Simone Leigh

Sovereignty
Simone Leigh: Sovereignty features a new body of work made for the United States Pavilion. Characterized by an interest in performativity and affect, Leigh’s expansive practice parses the construction of Black femme subjectivity. Her large-scale sculptural works join forms derived from vernacular architecture and the female body, rendering them via materials and processes associated with the artistic traditions of Africa and the African diaspora.

Sovereignty commingles disparate histories and narratives, including those related to ritual performances of the Baga peoples in Guinea, early Black American material culture from the Edgefield District in South Carolina, and the landmark 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition. With a series of new bronzes and ceramics both outside and inside the Pavilion, Leigh intervenes imaginatively to fill gaps in the historical record by proposing new hybridities.

The works in Sovereignty collectively extend the artist’s ongoing inquiry into the theme of self-determination. The exhibition’s title speaks to notions of self-governance and independence, for both the individual and the collective. To be sovereign is to not be subject to another’s authority, another’s desires, or another’s gaze, but rather to be the author of one’s own history. Many of the featured sculptures interrogate the extraction of images and objects from across the African diaspora and their circulation as souvenirs in service of colonial narratives. Though Leigh’s figural works present their subjects as autonomous and self-sufficient, they do not simply celebrate the capacity of Black women to overcome oppressive circumstances, but rather, they may be understood as an attempt to affirm their own humanity. Acknowledging the capacity of Leigh’s work to articulate an expansive view of Black female experience, American author and scholar Saidiya Hartman has described the artist’s address of the Black feminine as “an architecture of possibility.” Hartman’s conception of “critical fabulation”—a strategy that invites historians, artists, and critics to creatively fill 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.”

Leigh’s exhibition continues beyond the U.S. Pavilion with Loophole of Retreat: Venice, a convening of Black women scholars, performers, writers, and artists in October 2022, organized by Rashida Bumbray. The project reflects the collaborative ethos that is characteristic of Leigh’s practice, and pays homage to a long history of Black femme collectivity, communality, and care.

FIG. 1. Simone Leigh, Sphinx (detail), 2022
Simone Leigh: Sovranità presenta una nuova serie di opere create per il padiglione degli Stati Uniti. L’ampia produzione artistica di Leigh, caratterizzata dall’interesse per la performatività e la manifestazione emotivo-corporea, analizza la costruzione della soggettività femminile nera. Le sue sculture di grandi dimensioni uniscono forme tratte dall’architettura vernacolare e dal corpo femminile, rese in prassi e materiali legati alle tradizioni artistiche dell’Africa e della diaspora africana. Sovranità mescola storie e narrazioni disparate, come quelle relative alle performance rituali del popolo Baga della Guinea, alla prima cultura materiale americana nera del distretto di Edgefield nella Carolina del Sud e alla storica Esposizione coloniale di Parigi del 1931. Con la nuova serie di opere in bronzo e ceramica, esposte all’interno e all’esterno del padiglione, Leigh interviene in modo creativo a colmare le lacune della memoria storica proponendo nuove tipologie di ibridi.


**FIG. 1.** Simone Leigh, Sfinge (dettaglio), 2022
Works in the Exhibition

All exhibited works are by Simone Leigh (b. 1967 in Chicago), unless otherwise noted. All works are courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

Façade

2022
Thatch, steel, and wood
Dimensions variable

LEFT TO RIGHT


Considering the U.S. Pavilion itself as a sculpture, Leigh has transformed its architecture with an installation of thatch roofing on the building’s façade that resembles that of a 1930s West African palace. Leigh’s exterior intervention introduces contrasting forms and materials that carry their own histories and interact with the original neoclassical building. Façade draws upon the landmark 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition and its enduring legacy within the midcentury cultural landscape. Effectively reenacting the colonialist project while it was still ongoing, France mounted the exhibit to display the cultures and peoples of the lands then under colonial control.\(^1\) The Expo included a full-scale re-creation of the Khmer temple Angkor Wat as well as model villages, which, populated by people brought in from their homelands, recalled human zoos. Paris in the 1930s was a vibrant, cross-cultural center of literary and artistic production, and the exhibition became a crucible for the surrealist, Négritude, and modernist movements. Artists, writers, and activists of the time offered scathing critiques of the Exposition; in collaboration with the surrealists, the French Communist Party organized a counterexhibition, The Truth about the Colonies (La Vérité sur les Colonies).\(^2\) Informed by the philosophies of Martinican sisters Paulette and Jeanne Nardal and founded by poets Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, the burgeoning Négritude movement challenged the principles of racialized difference trumpeted by the Paris Colonial Exposition.\(^3\) Many of the buildings featured in the Exposition were designed collaboratively by French architects and those from the colonized nations, and their hybrid constructions became highly influential for modernist architects, including Le Corbusier. Venice’s Giardini is reminiscent of a world’s fair—it houses dozens of national pavilions, each symbolizing a given country’s national ideals. The U.S. Pavilion, designed by William Adams Delano and Chester Holmes Aldrich, opened during the height of Jim Crow in the United States and rising anti-Semitism and fascism in Europe. The Pavilion recalls Thomas Jefferson’s plantation Monticello, an example of Palladian architecture inspired by the Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio, whose buildings can be seen throughout Venice.\(^4\) By combining and reconsidering adjacent historic architectural forms and narratives from across geographies, Leigh’s installation proposes a new perspective on the history of architecture.

