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## Simone Leigh MOUTHING OFF by Elizabeth Kley

For “You Don’t Know Where Her Mouth Has Been,” [Simone Leigh](#)’s provocatively titled, spectacular exhibition at the Kitchen art space in Chelsea, the artist goes straight for the theatrical jugular. Three enormous chandelier-like sculptures hang from the ceiling, illuminated by dramatic spotlights that pierce through the prevailing darkness. In addition, the show includes wall-sized video installations, sculptures on stands and a tall, tripartite vase flanked on either side by rows of giant odiferous tobacco leaves.



With recent grants from the Joan Mitchell Foundation and Creative Capital and a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem last year, Leigh is on a roll, and this May she’ll be having another solo exhibition at Tilton Gallery on East 76th Street.

“Simone channels the power of prehistoric female craft by using ceramic techniques that date from 3000-8000 BC,” veteran dealer Jack Tilton enthused, “but she also employs the most sophisticated digital media. Her organic and sexual metaphors are related to the modern work of [Eva Hesse](#), [Louise Bourgeois](#) and [Meret Oppenheim](#).”

*Queen Bee* (2008-2012), a menacing chandelier conglomeration of black terracotta forms bristling with defunct TV antennas, resembles both the multiple breasts of a fertility goddess capped with gold and platinum nipples, and an arsenal of deadly bombs. To Sherry B. Bronfman, however, a prominent collector of African-American art who owns several of Leigh’s works, this ostensibly threatening object is really a metaphor for female vulnerability. “Think of all the things that revolve around the breasts of a woman -- the pain we go through, the pressure. I breast-fed my three children, and I know exactly what it feels like to be a vessel.”

“Most of the large objects in the two ceramic chandeliers are based on the form of a watermelon,” Leigh explains. “I started with the bullet-shaped forms I used in *Queen Bee*. Then I flipped them over and started making enlarged cowrie shells. Cowries are a very flexible sign, historically used as currency in many parts of the world and

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also sometimes used as eyes and mouths in African and diasporic ritual objects.”

*You Don't Know Where Her Mouth Has Been* (2012), another imposing hanging piece that also provides the show's title, is a collection of approximately 65 of these oversized sculptures of shells that also bring *vagina dentata* to mind. “Most of the cowries I made are porcelain and are fired in a salt kiln -- an atmospheric firing with common salt thrown into the kiln at peak temperature,” said Leigh. “The salt bonds with the silica in the clay body to form a glaze whose texture is reminiscent of orange peel, which provides lots of unpredictable effects.”



Although Leigh uses ancient African pottery techniques to create assemblages that are at once futuristic and atavistic, her sculptures make no claims of possessing any kind of mythical authenticity. As she told critic Quinn Latimer in a 2009 *Modern Painters* profile, “My work is often about this idea of a corrupt education. I learned how to make an ‘African pot’ using 19th-century colonial texts, which is kind of cool.”

This peculiar sense of time is also expressed through Leigh's use of cutting-edge media, as in *Uhura (Tanka)* (2012), one of two monumental video projections in the show. Lieutenant Uhura, *Star Trek's* beautiful communications officer (one of the first black female TV characters in America that wasn't a maid) was a childhood role model for Leigh. “I sat through so many episodes of *Star Trek* just waiting for Uhura to speak. I had to deal with the conundrum that she mostly repeated one line.”



In the video, Uhura's role -- an incessant adjustment of switches -- is played by Sharifa Rhodes Pitts, author of *Harlem is Nowhere*, one of the *New York Times's* 100 most notable books of 2011. A score by the Japanese musician Kaoru Watanabe, who plays traditional drums and flute, reflects *Star Trek's* contemporary status as an out-of-date version of a projected fictional future for outer space. The sounds provide an eerie soundtrack for the entire exhibition.

