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8 Things to Know About Lorna Simpson

By Rebecca Bates and Melissa Caspary

The artist and recipient of the 2015 Aspen Award for Art takes an unflinching approach to race, has created a new medium of photography, and amasses a collection of vintage issues of a particular magazine.



Artist Lorna Simpson. Photo © Will Ragozzino/BFA NYC.com

It's difficult to overstate just how dynamic and varied Lorna Simpson's oeuvre is. In the mid-1980s, Simpson began presenting series combining text and photography to examine the oversexualization of black women in art and media, as well as the media's othering of black hair. In the late 1990s, she began experimenting with short films, devising gorgeously choreographed narratives, and her recent collages have given new context to vintage photographs from old newspapers and magazines.

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Simpson, who has received almost two dozen awards and grants over the past thirty years and is the recipient of the 2015 Aspen Award for Art, given by the Aspen Art Museum as part of their annual ArtCrush auction and gala. Chaired by legendary collector Amy Phelan, ArtCrush is a reminder of the Aspen Art Museum's continued significance in the art world at large, and serves as a moment for collectors around the country to celebrate Aspen as a hub for contemporary art. To commemorate Simpson's award, we explore how the artist's early jobs shaped her work, the magazine collection that spawned a whole new series, and her particular brand of genre-blending.



Lorna Simpson, "The Bride," 2013.

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On becoming an Ebony archivist

Repurposing vintage images has become a central part of Simpson's works on paper of late, but perhaps her most glamorous and talked-about series began with old issues of Ebony. "I had a bunch of Ebony magazines actually that were my grandmother's," Simpson told the Tate in an interview. "One day I was just looking through them and just came up with the idea for making collages with them. Then I started collecting them and finding them." For her Ebony series, Simpson cut out the faces of women in before-and-after shoots, and then painted over their hair with ink in various hues, giving them voluminous, abstract coifs.

On revealing the hairy truth about hair

Hair was a focal point of much of Simpson's early work, as she addressed the cultural significance of black hair and how certain hairstyles have become especially fraught. A 1990 piece, *Double Negative*, shows four Polaroid prints of a braided hairpiece knotted in a circle like a noose. In between each photo are placards reading "not," "not," and "noose." A set of prints produced the following year shows a set of braids with frayed and split hairs.



A still from Lorna Simpson's "Momentum." Photo via Salon 94

On dancing the line between memory and reality

Like many little girls, Simpson briefly tried her hand at ballet. But unlike most ballet defectors, Simpson can identify the exact moment she became disenchanted with dance. In a TEDx talk in 2013, she talked about taking dance classes through the Bernice Johnson Dance School, a studio that often sent dancers on to the Alvin Ailey Theater. For a ballet recital when she was 12, Simpson and her fellow dancers wore gold leotards, painted their skin gold, and pinned on large afros, also painted gold. The choreography was set to a Duke Ellington song, and the performance took place two days after the musician's death. While dancing, Simpson says she suddenly felt a tremendous urge to be in the audience observing, rather than performing. "I think that moment really did define something about performance for me, but also my desire for recreation or reenacting moments," she said. "And that has become an element that has played in the work on many different levels and has fueled many different ideas." Indeed she recreated a fractured version of this performance in her 2011 film *Momentum*.

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Lorna Simpson, "Five Day Forecast," 1991. Photo via tate.org

On what to expect from the rat race

Most artists take on odd jobs to support their practice when they first start out. As an emerging talent, Simpson found herself working various secretarial and receptionist temp jobs. As anyone who has held an expendable position knows, those who take these roles are often ignored, overlooked, and dismissed as less than meaningful contributors to the workplace. Simpson used her work experiences as fodder for some of her earliest photography and text pieces, specifically *Five Day Forecast*. The work comprises five photographs of a woman's torso. The woman wears a white shift, her arms crossed and body positioned in awkward stances. Above the photos are placards naming the day of the week. Below are words describing moments of communication failure: "misdescription," "misinformation," "misidentify," "misdiagnose," "misfunction," "mistranscribe," "misremember," "misgauge," "misconstrue," "mistranslate."

On creating a new genre of photography

Having studied photography at New York's School of the Visual Arts and received an MFA from University of California, San Diego in 1985, Simpson was instrumental in pushing documentary photography into the realm of conceptual art. She has long thrived within the realm of the experimental and in the space between genres, and her original and undaunted approach has given a new level of complexity to the seemingly straightforward medium, raising more questions than it answers.

On becoming a global name

Simpson's prolific career has gained continuous momentum since 2007, when her first retrospective made appearances at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles and the Whitney. In 2013, she gained traction in Europe with a show that traveled from Paris's Jeu de Paume to Munich's Haus Der Kunst. This year she has come full circle with her work being shown at the 56th Venice Biennale, where Simpson was the first African American woman to be included in 1993.

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Lorna Simpson's "Three Figures," currently on view at the Venice Biennale, via thenation.com

On sticking to her roots

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Simpson has spent most of her life in New York and has long been represented by the esteemed uptown gallery Salon 94. Today, Simpson continues to reside in Brooklyn, now with her husband (noted contemporary photographer James Casebere, represented by Chelsea's Sean Kelly Gallery) and their daughter, Zora.

On her ties to the Aspen Art Museum

Simpson has long been a friend of the Aspen Art Museum. Her show *Lorna Simpson: Works on Paper*, the first museum exhibition to focus on her collages and drawings, debuted at the Aspen Art Museum in the summer of 2013, the same year that Simpson was an artist in residence there. On July 31, 2015, she will be receiving the Aspen Award for Art during the museum's annual benefit dinner.