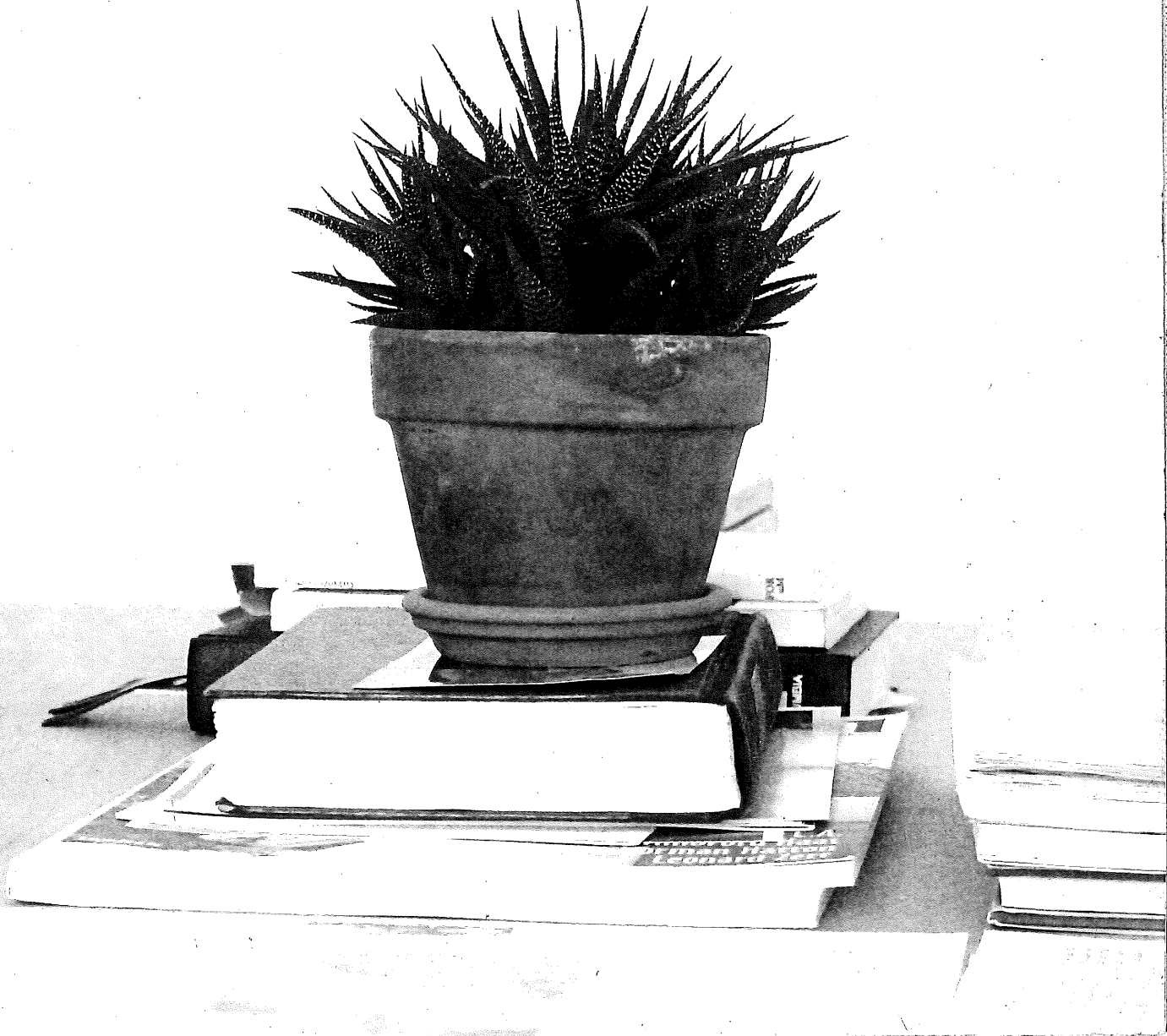


Evidence of Accumulation

Artists in Residence 2010-II
Simone Leigh,
Kamau Amu Patton,
Paul Mpagi Sepuya

The Studio Museum in Harlem



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Front cover: Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Studio, March 11, 2011* from *Studio Work*, 2010–present. Courtesy the artist

