



Visiting Artist Profiles

Simone Leigh

By Matthew Harrison Tedford *April 21, 2013*

The Visiting Artist Profile series, which highlights some of the artists, curators, and scholars who intersect with the Bay Area visual arts community through the various lecture programs produced by local institutions.



Simone Leigh. *You Don't Know Where Her Mouth Has Been*, 2012; installation view, the Kitchen, New York. Courtesy of the Artist.

*This article is part of the Visiting Artist Profile series, which highlights some of the artists, curators, and scholars who intersect with the Bay Area visual arts community through the various lecture programs produced by local institutions. **Simone Leigh will speak on May 1, 2013, at 7:00 p.m. at Nahl Hall at the California College of the Arts Oakland campus.***

“We want to see suffering, serenity, humor, when we know nothing,” proclaims the narrator in *Statues Also Die*, a 1953 French documentary about African art that is considered one of the first anti-colonial films. “Colonizers of the world,” he continues, “we want everything to speak to us.”¹ The film is not without problems, such as its monolithic view of African art (as if Nok terracotta statues and Bantu *minkisi* function in the same way or have the same history); nonetheless, the film’s insistence that white colonial society viewed

art from Africa instrumentally and with ignorance of its context represented a maturation in how non-African Europeans have historically discussed art from that vast continent.

Simone Leigh, a New York–based sculptor and video and installation artist, creates work that draws on African and African-diaspora art but is difficult to simplify along these colonial lines. Her work is often described as Afrofuturist, which is a broad cultural aesthetic that utilizes history and preexisting culture in order to envision a future for Africans and the African diaspora. In a recent op-ed in the *Brooklyn Rail*, Leigh wrote that she envisions a future in which black contemporary artists are not subject to a “paper-bag test,” a historical practice among some African Americans in which anyone with skin darker than a brown-paper bag was not accepted into certain organizations or social events.² She optimistically claims that soon black artists will no longer be told that they must make work that is not about blackness. The task for Leigh, then, is quite challenging since her work seeks to be an emotionally invested interrogation of her own identity. But identity is usually discussed in terms of categories, which are more fluid (and sometimes more restrictive) than a dictionary or encyclopedia entry can portray. Misinterpretations, assumptions, and stereotypes can easily result from any discussion or work on identity because viewers will often find what they want to see in these kinds of works.

Leigh has described some of her work as skeuomorphs, objects that are made to resemble other objects that precede them or are made of different materials.³ This technique, she says, serves to make viewers or users more comfortable with the new object or design—think of the many computer applications that visually resemble their analog predecessors rather than being reimaged for a new medium. Leigh consents to the label of Afrofuturism, so the use of skeuomorphs suggests an attempt by the artist to invoke in viewers a nebulous yet familiar sense of Africanism while proposing an alternative present or future. And yet Leigh describes herself as a surrealist.⁴ Given the inherent problems language presents to the act of considering identity, it is not a surprise that Leigh sees herself in the tradition of a movement known for revolting against the central role of language.

NOTES:

1. Daniel Vilensky, “Statues Also Die, or Schroedinger’s Black Cat,” *Sense of Cinema*, September 2012, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/statues-also-die-or-schroedingers-black-cat/>.

2. Simone Leigh, “Everyone Wants to Be Subaltern,” *Brooklyn Rail*, February 2013,

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/02/artseen/everyone-wants-to-be-subaltern>.

3. Kemi Ilesanmi, "An Interview with Simone Leigh," *Art21*, May 21, 2009, <http://blog.art21.org/2009/05/21/an-interview-with-simone-leigh/>.

4. Una-Kariim A. Cross, "What She Says: The Surrealist Art of Simone Leigh," *Ebony*, March 5, 2012, <http://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/what-she-says-the-surrealist-art-of-simone-leigh#axzz2QgxNk800>.

The curator Rashida Bumbray—who has worked with Leigh on multiple occasions at the Kitchen in New York, including Leigh's 2012 solo exhibition, *You Don't Know Where Her Mouth Has Been*—says that Leigh's work "looks backwards and forwards," making an "imagined future and the past come together."⁵ *You Don't Know Where Her Mouth Has Been* exemplified Leigh's surrealist Afrofuturism. The exhibition was dominated by three imposing sculptures hanging from the ceiling, one of which, the show's namesake, is a collection of sixty-five giant ceramic cowrie shells cast from watermelons. These two signs—the cowrie shell and watermelon—allude to very different times and places in African American history. Prior to European colonization, cowrie shells were used as currency throughout much of Africa, and Leigh says that they are "sometimes used as eyes and mouths in African and diasporic ritual objects."⁶ The cowrie shell is an affirmative symbol that evokes pan-African identity. But the shells in this piece are cast from a fruit that has come to symbolize bigoted stereotypes and racial apartheid across the Atlantic; Leigh says that watermelons resonate with her more than any other gourd-like shape, given their history and significance in America.⁷ These two symbols sit together uneasily, but it is not a historically contrived pairing, and in Leigh's sculpture they hang ominously above the heads of viewers.

The video piece *Uhura (Tanka)* (2012) stars the author Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts playing Nyota Uhura, the United States of Africa-born communications officer aboard the USS Enterprise in the original *Star Trek* series. Leigh recalls time spent as a child watching *Star Trek* and patiently waiting for Uhura to speak: "I had to deal with the conundrum that she mostly repeated one line," she remembers.⁸ The Uhura in Leigh's piece also remains silent, dutifully pressing buttons and congenially smiling. Nichelle Nichols, who played the original Uhura, holds an unsung but significant place in African American history and is often cited as one of the first black female television characters in the United States that wasn't a domestic worker. On November 22, 1968, during the episode "Plato's Stepchildren," Nichols and her co-star William Shatner performed American television's first scripted interracial kiss. While it could be easy to miss the significance of this in something as banal as *Star Trek*, Nichols recalls that when she was thinking of quitting the show, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. told her, "[Uhura] is not a black role or a female role. You have the first non-stereotypical role on television. You have broken ground...We look on that screen and we know where we're going."⁹

It is sometimes the silent character that makes the loudest statement. Leigh's use of Uhura instead of larger-than-life civil-rights leaders breaks the mold of what makes one's role in history important or not. Rather than

negating Uhura's importance because of her silence, but without neglecting that silence, Leigh and Rhodes-Pitts depict the officer as confident, happy, and noteworthy—a suitable vision for the future in its own right. Leigh's works don't always make immediate sense. Fighting the common urge of viewers to see African and diasporic works as tools of their own politics, Leigh's work simultaneously inhabits the realms of oppression and pride, as well as past, present, and future. Her work embraces African and African American identity without letting viewers come to concrete conclusions about what those identities are.

Simone Leigh. *Uhura (Tanka)*, 2012; video; 5:04. Courtesy of the Artist.

THE VISITING ARTIST PROFILE SERIES IS SUPPORTED BY A MATCHING GRANT THROUGH THE MICROSOFT CORPORATION.

NOTES (cont.):

5. Elizabeth Kley, "Simone Leigh: Mouthing Off," Artnet, January 27, 2012, <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kley/simone-leigh-the-kitchen-1-27-12.asp>.

6. Ibid.

7. Cross.

8. Kley.

9. Lee Speigel, "Nichelle Nichols On Having First Major Black Female TV Role And That First Interracial Kiss

On 'Star Trek,'" *Huffington Post*, February 6, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/31/nichelle-nichols-star-trek-uhura_n_1244343.html.

Comments **Show***Hide*