Simone Leigh

By Jonah Perrin, Richard Gao, Christopher Staley, Sarah Hasan, Hannah Lawry
Simone Leigh Trailer

Simone Leigh  Sovereignty
Background Information: Early life

**Early Life:**
- Born to two Jamaican parents in Chicago in 1967
- Went on to receive a BA in fine arts with a minor in philosophy from Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana in 1990
  - Undergrad served as a time for Leigh to let go of the traditional belief system she was raised around
  - During this time she trained in traditional ceramics and clay under Michael Thiedeman, leading to her applying for a semester at the Smithsonian

**A Semester at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art:**
- During Leigh’s time at the Smithsonian, she developed a personal interest in exploring and engaging with subject matter often thought of as taboo in the African diaspora
- It wasn’t until nearly a decade after graduating that Leigh began to explore this interest formally under the scope of a self-declared artist
I’ve had thirty years to make a ton of mistakes. Now I feel ready, and for some reason I’m not intimidated.” - Simone Leigh, featured in the New Yorker
Career Overview: The Beginning

Life Right After College:

- Moved to Greenwich village to work for a ceramics-supply store
  - It was due to this work experience she realized she couldn’t live in an area without a Black community
- She moved back to New York City in 1993 and made stoneware tiles for Brooklyn Subway Stations, Prospect Park and Parkside, in addition to teaching art to young children
- Despite the intensity of her daytime jobs, Leigh always made time to find studio spaces to work on her craft
- In 1996, Leigh took a break from going to the studio after the birth of her first child
Career Overview: The Awakening of the Artist

**Early 2000s to the Present:**
- In 2001 Leigh officially identified herself as an artist in addition to having her first show at the Rush Arts Gallery.
- In 2004 she had a solo show at Momenta Art in Brooklyn.
  - Around this time Leigh was also getting invitations to work in community spaces like the Manhattan Cultural Council, allowing her work to be viewed by other artists and museum curators.
- In 2010 she received a coveted residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem.
  - This is considered one of the earliest starts in Leigh’s art career.
- In 2012 Leigh had a show at the Kitchen in Chelsea.
  - This featured Leigh’s first video, a five minute futuristic study of Huhura, the only Black character in the original “Star Trek,” a series Leigh watched frequently as a child.
- In 2016 Leigh was featured at the Tate Exchange in London and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, introducing her sculptures to a wider audience.
  - Noted as the “turning point in terms of recognition” in Leigh’s career (New Yorker).
- In 2019 she had a solo show at the Guggenheim Museum.
Defining qualities of her work

- Black female subjectivity
- placing people back in the timeline who have been “left out of the archive or left out of history” - New York Times
- creates films, performances, activist pieces, but is most famous for her sculptures
- often uses cowrie shells to represent femininity subtly
- often have smoothed over features as a way to implement an idea of self-protection
- Auto-ethnographic artist; themes of concealment & visibility
- Free People’s Medical Clinic
Panoptica, 2019, terracotta pipe and steel, raffia, 125x120 inches

Jug, 2019, bronze, 84.5x49.6x48.7 inches
“Her challenge will be to turn that space upside down metaphorically with the stories that she’ll be able to tell through her artwork.”

- Cecilia Alemani, artistic director of the 2022 Biennale.
“The idea of Simone Leigh in Venice does disrupt the narrative of 400-plus years of American history. Her sculptures are really commanding in the space they occupy. The scale and presence and magnificence of her figures are so demanding of visibility.”

- Jill Medvedow
Hortense (2016)

- Beauty in hair
- Inflection
- Subjectivity of female form
- Foreground
Queen Bee (2008-2012)
Untitled (Cowrie), 2017, Glazed stoneware, $14 \frac{1}{2} \times 7 \frac{7}{10} \times 6 \frac{1}{5}$ in

Cowrie Shell installation at The Kitchen, 2011
Free People’s Medical Clinics

Free People’s Medical Clinic, 2014. Live art exhibition.
My Dreams My Work Must Wait Till After Hell
Leigh in the 2022 Biennale

“This is an area where the United States productively works with all other countries around the globe, and there’s no better artist for our time.”

——Jill Medvedow

Figure: Jill Medvedow, Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and the co-commissioner of the U.S. Pavilion in 2022 Biennale
Simone Leigh: Grittin
Works cited

https://simoneleighvenice2022.org/#
https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/simone-leigh
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/28/the-monumental-success-of-simone-leigh
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/arts/design/simone-leigh-venice-biennale.html
https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2016/hammer-projects-simone-leigh/
https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/simone-leigh-the-waiting-room