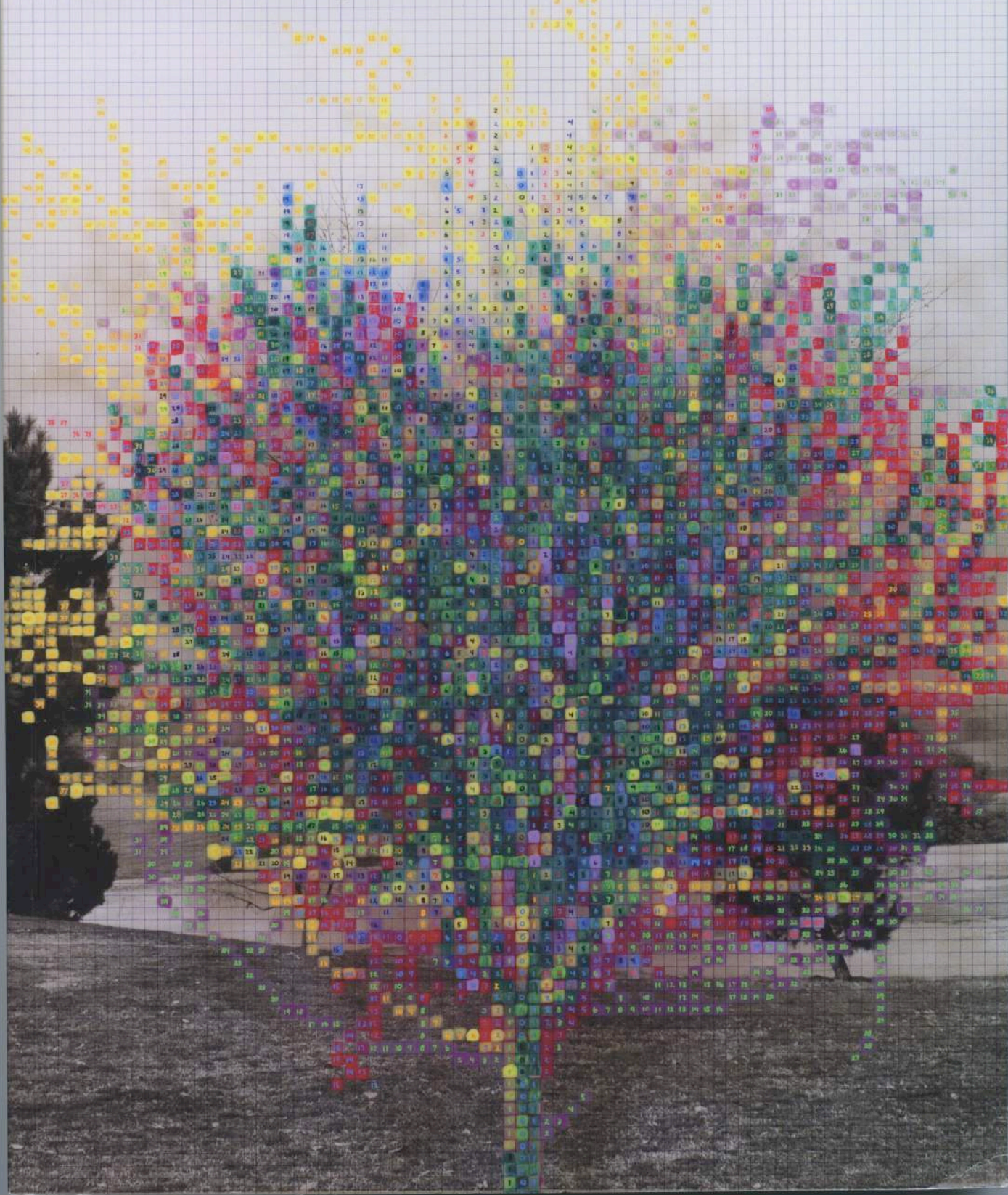


Studio

The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine Summer/Fall 2014



Simone Leigh Gone South

by Thomas J. Lax,
Assistant Curator



Simone Leigh
Cupboard, 2014
Courtesy the artist

Several years before Hattie McDaniel played Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, Mammy's Cupboard opened near Natchez, Mississippi. A family-owned pancake house in what was once a Shell gas station, the restaurant is Mammy—depicted with a serving tray, earrings made of horseshoes and a pink skirt made of brick, through which diners enter to enjoy their pancakes, syrup and homemade apple pie. While She has received several politically corrective renovations and face-lifts—which turned Her skin from a chocolate brown to a chalky white and refurbished the seating inside—She continues to stand twenty-eight-feet tall on U.S. Route 61, the major highway that leads through Mississippi to New Orleans.

