SIMONE LEIGH

THE WAITING ROOM

JUNE 22 - SEPT 18
For artist Simone Leigh, what happens within the duration and space of waiting is active, personal, political, and, in turn, an opportunity for reflection brimming with revolutionary potential. By way of introducing audiences to such a sense of liminal, yet urgent, possibility, the artist is apt to tell the disturbing story of Esmin Green. On June 18, 2008, the forty-nine-year-old woman was forcibly admitted to the psychiatric emergency department of Kings County Hospital Center, in Brooklyn, New York, due to “psychosis and agitation,” and subsequently waited for nearly twenty-four hours to receive treatment that never came. Instead, at 5:42 a.m. the following day, Green collapsed in her waiting room chair, falling to the floor—where she lay for more than an hour, unattended by employees who nevertheless stood by and looked on as she died. Adding to this tragedy was the fact that those who presumed themselves Green’s caretakers sought to skew documentation of this event: Contrary to what was recorded from four different angles by the hospital’s video cameras, her medical records say that at 6 a.m. she stood up and went to the bathroom—when in truth she was already lying on the floor—and that at 6:20 a.m. she was “sitting quietly in the waiting room.” And so while Green—a Jamaican native who lived in Brownsville, and who, according to a neighbor, kept to herself except for her regular visits to church—was claimed to have died due to a “deep venous thrombosis of lower extremities due to physical inactivity,” she could best be said to have died from waiting. Indeed, in the wake of her death, she was waiting still, for justice and, at the very least, for a truthful narrative.

It would be overreaching to suppose that artists hold the answers and means for enacting broad transformations of institutionalized violence and the repudiation of pain (specifically of black pain) such as led to Green’s death. Yet Leigh’s practice, through installation, sculpture, video, and performance, has consistently been invested in centralizing the subjectivities of black women like Green, referencing a wide span of diasporic histories across time and geography. “Free People’s Medical Clinic” (2014) and its follow up at the New Museum, “The Waiting Room”—the artist’s first major works that might fall under what has now been codified as socially engaged art—focus on the rights and roles of women of color in expanding notions of medicine within a socio-political state of deferred health justice. The new installation and its offering of public programs and care sessions, hosted at the New Museum, indicate that the road to health and empowerment has been long fought, and continues to be fought, on fronts both personal and social: dominant narratives frame the conversation as one of passivity, austerity, bureaucracy, and entitlement, rather than of defense, self-sufficiency, and active calls for reparative justice under untenable circumstances. Carving out a space for health care in its absence may be best understood—historically and in

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

JOHANNA BURTON, Keith Haring Director and Curator of Education and Public Engagement SHAUN LEONARDO, Manager of School, Youth, and Community Programs EMILY MELLO, Associate Director of Education
the present—as an act of civil disobedience that brings to light the stark normativity of injustice. In this regard, one may consider the example of the United Order of Tents, a secret society of nurses that provided care for escaped slaves in the Underground Railroad. More recently, one might point to the Black Panther Party’s free health clinics staffed by volunteers, which, as Alondra Nelson points out, served not only the practical purpose of providing access to care, but also provided an ideological and political “reframing of the definition and stakes of black well-being,” demanding health care as a birthright. Against this broader cultural backdrop, Leigh’s installation functions as both a sanctuary and a site of care—featuring a meditation room (where the artist screens video works focusing on the existential status of women of color) and an herbalist apothecary (inspired by a shop owned by one of the artist’s collaborators; and see Michele Wallace, Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (New York: Dial, 1979); Wallace’s book foregrounds much continued discussion on the expectations of “resilience.”

How we differentiate between immediate need and opulent extravagance, and for whom, offers some insight into the ways and means by which prejudice is normalized through cultural assumptions. Leigh seeks to expand internalized preconceptions around self- and community-care, while at the same time refusing to relinquish the singularity of time, place, history, and tradition. In “The Waiting Room”, abundance is signaled by a sensuous herb room, an extensive public program series on subjects relating to healing and mind-body connections, and in-depth courses for teens on self-awareness, while the presence of sandbags alludes to the means by which Black Panther clinics were once barricaded from police intimidation. The cohabitation of conflict and well-being in the installation alludes to histories of care understood as radical threats. It also speaks to the added pressures that accompany the stereotype of exceptional, strong, vulnerable black women, who are expected to stand as symbols of transcended societal racism and misogyny as they support, educate, and address inequity. One can also read here (and not only metaphorically in light of recent mass shootings) that sites for spiritual and clinical health—to say nothing of the self-determination of mind and body—continually require defense.

Measures of health have long been legislated for the use value of objectified, commodified bodies, as traced from slavery to medical experiments to the profitable prison industrial complex, to say nothing of everyday instances of ignorance undergirded by sanctioned racism. Turning to surveillance, narratives, and counternarratives for substantiation, and empathy training for prevention, we find visible but largely incommensurate tactics for addressing what ought to be the acknowledgment and transformation of a system that is, at its core, adversarial to human rights and dignified lives. As Naomi Murakawa has pointed out in her analysis of the carceral state, too often the focus on correcting procedures enacted by rogue cops, or perhaps here, dispassionate medical workers (as though purging anomalies in an otherwise effective structure), work against the desired concept of universal safety and care.

