

ARTFORUM

Simone Leigh

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View of “Simone Leigh,” 2015, Tilton Gallery, New York.

Simone Leigh’s solo exhibition “Crop Rotation” is on view at the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft in Louisville from February 6 through April 5, 2015, and a show titled “Moulting” is on view at Tilton Gallery in New York from March 3 through April 18, 2015. Here, Leigh discusses some of the sources that have inspired her recent work.

WHILE I WAS IN COLLEGE, cicadas emerged from a seventeen-year cycle to mate. It felt biblical. It was as if it had been written somewhere that in seventeen years *now* would be the time. I’ll never forget the deafening sound—it was like a freight train. So many years later, this moulting, a destiny to change and adapt, seems the perfect metaphor to describe my involvement with sculpture as an ongoing exploration of black female subjectivity. I am charting a history of change and adaptation through objects and gesture and the unstoppable forward movement of black women.

Last year I created an installation inside a black woman's home. The house was in Brooklyn, and the woman's name was Josephine English; she had been the first woman to open a private gynecological practice in New York State, in 1958. She also founded the Paul Robeson Theater in Brooklyn. I established my project, the *Free People's Medical Clinic*, at her house. I looked around the neighborhood and found a mansion owned by a secret society of black nurses, the United Order of Tents, who have gathered since the time of the Underground Railroad to perform good works and take care of the sick. From this Order, a master herbalist named Karen Rose gave lectures about self-knowledge, Julia Bennet ministered to over one hundred visitors who received acupuncture and her sage advice, and Aimee Meredith Cox—a former Alvin Ailey dancer and anthropologist—taught black folk dance. With this project I spent over a year focused on legacies of black self-determination in Brooklyn. It was so humbling. When I describe my reality, it sounds like someone's essentialist fantasy—but I really was surrounded by Super Blackwomen. On the last day, I was taken by surprise when two doctors who had worked in an original clinic run by the Black Panther Party in Brownsville, Brooklyn, appeared. These two doctors told me that Panthers had been so embattled in conflict with the police that their clinic was covered with sandbags, like a bunker.

When the clinic closed, I came back to my studio and returned to a body of work that I had started in Atlanta, using an odd restaurant called Mammy's Cupboard as a point of departure. This metaphorical black woman's cupboard is a large skirt where you can enter to eat pancakes. Formally, the spectacle of architecture meant to signify the inhabitation of a black woman's body is stunning. But using the apparatus of its white ball-gown-shaped skirt to cover this embodiment aligns it with many social and political histories. I think immediately of sexual assault but also of "sweating the rice," as Zora Neale Hurston described a Jamaican folk ritual that can cast a spell and make someone fall in love with you.

I've also started making jugs with Lizella clay, one of which will be in my show at Tilton Gallery. I've been told that African-American face jugs are made to look ugly to ward off evil spirits. Using the ugly, sometimes literally taking on the garment of your oppressors, is a device used often in the global south. In Namibia, some members of the Herero Genocide committee showed me how to get properly Herero dressed: The garment I tried on had four petticoats. These dresses are understood to be adaptations of missionaries' costumes. This kind of mimicry can be misunderstood as a desire for the other, an assimilationist gesture. But I

see it as a strategy of self-definition—a radical black practice of using what is at hand, as well as a kind of camouflage, which is self-defense. In Haiti, during *Karnaval*, Chaloskas wear a barred teeth mask and the costume of Charles Oscar Etienne, a police chief who killed many political prisoners in one night in a remarkable feat of police brutality. This reenactment of evil is also a purging.

For my recent installation, *Crop Rotation*, I worked with local materials and found objects to push through some of these ideas. I attached tobacco hands to a hoop skirt shaped like a cotillion ball gown, and I also incorporated a window removed from my father's church. This window, its fleur-de-lis and the colored light it casts down, was one of my earliest experiences with art. I imagine it to be a kind of bottle tree, with its borrowed symbolism and illusion of shelter and protection against evil through colored light. I wonder what offers you more protection: a skirt of bananas, or an architecture that functions as a symbol of your own demise.

— *As told to William J. Simmons*