1. Though the event was organized by France and sited in Paris’s Bois de Vincennes, several other countries participated in the Exposition, including Belgium, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
Guardando al padiglione degli Stati Uniti come a una scultura, Leigh ne trasforma l’architettura con l’installazione di una copertura in paglia sulla facciata dell’edificio, che va a somigliare a un palazzo dell’Africa occidentale degli anni Trenta. L’intervento di Leigh introduce forme e materiali contrastanti, che hanno una propria storia e interagiscono con l’edificio neoclassico originale.

Facciata si rifà alla storica Esposizione coloniale di Parigi del 1931 e alla sua perdurante eredità nel panorama culturale della metà del secolo. Ricreando efficacemente un progetto colonialista che era ancora in corso, la Francia allestisce la mostra per esibire le culture e i popoli dei paesi allora sotto il controllo coloniale.1 L’Esposizione include una ricostruzione in scala reale del tempio Khmer di Angkor Wat e di alcuni villaggi modello che, popolati da gruppi di persone trasferiti dalle loro terre di origine, sembrano zoo umani. Parigi negli anni Trenta è un centro vibrante e interculturale di produzione letteraria e artistica, e la mostra divenne il punto di incontro tra movimento surrealista, Négritude e i modernisti: artisti, scrittori e attivisti dell’epoca criticano aspramente l’Esposizione e il Partito Comunista francese, in collaborazione con i surrealisti, organizza una contro-esposizione, La Verità su le Colonie (La verità sulle Colonie).2 L’installazione di Leigh, che mescola e ripensa forme architettoniche storiche contigue e narrazioni provenienti da aree geografiche tra loro lontane, propone una nuova prospettiva sulla storia dell’architettura.

1. Alla mostra organizzata dalla Francia a Parigi, al Bois de Vincennes, partecipano molti altri paesi, tra cui Olanda, Belgio, Italia, Giappone, Portogallo, Regno Unito e Stati Uniti.

2022
Paglia per copertura, acciaio e legno
Dimensioni variabili

DA SINISTRA A DESTRA

FIG. 2. Illustrata della Grand Pavillon che ospita la mostra del Camerun/Togo alla Esposizione coloniale di Parigi, 1931. Imp. Braun & Cie, Editeurs Concessionnaires, Parigi

Standing at the center of the U.S. Pavilion's outdoor forecourt is *Satellite*, a combine sculpture that references forms with rich cultural histories. The work recalls a traditional D'mba (also called nimba), a headdress shaped like a female bust, created by the Baga peoples of the Guinea coast and used during ritual performances to communicate with ancestors. Alongside other African sculptures and masks, D’mbas were a source of fascination for European modernists, including Pablo Picasso, who owned one. This interest typified colonialist attitudes, which valued such objects for their aesthetics rather than for their original functions, and considered them in service to a European art-historical canon. The D’mba is one of the most recognizable objects of African art history; a prime example is held in the nearby Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

Monumental and rendered in bronze, *Satellite* presents the body at architectural scale. The legs become architectonic columns, and the figure is tall enough for visitors to pass under, creating an intimate space. In place of the head typically found on a traditional D’mba headdress, Leigh tops her sculpture with a cast satellite dish, which, with its capacity for transmitting and receiving, echoes the D’mba’s function as a communicative conduit.

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Al centro del cortile esterno si erge Satellite, una scultura composta che si rifà a forme ricche di riferimenti culturali. L’opera ricorda un tradizionale D’mba (detto anche nimba), maschera a spalla a forma di busto femminile creata dalle popolazioni Baga della costa della Guinea, usata durante le cerimonie rituali per comunicare con gli antenati. Le sculture e maschere africane, inclusi i D’mba, affascinano i modernisti europei come Pablo Picasso, che ne possiede uno. Questo interesse è tipico dell’atteggiamento colonialista, che apprezza gli oggetti per ragioni estetiche invece che per le loro funzioni originali e li considera al servizio del canone storico-artistico europeo. Il D’mba è uno degli oggetti più riconoscibili della storia dell’arte africana; un ottimo esempio è conservato nella vicina Collezione Peggy Guggenheim.

Opere monumentali in bronzo, Satellite presenta il corpo in scala architettonica: le gambe divengono colonne, la figura è così alta da permettere ai visitatori di passare al di sotto, dove si crea uno spazio intimo. Al posto della testa del copricapo tradizionale D’mba Leigh inserisce un’antenna satellitare fusa in bronzo che, alludendo alla capacità di trasmettere e ricevere, richiama la funzione del D’mba come canale di comunicazione.

Occupying the Pavilion’s first gallery is a large reflecting pool featuring Last Garment, a bronze sculpture depicting a laundress at work. Last Garment references a late nineteenth-century photograph made in Jamaica by photographer C. H. Graves titled Mammy’s Last Garment. Postcards bearing such imagery played a key role in supporting stereotypes created by the growing Anglophone Caribbean tourism industry, which, spurred on by the British colonial government, marketed Jamaica as a “tropical paradise.”

Images of the popular trope of the laundress circulated widely, depicting the island’s inhabitants as “loyal, disciplined, and clean,” in order to encourage white travelers to visit the British West Indies. Icons like these formed a part of a visual economy that constituted an idea of Jamaica as imagined by its colonizers and perpetuated the myth of the “noble savage,” which promoted an idealized and sentimental view of colonized people, who came to represent a pure expression of human virtue uncorrupted by civilization.

