



# Simone Leigh, Art & Theory: Responses from Students at Spelman College and the AUC Art History + Curatorial Studies Collective

The ICA partnered with Spelman College to offer a two-semester seminar to immerse students in the art and ideas of Simone Leigh, and introduce them to the history of the U.S. Pavilion and the organization of the Leigh exhibition there as part of the 2022 Venice Biennale. The seminar, entitled “Simone Leigh, Art & Theory,” was taught by Dr. Julia Elizabeth Neal in the fall and Dr. Cheryl Finley in the spring. The curriculum included foundational written and visual sources to “provide a broad context for, and cultivate a rich understanding of, the concepts and aesthetics framing Leigh’s work and practice. Topics included Black feminist theories, social practice and sculpture, visual traditions with African diasporic cultures, and performance art.” Eleven students from across the college and the AUC Art History + Curatorial Studies Collective participated.

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# ming joi washington, Spelman College, C' 2022

laboring woman

after saidiya hartman in conversation w/ simone leigh<sup>1</sup>

raffia in the wind  
snails on the shore  
sun baked brick house<sup>2</sup>  
built overlooking the bay  
or built overlooking tenth ave  
— laboring woman  
& all of this an offering  
carved of clay glistening a glaze  
made of tears & ocean mist<sup>3</sup>  
bronze cast so smooth  
the side of the moon<sup>4</sup>  
left weatherworn &  
void of fingerprints  
DNA in the dirt  
clay impurities  
collapsing time in the  
closing fan of the horizon  
the kiln's burning sun  
salt fired stoneware<sup>5</sup>  
stable fragility

self-reliant  
spirit form  
& the radical  
black woman  
anonymous<sup>6</sup>  
to you in the reductive  
glow of her halo — an afro  
orb covered in roses<sup>7</sup>  
neck stretched long  
becomes a staggering  
slender sentinel<sup>8</sup>  
curves as smooth as the current  
gaze peering over a field of  
black girl children  
budding from beneath gravel<sup>9</sup>  
blue skies circling the dwelling  
called home — call mother<sup>10</sup>  
earth's abundant breast to feast on<sup>11</sup>  
& feet never stop running  
under raffia skirt kicking up  
the winds of revolution.<sup>12</sup>

- 1 Anderson Ranch Arts Center. "Summer Series Conversation: Simone Leigh." *YouTube* video, 1:01:30. July 15, 2021. <https://youtu.be/k3e9-SKH2Co>
- 2 Simone Leigh, *Brick House*, 2019. Bronze. 16 × 9 feet.
- 3 *Ibid.*, *Martinique*, 2022. Glazed stoneware, 60 3/4 × 41 1/4 × 39 3/4 inches.
- 4 *Ibid.*, *Satellite*, 2022. Bronze. 24 feet × 10 feet × 7 feet 7 inches.
- 5 *Ibid.*, *Cupboard IX*, 2019. Stoneware, steel, and raffia, 78 × 60 × 80 inches.
- 6 *Ibid.*, *Anonymous*, 2022. Glazed stoneware and bronze, 298 × 155 × 129 cm.
- 7 *Ibid.*, *107 (Face Jug Series)*, 2019. Salt-fired stoneware, 19 × 8 × 7 inches.
- 8 *Ibid.*, *Sentinel IV*, 2020–21. Bronze, 128 × 25 × 15 inches.
- 9 *Girl*, Simone Leigh, Chitra Ganesh, *My Dreams, My Works Must Wait Till After Hell*, 2011. Single-channel digital video (color, sound; 07:14 minutes).
- 10 Simone Leigh, *No Face (House)*, 2020. Terracotta, porcelain, ink, epoxy and raffia, 29 × 24 × 24 inches.
- 11 *Ibid.*, *Trophallaxis*, 2008–2017. Terracotta, porcelain, epoxy, graphite, gold and platinum glazes, and antennas, dimensions variable.
- 12 *Ibid.*, *Village Series*, 2021. Glazed stoneware, metal and raffia, dimensions variable.