Inside front cover: Kamau Amu Patton, *Studio Installation*, 2008. San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA. Courtesy the artist

Inside back cover: Kamau Amu Patton, *Studio Installation*, 2011. The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY. Courtesy the artist

Back cover: Simone Leigh, *Porcelain roses* (materials for *Overburdened With Significance*, 2011). Courtesy the artist

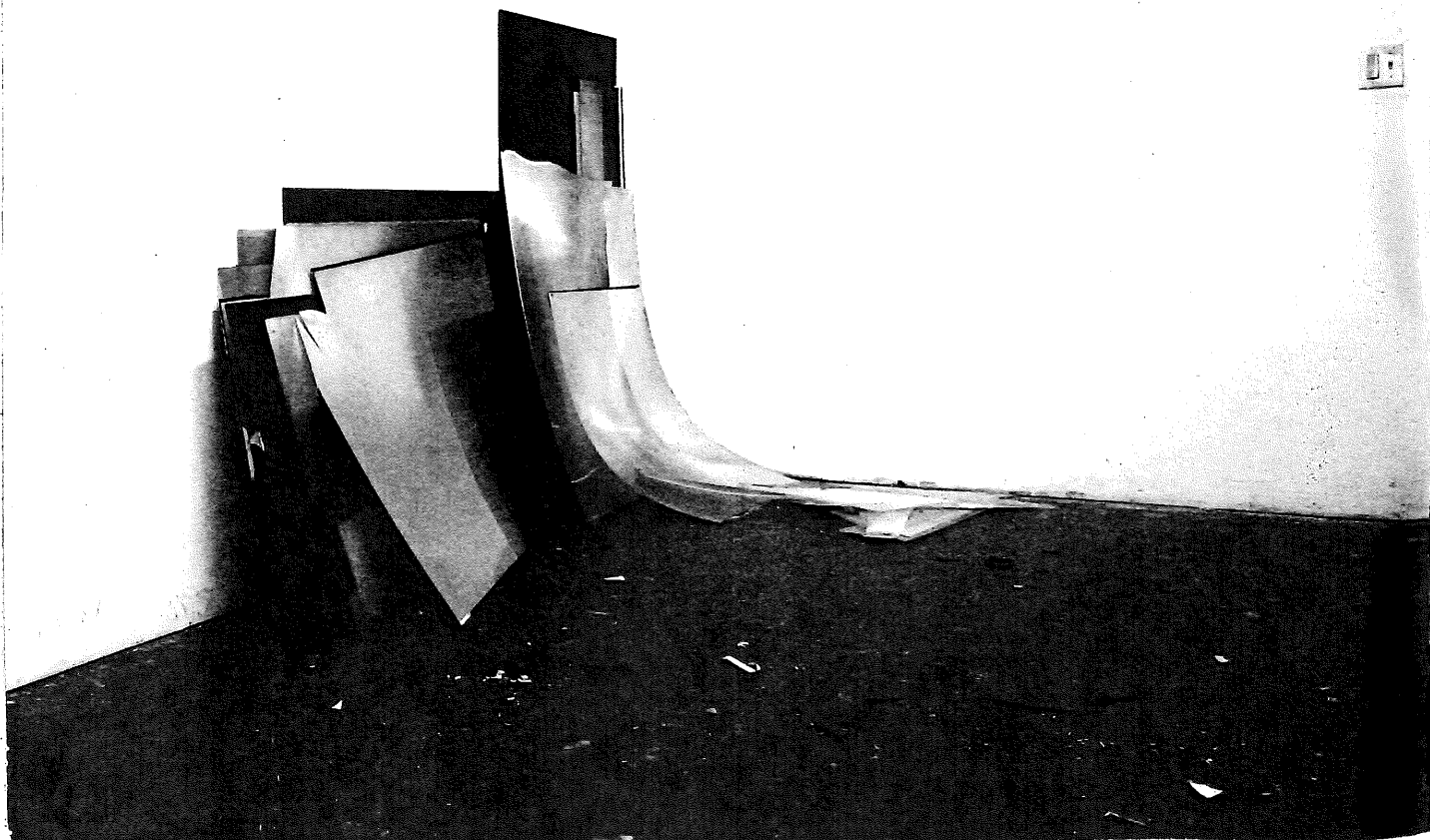
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“Black art must take more risks!” shouted Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, Lorraine O’Grady’s (b. 1934) irate and impeccably dressed avatar, as she whipped herself with a cat-o’-nine-tails in front of stunned gallery patrons in 1980. I invoke this alter ego in considering Simone Leigh’s oeuvre for an obvious reason: Leigh’s artistic practice is by no means ostensibly “safe” or instantly readable to spectators. Rather, her ceramic objects and media-based work are often situated seemingly 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 preconceptions of art—particularly craftwork and sculpture—as merely decorative. Instead, Leigh’s work engages in multidirectional gestures, not only pointing toward 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* has, in past work, engaged the dialectic between the aesthetically beautiful and the brutally utilitarian with her repurposing of 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* (2005), for instance, which sutures steel clamps with a motley assortment of glazed ceramic plantain-like objects and other forms, confounds facile categorization. *The New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter likened the piece to a “cross between a giant flower and a thresher.”¹ *Monarch* (2008) 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 those in *Fetish with Vinyl* (2006), resemble other-worldly artifacts reminiscent of science fiction milieus staged in cult films such as *Mad Max* (1979) or Sun Ra’s (1914–1993) *Space is the Place* (1974). These discrete pieces, as well as Leigh’s current projects, evince her Conceptualist-like approach to her work, specifically in her 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, reanimating these “relics of Africa-Americana” as phantasmagoric forms in themselves.² 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, the objects also echo surrealist depictions of *vagina dentata*. Their evocation of the myth of the “devouring female” lends them an almost anthropomorphic quality.³ Meanwhile, the pointing antennae further suggest these pieces as living things, receiving and transmitting information, perhaps from an ancestral past or mythic future. This temporal dislocation, present in much of Leigh’s corpus, is suggestive of the fluid relations between past, present and future that are a signature of cultural texts identified with the paradigm AfroFuturism.⁴

