

# 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

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 Esmin 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

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/>.