The laundress souvenir exemplified a desire on the part of white tourists to control, possess, hold, and touch an image of the “other.” Imagery of this type, often made without the full consent of the people depicted, illustrates the subjects’ lack of autonomy or sovereignty over their own representation. Leigh counters this voyeuristic impulse with another notion of touch, evinced in both the sculpture’s form and its making. Prior to casting the work in bronze, Leigh sculpted Last Garment in modeling clay, working from both photographs and a live model dressed in era-specific garments. She also handcrafted in clay each of the more than 800 rosettes that comprise the figure’s hair before casting them in bronze.


7. Thompson notes that the laundress was among the most popular tropes in establishing ideas of “civilized” and “clean natives” to white tourists in An Eye for the Tropics, 6.

8. In the process of creating this work, costume designer Niki Hall researched the clothing of the period, sourcing garments similar to those worn by the woman in the photograph.
L’ultimo indumento

Nella prima sala del padiglione una scultura in bronzo che raffigura una lavandaia al lavoro, L’ultimo indumento, si riflette in una grande vasca. L’opera fa riferimento a una fotografia della fine dell’Ottocento scattata in Giamaica dal fotografo C. H. Graves, dal titolo Mammy’s Last Garment (L’ultimo indumento di Mammy). Cartoline con immagini simili svolgono un ruolo chiave nel propagare gli stereotipi creati dalla crescente industria del turismo caraibico anglofono che, spinto dal governo coloniale britannico, pubblicizza la Giamaica come “paradiso tropicale”.

Le immagini del popolare tropo della lavandaia hanno ampia diffusione e raffigurano gli abitanti dell’isola come “leali, disciplinati, puliti” per incitare i viaggiatori bianchi a visitare le Indie Occidentali britanniche. Immagini analoghe sono state utilizzate per rafforzare l’idea di Giamaica così come immaginata dai suoi colonizzatori e perpetua il mito del “nobile selvaggio”, promuovendo una visione idealizzata e sentimentale della gente colonizzata che finisce per rappresentare la pura espressione della virtù umana non corrotta dalla civiltà.

Il souvenir della lavandaia esemplifica il desiderio, da parte dei turisti bianchi di controllare, possedere, tenere e toccare una immagine dell’altro. Immagini di questo tipo, spesso create senza il pieno consenso della persona raffigurata, testimoniano la mancanza di autonomia dei soggetti o di sovranità sulle proprie rappresentazioni. Leigh contrappone a questo impulso voyeuristico un altro concetto di tocco, che si manifesta sia nella forma che nella realizzazione della scultura. Prima di fondere l’opera in bronzo infatti Leigh scolpisce L’ultimo indumento in argilla, lavorando sia a partire dalle fotografie che dal vivo, con una modella vestita in abiti dell’epoca. Inoltre scolpisce a mano nell’argilla, prima di fonderla in bronzo, ciascuna delle oltre ottocento rosette che compongono la capigliatura della figura.

7. Thompson osserva che la lavandaia è tra i tropi più popolari atti a radicare nei turisti bianchi l’idea di “nativi puliti” e “civilizzati” in An Eye for the Tropics, p. 6.
8. Durante la realizzazione dell’opera la costumista Niki Hall ha svolto ricerche sull’abbigliamento del periodo, procurandosi indumenti simili a quelli indossati dalla donna nella fotografia.
Anonymous draws upon an 1882 picture by photographer James A. Palmer, who produced thousands of images of “Southern plantation life” in South Carolina and Georgia. Palmer’s photograph, titled The Wilde Woman of Aiken, depicts a Black woman seated at a table with an Edgefield face jug holding a large sunflower. The jug in the photograph is the first known image of a face vessel, a type of object made in the American South by both enslaved and freed African Americans in Edgefield District, South Carolina, a region renowned for the production of utilitarian stoneware. These enigmatic face vessels might have functioned in ritual or religious practices, or as coded objects that disguised hidden meanings. As a resident of the Edgefield District, Palmer was familiar with face vessels but wasn’t versed in the complexity of their historical references or uses. His racist photograph was intended as a satire of Oscar Wilde and as a rejection of the poet’s aesthetic theory that anything can be beautiful.

Leigh brings the anonymous model in the small-scale photograph to larger-than-life size, situated in proximity to the over five-foot-tall Jug. Leigh’s sculpture departs from the traditional vessels in significant ways, most emphatically through scale. Appended across the surface of the work are forms resembling cowrie shells the size and shape of the watermelons the artist uses as molds to generate them.

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**Anonymous, 2022**
Glazed stoneware
72 1/2 × 53 1/2 × 43 1/4 inches (184.2 × 135.9 × 109.9 cm)

**Anonymous, 2022**
Glazed stoneware
62 1/2 × 40 3/4 × 45 3/4 inches (158.8 × 103.5 × 116.2 cm)

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**Jug, 2022**
Glazed stoneware
62 1/2 × 40 3/4 × 45 3/4 inches (158.8 × 103.5 × 116.2 cm)

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Brocca e Anonima

Anonima riprende un’immagine del 1882 scattata da James A. Palmer, fotografo che produsse migliaia di immagini della “vita nelle piantagioni del Sud”, nella Carolina del Sud e in Georgia. La fotografia di Palmer, intitolata The Wilde Woman of Aiken, ritrae una donna nera seduta a un tavolo su cui è posata una brocca Edgefield a forma di faccia che sorregge un grande girasole. La brocca della fotografia è la prima immagine nota di un vaso facciale, un tipo di oggetto realizzato da afroamericani, sia liberi che schiavi, negli stati del Sud, in particolare nel distretto di Edgefield in Carolina del Sud, regione rinomata per la produzione di stoviglie in grès. Questi enigmatici vasi facciali servivano forse per pratiche rituali o religiose, oppure erano oggetti codificati che mascheravano significati segreti. Palmer, che viveva nel distretto di Edgefield, conosceva bene i vasi facciali ma non ne comprendeva la complessità di riferimenti storici o i loro usi. La sua fotografia razzista vuole essere una satira rivolta a Oscar Wilde, una contestazione della teoria estetica del poeta secondo cui qualsiasi cosa può essere bella.