## Alexis Brooks, Spelman College, C' 2022

### Black Erasure and the 2022 Venice Biennale

Black Venice has an important story to tell. Because of the city's deeply rooted history of erasure and displacement of its Black citizens, this story remains largely unknown and untold. As we look to the 2022 Venice Biennale, a similar bell rings in its essence — there are stories across the African diaspora that have historically been erased. The Biennale offers an opportunity for this narrative to change. The presence of Black artists, such as Simone Leigh in the U.S. Pavilion, provides a critical moment of reflection on the reoccurring erasure of Black Venice and Blackness across the globe. Leigh's positionality within the Biennale is especially significant because, in the history of Biennales, the United States has never chosen a Black female artist as its representative. Though she is the first Black female U.S. representative, Leigh's lineage of female representation at the Venice Biennale also includes the likes of Adrian Piper, the 2015 Golden Lion recipient, recognized for her work in Okwui Enwezor's show *All the World's Future*, and Sonia Boyce, the 2022 recipient (along with Leigh) recognized for her exhibition *Feeling her Way*.

Leigh's philosophy runs parallel to the understanding that Black Venice faces significant cultural erasure in that she understands that Black women "have been left out of the archive or left out of history."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, her work fits impeccably within this year's Venice Biennale due to her particular care and focus on Black visibility within the public sphere. On display at the 2022 Venice Biennale, Leigh's 16-foot-tall bronze statue entitled *Brick House* (2019) depicts "a Black woman with a torso that combines the forms of a skirt and a clay house,"<sup>2</sup>. Through this sculpture, she emphasizes the strength, endurance, and integrity of a house (symbolical of Black women). Most relevant to the upcoming Biennale, perhaps Leigh uses the

1 "Simone Leigh: *Brick House*," Plinth, High Line, 20 February 2022, <https://www.thehighline.org/art/projects/simoneleigh/>.

2 Simone Leigh: *Brick House*."

public location of this piece in New York City to protest Black female erasure. In relation to her participation in the Biennale, perhaps her representation at the U.S. Pavilion works to reconcile the long history of Black female erasure not only in American history, but also that of Venice and the world.

Whilst celebrating Leigh's historic mark on the Venice Biennale, it is critical to acknowledge that she stands alongside other artists with similar positionalities. More significantly, these female artists are representing nations with brutal colonial histories against Black people that laid a foundation for the Black erasure witnessed today. Sonia Boyce, for example, marks history as the first Black woman to represent Great Britain.

Her work overlaps with Leigh's in that she discusses social themes including race, gender, and inequality.<sup>3</sup> In many of Boyce's works, she draws herself within history where Black people have been excluded.<sup>4</sup> Similar to Leigh's, her work exists to challenge the standard of Black erasure across the globe. Just as Leigh and Boyce are representing their respective countries, Alberta Whittle is the Black female artist to represent Scotland. Her work crosscuts a plethora of themes, from Black erasure and colonialism to xenophobia.<sup>5</sup>

The culmination of these Black female artists' works across the diaspora functions as a step toward historical recognition for the deeply rooted Black history in Venice. And their collective presence in the 2022 Venice Biennale marks a critical shift in the artistic canon toward more inclusive globally recognized work.

- 3 Melissa Chemam, "Sonia Boyce: A Revolutionary Face of Contemporary British Art," Art UK, October 2, 2020, <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/sonia-boyce-a-revolutionary-face-of-contemporary-british-art>.
- 4 "From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers Her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and Her Roots in Reconstruction," Art UK, 20 February 2022, accessed date tk, <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/from-tarzan-to-rambo-english-born-native-considers-her-relationship-to-the-constructedself-image-and-her-roots-in-reconstruction-234873>.
- 5 Alberta Whittle, "'No One Can Find Barbados on a Map, Whereas Everyone Can Find the UK. That Level of Inattention Galvanises so Much of My Work,'" interview by Anna McNay, Studio International, May 9, 2020, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/alberta-whittle-interview-no-one-can-find-barbados-on-the-map-that-level-of-inattention-galvanises-so-much-of-my-work>.

