

Simone Leigh uses sculpture, video to race, gender issues

Kimberly Chun

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Simone Leigh's "My dreams, my works must wait till after hell..." Created, directed, & produced by Girl (Simone Leigh + Chitra Ganesh)
Photo: Courtesy Of The Artist And Galle

Is there a more loaded symbol in African American iconography than a watermelon? Driven to explore black female subjectivity and racial politics in her work, New York City artist Simone Leigh might argue that there isn't, and that's why she repeatedly has turned to a mold of the fruit when it comes to sculpture construction.

"It's one of the few forms I can think of that's actually an insult," she says. "You can put a watermelon next to a black body, and that's an insult. You don't have to change or do anything to it to have this content."

The watermelon mold was used to make the gold--nipped ceramic orbs - - clustered amid TV antennas, in "Queen Bee," and the textured cowrie sculptures that evoke the shells once used in West Africa as currency - as well as a certain female body part. The latter, as well as the final site-specific version of "Queen Bee" and videos such as "Breakdown," appear in "Code Switch" at Gallery Wendi Norris, her West Coast debut exhibition.

Q: How did you become interested in sculpture?

A: I was studying philosophy in college and I just happened upon a ceramics studio and was really fascinated with this studio and the idea of American studio pottery, which has a lot of orientalist tendencies.

I became interested in art from a cultural studies perspective.

Soon after that I did a residency at the Smithsonian studying West African ceramics, and since then I sort of understood the kind of work I wanted to make, but it took many years to have the skill to create that work.

I was interested in all these objects that were held in a location called the ethnographic, away from art. That was the significance of West African ceramics to me -- it was work primarily made by women and works that are, for the most part, considered anonymous.

Q: Why have you started making videos?

A: I naively became interested in making video because I thought it would be more immediate and a lot of the objects and the sculpture are labor-intensive work, and there's a lot of loss involved because I do experimental firings. But "Breakdown" took a little over nine months to make.

In "Breakdown," we were interested in looking at how the idea of a nervous breakdown is gendered and raced and we looked at a lot of different footage from various sources like the reality TV show "Intervention," Chantal Akerman's "Jeanne Dielman," and Amirki Baraka's "The Dutchman," "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman."

Performer Alicia Hall Moran "really takes the language and gesture through a kind of screen of African American performance. It adds another layer to the piece, which is what makes it one of the best things I've made."

If you go

Simone Leigh: Code Switch:

Reception 6--8 p.m. Thursday (Feb. 6). Through March 29.

11 a.m.--6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

Gallery Wendi Norris, 161 Jessie St., S.F. (415) 346--7812.

www.gallerywendinorris.com.

Kimberly Chun sees hawks and possums in her Berkeley neighborhood.

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