Leigh traspone la modella anonima della piccola fotografia in dimensioni più che umane e la colloca vicino a Brocca, che si discosta significativamente dai vasi tradizionali, soprattutto per le misure. Sulla superficie della brocca sono applicate forme simili a conchiglie di ciprea, che hanno le dimensioni e la forma delle angurie che l’artista usa come stampi.


DA SINISTRA A DESTRA

Brocca, 2022
Grès smaltato
158,8 x 103,5 x 116,2 cm

Anonima, 2022
Grès smaltato
184,2 x 135,9 x 109,9 cm

Fig. 8. Ceramista non riconosciuto del distretto di Edgefield, vaso facciale del raccolto, XIX secolo. Grès alcalino smaltato con inserti di caolino, 26 cm (altezza)

Fig. 9. James A. Palmer, The Wilde Woman of Aiken, dalla serie Aiken and Vicinity, 1882. Stampa all’albumina d’argento da negativo su vetro, 16,5 x 10,5 cm

Fig. 10. Simone Leigh al lavoro sulla scultura, 2021
Sentinel, which stands at the center of the U.S. Pavilion’s rotunda gallery, references an important genre of African diasporic artwork called power objects. Taking different forms—many of them anthropomorphic—power objects play an essential role in spiritual life and are believed to possess inherent divine energy and knowledge. Leigh’s sculpture combines an elongated female form with an object traditionally used in fertility rituals, associating the femme body as a tool or site of labor and consumption. The work’s title, which denotes the act of watching over, casts the figure as an observant presence within the exhibition.

2022
Bronze
194 × 39 × 23 1/4 inches
(492.8 × 99.1 × 59.1 cm)

FIG. 11.
Simone Leigh sculpting Sentinel, 2021

FIG. 12.
Leigh, Sentinel, 2022
Conspiracy and Sharifa are joined in a call and response in the Pavilion’s penultimate gallery. The film captures aspects of the sculpture’s making, and together, the two works expand on narratives of care, labor, and creation.

Sharifa is the first portrait Leigh ever made. Sculpted from life after writer Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, this colossal bronze stands twice as tall as its model. Leaning against the wall, with her hands placed on thighs and eyes gazing downward, Sharifa presents a body at rest. Her posture evokes strategies of refusal that feed the creative possibilities—and necessity—of Black women’s interior worlds. In large part, the sculpture is enigmatic and its significance remains unclear to the viewer. This quality of opacity is a consistent device in Leigh’s work—one she has used in her social practice projects, performances, and sculptures—wherein part of the work remains unseen or is otherwise inaccessible to viewers.

Sharifa exhibits two of Leigh’s signature formal strategies: the abstraction of the femme body and the evocation of body as architecture. A foot protruding from the figure’s skirt conjures the tradition of Egyptian statuary. Rhodes-Pitts’s own prescient words, written before the creation of this piece, expand on the dual roles of being subject and source:

At Simone’s direction, my body passed easily from woman to earth, water, fire, air, time. Other of Leigh’s friends and associates have appeared this way, as oneself and as something beyond oneself, as source and emanation (I could also say: as material), creating space.

Along with artist Lorraine O’Grady, Rhodes-Pitts is also featured in the film Conspiracy, which Leigh made collaboratively with filmmaker Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich (b. 1987 in New York). Inspired in part by the 1962 documentary Hands of Inge, about the American sculptor Ruth Inge Hardison, Leigh and Hunt-Ehrlich’s film—shot on black-and-white 8mm and 16mm stock—focuses on the performativity of making and on the studio as a site of labor and care. Close-ups of Leigh’s hands punching, scraping, kneading, and modeling clay are joined by carefully framed shots of the studio, wooden tools, and Leigh’s model, all rendered in chiaroscuro. Meditative sequences of Leigh’s manual labor are paired with a voice-over featuring excerpted text from art historian Robert Farris Thompson’s influential Flash of the Spirit (1983)—specifically about the spirit embodying materials of Kongo’s artistic traditions—and a description of a ceremonial Jamaican balm bath as recalled by Zora Neale Hurston in her 1938 travelogue Tell My Horse. An additional underlying text to the film is the album Conspiracy (1975) by Jeanne Lee.

13. Leigh cites Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 autobiography, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, in several artworks, specifically Leopoldo de Retribut: Venice (see page 18 in this broadsheet).
La penultima sala del padiglione riunisce Sharifa e Cospirazione in un dialogo a “chiamata e risposta”: il video cattura alcuni aspetti della realizzazione della scultura e insieme le due opere si soffermano su narrazioni di cura, lavoro e creazione.