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## Nailah Barnes, Spelman College C'2022

Throughout her oeuvre, Simone Leigh celebrates the support systems Black women create for each other when societal securities prove inadequate or nonexistent. The soundscape of *Loophole of Retreat I* (2019) pays homage to the women in Cambridge Springs Prison who helped Debbie Africa — a Black liberationist and member of the anarcho-primitivism group MOVE — birth and conceal her newborn while incarcerated.<sup>1</sup> To recognize this story of oppression and solidarity, Leigh montaged sounds from two major events: the 1985 news coverage following a fatal bombing by Philadelphia police of a residential home inhabited by members of MOVE and their children; and recordings from a protest at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn during the 2019 polar vortex when incarcerated men banged objects to call attention to the facility's loss of power and heat.<sup>2</sup>

The reoccurring vernacular of “loopholes of retreat” in Simone Leigh's iconography speaks to the reality that the world is not built for Black women's success, nor has it been adequately retrofitted; persistent social and economic legislation and praxis inhibit Black women's safety and prosperity. For example, the imprisonment rate for Black American women was nearly twice that of white women in 2020. Similarly, Native American girls are more than four times as likely, and African American girls are more than three times as likely as white girls to be incarcerated.<sup>3</sup> To combat disproportionate rates of our disenfranchisement, Black women historically and contemporarily have had to create our own spaces for safety and success.

This paradigm rings true at the Venice Biennale. Although Cecilia Alemani's creative direction and mission for the 59th Venice Biennale foregrounds women and non-binary people's contributions to the

- 1 Pilkington, Ed. “Born in a Cell: The Extraordinary Tale of the Black Liberation Orphan,”. 2018. *The Guardian*, July 31, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/31/debbie-sims-africa-mike-jr-black-liberation-orphan-move-nine-philadelphia>.
- 2 Brooklynmuseum.org. 2022. Brooklyn Museum. [online] Available at: <<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/224735>> [Accessed 19 September 2022].
- 3 The Sentencing Project. 2022. Incarcerated Women and Girls | The Sentencing Project. [online] Available at: <<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>> [Accessed 19 September 2022].

contemporary art scene, the structure of the Venice Biennale at base prevents proportionate representation of women artists from the Global South. There is a palpable dearth of sub-Saharan African nations presenting this year — only 5 percent of the pavilions are sub-Saharan African countries while these countries make up over 30 percent of our world.

Ever in pursuit of community on Black women's terms, Simone Leigh's upcoming convening, *Loophole of Retreat: Venice* is a refuge within the Venice Biennale much like the crawlspace Harriet Jacobs lived in for seven years after her escape from enslavement as she records in her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). *Loophole of Retreat: Venice* is also reminiscent of the safe haven Debbie Africa's incarcerated community created. This convening will be an incubator for reimagining how Africa-descended and Global Southern women's voices in general are represented in the art world. Instead of resting on the laurels of a few Black women from wealthy nations who have reached the heights of the ecosystem and been lauded extensively, as in Simone Leigh and Sonia Boyce who are the first Black women to represent the United States and the United Kingdom at the Venice Biennale respectively and each won a Golden Lion, it is of the utmost importance to fortify grassroots support and shared vocabulary around the importance of collaborating horizontally. Like the global reference points Leigh includes in her monumental works, such as raffia which flourishes in the coastal valleys of Madagascar, and the exotification postcards from formerly colonial Jamaica that inform *Last Garment*, the Black women and femmes participating in *Loophole of Retreat: Venice* hail from all across the African diaspora and the Black Atlantic.

Leigh and Boyce discuss this shift in framing critiques of the Venice Biennale in the talk “at home: Artists in Conversation” hosted by the Yale Center for British Art on February 4, 2022. In their conversation, both artists place emphasis on fortifying other entities — galleries, community based cultural institutions, et cetera — to help Black women artists and intellectuals sustain and promulgate their visions with more horizontal collaboration and less bureaucracy and admission-seeking from historically all white and male institutions like the Venice Biennale.<sup>4</sup>

While it is paramount for Black women creatives and intellectuals to build our own tables instead of receiving a chair at the large pre-existing faulty one, it is also important to constructively critique and work towards ameliorating the established structures. One might wonder why there are so few countries from the African continent and the global Black diaspora presenting at the 59th Venice Biennale. Presenting at the Biennale is a Herculean feat for any nation. Many African countries do not have robust cultural affairs budgets and funding from capital-rich foundations like ‘super-power’ nations do and thus cannot afford to participate.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, wealthy nations possess these mega economic advantages due to histories of colonialism and slavery. Meanwhile, the very countries they exploited — Global South countries still recovering for structural slavery and colonialism — struggle to gain access to the Venice Biennale and its benefits.

