly, and each latch and lid
I bid, Be firm till I return from hell.
I am very hungry. I am incomplete.
And none can tell when I may dine again.
No man can give me any word but Wait,
The puny light. I keep eyes pointed in;
Hoping that, when the devil days of my hurt
Drag out to their last dregs and I resume
On such legs as are left me, in such heart
As I can manage, remember to go home,
My taste will not have turned insensitive
To honey and bread old purity could love.

Gwendolyn Brooks, "my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell," in *Selected Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). Reprinted By Consent of Brooks Permissions

Visual Description

A video of a Black woman lying on her left side with her back facing the camera is projected onto the gallery wall, taking up the entire wall space. Her head is completely covered in slate-gray gravel. She is breathing, but it is barely detectable.

Sound Description

00:00:00,301 --> 00:00:03,634
(gentle soothing music)

00:00:10,680 --> 00:00:14,263
(soothing music continues)

00:00:22,188 --> 00:00:25,771
(soothing music continues)

00:00:35,502 --> 00:00:39,085
(soothing music continues)

00:00:46,940 --> 00:00:50,523
(soothing music continues)

00:00:58,428 --> 00:01:02,011
(soothing music continues)

00:01:09,961 --> 00:01:13,544
(soothing music continues)

00:01:21,011 --> 00:01:24,594
(soothing music continues)

00:01:32,523 --> 00:01:36,106
(soothing music continues)

00:01:43,925 --> 00:01:47,508
(soothing music continues)

00:01:55,468 --> 00:01:59,051
(soothing music continues)

00:02:06,901 --> 00:02:10,484
(soothing music continues)

00:02:18,443 --> 00:02:22,026
(soothing music continues)

00:02:29,817 --> 00:02:33,400
(soothing music continues)

00:02:40,995 --> 00:02:44,578
(soothing music continues)

00:02:51,821 --> 00:02:55,404
(soothing music continues)

00:03:00,484 --> 00:03:02,734
(no audio)

00:03:03,698 --> 00:03:06,698
(drum gently booms)

00:03:10,498 --> 00:03:13,915
(drum continues booming)

00:03:17,298 --> 00:03:20,894
(drum continues booming)

00:03:20,894 --> 00:03:24,300
(cymbal clangs)

00:03:24,300 --> 00:03:27,717
(drum continues booming)

00:03:31,041 --> 00:03:34,458
(drum continues booming)

00:03:37,937 --> 00:03:41,354
(drum continues booming)

00:03:44,577 --> 00:03:47,887
(drum continues booming)

00:03:47,887 --> 00:03:50,554
(cymbal clangs)

00:03:51,466 --> 00:03:54,883
(drum continues booming)

00:03:58,308 --> 00:04:01,725
(drum continues booming)

00:04:04,826 --> 00:04:08,243
(drum continues booming)

00:04:12,084 --> 00:04:15,726
(drum continues booming)

00:04:15,726 --> 00:04:19,124
(cymbal clangs)

00:04:19,124 --> 00:04:22,541
(drum continues booming)

00:04:25,866 --> 00:04:29,283
(drum continues booming)

00:04:32,628 --> 00:04:36,045
(drum continues booming)

00:04:39,428 --> 00:04:43,164
(drum continues booming)

00:04:43,164 --> 00:04:45,831
(cymbal clangs)

00:04:46,666 --> 00:04:50,564
(drum continues booming)

00:04:50,564 --> 00:04:53,147
(cymbal clangs)

00:04:53,147 --> 00:04:56,564
(drum continues booming)

00:05:00,322 --> 00:05:03,739
(drum continues booming)

00:05:07,083 --> 00:05:10,500
(drum continues booming)

00:05:11,627 --> 00:05:13,783
(cymbal clangs)

00:05:13,783 --> 00:05:17,200
(drum continues booming)

00:05:20,683 --> 00:05:24,100
(drum continues booming)

