



THE FLEETING SELF

Lorna Simpson's mixed-media explorations of identity, which have won her a place on the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize shortlist, are as captivating as they are elusive. By **Lucy Davies**

Although Lorna Simpson studied documentary photography, the Brooklyn-born artist has moved away from the photograph as an end in itself. She has been nominated for her career-long survey at the Jeu de Paume, Paris, which recently transferred to the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead.

As well as her own photographs, Simpson's wide-ranging practice embraces found photographs, poetry, slave narratives, advertising copy and her own memories. She moves seamlessly between still and moving images, and even delicate, pin-sharp drawings in pen-and-ink and wash.

Her first experience of taking pictures was as a child, when she saved coupons from tissue boxes to buy a Polaroid camera. She studied photography at the School of Visual Arts in New York in the 1970s and 80s, when the art world roiled with conceptualism but the photographic establishment was stuck fast to stalwarts such as Henri Cartier-Bresson.

'People of her generation were influenced by the voices of feminism and racial activism,' the show's



**SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER,
THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED,
ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY.**

Above *Corridor (Phone)*, 2003, a still from a two-channel video installation.
Left *Waterbearer*, 1986

curator, Joan Simon, says. 'Minimalism and abstraction had been dominant for years, but now the figure was coming back, and with it questions about how you place yourself and how others perceive you.'

Simpson had an important decision to make: should she carry on taking documentary photographs or should she pursue some of the ideas bubbling to the surface in her work? After winning a place at the University of California, she began combining text with image, and presenting her works across multiple panels. Figures are shown from the back or side, so that key information is withheld; a gesture is mirrored elsewhere in the piece – almost like a strip of film.

Texts or single words are used as a kind of parlour game. The viewer will automatically try to find a connection between image and text, but often that connection doesn't exist. 'Eye and ear are working in tandem,' Simon says. 'Even though they may be telling you opposing things.'

Gradually Simpson moved from traditional to more inventive printing methods. Inspired by Joseph

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Beuys, she began printing photographs on felt, creating a disorienting yet sensuous visual experience where an image becomes almost sculptural.

Simpson often appears in her own works. In her video *Momentum* she re-enacts a performance she did as a child at the Lincoln Center, Manhattan; in *1957/2009* she recreates poses from the 1950s photo album of a Los Angeles would-be model or actress. These act as a hall of mirrors, so a person or gesture

Below details from *1957-2009* (2009).

Bottom *Five Day Forecast*, 1988

exists across time, or in several places at once. In her stories and histories, perceptions and reflections, identity is a many-sided and fascinating thing.

The Deutsche Börse Photography Prize exhibition, the Photographers' Gallery, London W1, April 11 to June 22 (thephotographersgallery.org.uk). Lorna Simpson's retrospective is at the Baltic, Tyne and Wear, until June 22 (balticmill.com)

Next week: Alberto García-Alix

In recreated poses from a 1957 photo album a person or gesture exists across time