Sharifa è il primo ritratto mai eseguito da Leigh. Questo bronzo colossale, realizzato dal vero nelle sembianze della scrittrice Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, è alto il doppio della modella. Appoggiata al muro, con le mani sulle cosce e lo sguardo rivolto verso il basso, Sharifa mostra un corpo a riposo, la cui postura rimanda alle strategie di rifiuto che alimentano le possibilità creative e la necessità - dei mondi interiori delle donne nere13. In gran parte, la scultura è enigmatica e il suo significato rimane abbastanza oscuro allo spettatore. Questa opacità, in cui una parte dell’opera rimane invisibile o altrimenti inaccessibile agli spettatori14, è un espediente spesso usato da Leigh nelle sue opere, nei project sociali, nelle performance e nelle sculture.

Sharifa presenta due strategie formali tipiche di Leigh: l’astrazione del corpo femminile e l’evocazione del corpo come architettura. Il piede che sporge dalla gonna della figura evoca la tradizione della statuaria egiziana. Le parole premonitrici della stessa Rhodes-Pitts, scritte prima della creazione dell’opera, approfondiscono il suo doppio ruolo di soggetto e fonte:

Sotto le direttive di Simone, il mio corpo si trasforma facilmente da donna a terra, acqua, fuoco, aria, tempo. Altre amiche e collaboratrici di Leigh sono apparse proprio così, sia come se stesse sia come qualcosa che supera il sé, come fonte ed emanazione (potrei anche dire: come materiale) a creare lo spazio15.


Conceived as a chorus of figures, the group of works assembled in the final gallery of the U.S. Pavilion are crafted in ceramic and raffia, two materials that have long been central to Leigh’s practice. Clay forms the basis of most of Leigh’s artworks—including her bronzes, which she first sculpts in clay—and the artist pushes the medium’s possibilities through scale and method, using techniques such as atmospheric salt firing. The relationship of ceramic material to geology links Leigh’s work to the burgeoning discourse of the geopolitics of the Anthropocene.

Architecture is an extension of the body in Cupboard, a towering bell-shaped form covered in raffia. Cupboard invokes both the vernacular architecture of the Global South and women’s dress. As references for these dome-like forms, Leigh has pointed to the 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition, which established the hut as an iconography of the colonies; the 1940s-era restaurant Mammy’s Cupboard in Natchez, Mississippi, which invokes the violence of entering a woman’s skirt to eat; and Diego Velázquez’s 1656 painting Las Meninas. These forms carry with them the potentials of concealment, gathering, and invasion, evoking Hortense Spillers’s conception of the contrast between body and flesh. Another form channeled in this gallery is that of the Egyptian sphinx, one of the most recognizable in ancient history. Taken together, the works in this room demonstrate Leigh’s continued use of forms and processes that have traditionally been gendered and that send up essentialist ideas of the Black femme body.

Cupboard, Martinique, and Sphinx

Cupboard, 2022  
Raffia, steel, and glazed stoneware  
135 1/2 × 124 × 124 inches  
(344.1 × 315 × 315 cm)

Martinique, 2022  
Glazed stoneware  
60 3/4 × 41 1/4 × 39 3/4 inches  
(154.3 × 104.8 × 101 cm)

Sphinx, 2022  
Glazed stoneware  
29 3/4 × 56 3/4 × 35 inches  
(75.6 × 144.1 × 88.9 cm)


Il gruppo di opere riunite nell’ultima sala è concepito come un coro di figure realizzate in ceramica e rafia, due materiali da tempo fondamentali nella prassi artistica di Leigh. L’argilla è il materiale alla base della maggior parte delle sue opere, inclusi i bronzi che l’artista scolpisce dapprima in creta; Leigh spinge al limite le potenzialità del materiale in quanto a dimensioni e metodo, utilizzando tecniche come la cottura con i sali in forno atmosferico. La relazione del materiale ceramico con la geologia collega l’opera di Leigh alla nascente discussione sulla geopolitica dell’Antropocene.

In Credenza, torreggiante forma a campana coperta di rafia, l’architettura è un’estensione del corpo. L’opera richiama sia l’architettura vernacolare del Sud globale che l’abbigliamento femminile. Leigh ha identificato come punti di riferimento di queste forme a cupola l’Esposizione coloniale di Parigi del 1931, che stabilisce la capanna come immagine iconica delle colonie; “Mammy’s Cupboard”, ristorante degli anni Quaranta a Natchez, Mississippi, che fa pensare all’atto violento di entrare nella gonna di una donna per mangiare; e il dipinto Las Meninas di Diego Velázquez, del 1656. Queste forme portano con sé potenzialità di occultamento, aggregazione e violazione, e riportano alla distinzione tra corpo e carne espressa da Hortense Spillers. Nella sala si manifesta un’altra forma, quella delle sfinge egizie, una tra le più riconoscibili della storia antica. Nell’insieme, le opere esposte in questa sala testimoniano l’uso costante da parte di Leigh di forme e processi tradizionalmente connotati dall’identità sessuale, che potenziano la concezione essenzialista del corpo della donna nera.

As part of her exhibition at the U.S. Pavilion, Leigh will bring together scholars, artists, and activists from around the world for a major project, *Loophole of Retreat: Venice*. Organized by Rashida Bumbray, director of Culture and Art at the Open Society Foundations, with curatorial advisors Saidiya Hartman, University Professor, Columbia University, and Tina M. Campt, Owen F. Walker Professor of Humanities and Modern Culture and Media, Brown University, the three-day symposium will comprise dialogue, performances, and presentations centered on Black women’s intellectual and creative labor. Taking place in Venice in fall 2022, the gathering will feature a global roster of participants and will spotlight performances, film screenings, and conversations organized around selected key directives including maroonage, magical realism, and medicine.