Furthermore, not only is it expensive to present at the Biennale, there is also a low direct return on the investment. Western galleries often

4 Britishart.yale.edu. 2022. at home: Artists in Conversation | Sonia Boyce and Simone Leigh. [online] Available at: <<https://britishart.yale.edu/videos/home-artists-conversation-sonia-boyce-and-simone-leigh>> [Accessed 19 September 2022].

5 Thackara, Tess. “Despite Obstacles, African Countries Shine at the Venice Biennale,” *Artsy*. May 24, 2017. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-despite-obstacles-african-countries-shine-venice-biennale>.

poach promising African artists and reap the benefits of their success.<sup>6</sup> These realities together form a significant deterrent to participation for sub-Saharan African countries.

Valerie Kabov suggested a solution to this issue of economic access for African artists at the 2019 Africa in Venice Forum: the creation of a mutual aid fund to benefit underrepresented nations and artists at the Venice Biennale. Governments of world powers that have direct exploitative ties to countries struggling to afford the Venice Biennale would contribute to this fund. For example, France would contribute to the fund to benefit Togo and Haiti. Relatedly, on the commercial side, Western and African galleries should collaborate when a Western gallery wants to be involved with an African artist. For example, if Gagosian wishes to represent a Kenyan artist, a Kenyan gallery should also represent that artist, with an equitable split in earnings between the artist and the galleries.

Strategies to amend the Venice Biennale's exclusionary economic structure are vital to discuss and work towards. Simultaneously, the need to imagine and create systems in which Black Global South women creatives and intellectuals are the primary players and no longer have to work to gain a seat at the table but instead build their own, undergirds Leigh's practice and is of the utmost importance. Both realities can and must coexist.

6 Kabov, Valerie, Frank Kilbourne, and Janine Gaëlle Dieudji. "Making Venice Count: Strategies and Actions from Africa for Africa," African Art in Venice Forum, May 9, 2019, YouTube video, 19:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwMqgv5RR4c&t=1775s>.

## Neil Grasty, Morehouse College C'2024

### Materializing Black Bodies: Simone Leigh and The Blackamoor

Garnering much acclaim and even a coveted golden lion<sup>1</sup>, Simone Leigh's representation of the United States at the 2022 Venice Biennale continues to be a seminal event in African diasporic art history and art history at large. One way of understanding the importance of Leigh at the Biennale is through historical representations of the Black body in Western art. Blackamoors are a representation of the Black body with significant ties to Venice. The Blackamoor within decorative arts emerged in the 17th century, with examples in European furniture appearing as early as 1680.<sup>2</sup> During the 18th century, Blackamoors rose to prominence and became a major export of Venetian workshops. Blackamoors are characterized by their lustrous appearance, elaborate clothing, and use as utilitarian objects. Similarly, Leigh's sculpture often incorporates decorative art forms (e.g., pottery, jugs, spoons, etc.) and fuses them with representations of the Black female body. This fusion gives her sculpture a unique connection to the Blackamoor. Leigh has never attributed this tradition as an influence on her sculpture, yet it illustrates how she subverts fraught histories of the Black body's representation. The following comparative analysis examines femininity and gaze within Leigh's sculpture and the Blackamoor.

Femininity as it relates to the Blackamoor has been discussed by cultural studies scholar Ella Shohat in her 2018 essay "The Specter of the Blackamoor." The femininity she discusses within the Blackamoor can be understood as being weak and submissive. Blackamoors' weakness lies in their embodiment of a dominated or tamed racial other, specifically that of the Black African, Moor, and Muslim.<sup>3</sup> Their opulent appearance antithesizes hypermasculine depictions of the aforementioned groups as savage or violent.<sup>4</sup> Submissiveness is seen through their cheerful servitude depicted

- 1 "Sonia Boyce and Simone Leigh Win Golden Lions at Venice Biennale," *ArtReview* (ArtReview, April 25, 2022), <https://artreview.com/sonia-boyce-and-simone-leigh-win-golden-lions-at-59th-venice-biennale/>.
- 2 Adrienne Childs, "A Blackamoor's Progress: The Ornamental Black Body in European Furniture," in *ReSignifications: European Blackamoors*, *Africana Readings*, ed. Awam Amkpa (Rome: Postcart, 2016), 120.
- 3 Ella Shohat, "The Specter of the Blackamoor: Figuring Africa and the Orient," *The Comparatist* 42 (October 2018): 178-179, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26533653>.
- 4 *Ibid.*

through posture and facial expression;<sup>5</sup> this is often characterized as a feminine trait. It is important to note that the ideas of femininity enacted on Blackamoors is present within male and female figures alike.<sup>6</sup> The ideas of femininity Blackamoors represent fuel misogyny and patriarchy.

