

Relics of the Future: The Aesthetic Wanderings of Simone Leigh

“Black art must take more risks!” shouted Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, Lorraine O’ Grady’s irate and impeccably dressed avatar, as she whipped herself with a cat-o-nine tails in front of stunned gallery patrons in 1980. I invoke this alter ego, in considering artist Simone Leigh’s oeuvre, for an obvious reason: Leigh’s artistic practice is by no means ostensibly “safe” or instantly readable to spectators; rather Leigh’s ceramic objects and media-based work are often situated seemingly in between highly ambiguous and palimpsestic fields of meanings. The disorientation provoked by Leigh’s *objets d’art* is, therefore, purposeful: they playfully but pointedly subvert pre-conceptions of art, particularly craftwork and sculpture, as merely decorative. Instead, Leigh’s work engages in multi-directional gestures, not only pointing towards diasporic modes of production—literally the processes by which cultural workers globally have and continue to shape and construct objects—but also engaging in “lost” aesthetic and historical genealogies.

The American-born, New York-based bricoleur, in past work, has engaged in the dialectic between the aesthetically beautiful and the brutally utilitarian with her re-purposing of *objets trouvés*, or found objects. Specifically, Leigh has often combined carefully crafted ceramic objects—in morphologies resembling Lilliputian missiles or other archaic and yet futuristic forms—with quotidian items, such as brightly colored plastic buckets or toilet plunger handles, to make strikingly strange new forms. *Brooch*, for instance, which sutures steel clamps with a motley assortment of glazed ceramic plantain-like objects and other forms, confounds facile categorization; *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter recently likened the piece to a “cross between a giant flower and a thresher.”ⁱ *Monarch*, similarly, subverts lexical associations with royalty in Leigh’s construction of a pair of plaid shorts out of the seemingly inconspicuous: patterned synthetic bags utilized for transporting goods. Meanwhile, terra-cotta pots such as *Fetish with Vinyl* resemble otherworldly artifacts reminiscent of science fiction milieus staged in cult films such as *Mad Max* or Sun Ra’s 1974 *Space is the Place*. These discrete pieces as well as Leigh’s current projects, evince her Conceptualist-like approach to her work, specifically Leigh’s ability to filter a concatenation of disparate ideas and influences, from Surrealism to AfriCOBRA, through the figurative forms that she molds into being.

Leigh’s assemblage of large cowrie shell-like sculptures, for instance, obliquely engage with the multiple discourses and histories attached to these putatively ancient objects, while also hinting at new imaginaries. Cowrie shells, often perceived as purely ornamental items in the United States, possess their own diasporic past as modes of monetary exchange in several African and Asian societies. Leigh’s sculptures are an ironic take on this history, re-animating these “relics of Africa-Americana,” as phantasmagoric forms in themselves.ⁱⁱ The watermelon-shaped pieces play with economies of scale by transmogrifying unassuming bijoux into large seemingly fecund objects. Yet, in the now enlarged

shell-ridges that resemble teeth, they also echo surrealist depictions of vagina dentata. These objects' evocation of the myth of the "devouring female," then, lends them an almost anthropomorphic quality.ⁱⁱⁱ Meanwhile, the pointing antenna further suggest these pieces as living things, receiving and transmitting information, perhaps from an ancestral past or, conversely, a mythic future. This temporal dislocation, present in much of Leigh's corpus, is suggestive of the fluid relations between past, present, and future that is a signature of cultural texts identified with the paradigm *AfroFuturism*.^{iv}

Concomitantly, Leigh's media-based works continue her praxis of probing subterranean narratives via the mediums of visual representation and performance. Leigh's earlier *Uhuru*, for instance, extracted a short clip of the ambiguously African character Lieutenant Uhuru from the television series *Star Trek* (portrayed by actress Nichelle Nichols) and repeated it on loop for forty minutes. The initially perplexing work, which was played ad infinitum in the elevator of The Kitchen when shown there, brilliantly succeeded in creating a dialogue apropos black iconography, especially regarding black women, by re-centering Uhuru as a protagonist, rather than outlier, in her own deep space tableau.

Meanwhile, Leigh's latest video-work *Breakdown* sutures two seemingly incommensurate tropes—virtuosity and severe mental instability—into a compelling drama. Leigh's stated influences for this particular work, made in collaboration with artist Liz Magic Lazer, are a hybrid of theatrical (Amiri Baraka's play *The Dutchman*) and aesthetic (Adrian Piper's *Catalysis* series) sources, among others. The piece centers on a singular and unnamed woman, played by opera singer Alicia Hall-Moran, whose initial vacillation between moments of giddy excitement and wailing loss signals the nervous breakdown the title alludes to. The work alludes to distinctly different "doings" enacted by social actors: the highly skilled and physically laborious performances staged by female opera singers (which would include staging insanity) and the more habitual occurrences of hysteria enacted by urban flaneurs on a daily basis, particularly by women.

Yet, as the piece progresses the demarcation between those two modes becomes more complex, if not murky. Hall-Moran's dexterity as a trained soprano becomes more transparent as her putative off-ness continues. Her highly disciplined skill, ironically, becomes the vector through which a wildly erratic madness emerges. *Breakdown*'s taut tethering of psychological delirium and vocal technique is suggestive of the "aesthetic[s] of simultaneous failure and virtuosity" in certain queer aesthetic practice that performance theorist José Muñoz denotes as an "active political refusal" to situate oneself in the limitations of the present.^v Moreover, the figure's repeated *cri de coeur*—"I've always performed! I've been performing my whole life!"—pointedly delimits that "being" itself is a set of highly performative behaviors and the physical toll such performances may take on black diasporic women.

It is no accident that Leigh often returns to sculpture as a baseline in her work, since her actions of rendering sundry materials ductile mimics the approach she applies to the global narratives that surface in her art. In her sculptures, Leigh's praxis subverts Western notions of craft as ostensibly "dead" and outside of modernity and instead reveals it as generative and capable of executing Conceptualist-like rigor. Meanwhile, her larger oeuvre attests to her adroit peripatetic-like approach to art-making, specifically in her traversal across temporal zones and aesthetic limits. In that sense, we may not know where she's heading next, but undoubtedly it will be initially strange, ambiguous, and to re-invoke the ghost of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, risky.

ⁱ Holland Cotter, "Else," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2010: C30.

ⁱⁱ Author conversation with the author, May 2nd, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli, and Gloria Gwen Rassberg, eds., *Surrealism and Women* (The MIT Press, 1991): 100.

^{iv} Writer Mark Dery loosely defines AfroFuturism as "African-American voices" with "other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come. See Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995): 182.

^v José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: NYU Press, 2009): 178, 176.