“Leigh is committed to the lineage of Black women artists and intellectuals that make her practice possible. As such, in connection with her exhibition at the U.S. Pavilion in Venice, she continues her work of making Black women’s intellectual labor more visible. *Loophole* will elevate a global conversation on Black feminist thought in order to nurture the intergenerational and interdisciplinary connections between Black women thinkers and makers,” said Bumbray in a statement.

*Loophole of Retreat: Venice* builds on an eponymous one-day convening held in 2019 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. The conceptual frame is drawn from the 1861 autobiography of Harriet Jacobs, a formerly enslaved woman who for seven years after her escape lived in a crawl space she described as a “loophole of retreat.” Jacobs claimed this site as simultaneously an enclosure and a space for enacting practices of thinking, planning, writing, and imagining new forms of freedom. It is a place that *Loophole of Retreat: Venice* will mobilize again in centering this space for the intellectual labor of Black women and femmes.
Loophole of Retreat: Venice

Come parte integrante della mostra, Leigh intende riunire studiose, artiste e attiviste da tutto il mondo per un importante progetto, Loophole of Retreat: Venice (La scappatoia del rifugio: Venezia).

Organizzato da Rashida Bumbray, direttrice di Culture and Art alla Open Society Foundations, con il supporto curatoriale di Saidiya Hartman, University Professor alla Columbia University e di Tina Campt, Owen F. Walker Professor di Humanities and Modern Culture and Media alla Brown University, il simposio della durata di tre giorni comprenderà discussioni, performance e interventi incentrati sul lavoro intellettuale e creativo delle donne nere. L’incontro, che si svolge a Venezia nell’autunno 2022, presenterà una rosa internazionale di partecipanti e punterà il riflettore su performance, proiezioni di film e conversazioni organizzate per tematiche fondamentali, tra cui il maroonage (lo stato degli schiavi fuggitivi riuniti in comunità clandestine, ndt), il realismo magico e la medicina.

“Leigh è profondamente legata alle generazioni di artiste e intellettuali nere che hanno reso possibile la sua carriera artistica. Per questo, in coincidenza con la mostra al padiglione degli Stati Uniti a Venezia, continua il suo impegno per dare maggiore visibilità al lavoro intellettuale delle donne nere. Loophole solleverà una discussione globale sul pensiero femminista nero per alimentare le connessioni intergenerazionali e interdisciplinari tra intellettuali e creative nere”, dichiara Bumbray.


7–9 ottobre 2022
Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia

Per ulteriori informazioni: simonoleighvenice2022.org

FIG. 19.
Mary McLeod Bethune, Ida B. Wells, Nannie Burroughs e altre donne al raduno delle donne battiste, Chicago 1930
About the Project

Simone Leigh

Over the past two decades, Simone Leigh (b. 1967 in Chicago) has created an expansive body of work in sculpture, video, and performance that centers Black femme interity, inflected by Black feminist theory. Leigh’s practice intervenes imaginatively to fill gaps in the historical record by proposing new hybridities. Leigh’s sculptural works join forms derived from vernacular architecture and the female body, rendering them via materials and processes associated with the artistic traditions of Africa and the African diaspora. The collaborative ethos that characterizes Leigh’s videos and public programs pays homage to a long history of Black female collectivity, communality, and care.


The works that comprise Leigh’s exhibition for the U.S. Pavilion will be featured in her first museum survey exhibition at the ICA in 2023, which will subsequently tour to museums throughout the United States. The exhibition will be accompanied by the first comprehensive monograph dedicated to Leigh’s work.

Eva Respini

CO-COMMISSIONER AND CURATOR
DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR CURATORIAL AFFAIRS AND BARBARA LEE CHIEF CURATOR, ICA/BOSTON

For two decades, Eva Respini has been curating groundbreaking and ambitious exhibitions; she has worked with a range of artists exploring themes around representation and history, political agency, and material culture. At the ICA she has curated the critically acclaimed thematic exhibitions When Home Won’t Let You Stay: Migration through Contemporary Art (2019) and Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today (2018); she has organized ambitious solo presentations featuring artists such as Firelei Baez (2020), Deana Lawson (2021), John Akomfrah (2016), Huma Bhabha (2019), and William Forsythe (2018). Her other notable exhibitions include retrospectives of Walid Raad (2015) and Cindy Sherman (2012) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Well respected in the art field, she teaches curatorial studies at Harvard University and publishes widely. Respini is currently working with Leigh on the artist’s first museum survey exhibition, scheduled for 2023 at the ICA.

Spelman College

The ICA is partnering with Spelman College to offer a too-semester seminar to immerse students in the art and ideas of Simone Leigh and to introduce them to the history of the U.S. Pavilion and the organization of the Leigh exhibition as part of the 2022 Venice Biennale. The yearlong seminar was taught in fall 2021 by Julia Elizabeth Neal and in spring 2022 by Dr. Cheryl Finley. Topics included Black feminist theories, social practice and sculpture, visual traditions of African diasporic cultures, and performance art. Students from across the college and the Atlanta University Center consortium History + Curatorial Studies Program participated.