Contrastingly, Leigh rethinks these ideas within her work. When discussing her notable sculpture *Brick House* (2019), she expresses her interest in “a femininity that’s based on being solid as opposed to fragile.”<sup>7</sup> Leigh’s reinterpretation of the feminine can be seen within how she conceives her face jug series. Within this series, she depicts faces that are distinctly those of Black women, drawing from diasporic art traditions. She declares, “Face jugs are part of the early material culture of African Americans. They represent a particular type of creolisation between West African and American cultures. Face jugs are a kind of power object. [...] They act: they are something beyond being a container or vessel.”<sup>8</sup> The femininity depicted within this series, unlike that of the Blackamoor, exemplifies a sense of power. Furthermore, the decorative art forms within the series transcend their utilitarian use. This is a freeing process, especially when considering Blackamoor’s confinement to their utilitarian use. The utilitarian aspect of Blackamoors contributes to the servitude which characterizes their Black bodies. This directly relates to their rise to prominence during the transatlantic slave trade<sup>9</sup>. Notions of femininity within Leigh’s sculpture and the Blackamoor differ greatly. This is influenced by the gaze and by the intended audience for these works.

In Tina Campt’s *A Black Gaze*, she discusses Leigh’s work and the gaze. In verse five, “Sounding a Black Feminist Chorus,” Campt describes works on view at Leigh’s prolific 2019 exhibition *Loophole*

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.,18.

7 Simone Leigh, “Simone Leigh, Now in the Spotlight, Contemplates the Theme of Invisibility,” interview by Nancy Kenney, *Art Newspaper*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/04/24/simone-leigh-now-in-the-spotlight-contemplates-the-theme-of-invisibility>.

8 Ibid.

9 Childs, “A Blackamoor’s Progress,” 116–26.

*of Retreat* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York: "United kindred in the gallery, the three figures create a sheltering space of care, providing refuge as a group that watches out and watches over."<sup>10</sup> The figures she is likely mentioning in this quote are *Panoptica*, *Sentinel*, and *Jug* (all 2019). *Jug* is especially important when considering Leigh's usage of decorative art forms and their contrast to those within Blackamoor objects. This bronze sculpture consists of the torso of a Black woman whose head is adorned with an Afro; the bottom half of her body is that of a jug. Its form emulates decorative art objects and draws from the architecture of the Mammy's Cupboard restaurant in Natchez, Mississippi. Later in verse five, Campt more directly acknowledges the gaze, declaring, "Leigh's work denies a 'white and dominant' gaze, but I believe we underestimate its power when we understand its impact as achieved either reactively or at the level of negation or reserve. Its purchase resides instead in the power of opacity, which produces its own form of scrutiny and, in turn, its own distinctive gaze."<sup>11</sup> The "distinctive gaze" Campt describes is one heavily informed by Black feminism and African diasporic visual histories. To understand this gaze, one must acknowledge Leigh's intention around audience.

In 2019, Leigh posted an Instagram response to critics' comments about her work at the Whitney Biennial. In the post, she famously proclaims, "black women are my primary audience," candidly declaring to the world the who and what informing her sculpture.<sup>12</sup> This juxtaposes the gaze and audience informing the Blackamoor. The Blackamoor's emergence and popularity coincide with the transatlantic slave trade and the beginnings of European colonialism in Africa, which took place during the 18th century. Blackamoors are physical manifestations of European exoticist tastes and Africans' then newly established status as slaves within the Western world.<sup>13</sup>

10 Tina Campt, "Sounding a Feminist Chorus," in *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 152.

11 Ibid., 153.

12 Simone Leigh (@simoneyvetteleigh), "I've seen some preliminary thoughts on the Biennial and concerns about radicality," Instagram photo, May 16, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BxiJI58gl4t/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>.

Exoticist tastes are seen in their representation of Africa and Asia. This is illustrated with their lustrous black skin, and elaborate garb referencing the Eastern world.