00:05:27,307 --> 00:05:30,724
(drum continues booming)

00:05:34,283 --> 00:05:37,563
(drum continues booming)

00:05:37,563 --> 00:05:40,230
(cymbal clangs)

00:05:41,499 --> 00:05:44,916
(drum continues booming)

00:05:47,840 --> 00:05:51,257
(drum continues booming)

00:05:55,035 --> 00:05:58,452
(drum continues booming)

00:06:01,899 --> 00:06:04,661
(drum continues booming)

00:06:04,661 --> 00:06:07,328
(cymbal clangs)

00:06:08,416 --> 00:06:11,833
(drum continues booming)

00:06:15,435 --> 00:06:18,852
(drum continues booming)

00:06:22,416 --> 00:06:25,833
(drum continues booming)

00:06:29,216 --> 00:06:32,633
(drum continues booming)

00:06:33,675 --> 00:06:36,149
(cymbal clangs)

00:06:36,149 --> 00:06:39,566
(drum continues booming)

00:06:43,067 --> 00:06:46,484
(drum continues booming)

00:06:49,925 --> 00:06:53,342
(drum continues booming)

00:06:56,527 --> 00:07:00,145
(drum continues booming)

00:07:00,145 --> 00:07:03,344
(cymbal clangs)

00:07:03,344 --> 00:07:06,774
(drum continues booming)

00:07:06,774 --> 00:07:10,191
(cymbal clanging echoes)

GALLERY 9

Sphinx

2022

Stoneware

Collection Andy Song

Sphinx

2022

Stoneware

Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland

Visual Description

Two sphinx sculptures are situated on the gallery floor, angled slightly toward each other. Mirroring each other's body position, both sculptures have the body of a lion lying down on the ground. Their front legs and paws are slightly in front of them, while their back legs rest to either side of their rears. Their tails curve around to rest on the floor, toward the centerpoint between the two sculptures. Both have the head of an eyeless woman with short cropped hair. The figure on the left is swathed in a mix of gray and tan, while the figure on the right is a mix of light and dark charcoal hues. Both sculptures are slightly textured, with a shiny glazed finish.

Martinique

2022

Stoneware

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Wall Text

Simone Leigh has referred to her practice of sculpture as a “time-based medium.” In some measure, this relates to her combining premodern ceramic techniques with contemporary art practices, even perhaps to the clay-firing process itself, in which material morphs and hardens over time. However, Leigh also consistently—and pointedly—addresses specific histories within her work. The brilliantly blue *Martinique* refers to a nineteenth-century monument of Joséphine Bonaparte, first wife of former French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Joséphine grew up on the island of Martinique and is seen as largely responsible for extending the practice of slavery within that French colonial Caribbean outpost. Protesters decrying racism beheaded the original statue in 1991 and splashed it with red paint; in 2020, activists brought down the monument altogether. Reimagined in new guise here, Leigh’s *Martinique* gathers, both materially and metaphorically, multiple timespans into a single, static form.

Visual Description

Situated on a large white platform, *Martinique* is a shiny, rich royal blue sculpture that combines a headless female torso with a large round base. The bottom of the sculpture is an evenly cylindrical form with a slightly flattened top, rounded edges, and straight sides that extend down to the platform it sits on. The torso of a female figure protrudes from the center of the cylinder. The figure’s torso is bare, with a defined navel and large, pointy breasts. The figure’s arms are slightly bent, with its hands cupped under each breast.

No Face (House)

2020

Terracotta, porcelain, cobalt, India ink, epoxy, and raffia

Bridgitt and Bruce Evens

Visual Description

Situated on a tall square platform is a 3-foot-tall bell-shaped sculpture. The figure's face is missing, and in its place are dark blue rosettes in a wreathlike shape. Below the head, dried tan raffia leaves are layered around the sculpture and extend outward in a skirtlike bell shape.