For her recent exhibition *Gone South* (on view from April 4 through May 31, 2014, at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center), artist Simone Leigh made *Cupboard* (2014), a twelve-foot representation of the pancake house that replaces the solid skirt with a wire

cage that encloses a chandelier composed of ceramic sculptures in the shape of extra-large cowrie shells. Leigh first found out about the infamous tourist site from photographer and photography historian Deborah Willis, and was immediately drawn to it because of its perverse yet potentially open-ended connotations. For Leigh, the structure brought to mind celebrated Mousgoum architecture—mud houses located in the flood plains of Central and West Africa. Likewise, Leigh was reminded of the morphology of cotillion dresses, those icons of Southern gentility that originated in eighteenth-century France, which she has called “a hygiene of the black body.” Like the restaurant, *Cupboard* can be entered. As a body and a house, a place to consume and to be consumed, Mammy's Cupboard was bad in all the right ways.

In her work, Leigh often extends the long *durée* of appropriation strategies through which dispossessed people have taken on dominant and exclusionary cultural

Simone Leigh

Gone South



Simone Leigh
Tree, 2014
 Courtesy the artist

tropes as a way to critique them through embodiment and masquerade. Consider the cakewalk, the parodic dance enslaved Americans developed on plantations to mime the grandiose mannerisms of Southern society, which artist Houston Conwill quotes in his 1980s performances of the same name at Just Above Midtown Gallery. Or Kara Walker's recent monumental sugar sculpture at the Domino Sugar Factory, which depicts a sphinx: half lion, half Mammy. Or the Haitian carnival character Chaloska, a send-up of Charles Oscar Etienne, the chief of police in Jacmel who murdered hundreds of political prisoners in the first half of the twentieth century, and is resurrected in spectacular form every year before Lent. Many makers and thinkers have used this strategy of working with and against, variably referred to as postcolonial or queer. The late feminist performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz, for example, described this process as "disidentification . . . recycling and rethinking

encoded meaning,"¹ while much earlier the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade famously cites it as "cannibalistic" in his "Manifesto Antropófago."²

In her work, Leigh has repeatedly made use of exclusionary and primitivizing forms, and perverted them in the process to consider how museums stage relationships between objects from the global South and their various viewers. In *Gone South*, for example, we come upon *Untitled* (2013), a yonic, glazed ceramic sculpture hung on the wall at the height of the viewer's torso, with blue crystals forming on its surface. The sculpture is at once an oversized cowrie shell (a mnemonic reminder of the chandelier of cowries that hang inside *Cupboard*), vulvae and an abstracted bust. It beckons the viewer, recalling a mode of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century spectatorial address during which corpses and amputated body parts of dead slaves were used as bait to attract cowries off the coast of West Africa, according

Simone Leigh

Gone South



Simone Leigh
Untitled, 2013
 Crystal glazed stoneware
 Courtesy the artist and Tilton Gallery, New York



Simone Leigh
Jug, 2014
 Lizella clay
 Courtesy the artist

to popular lore.³ Displayed kitty-corner to *Untitled, Jug* (2014), a sculpture made (visibly) by hand in Atlanta from unfired, earth-red Georgia Lizella clay, references both the scale of a face jug (here rendered sans visage), as well as the mouthwatering Mamma's skirt.

Tree (2014) sits in the corner, another wire armature without a skin, at once an antidote to and an acceleration of the stakes of *Cupboard's* architectural space. Unable to be entered, *Tree* references the Southern bottle-tree tradition, and includes glass bottles, small jars and baby food containers. Bottle trees have been referenced by contemporary artists including David Hammons, Alison Saar and Gary Simmons, among thousands of other cultural practitioners throughout the South. Shaped like the bow of a ship, an attic or a hiding place, *Tree* is at once a cage and a domestic or nautical dwelling: a provisional structure. In Leigh's installation-based mash-up of cultural references from global vernacular architectures to

the forms and materials of black American craft traditions, the artist places this lyrical domicile close to the ground and next to a window, as if to suggest that these various histories might be our only way out of—or into—the belly of history.

Simone Leigh was a 2010–11 Studio Museum artist in residence and is based in Brooklyn. She is working on a major commission with Creative Time, which will open in 2015.

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.
2. Oswalde de Andrade, "Manifesto Antropófago," *Revista de Atropofagia* (São Paulo), no. 1 (May 1928), 3–7.
3. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 209.