Spelman College, a historically black college and a global leader in the education of women of African descent, is dedicated to academic excellence in the liberal arts and sciences and the intellectual, creative, ethical, and leadership development of its students. Spelman empowers the whole person to engage the many cultures of the world and inspires a commitment to positive social change.

Collaboration with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

The involvement of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, through the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, with the U.S. Pavilion this year includes also a collaboration with the ICA to amplify the reach and impact of this project on the young people of the city of Venice. The ICA will offer a four-day professional development experience for 24 middle- and high-school educators in the Veneto region. These teachers will form a learning community to explore the work of Simone Leigh using a multidisciplinary arts engagement approach rooted in the ICA’s nationally recognized teen arts education model and informed by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection’s educational program. The workshop will connect visual and verbal learning and bring together teachers of various disciplines. All workshops will be held in both Italian and English. Participating educators will make art with professional artists, attend special tours of the U.S. Pavilion and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, engage in critical conversations, and create original work. The teachers will build a curriculum designed to inspire, empower, and educate their students. This curriculum, and resources codelivered by the ICA and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, will be shared broadly with educators in Italy and the U.S.

Robust arts education is critical to building the next generation of artists, leaders, and citizens. The art of Simone Leigh will be a vehicle for these teachers in empowering Venice’s young people to develop knowledge of themselves and of the world around them.

About the U.S. Pavilion

The United States Pavilion opened on May 4, 1930. Since 1986, it has been owned by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, and managed by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, which works closely with the U.S. Department of State and exhibition curators to install and maintain all official U.S. exhibitions presented in the Pavilion. Every two years, museum curators from across the country detail their visions for the U.S. Pavilion in proposals that are reviewed by the National Endowment for the Arts’ Federal Advisory Committee on International Exhibitions (FACEL), a group comprising curators, museum directors, and artists, who then submit their recommendations to the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State.

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About the ICA/Boston

A museum at the intersection of contemporary art and civic life, the Institute of Contemporary Art has advanced a bold vision for amplifying artists’ voices and for expanding the museum’s role as educator, incubator, and convener. Since its founding in 1936, the ICA has shared the pleasures of reflection, inspiration, imagination, and provocation that contemporary art offers with its audiences. Its exhibitions, performances, and educational programs provide access to the breadth and diversity of contemporary art, artists, and the creative process, inviting audiences of all ages and backgrounds to participate in the excitement of new art and ideas.

Jill Medvedow

CO-COMMISSIONER
ELLEN MATILDIA POSS DIRECTOR, ICA/BOSTON

Jill Medvedow is recognized across the United States as a national leader in the fields of art and civic life, having dramatically altered the landscape for contemporary art in Boston when, in 2008, she opened the city’s first new art museum in a century. During her more than twenty-year tenure, Medvedow established the museum’s permanent collection; developed a national model for teen arts education; and opened the ICA Watershed, transforming a condemned former copper-pipe factory into a free and open space for immersive works of art. Under her leadership, the ICA has produced influential exhibitions such asLeap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957 (2015–16) and Freestyle: Sculpture 1960–present (2014–15), and has commissioned works by artists such as John Akomfrah and Firelei Baez, generating new scholarly directions in the arts as well as supporting women artists and artists underrepresented in the art historical canon.

Medvedow began her career championing artists’ books and was instrumental in establishing spaces in New York and Seattle before founding Vita Brevis in Boston, producing groundbreaking temporary projects in public art.

About La Biennale di Venezia

Simone Leigh: Sovereignty is presented by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston in partnership with the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State.


The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the U.S. Department of State builds relations between the people of the United States and the people of other countries through academic, cultural, sports, professional, and private exchanges, as well as through public-private partnerships and mentoring programs. These exchange programs inform foreign relations and strengthen the national security of the United States, support U.S. international leadership, and provide a broad range of domestic benefits by helping break down barriers that often divide us, like religion, politics, language and ethnicity, and geography. ECA programs build connections that engage and empower people and motivate them to become leaders and thinkers, to develop new skills, and to find connections that will create positive change in their communities.

About Loophole of Retreat: Venice

Rashida Bumbary

CURATOR, LOOHOLE OF RETREAT: VENICE
DIRECTOR OF CULTURE AND ART, OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

Rashida Bumbery is the director of Culture and Art, The Open Society Foundations’ program dedicated to advancing diverse artistic practices and strengthening locally led cultural spaces around the world. Since joining the Open Society Foundations in 2015, Bumbery has launched and overseen many new grantmaking initiatives in global contexts including the Global Initiative on the Rastafari of African Cultural Heritage, the Soros Arts Fellowship, the OSF Arts Forum on Art, Public Space and Closing Societies. With colleagues from Haiti’s FOKAL, she helped to inaugurate a new Caribbean cultural foundation, and in collaboration with Open Society-US, she established the Alternative Monuments Initiative.

Bumbery began her curatorial career in 2001 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, where she coordinated major exhibitions including Frequency (2005) and Freestyle (2005). As associate curator at The Kitchen, New York, Bumbery organized critically acclaimed exhibitions and commissions including Simone Leigh’s solo exhibition You Don’t Know Where Her Mouth Has Been (2006) and the International Art Exhibition of Creative Time’s public art exhibition Funk, God, Jazz and Medicine: Black Radical Brooklyn in 2014, which included Leigh’s Free People’s Medical Clinic.

