

ARTFORUM

Simone Leigh

05.22.14

AUTHOR: VICTORIA CAMBLIN

04.04.14-05.31.14 Atlanta Contemporary Art Center

Prominent in “Gone South,” Simone Leigh’s solo institutional debut, is *my work, my dreams, must wait until after hell*, 2012. The video loop, made with Chitra Ganesh under the collaborative moniker Girl, presents a woman’s back as it almost imperceptibly rises and falls with her breath, her head abbreviated beneath a mound of rocks. Unique among the works on view—which are chiefly ceramic or otherwise sculptural—the video nonetheless participates in the exhibition’s emphasis on materiality, wherein human form and culture are engaged in dialogue with the raw elements of the earth.

This corporeal approach is mediated through *Jug*, 2014, an unfired vessel created on site from local Lizella clay. This, Leigh suggests in a sound bite, is a “face jug,” referencing a spiritually potent style of pottery developed in the antebellum American South. *Jug* has gradually contracted while drying since the exhibition’s opening—evidence of a “slow” dynamism resonant with the region’s swampy natural landscapes and heavy historical atmosphere.

The intelligently sparse selection of works on view is punctuated with blue hues of porcelain: Stashed in a corner is *wedgewood bucket*, 2009, replete with jasperware bananas; nearby, *Cupboard*, 2014, includes a suspended bunch of oversized cowrie shells, one of them a striking cobalt blue. Used in French and English porcelain, this color is, ostensibly, a colonial shade, registering a flash of the Old World in an oeuvre where a new one triumphs and pressing an industrial hand upon an organic palette of beach-glass browns and grays. The cowries are, remarkably, made from watermelon molds, salt fired and glazed to yield unpredictable finishes. Crossing this shell—a hoodoo charm and symbol of feminine power—with the fraught iconographic legacy of the watermelon, Leigh claims a visual language from the Southeast then expands its vocabulary.