GALLERY 10

102 (Face Jug Series)

2018

Stoneware

Private collection, Boston

Visual Description

Standing about a foot tall on a pedestal, a slightly textured brown ceramic sculpture combines a head with a vase. The neck of the figure serves as the base of the vessel. The center of the vase is a head with an eyeless face, a neutral facial expression, and short cropped hair. A round open vase top protrudes from the center of the head, flaring outward slightly.

Overburdened with Significance

2011

Porcelain, terracotta, and graphite

Bridgitt and Bruce Evans

Wall Text

One of the artist's earliest figurative works, this stoneware bust portrays a woman whose facial features are partly obscured by a majestic, towering updo composed of hundreds of tightly coiled rosettes. Leigh often has returned to the rosette motif, forming each delicate spiral of clay by hand through individual gestures that accumulate into an almost overwhelming sense of abundance. Formally, the rosette calls to traditional notions of beauty, and here they gather to create a sort of armor or shield that envelops the figure. Through the repetition of this controlled and concentrated action, Leigh further considers the anonymous—and thereby easily devalued and historically unrecognized—labor that has long been performed by Black women.

Visual Description

Fixed to a square platform sits a sculpture of a female head, from the neck up. The eyes, head, and neck of the sculpture are covered in small porcelain rosettes of various sizes and colors, which rise from the head like a tall hairstyle. The roses are varying shades of white, gray, and black, with a few yellow, gold, and pink rosettes scattered throughout. Small round lapis stones are interspersed among the rosettes. Only a small portion of the figure's face can be seen through the roses. The face is black and has a neutral expression and no eyes.

White Teeth (For Ota Benga)

2001-2004

Porcelain, steel, glass, and wire

Collection of Sherry Brewer Bronfman, New York

Wall Text

White Teeth addresses and honors the legacy of Ota Benga, a young man who was kidnapped from his home in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo and brought to America to be displayed at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in St. Louis, Missouri. He was subsequently “exhibited” in the autumn of 1906 at the Bronx Zoo. In youth, Benga’s teeth had been manually filed into sharpened points in a ritual practice, a motif Leigh engages through an accumulation of toothlike ceramic forms individually glazed in an alternating palette of materials including gold, platinum, and mother-of-pearl. Leigh places this sumptuous, treacherous topography behind glass, recalling the “cabinets of curiosity” in which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “treasures”—many stolen through colonialist plunder—would be gathered and displayed for European audiences.

Visual Description

A thin metal table holds a long, curved concave metal frame broken into five adjacent sections. An accumulation of pointed toothlike ceramic forms are fixed to the frame, covering it entirely. They are individually glazed in an alternating palette of materials including gold, platinum, and mother-of-pearl. The frame is encased in glass.

OUTDOOR PLAZA

Simone Leigh

B. 1967, Chicago

Satellite

2022

Bronze

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery

Text

Satellite is a monumental bronze sculpture informed in part by ideas found in masked rituals and performances throughout Africa and the African diaspora. Among these citations are *D'mba* (also called *nimba*) headdresses made by the Baga peoples of the Guinea coast. Traditionally crafted in wood, these masks are used to communicate with ancestors and carry associations of feminine protection and maternal wisdom. Abstracted to an architectural scale, *Satellite* is topped with a cast satellite dish, another conduit for transmitting and receiving.

Satellite is presented as part of the exhibition *Simone Leigh*, on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden from November 3, 2023, to March 3, 2024.

Visual Description

A monumental black sculpture stands on four thin legs on the outdoor Plaza in front of the convex glass windows of the Museum. The four legs meet at the center of the sculpture to create a short body with flat, drooping breasts. From the upper center of the body, a thin, cylindrical neck juts straight upward to a massive satellite-shaped head. The hemispheric bowl is tilted slightly upward, as if the figure is looking up toward the sky.

Image credit:
Installation View, *Simone Leigh* (detail)
2023
Photo by Timothy Schenck
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HIRSHHORN
● Smithsonian

