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Baltic exhibition reflects on American artist's 30-year career

Anyone walking along the quayside over the past few days can't fail to have noticed the striking image on the outside wall of Baltic. Turning the gallery's exterior into an exhibition space is the central twirling figure of a female dancer by American artist Lorna Simpson whose first European retrospective of work, spanning more than 30 years, has just opened inside on floors three and four:

One of a group of ballet dancers, the pirouetting woman - a blur of gold - looks naked but in fact they're all wearing gold leotards, gold body paint and huge gold hairdos.

The scene, explains the Brooklyn-born artist when she shows me around the exhibition which has seven-minute film Momentum - the source of that image - as its focal point, was inspired by the memory of a dance performance at the Lincoln Center in New York which she took part in as a youngster: "It's based on a performance I made as a child, a ballet recital, at 11," she tells me.

"I didn't enjoy performing it although I loved the rehearsals and classes in the dance studios."

She remembers thinking at the time how she would prefer to be in the audience, watching, and here visitors can do just that, as two large, double-sided screens show the group of dancers revolving en point - the feat which Simpson recalls needing to accomplish - as they keeping the spin going as long as possible, with the only sound being that of the squeaking and soft thuds of ballet slippers.

"I stopped dancing after that but the memory stayed with me and I thought I would make a completely crazy idiosyncratic piece based on my memory and based on the most difficult piece of choreography!"

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The young dancers on-screen include some from New York's famous Alvin Ailey dance school, and friends of Simpson's daughter, who had not performed before. And the gold and the hair? Are they recreations from that childhood show? "It was 1971," she laughs. "Very Vegas!"

Over the past 30-plus years Simpson has worked in various mediums: photography, film, video, drawing and, since 2005, watercolours too which are also featured.

In the mid-eighties she was well-known for large-scale works combining photographs and text; in the next decade came multi-panel photographs printed on felt, with panels of text (and visitors can see some scene-setting postcard images, silkscreen over felt, of the Lincoln Centre on show near Momentum); then, again over the past 15 years or so, she has turned to films and videos. One of these, in an adjacent darkened room, is her recent Chess, a special commission for Baltic, which, unusually, features the artist herself - although she's quite unrecognisable.

Showing on a loop, to a piano soundtrack played by composer Jason Moran, the Lorna Simpson retrospective, a new exhibition at Baltic in Gateshead black and white film shows 53-year-old Simpson as a woman with a Tina Turner hairstyle and also as a man in five-way mirror projections which capture the figures at different angles as she sits at a table, involved in separate games of chess.

"It doesn't feel like me at all!" says Simpson of the screen images which see her transformed by a make-up artist and, in her male role, adopt very different mannerisms. "I look exactly like my father in it!" she adds.

Also touching on memory, Chess follows on from her work 1957-2009 - on show on the third floor below - which was inspired by the finding of 299 photographs featuring a woman in various poses which were taken in Los Angeles in 1957. They were the sort of photos commonly taken of aspiring actresses or models at the time who wanted to see what they looked like from various camera angles, and Simpson recreates the poses. Here, the effect of the five-way angles in Chess is cleverly replicated images which show the figures playing not each other but themselves. Intrigued by those original photographs, which Simpson found online, she wondered what the subject would look like now, in her seventies so in the film the pair age slowly, almost imperceptibly, until by the end they look different.

Over 10 minutes, visitors can watch the games play out (the woman wins hers) and it's quite mesmerising watching the methodical moves and the thought processes played out on their faces.

"It's a real game but I know nothing about playing chess - I had someone calling out to me the movement of the pieces!" admits Simpson.

"In quite a lot of the videos I make not a lot happens; they play with time or are very repetitive. And chess is the most boring thing in the world!"

But the visual trickery, the trompe l'oeil and photographic illusion popular in the 1900s is the interesting thing. Involving mirrors and duplicate images which made people appear in different positions, the surreal effect was a hit.

"It was used all over, particularly in New York in 1910, where you could go to a studio that made those images," explains Simpson who still lives in Brooklyn. "The photographic trick in 1910 was to take two mirrors, put them at 70 degree angles and put the subject three to four feet from the mirror to create these beautiful reflections of the subject. "But each is slightly different which makes it more curious." On an adjacent screen, composer Moran is seen, again captured by five-way mirror angles, as he plays his piece built around a piano exercise to strengthen both hands.

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Simpson calls the exhibition, which covers the mid-eighties to the present, “a quasi-retrospective”. So what is its common thread for an artist whose work spans such a range of media linking past and present, the still and moving, and whose interplays of word, performance and image tackle ideas of gender, class, race, culture, history and memory?

“There are themes that repeat throughout the show,” says Simpson. “It’s more interesting as an artist to do a thematic language of work, rather than a chronological one. “It’s good to revisit different things and think about them as your perception is different too.” Also on floor four is a body of work featuring cut-out faces of black women with painted bursts of more sparkling gold as well as a rainbow of colours representing billowing clouds of hair. In marked contrast, the third floor features a strikingly laid-out display of black and white work, including the piece which brought Simpson international recognition: 1986’s Waterbearer which shows a young woman, back to camera, pouring water.

Here the only sound in the room is whistling, the source of it discovered in a tucked-away space out of view at the far end where a mono film of a late musician Terry Adkins shows him in a swirl of mist which ebbs and flows as he whistles a hymn made popular by African American slaves in the late 17th and early 18th Century.

Simpson’s work conjures up all sorts of connections with slavery, relationships and history, sometimes without us realising quite how, because much is left unsaid. Even the text added to some works tends to stand alone. Instead we get snatches of gestures, backs of heads, a focus on hair - you rarely see a full face - and it all combines in images that linger in the mind. Now should be about the time for Simpson to be thinking of a next body of work but she’s been busy travelling in Europe with her show and overseeing its installation.

It has proved, she says, “ a really great opportunity” for her and each location affords different and new ways of showing the work which is making her re-think it all the more. Having spent last week in the region, taking the chance to look around Newcastle after working on the exhibition’s layout, she adds: “It’s really beautiful at Baltic and it’s a really interesting space which makes you think outside the box.”