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LORNA SIMPSON: 'Gathered'

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

Brooklyn Museum

200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park

Through Aug. 21

Much of Lorna Simpson's photo-based work has been about African-American identity approached from an oblique and elusive perspective. Most of the figures in her pictures, usually black women, were filmed with their backs to the camera, as if to make them generic presences, adaptable to any narrative. The implication is that there are many narratives about race available, all of them conditional and subjective, created by the pressures of personal experience, interpretation and memory.

She returns to these ideas, but in new ways, in the two installations and a video that make up the small show called "Gathered" at the Brooklyn Museum. One installation consists of some 300 framed photographs hung in grid formation on a long gallery wall.

Roughly half the pictures are vintage 1950s pinup images of young black women alluringly posed in domestic settings. The rest are of Ms. Simpson herself, posed and dressed like the women in the original photographs.

At a glance, it's hard to sort out new from old. And when differences gradually become apparent, they don't seem particularly important. The purpose of the piece is not to contrast the past with the present, but rather, through visual time traveling, to suggest consistencies, good and bad, between now and then, unbroken links that are rarely acknowledged in progressive discussions of African-American culture today.

The second, smaller installation is also about memory, though it's more hard-hitting. Here 80 or so found photo-booth portraits are interspersed with black-and-white abstract drawings of the same size. The tiny portraits, which Ms. Simpson found in flea markets and on eBay, date back more than a half-century. They are all of unidentified African-Americans, young and old, with now untraceable lives in pre-civil-rights-era America.

Ms. Simpson makes no attempt to recoup the past here, though. Several of the portraits are time-darkened; the dark, abstract drawings she has scattered among them hint at what they will become.

If the first installation is a back-and-forth view between present and past, the second is a view from the past to an obliterating future, when, for better and worse, a fraught racial history, and the individual lives it affected, will be lost to memory.

The show's organizer, Catherine J. Morris, curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the museum, completes the presentation with a video that appeared in Ms. Simpson's 2007 Whitney Museum retrospective. It provides an ideal coda to the more recent work. In it we see a grid of 15 different mouths, viewed close up, humming the 1935 Rodgers and Hart classic tune "It's Easy to Remember." It sounds great, but chances are the song is too old for most visitors to recognize, and there's no way to know its contents, as the lyrics have been left out.