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What She Says: The Surrealist Art of Simone Leigh

YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE HER MOUTH HAS BEEN...

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Artist Simone Leigh's (2010-2011 Artist in Residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem) exhibition *You Don't Know Where Her Mouth Has Been*, curated by Rashida Bumbray is currently on view at The Kitchen in New York City. The work is comprised of large-scale sculptures and video and infused with the pungent scent of fresh tobacco. As an artist, Leigh embraces the connections people make between her work and Afro Futurism, yet she self-identifies as "surrealist." The juxtapositions in her work speak to the tensions and

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histories of objects, materials, and bodies as well as those that exist within culture, humanity, and women's work.

Entering the central gallery, viewers are pulled into what Bumbray describes as a "radical, celestial, science fiction moment." The Bumbray-Leigh install collaboration powerfully defies the ideological conventions of the white cube. The gallery is transformed through painted black walls that create shadows and luminosity that accentuate each work.

The large-scale chandeliers are what Bumbray calls the "three majestic sculptural installations." There is *Queen Bee*, a seeming beehive comprised of black terracotta oval bodies that vary in size and look like gold tipped bullets with protruding antennae. Next is the title piece *You Don't Know Where her Mouth has Been*, which is an assemblage of porcelain cowrie shells that also suggest the vagina dentate. Each shell has its own marks, color, and texture, which is determined by how they are fired or whether they have a slip, or an iridescent glaze. Last is *Kool-Aid*, a sculpture comprised of multiple blown glass forms filled with salt and illuminated by colored gels. The lighting projects the colors of the Kool-Aid palette onto the wall as homage to AfriCOBRA.

The sounds of Kaoru Watanabe's taiko drums and flute fill the space from the score for *Uhura (Tanka)* a wall sized single-channel video that features author Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts as Lieutenant Uhura, the beautiful and mostly silenced woman in Star Trek. The Afro-Asian sound is both meditative and futuristic.

When discussing the strategy behind the installation Bumbray stated that she shared a collaborative vision with Leigh that "allows the work to function at its highest level whereby the environment supports the work."

We caught up with Leigh at The Kitchen where she weighed in on that notion, and about her work, process and practice.

EBONY: At what point in your life did you begin creating art?

Simone Leigh: I started making art in college under the tutelage of Michael Theideman. He was an apprentice of Warren Mackenzie, who was, in turn, an apprentice of Bernard Leach. Theideman gave me a copy of Leach's enormously influential text, *A Potter's Book*. I continue to draw upon many of the things I learned with Michael in my studio practice. Michael also allowed me to create my own curriculum focused on West African and Native American traditional ceramics, and helped me secure an internship at the Smithsonian National Museum for African Art to support my research. Most recently, I traveled to South Africa with a grant from the Art Matters Foundation to work with Clive Sithole in his studio in Durban. Clive studied with Nesta Nala in the making of traditional Zulu ceramic forms, although traditional form making is not his practice. One of the first things he did was show me his signed copy of *A Potter's Book*. This is one of the tribes I belong to. I value my engagement with this tradition at the nascent stage of my development as an artist. It informs my on-going interest in cultural appropriation, oral histories and failures.

EBONY: Who were your earliest supporters and mentors; can you recall those who gave you the best advice and or "permission" to be an artist?

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Simone Leigh: Contemporary artist Rina Banerjee, who was one my early mentors, bolstered my confidence to continue to not involve myself with "erasing identity" and other machinations of post-blackness that held sway at the time. I continue to revel in my identity the same way many other artists do. I hope to be in conversation with a group of trans-national artists who consider identity and its construction including Cady Noland, Nicholas Hlobo, LaToya Ruby Frasier, Rina Banerjee, Matriarch (the collaboration of Maren and Ava Hassinger) and Blue Curry.

EBONY: Could you speak a bit more about your clear vision of re-creating history for objects (as in the watermelon cast) or characters, as in Uhura?

Simone Leigh: I use materials and forms because of what they mean. A watermelon is more resonant to me than any other gourd-like shape for me because of its American vernacular associations. It's an obvious choice to build on. In this most recent work *Uhura (Tanka)* I focused on the memory of watching Uhura, a character on the Star Trek television series, as a child. In this third iteration of a series of videos about Uhura, I specifically wanted to focus on that memory as a psychological experience. The score written for *Uhura (Tanka)*, by musician Kaoru Watanabe, creates a narrative and emotional environment for the piece.

EBONY: Could you speak more about the violence that surrounds "Herero" and what it means in your work?

Simone Leigh: The Herero genocide took place between 1904-1907 on land that is in current day Namibia, and is considered to be the first genocide of the 20th Century. A result of the Herero peoples' attempt to rebel against German colonialism, they died en masse in the ensuing starvation and thirst. Some Herero people had replaced their earlier traditional dress with gowns that are looked like they were of Victorian English origin. They transformed this Victorian silhouette, with indigenous fabrics and what I would describe as a black aesthetic--over doing it -- apparently up to nine petticoats are required for Herero realness! The transformed Herero clothing also includes a horn-like headdress. I became interested in Herero traditional dress because of how it makes the body look cross-like.

Simone Leigh's *You Don't Know Where Her Mouth Has Been* is on view at *The Kitchen*, 512 West 19th Street, New York, NY through March 11, 2012. For more information visit:www.simoneleigh.com

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