“The way Simone looks backwards and forwards is a prime example of Afrofuturism, where an imagined future and the past come together,” explained curator Rashida Bumbray, who has been working with Leigh on the show for several years. A previous version of the Uhura video was featured in “The Future as Disruption,” a

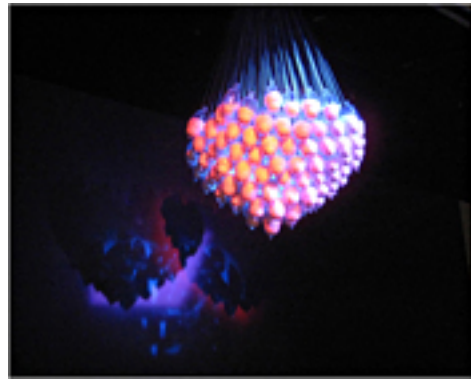
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2008 group show, also at the Kitchen, that Bumbray curated with Matthew Lyons.

"I'm thrilled with the breadth of Simone's project, and with its drama," Bumbray went on. "She's completely transcended the original parentheses put around her work as referring only to the black female body."

*Herero Dress, 1904* (2011), a portrait bust of a black woman with a hairdo of white and gold porcelain roses, is a case in point. Borrowed from its owner, tennis star Venus Williams, the sculpture's strangely unformed features -- the figure lacks eyes, nostrils and an opening in her lips -- make it seem as if the subject either has no voice or is trapped inside of her own world.

The work's title, however, references the 20th century's first genocide, which took place in German West Africa (now Namibia). As the history goes, the Germans crushed a rebellion by the Herero tribe, whose land had been stolen from them, and then drove them into the desert. German General Lothar von Trotha then proclaimed, "Any Herero found inside the German frontier, with or without a gun or cattle, will be executed. I shall spare neither women nor children." Between 24,000 and 100,000 people died of thirst. No wonder Leigh's sculpture is mute.



A mysterious silence is also projected by the video installation *Untitled #1* (2012), from the series "My Works, My Dreams, Must Wait Till After Hell," which Leigh made with Indian-American artist [Chitra Ganesh](#), whose raucous, comic-book-style wall painting was recently on view at PS 1. In *Untitled*, the torso of a dark-skinned, nude woman lying on her side can be seen heaving gently as she breathes, while her head is entirely buried under a pile of small rocks.

"My collaboration with Simone has evolved through a series of formal experiments," Ganesh explained. "We're both interested in using the body as a metaphor. In the video, we are playing with scale -- manipulating the traditional relationship between the size of the viewer and the size of the nude. The spectator usually dominates the nude, but here the spectator is dwarfed by her. The woman on screen is also denying us visual access to her body and presenting us only with her back."

An assortment of heavy-hitting admirers was on hand to celebrate Leigh's success. "Simone and I met while pushing strollers in Prospect Park," said *New York Times* movie critic A.O. Scott. "My son Ezra and her daughter Zenobia have been friends since they were born. We both had a lot of crazy ideas about our futures -- I always



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knew she was a major talent.” Legendary director Jennie Livingston, whose 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* introduced the wider world to New York’s gay and transgender black and Latino ball culture (the doc is a bible for anyone interested in performance) is also a fan and a friend. “Although I work in film, Simone and I both work with identities of gender, race and class, and the histories that form and deform them,” Livingston explained. “Much of Simone’s sculpture plays with the idea of decorative art and challenges viewers to think about what is and isn’t allowed to be beautiful. She challenges the boundaries between art and craft with fearlessness and humor.”

Pioneering African American performer Lorraine O’Grady, the creator of the persona *Mlle Bourgeois Noire* (who first appeared in 1980), provided the opening’s culminating shot of star power. “My work and Leigh’s work overlap in a curious way,” O’Grady said. “We share an interest in the esthetic systems of voodoo as filtered through **Maya Deren**’s films and Zora Neale Hurston’s writings. But our connection is deeper than that. Simone is one of the most adventurous young artists I know.”

Prices in the show range from \$20,000 to \$100,000, and a free performance created in conjunction with the exhibition takes place at the Kitchen on Feb. 13, 2012, at 7 pm.

“Simone Leigh: You Don’t Know Where Her Mouth Has Been,” Jan. 18-Mar 11, 2012, The Kitchen, 512 W 19th Street, New York N.Y. 10011.

<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kley/simone-leigh-the-kitchen-1-27-12.asp>