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The Doctor Is In, at the New Museum

New York artist Simone Leigh explores health and wellness in 'The Waiting Room'



Simone Leigh, artist-in-residence at the New Museum, is in front of a model apothecary that is part of 'The Waiting Room.'
PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Taking in an art show was a hands-on experience for a lucky few at the New Museum on Sunday, when the first in a series of free in-house massage sessions began.

The rubdowns—continuing on select weekend dates into September—come courtesy of a certified masseur. The occasion: an exhibition, “The Waiting Room,” by New York artist Simone Leigh.

For a show with health and wellness on its mind, Ms. Leigh uses video, sculpture and sound as well as a program of participatory “Care Sessions” to pay tribute to collective-care practices from around the world.

A model apothecary features dozens of herbs on display, as well as medicinal concoctions made from organic matter. The exhibit’s main space, on the museum’s fifth floor, is filled with meditation cushions for use by anyone with a spirit in need of

cleansing. “I’ve been trying to use my position as an artist to give visibility to things I don’t think are as visible as they should be,” Ms. Leigh said of collective health practices passed down through different cultures—often by unofficial means, outside the modern medical marketplace.

“Certain kinds of knowledge can’t be capitalized on,” said the artist. “A lot of times black women have been containers of this kind of knowledge and have passed it down from one generation to the next.”

In the exhibition’s apothecary section, for example, glass jars hold varieties of herbs collected by Ms. Leigh from a medicine market in South Africa and other foreign climes, as well as shops just a few blocks away in Chinatown. Among the natural wares: lavender, nettle, calendula, magnolia bark and red ocher used for cosmetics in Namibia.

Although Ms. Leigh works largely in sculpture, “The Waiting Room” continues in a vein she first mined in “Free People’s Medical Clinic,” a 2014 project she organized for the public-arts group Creative Time. The piece was a tribute to the Black Panther Party’s work with community-healthcare initiatives starting in the 1960s.

“A lot of people are curious about the sandbags,” said Devon Ma, one of a group of teenagers who greet visitors to the New Museum show. The bags refer to walls the Black Panthers would construct to guard their pop-up health clinics from police, she said.



Visitors view videos in Ms. Leigh’s ‘The Waiting Room.’ PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A large screen positioned by the array of meditation cushions shows a video Ms. Leigh made of a woman inside a giant clay pot, spinning over and over so as to mesmerize the viewers on the floor.

“Almost all pots are made by women, and they’re very rarely authored,” Ms. Leigh said of the anonymity also frequently shared by nurses and others who hand down caregiving wisdom and traditions. “I’m interested in anonymous labor.”

To supplement her installation, Ms. Leigh assembled a participatory program including access to such practices as herbalism, acupuncture, therapeutic movement and massage.

On select Sundays through Sept. 18, visitors can also sign up in the museum lobby to have their same-day 20-minute turn in a classroom temporarily converted to a massage space.

Last Sunday, a knock on the door was answered by Malik K. Bellamy, a professional massage therapist based in Harlem. A jazz soundtrack played—“The Delightful Deggie” by Lee Morgan—before shifting to hypnotic Afrobeat grooves by Nigerian musical hero Fela Kuti.

After asking about any areas in need of special care, Mr. Bellamy proceeded to rub, grind, press and chop a reporter’s muscles in need of relaxing.

Massage, said Mr. Bellamy, “should be part of everyone’s regular regimen, to maintain mental happiness and physical well-being.”

Other care sessions offered during the exhibition’s run through Sept. 18 include a workshop titled “Herbalism: How To Heal Yourself with Plants” by Karen Rose, the owner of Sacred Vibes Apothecary in Brooklyn, and “Afrocentering,” a movement class taught by Aimee Meredith Cox, a former Alvin Ailey dancer who created a special program in the service of mind-body connection and self-awareness.

“We tried to home in on a few pivotal things that have to do with well-being and happiness,” Johanna Burton, the New Museum’s director and curator of education and public engagement, said of the services provided.

Participants in the care sessions must sign a waiver freeing the museum of medical liability, but the program fits into the institution’s educational mandate, she added.

“The definition of what counts as necessary and what counts as a luxury is something we wanted to question,” Ms. Burton said.