Bumbery is also an accomplished choreographer whose practice draws from traditional African American vernacular and folk traditions. Her performances have been performed at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Modern, London; the New Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harlem Stage, and Summerstage, all in New York; and Project Row Houses, Houston.
Il Progetto

Simone Leigh

Simone Leigh (nata nel 1987 a Chicago) ha creato negli ultimi due decenni un ampio corpus di opere di scultura, video e performance incentrate sul mondo interiore delle donne. La sua prassi artistica, iniziata sulla base dei temi del femminismo, interviene creativamente a colmare le lacune della memoria storica proponendo nuove tipologie di realtà. Le sculture di Leigh svincolano forme derivate dall’architettura vernacolare e dal corpo femminile, che l’artista realizza con materiali e pratiche legati alle tradizioni artistiche dell’Africa e della diaspora africana. L’ethos collaborativo che caratterizza i video e i programmi sociali rende omaggio a una lunga storia di collettività, composta e cura delle donne nere.


Il padiglione degli Stati Uniti


Le donne e gli artisti sottorappresentati nel lavoro di Leigh sono state una constante. Nelle sue opere di scultura, video e performance, il corpo femminile è un elemento fondamentale che Lei ha approfondito, sviluppando una prassi artistica, declinata sulle teorie del femminismo nero, della pratica sociale e della cultura materiale. All’ICA Respini ha curato diverse iniziative di sovvenzione in contesti globali, tra cui la Global Initiative per il padiglione degli Stati Uniti in progetti che vengono sostenuti dal Dipartimento di Stato americano. Dal 1986 il padiglione è proprietà della Fondazione Solomon R. Guggenheim di New York. La sua attività è amministrata dalla Collocazione Peggy Guggenheim di Venezia, che opera in stretta collaborazione con il Dipartimento di Stato e con i curatori delle mostre per instaurare e mantenere tutte le mostre ufficiali accettate nel padiglione. Nella prossima generazione di artisti, leader e cittadini. L’arte di Simone Leigh fornisce a questi insegnamenti il mezzo per incoraggiare i giovani a sviluppare la conoscenza di sé e del mondo che li circonda.
Project Credits

Simone Leigh: Sovereignty is presented by the institution of Contemporary Art/Boston in partnership with the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the Department of State. The exhibition is produced with the collaboration of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

Simone Leigh: Sovereignty is presented by l’instituto di Contemporary Art/Boston in collaborazione con il Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs del Dipartimento di Stato americano. La mostra è prodotta con la collaborazione della Collezione Peggy Guggenheim, Venezia, e della Fondazione Solomon R. Guggenheim, New York.

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Jill Weinreich

We are grateful to so many people and institutions, all of whom were instrumental in the realization of the U.S. Pavilion. We are deeply thankful for the partnership of our colleagues across the ICA. Outside the museum, our sincere thanks are due to the individuals and organizations in the United States and Europe who helped make this project a reality. Each of the philanthropists recognized in this brochure has responded to our request for support with extraordinary generosity. Our final and most profound thanks are to Simone Leigh, for the incredible gift of her work.

—Jill Medvedow & Eva Raspoli

Siamo grati alle tantissime persone che sono state determinanti per la realizzazione della mostra al padiglione degli Stati Uniti. Siamo profondamente riconoscenti ai nostri colleghi in ogni dipartimento di ICA per la loro collaborazione. Al di fuori del museo, i nostri sinceri ringraziamenti vanno agli individui e alle organizzazioni degli Stati Uniti e in Europa che hanno contribuito alla realizzazione di questo progetto. Ognuno dei Bianchetti citati in questa brochure ha risposto alla nostra richiesta di supporto con straordinaria generosità. Il nostro ultimo e più profondo ringraziamento va a Simone Leigh, per l’incalzabile dono della sua arte.

—Jill Medvedow & Eva Raspoli

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Thanks to Simone Leigh for her contributions to the texts in this publication.

ARTWORK ENTRIES

Front cover. Leigh, Sharifa, 2022, Bronzes, 111 1/2 x 40 3/4 x 40 1/2 inches (283.2 x 103.5 x 102.9 cm). © Simone Leigh, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo by Timothy Schenck

Fig. 1. 7, 12, 14, 18. © Simone Leigh, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo by Timothy Schenck

Fig. 2. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV Collection 1404344. Creative Commons BY-NC 3.0

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Fig. 4. EEPA Postcard Collection, Goiânia, EEPA GV-17-02, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

Fig. 5. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venezia (Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York). 76.2583 PG 243

Figs. 6, 19. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Fig. 7. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Nancy Dunn Revocable Trust Gift, 2017. Public domain

Fig. 8. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Nancy Dunn Revocable Trust Gift, 2016. Public domain

Fig. 9. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The Lane Collection, 2017.3532. Photograph © 2022 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Fig. 17. Adolf Friedrich, Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin. From the Congo to the Niger and the Nile: An Account of the German Central African Expedition of 1910–1911. London: Duckworth, 1913. Public domain

Back cover: Leigh, Martinique, 2022. Glazed stoneware, 30 3/4 x 47 1/4 x 39 3/4 inches (80.4 x 120 x 101.3 cm). © Simone Leigh, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo by Timothy Schenck

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#SimoneLeighVenice #SimoneLeigh #BiennaleArts2022

Hear more about the works on view on Bloomberg Connects, official digital guide to the U.S. Pavilion.

Ascolta gli approfondimenti sulle opere esposte su Bloomberg Connects, guida digitale ufficiale al padiglione degli Stati Uniti.
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