Africans' newly established status in the Western world is represented in their docile and nonthreatening appearance: the Blackamoor, according to Shohat, embodies or soothes European's anxieties around racial others.<sup>14</sup> Shohat explains how these anxieties include racial mixing, Eastern/Muslim invasion, and a fear of the Black body.<sup>15</sup> Shohat's "Specter of the Blackamoor" as well as Adrienne Childs's "A Blackamoor's Progress" are two pivotal texts that examine the problematic nature of the Blackamoors. Notably, this has also been explored in the exhibition *ReSignifications* at New York University's Villa La Pietra in Florence, Italy<sup>16</sup> and Fred Wilson's *Speak of Me as I Am* at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the Blackamoor, Leigh's representation of Black bodies does not cater to white tastes or racial anxieties. Instead, it celebrates the Black body and Black visual histories through its techniques, which draw from African diasporic ceramic traditions. Significantly, Leigh's work solely celebrates the Black female. This is especially remarkable when one considers the histories of subjugation and exploitation that the Black female body has endured and continues to experience.

Essentially, understanding the Blackamoor gives viewers a necessary perspective on Leigh's work especially in the context of Venice specifically. Leigh's sculpture has set a new and radical framework for how the Black body can be represented within art. Furthermore, by deciphering the formal qualities of the Blackamoor trope within the decorative arts, one can understand the histories of racial

13 Childs, "A Blackamoor's Progress," 123–24.

14 Shohat, "The Specter of the Blackamoor," 19.

15 Ibid., 19–20.

16 "Re-Significations (Academic Year 2014–2015)," Villa La Pietra, New York University, Accessed March 16, 2022, <https://lapietra.nyu.edu/project/re-significations/>.

17 Blake Gopnik, "At Venice Biennale, Fred Wilson Colors In the City's History," *Washington Post*, June 14, 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2003/06/14/at-venice-biennale-fred-wilson-colors-in-the-citys-history/bdcdd4ab-d267-484e-8eb1-da78b4649e04/>.

representation Leigh is up against as an artist exhibiting in Italy. Leigh's representation of the U.S. at the Venice Biennial is a marker of both progress and of possibility for the future.

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# Tenesha Carter Johnson, Spelman College, C'2024

## Simone Leigh: A Look into the Unknown

Simone Leigh often refers to her practice and mode in the terms of “auto-ethnographic” she reflects on the recurring themes of identity, cultural feminism, and the reality and relativity of social systems experienced by African diasporic women. *Sentinel* (2019) is one of many works that display her unique sculptural practice to abstract aspects of the form to evoke introspection around processes of identity, formation, and visibility. Considering the definition of *sentinel*, a “watchperson” or “guard,” the singular sculptural figure also invites a conversation between the audience observing the work and the work observing the audience. It is suggested and intended that the form’s curves and roundness against the boundaries of the space and bronze-colored texture reflect the images and labor of the Afro-diasporic women Leigh is influenced by through her work. First exhibited in her solo symposium, *Loophole of Retreat* (2018), *Sentinel* stood amongst many other of Leigh’s contemporary works that won the Hugo Boss Prize in 2018 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. The fruition of the symposium came about in response to Harriet Jacob’s slave narrative<sup>1</sup> serving to extend and generate intimate discussions regarding “the agency of Black women and their power to inhabit worlds of their own creation.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, works, like *Sentinel*, serve as a posing questions and comments for viewers to evaluate the intention of the narrative from the approach in which Leigh takes in response through her sculptural forms.

Within the space of the exhibition, the 8-foot *Sentinel* (2019) towers over the viewer making it nearly impossible to dismiss its powerful presence. The work’s message is conveyed depending on the receptivity, resonance, and relationship between the viewer and work, *Sentinel*, itself. The smoothed-over eyes create ambiguity and disconnect between the work and viewer as it evokes an uneasiness

1 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (L. Maria Child, 1861).

2 “The Hugo Boss Prize 2018: Simone Leigh, *Loophole of Retreat*,” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, April 24 2022, <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/hugo-boss-prize-2018>.

and uncertainty with what the form is and is not. As a society that is often confronted by the daily complexity of systems, the form's vagueness detaches itself from the imposed violence of identification. Eyes are directly correlated with one's visibility, however, Leigh explores and challenges this notion beyond the literal sense of seeing but of being regardless of how it resonates. *Sentinel* furthers the play between figuration and abstraction hinting at the influence of early Egyptian sphinx structures combining the feminine attributed head to rounded corrugated metal and raffia material. Extracting from the earliest forms of Egyptian sphinx that historically depict male pharaohs as a human-lion hybrids representing the strength and intelligence of mankind, Leigh reimagines this history to situate the commentary on women and their identity with and within the labor systems that have simultaneously functioned to liberate and oppressed them. The ambiguity of work aims to reengage the audience in their receptivity to the story being told of the work and their inner awareness of the eyes that gaze at it. Common in many of Leigh's works, *Sentinel* presents the note that the Black woman experience is not monolithic nor to be evaluated from the gaze of judgement but of openness and introspection.

