



Review: Simone Leigh's exploration of Southern blackness at ACAC is elegant and Zen-like

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Simone Leigh with Chitra Ganesh: Girl, from the video series my works, my dreams, must wait till after hell, 2012. (All photographs courtesy the Atlanta Contemporary Arts Center)

Simone Leigh's *Gone South*, on view at the [Atlanta Contemporary Art Center](#) through May 31, is a spare but elegant series of installations that conjure the complex layers of identity inherent in being an African American woman artist. In these works, Leigh, who is based in New York, explores artifacts of Southern blackness and finds a rich legacy that is inescapably bound with suffering.

Leigh's 2012 video installation, *Girl* — from the series *my works, my dreams, must wait till after hell*, created with Chitra Ganesh with music by Kaoru Watanabe — dominates the exhibit with its gripping, wall-size image. The shakuhachi flute of the musical score casts a contemplative, elegiac spell over the entire exhibit.

The video presents the back torso of a dark-skinned woman whose head is buried under a pile of landscaping rocks. Her nearly imperceptible breathing is the only movement in the video. This image is so aesthetically arresting that it might be used in some sort of avant-garde advertisement. The woman's skin and figure are flawlessly beautiful, and they contrast with the coarse-textured pile of rocks in a way that pleases the eye.

And yet the implications of this image are horrific: has the woman been left for dead, even though she is alive? Is this some sort of torture? Or has she simply become an anonymous part of the landscape? Pain has been so successfully translated into beauty that we may forget for a moment that it is, nonetheless, pain.

Center, Simone Leigh with Chitra Ganesh: Girl, from my works, my dreams, must wait until after hell, 2012, single channel video projection and digital video;; left, Simone Leigh: Jug, 2014, Lizella clay;; right, Simone Leigh: Untitled, 2013, crystal glazed stoneware.



Two sculpted objects — a jug Leigh constructed on-site from Lizella clay and a crystal-glazed stoneware sculpture of a large cowry shell — coexist enigmatically with the video. Leigh's *Jug* is raw and natural, but it has "wabi," the quality of rough organic imperfection so prized in Japanese aesthetics. By contrast, the glazed cowry shell (*Untitled*) on the opposite wall is polished and refined;; it is as celestial as *Jug* is earthy and simple.

Lizella clay, which comes from central Georgia, has been the material foundation for generations of white family potteries famous for southern "face jugs." A recent exhibit of face jugs at the [Columbia Museum of Art in South Carolina](#) traces their roots to "the mystic beliefs of the Kongo" and reveals that they were initially created by African American potters to preserve their African heritage. The influence of African culture and the work of African American potters has been seamlessly absorbed into white southern culture and only recently acknowledged.

If *Jug* suggests the rough virtuosity of African American artistry bound by limited scope and resources, *Untitled* reflects the sophistication and depth of African culture. Together, they pose a kind of koan or paradox: how can such disparate creations share space?

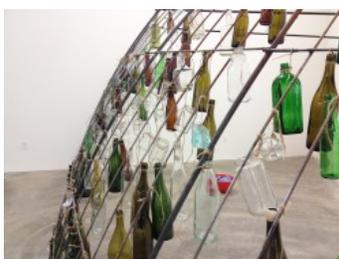
In another room, Leigh has constructed two sculptural installations on-site. *Cupboard* was inspired by a 1941 photograph taken by [Edward Weston](#) (*Mammy's Cupboard*) of a roadside pancake house in Natchez, Mississippi, in the shape of a large "mammy." Customers entered through the mammy's skirt.



Simone Leigh: Cupboard, 2014;; steel, porcelain, stoneware and wire.

In Leigh's *Cupboard*, a mass of large cowry shells hangs like a bunch of grapes from the center of metal scaffolding formed in the shape of a skirt. The texture and quality of each of these biomorphic shells is different — some are highly polished and shiny, others are burnished, some look burned and still others are leathery;; some have dots and others do not. The scaffolding, despite its door, creates a barrier between the shells and the viewer. The grid of the scaffolding contrasts with the organic quality of the shells and seems to contain them.

Tree, also defined by a fence-like grid of metal scaffolding, is decorated with an intriguing assortment of glass, echoing the "bottle tree" of southern tradition. Although bottle trees have become immensely popular as yard decorations in the last decade or so (you can order them from Amazon), they were originally introduced into the South by African slaves who believed the bottles would capture evil spirits.



Simone Leigh: Tree detail, 2014;; steel, glass, mason jar factory glass, glass bottles and rope wire.

Leigh's *Tree* was created on-site using recycled glass and bottles collected by ACAC during the month of March. Chunks of glass, a considerable assortment of bottles and a mysterious bunch of light bulbs are tied to the scaffolding with twine. The jars and bottles evoke reflections about all the aspects of domestic endeavor that are fundamental to life yet routinely overlooked and undervalued. Leigh insisted on natural light for this part of the exhibit, and it plays nicely among the bits of hanging glass.

The exhibit as a whole is Zen-like — a quality reinforced by the permeating music of the Japanese flute. It provokes contemplation of each segment with intensified attention to nuances that would surely escape the viewer if there were more to look at. But the empty space is not altogether peaceful. It seems to speak of things the artist could not or would not say about the experience of “going South.”
