

# Simone Leigh's Metaphors of Interiority at the ACAC

By [Tom Berlangero](#) on April 30, 2014



Installation view of Simone Leigh's exhibition "Gone South" showing (l to r) *Cupboard* and *Tree*, at the ACAC.

For a body of work that is heavily situated in discourses surrounding postcolonial legacies and the social containment and conditioning of black and brown bodies, Simone Leigh's installations create a rather generous space for these issues to breathe. "Gone South," on view at the [Atlanta Contemporary Art Center](#) through May 31, comprises works in ceramic, video, and installation that viscerally engage notions of black female subjectivity.

Never didactic, the sociopolitical content of Leigh's work is transferred atmospherically and by formal means. Many works are deeply inward-turning, folding together notions of vulnerability and hostility. *Cupboard*, a yurtlike dome that sits at the heart of the show both spatially and conceptually, seems to get most directly at this painfully resonant interiority. The work is visually permeable, its welded steel structure inviting physical entry.

The cluster of forms hanging from *Cupboard's* apex, which constitutes a work in itself (*Topsy Turvy*, 2013), demands a certain level of deference. The bulbous units are layered, referencing female anatomy, antiquated western African currency, and the watermelons from which they are made. The process of casting molds from the fruit allows the artist to heavily abstract the form, making covert use of its racist connotations. Moves like these reveal Leigh to be less interested in lampooning outright the visual instruments of institutional racism as she is in expressing how their effects are internalized by individual bodies.

Circumnavigating *Cupboard*, one comes upon *Tree*, a wall-like structure that retreats into the far corner of the gallery. It comprises another steel facade, this one adorned with dangling mass-produced glass bottles and mason jars. These appropriated utilitarian objects provide a crucial counterpoint to Leigh's heavily hand-worked ceramic objects. Leigh's installations often dole out equal signficatory responsibility to both class of object, showing her discrete ceramic forms to be subservient to the overall network of shapes, spaces, and surfaces.



Simone Leigh, untitled 2013; crystal glazed stoneware; 25.5 by 13 by 10 inches.

Indeed, in a recent interview Leigh seems to suggest that even her more hands-on ceramic works appropriate particular means of making. “I have spent a lot of time researching exactly how these objects are made and I try to make them in that way. So, in another sense, I’m also performing the work of the ‘anonymous African potter’ (oftentimes a woman).” The ceramic components, although expertly crafted and formally gratifying, are assigned no more value than a sampled video clip or scavenged mason jar.

The currency Leigh places on relationships between works is exemplified by *Tree*, which contains a work previously presented as *Wedgewood Bucket* (colored porcelain, plastic, 2009). The work is composed of a lowly red plastic bucket filled with matte blue plantains. The fruit’s delicate hue references the Wedgewood porcelain that is the stuff of privileged dining, which is in stark contrast to the aesthetic heterogeneity of the home in poor, post-colonial countries. Through such economic gestures, Leigh produces work that reads at multiple speeds and plumbs a variety of depths.

The two rooms are elegantly linked by a number of formal echoes. On a white podium sits an unglazed and thumbprint-riddled jug that calls back the contour of *Cupboard*, this time with forbidding opacity. In large part, “Gone South” is a reshuffling of elements previously exhibited elsewhere. *Jug*, however was made expressly for this occasion. It makes use of lizella clay, a material specific to Georgia’s landscape, and takes its cue from face jugs originally fashioned by Southern slave potters.

*Opposite Jug* hangs a singular watermelon cowrie piece. With the shell’s signature toothed opening, suggestive of an inverted spine and other bodily associations, the untitled piece provides entry into a video made in collaboration with Chitra Ganesh. My works, my dreams, must wait until after hell depicts a dark-skinned woman lying on a white surface, bare back turned to the camera. Although her head is buried beneath small stones, her body heaves slowly and subtly, suggesting silent perseverance.

“Gone South” is an exhibition that demands repeated visits, but this isn’t due to an overwhelming volume of work. Rather, it is because it makes space enough for the viewer. One can approach its meditations on a particularly raced and gendered bodily experience and live a while in them. This implicit invitation to inhabit is ultimately not out of sync with the work, itself deeply inhabited.

**Tom Berlangero** is a writer, designer, artist, and improviser. He lives in Atlanta, where he likes to hike, ride bikes & cook new meals to feel real. He is a recent transplant from New York, where he earned a BFA in painting and sculpture from the State University of New York at Purchase and studied improv comedy.