The appointment of Simone Leigh as the United States participant for the 59th Venice Biennale signals a profound renaissance and revitalization of Black art and artists locally and globally. Leigh stands not only for herself, but also for the many Black women, like me, who see themselves within her work. To be seen, whether with the eyes of the body or the eyes of the soul, is to be heard, is to be felt.

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## Gabrielle Morse, Spelman College, C' 2022

### The Importance of Short Films and Their Accessibility

Exploration is crucial to the well-being of an artist. To be considered in high regard, artists often find themselves confined by an expectation of the mediums that they have practiced and studied. Short films, however, are a tool that many creators often employ with no prior film expertise. Whether they are tinkering with visual concepts on a whim or investing in the production of a short film, the accessible qualities of the medium allow artists to experiment with concepts and techniques that may inform their future work.

Simone Leigh is one such artist who expands the core themes she displays in the sculpture practice she is most known for and translates them into the moving picture. *Breakdown* (2011) is a short film directed by Leigh and performance artist Liz Magic Laser, with a performance by mezzo-soprano Alicia Hall Moran. The piece features an unnamed Black woman, performing an operatic rendition of a mental breakdown. *Breakdown* is a critique of society's voyeuristic tendencies when regarding the mental unraveling of women, particularly Black women, who very often receive ridicule and mockery when dealing with mental health issues. When considering this work within the context of Leigh's seminal creations such as *Brick House* (2019), a sculpture that sanctifies the act of refusing to return a gaze, the audience receives the full scope of the dangers of hypervisibility and the respite of solitude.

Video often is used to document the performance works of artists, as well as their different works in traditional mediums. Such documentation allows for audiences to view the work from different settings if they could not witness the work in person. Viewing a re-creation of a work invites an entirely different experience than seeing the work in person. While the documentation of artistic

endeavors sustains the art practices these creators enact, there is a craft in the act of video recording all by itself. Many artists utilize short films to document and expand upon their art. The short-film medium provides a greater avenue for exploration and creativity due to its accessibility and qualifications. As opposed to feature-length films, the time constraint for a short film demands less structure of the filmmaker, allowing them to experiment with different methods of lighting, sequence, and shot composition. Short films do not require the justification of the audience to be produced, unlike feature-length films, which often rely on their commercial success to be considered worth the time and energy made to produce them.

The importance of creating for the sake of the progression of the art form has been a consistent factor in the Venice Biennale Film Festival. As one of the oldest festivals in the world, with its inaugural year in 1932, just five years after sound was integrated into film, the competition has primarily awarded filmmakers Golden and Silver Lions based on their selection regarding artistry and skill demonstrated. Despite being one of the most prestigious film events, the submission process has remained relatively accessible. The cost of submitting a short film is 60 euros, and anybody can submit regardless of previous credentials and Accolades.

The short-film industry, while often overlooked and underrated, has provided artists, both burgeoning and professional, with a space to grow in their creativity. In the age of “content creation,” society often reduces creators to one facet of their work. The celebration of experimentation and exploration in short films would encourage new innovative art practices that propel creativity forward.

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## Jordan Barrant, Spelman College C'2022

### Wombs and Nourishment: Meditations on Simone Leigh's *Trophallaxis* and *Free People's Medical Clinic*

Suspended above the viewer, a large cluster of black terracotta and porcelain melon-shaped breast imitations hangs from the ceiling, variously crowned by silver and gold nipples. Thin metal rods project from some of the forms, pushing the sculpture toward the viewer. This is Simone Leigh's 2008/2017 work *Trophallaxis*, which reimagines the Black female body through its representation of a breast, a womb, and a body. Scientifically, the act of trophallaxis is the exchange of nutrients between insects of the same colony, often observed in bees, wasps, and ants.<sup>1</sup> Through sculptures, performances, and installations, Leigh creates meditative experiences that explore Black female subjectivity.

