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African, personal history infuses artist's work

Elizabeth Kramer, ekramer@courier-journal.com 8:33 a.m. EST February 20, 2015



"Someone asked if this was tobacco. It is tobacco," said educator Ramon Lindsey to nearly 20 schoolchildren as they wound their way through Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft's upper floor one recent morning.

Sagging tobacco leaves were hanging off a 5-foot-high semicircle fashioned with steel wire created by Simone Leigh, a Chicago-born artist who has a growing reputation among curators through exhibits of her work throughout this country and abroad.

"What does it look like to you besides tobacco?" Lindsey asked the children.

Like most of Leigh's works in her solo show here, called "Crop Rotation," this one references the work of women and the history of black Americans. This particular piece, called "Cupboard II," takes the shape of a piece called "Cupboard" in Leigh's solo show last year at The Atlanta Contemporary Art Center called "Gone South." The shape resembles that of a hoop skirt that was the fashion at the time of slavery, when mainly black women were charged with picking tobacco, Lindsey explained to the children.

As Lindsey moved on to talk about another sculpture, her lecture included other historical tidbits, such as how women once worked in the garment industry. Near Lindsey was a work called "Cowerie (Blue)," with an abundance of what appear to be small, tightly wound pieces of fabric on an egg-shaped surface that is actually made of terracotta, porcelain and cobalt.

Leigh, who said she "had no interest in being an artist" after she graduated from Indiana's Earlham College in 1990, has built a body of work that began rooted in sculpture and has evolved to include art installation and video.

Galleries that have shown her work include New York's The Kitchen and Tilton Gallery and Pittsburgh's Andy Warhol Museum, as well as ones in South Africa and Morocco. Last year, her work was included in the Biennale of Contemporary African Art, also known as Dak'art, in Senegal.

While Leigh's work bears an inherent beauty, it also surreptitiously weaves in cultural clues to the history of women and the African diaspora rarely referenced in most elementary classrooms or anywhere else.

But on a recent visit to Louisville to open "Crop Rotation," Leigh also described herself as the subject of her work through its references to her own personal history. In the KMAC gallery, she pointed to an old stained-glass window from a church she was born in and her father headed when she was growing up. That window is integrated into an installation that includes shards of rocks.

"That window is like one of my original art histories," she said. "I grew up around it."

Growing up included trips to Chicago institutions such as the Field Museum of Natural History and the Art Institute of Chicago. In high school, she took a course at the institute that included lectures by many of the curators there.

"That collection of art was my touchstone," she said. "I learned other things along the way, but I still relate to that collection." Along the way, she majored in philosophy at Earlham College, where she learned how to make ceramics and studied art. "I thought it was interesting that there was a Japanese ceramics studio in middle of the campus and no one found it odd," she said. "I was really curious."

There, Leigh studied under Mike Theideman who was an apprentice of noted American craft potter Warren MacKenzie, whose work is in the collections of the Smithsonian and the Victoria and Albert museums. During college, Leigh also had an internship at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art.

At the time, she thought being an artist "was an absurd thing to do and really impractical," but she kept making artwork that involved ceramic sculpture and later began to incorporate other materials.

"At a certain point, I had to accept that I was going to continue to do it and find ways to support it," she said.

Getting serious

Over the past 15 years, she has done that through a string of artist residencies, fellowships and grants. Those included a residency at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 2010 and 2011 and a grant in 2011 from the Joan Mitchell Foundation (named for the famous Chicago-born abstract painter and printmaker).

Then in 2012, she was named a grantee of Creative Capital, the nonprofit organization that every year finances a group of artists who challenge convention. (Creative Capital has brought a panel of its artist grantees to Louisville for the annual IdeaFestival since 2010.)

While Creative Capital president and founding executive director Ruby Lerner noted the quality of timelessness in Leigh's work combined with rigor and craftsmanship, she credited the panel of arts professionals for choosing to support Leigh.

"I think what the panelists saw in her work was how evocative it is," Lerner said.

Since 2000, her work has evolved from being largely based in ceramics that reference African history, notably with her use of the image of the egg-shaped cowrie shells that come from snails and were used as currency for centuries in Africa. Her work also

frequently references water pots or jars that are often recognized as early African art.

In 2012, she created a sculpture titled "Stack" that resembles a column or totem created from water pots placed on top of each other. For "Crop Rotation," she returns to the totem idea with "Stack II," which is a sculpture featuring a tall, thin section of wood carved to resemble a woman's body topped with a ceramic pot covered in gold leaf. She was inspired by another work she saw at a collector's home of a Polynesian totem pole that held a pot aloft. For "Stack II," Leigh embellished a pot she had already made and worked with native Louisville artist Tony Pinotti, who carved the wood portion.

Collaborative video

Also in "Crop Rotation" is a nine-minute video from 2011 called "Breakdown" that Leigh co-created with New York performance and video artist Liz Magic Laser that features mezzo-soprano Alicia Hall Moran singing a script Laser and Leigh compiled from plays and television programs with men and women having a nervous breakdown.

"It was the most collaborative piece I had done to that date," Leigh said.

Included in the script are sections from Amiri Baraka's 1964 play "Dutchman" and the A&E series "Intervention." But a large portion of the script is from the soap opera "Mary Hartman, Mary Harman" when the main character has a very public mental breakdown.

"That's juxtaposed with the tobacco piece," Leigh said. "Both riff on ideas about health and medicine."

In 2012, Leigh followed up with another collaboration for a video called "My dreams, my works must wait till after hell ..." after the poem of the same title by Pulitzer Prize-winning, African-American poet Gwendolyn Brooks. Leigh and New York artist Chitra Ganesh created the video under their collaborative name, Girl, and it features the bare back of a black woman lying on her side with crushed rock covering her head and breathing ever so slowly to a music by Kaoru Watanabe. "Crop Rotation" features two large stills from that video.

Reporter Elizabeth Kramer can be reached at (502) 582-4682. Follow her on Twitter at @arts_bureau.

CROP ROTATION: WORKS BY SIMONE LEIGH

When: Through April 5. Gallery hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday. Docent-guided exhibition tours at 3 p.m. Sunday and March 7, 8, 21 and 22 and April 4 and

Where: Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, 715 W. Main St.

Cost: \$8 for museum admission; \$4 students age 13 through college; \$5 seniors and military; \$2 children 6 to 12; free for museum members and children 5 and under.

Information: (502) 589-0102; www.kmacmuseum.org (<http://www.kmacmuseum.org/>) and www.simoneleigh.com (<http://www.simoneleigh.com/>)

**SAME DIFFERENCE: WORKS BY MICHELLE GRABNER, SIMONE LEIGH AND
RUSSELL MALTZ**

When: Through April 12. Gallery hours are noon-5 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday and Sunday;
noon- p.m. Sunday.

Where: Singletary Center for the Arts, 405 Rose St., Lexington

Cost: Free |

nformation: (859) 257-5716; finearts.uky.edu/art-museum
(<http://finearts.uky.edu/art-museum>)