Concomitantly, Leigh's media-based works continue her praxis of probing subterranean narratives via visual representation and performance. Leigh's earlier *Uhura* (2008), for instance, extracted a short clip of the ambiguously African character Lieutenant Uhura from the television series *Star Trek* (portrayed by actress Nichelle Nichols [b. 1932]) and repeated it on a 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 about black iconography—especially regarding black women—by re-centering Uhura as a protagonist, rather than an outlier, in her own deep space tableau.

Meanwhile, Leigh's latest video work, *Breakdown* (2011), 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 Laser (b. 1981), are a hybrid of theatrical (Amiri Baraka's [b. 1934] play *The Dutchman* [1964]) and aesthetic (Adrian Piper's [b. 1948] "Catalysis" series [1970–71]) sources, among others. The piece centers on a singular and unnamed woman, played by opera singer Alicia Hall Moran (b. 1973), whose initial vacillation between moments of giddy excitement and wailing loss signals the nervous breakdown to which the title alludes. The work references the 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 (particularly women) on a daily basis.

Yet, as the piece progresses, the demarcation between those two modes becomes more complex, if not murky. Hall-Moran's dexterity as a trained mezzo-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 a certain queer aesthetic practice that performance theorist José Muñoz (b. 1942) denotes is an "active political refusal" to situate oneself in the limitations of the present.⁵ 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, as well as 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 approach to art-making, specifically in her traversal of 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 invoke the ghost of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, risky.

Uri McMillan, an Assistant Professor of English and African-American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, has published in *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, and *e-misferica: Performance and Politics in the Americas*. His research interests include cultural studies, performance studies, visual culture and aesthetic theory, and queer studies. He is currently completing a manuscript on performances of objecthood by black cultural actors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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- 1 Holland Cotter, "Else," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2010: C30.
 - 2 Simone Leigh, conversation with the author, May 2, 2011.
 - 3 Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli, and Gloria Gwen Rassberg, eds., *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991): 100.
 - 4 Writer Mark Dery loosely defines AfroFuturism as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes" and "African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future." 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): 180.
 - 5 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: NYU Press, 2009): 178, 176.