Leigh further divulges this subjectivity between the stained-glass windows and dark woods of the Stuyvesant Mansion. For her 2014 project in partnership with Creative Time, the *Free People's Medical Clinic*, Leigh organized several workshops in the Stuyvesant Mansion, the residence of the late Dr. Josephine English. Centered on the community framework of the home, the clinic emerged from Leigh in response to the consistent lack of care Black women experience in medical centers. The clinic aimed to nourish Black women, homing in on the ways Dr. English, the first Black woman to have an OB/GYN practice in the state of New York, was able to create a legacy of community care through her practice.<sup>2</sup> Classes and clinics such as The Medicine of Integration, Black Folk Dance, and HIV testing were made available at no cost.<sup>3</sup> With her artistic labor, Leigh continued to feed her community by activating her work in the form of a clinic. In Venice, alongside her work for the U.S. Pavilion, Leigh hosted a global convening, *Loophole of Retreat: Venice*,

- 1 Stefan Jarau, et al., "Trophallaxis: A Mechanism of Information Transfer," in *Food Exploitation by Social Insects: Ecological, Behavioral, and Theoretical Approaches* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2009), 173–83.
- 2 "Our Story," Stuyvesant Mansion, [https://www.thestuyvesantmansion.com/our\\_story](https://www.thestuyvesantmansion.com/our_story); and "Simone Leigh: Trophallaxis," Pérez Art Museum Miami, <https://www.pamm.org/en/artwork/2018.005/#introduction>.
- 3 "Medicine: Simone Leigh in Collaboration with Stuyvesant Mansion," Creative Time, <https://creativetime.org/projects/black-radical-brooklyn/artists/simone-leigh/>.

which will invite scholars, artists, and activists to mediate on themes such as maroonage and magical realism. The event built upon Leigh's legacy of activating her work, this time in Italy.<sup>4</sup>

The shape of *Trophallaxis* alludes to the Black female body, and the materiality of ceramics adds to its sensitivity. The large cluster of melons then stands as a way to support each other, rendered individual by the scars and marks that to my view call African tradition of scarification to mind. The ritual practice of scarification is often meant to beautify individuals or to indicate a person's group or cultural affiliation.<sup>5</sup> The late Dr. English stands alongside many Black women health-care professionals whose practices resulted from activist work and community support, particularly Black women working with birthing, specifically as midwives, doulas, and OB/GYNs. Sarah Parker Remond exists in that legacy and the legacy of Black collegiates who sought education in Europe as freewomen. Remond was an activist, lecturer, abolitionist, and physician who utilized her education to be vocal about the health and social conditions for Black women and gave several lectures across Ireland and England regarding such. At the age of forty-two, in 1866, she moved to Florence, Italy, to begin her education at the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital school. For the last twenty years of her life, she built on her work as a women's suffrage and human rights activist, this time through a medical practice.<sup>6</sup> Like those of Dr. English and Leigh, Remond's work and interests were guided by the needs of Black women.

4 Sarah Cascone, "Artist Simone Leigh Reveals Her Plans for the Venice Biennale, Including a Major Symposium of Black Thinkers and Makers," *Artnet News*, December 8, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/simone-leigh-venice-biennale-details-and-symposium-2045921>.

5 Katrina H. B. Keefer, "Scarification and Identity in the Liberated Africans Department Register, 1814–1815," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 47, no. 3 (2013): 537–53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43860470>.

6 Lucy Jordan, "A Voice for Freedom: The Life of Sarah Parker Remond," University of London, <https://london.ac.uk/news-and-opinion/leading-women/a-voice-freedom-life-sarah-parker-remond>.

The word *trophallaxis* stems from the Greek words for “nourishment” (tropho) and “exchange” (all axis).<sup>7</sup> Leigh imagines spatial activations that offer insight and ideas through tangible works such as *Trophallaxis* or experiential works like the *Free People’s Medical Clinic*. Honoring the rich archive of her community, her colony, and the legacy of giving between Black women, Leigh calls to our collective power, the power of deeply nourishing exchanges.

7 Adria C. LeBoeuf, “Trophallaxis,” in *Encyclopedia of Social Insects*, ed. Christopher K. Starr (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28102-1\\_130](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28102-1_130).

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