The New Museum has a precedent for working with artists who engage in social justice, and specifically health justice: in 1987 the Museum organized “Let the Record Show…,” one of the first major art world responses to the AIDS crisis. The show sparked the creation of Gran Fury, an artist collective using visual strategies to create awareness of the disease and to promote political demands. If a larger vision for change within political structures, to ensure that lives and health matter, cannot, or should not, be relegated to government alone, nor solely to activists whose outcry is too often met with being told to be patient and pragmatic, what might be the role of artists and art institutions? As the measure of change continually shifts in time, as in any social sphere, the desire for transformative actions taking place within and without institutional walls persists.

Scholar Saidiya Hartman has suggested that we consider both the limits and the possibilities for historical records, documents necessarily written with, and even by way of, omissions. For Hartman, the present might be viewed as a space between what is and what ought to be, a middle passage, an “interval, between too late and too early.” This kind of waiting is urgent and perilous, yet holds open the “as-yet-incomplete project of freedom.”

1 “Simone Leigh: Free People’s Medical Clinic” was organized by Creative Time at the Stuyvesant Mansion in Brooklyn, New York. See http://creativetime.org/projects/black-radical-brooklyn/artists/simone-leigh/.


3 Myisha Priest, “Salvation Is the Issue,” Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism 8, no. 2 (2008): 116–22. Priest’s essay, calling for dialogue on the premature deaths and health issues of black women intellectuals, activists, and cultural workers, has been influential to Leigh and her collaborators; and see Michele Wallace, Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (New York: Dial, 1979); Wallace’s book foregrounds much continued discussion on the expectations of “resilience.”


PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Rashida Bumbry: MOTHERLESS CHILD SET
THURSDAY, JUNE 23, 5-7 PM
FIFTH FLOOR
FREE WITH MUSEUM ADMISSION

To celebrate the opening of "Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room," curator and choreographer Rashida Bumbry and guests will perform a cycle of black folk songs during this event.

Chitra Ganesh: ON DISOBEDIENCE
THURSDAY, JUNE 30, 7 PM
NEW MUSEUM THEATER
$10 GENERAL PUBLIC
$10 MEMBERS

Artist Chitra Ganesh will discuss her recent visual research on the aesthetics and performative gestures of protest, exploring the notion of disobedience as it has been mobilized in political protest and social movements outside of the United States. Ganesh will share images and texts that elaborate on forms of disobedience—as hermeneutically specific in the Global South—that challenge structural power and activate social change, drawing attention to state-sponsored violence and erasures enacted on human bodies.

For over a decade, Ganesh’s drawing-based practice has probed mythological, taxonomic, and social narratives to develop complex visual iconographies of female subjectivity and power. Her work has been widely exhibited and internationally recognized, and she is the recipient of numerous awards, including the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in the Creative Arts.

Karen Rose: HOW TO HEAL YOURSELF WITH PLANTS: HERBALISM GALLERY TALK
THURSDAY, JULY 7, 21 PM
FREE WITH MUSEUM ADMISSION

Karen Rose is trained in Eastern and Western herbal medicine and is personally dedicated to empowering individuals to make informed decisions regarding their health and well-being for their public talk, and in-depth workshops series at the New Museum, she will draw from over fifteen years of experience as a community, clinical, and formulary master herbalist, bringing a particular focus to how women may live inspired lives using the energies of plants. Rose created Sacred Vibes Healing and the Sacred Vibes Apothecary in 2000, a Brooklyn-based herbal apothecary.

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: REMEDIOS: PERFORMANCE RITUALS AS HEALING
SATURDAY, JULY 9, 2-3 PM
NEW MUSEUM THEATER
$10 GENERAL PUBLIC
$10 MEMBERS

Artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons will present a performance media on survival. As part of her performance, she will negotiate narratives of pain, trauma, and resilience, while reimagining herself in a time of societal and geopolitical transitions.

Born in Matanzas, Cuba, in 1959, and based in Boston, Campos-Pons has established an international career as an interdisciplinary artist and teacher. Campos-Pons draws from her Afro-Cuban and American/citizenship, connecting migratory experience across a range of mediums, objects, installations, and situ actions. Influenced by Yoruba spiritual practices from Africa that survive the Middle Passage and their syncretic forms in Cuba, she reimagines and reclaims cultural, ancestral, and personal memories, as well as new legacies, through ritual engagement with materials and spatial experiences.

Lorraine O’Grady: ASK ME ANYTHING ABOUT AGING
THURSDAY, AUG 4, 7 PM
NEW MUSEUM THEATER
$10 GENERAL PUBLIC
$10 MEMBERS

This event will consider the benefits of intergenerational word-of-mouth information and strategy sharing among women. Artist Lorraine O’Grady will field questions about aging from the audience joining her for this intimate conversation.

O’Grady identified as an artist when she was in her forties, making her first public artist in 1960 after previous careers as an intelligence analyst for the US government, a literary translator, and a rock critic. O’Grady’s performance Miss Bourgeois Noir (1980-83) has long been considered a landmark piece of postcolonial theory and cultural studies. A Conceptual artist who grew over the last decades, O’Grady has used auto-biography to consider black female subjectivities and identity construction within the social and political structures of sex and the world at large. In 2004, O’Grady brings sharp focus to the experience of aging.

ON ABORTION: A CONVERSATION
THURSDAY, SEP 7, 7 PM
SKY ROOM
FREE

During her residency at the New Museum, Simone Leigh will organize an event addressing historical and contemporary narratives surrounding reproductive health and rights of black women through dialogues with invited guests.

THE WAITING ROOM UNDERGROUND

The Waiting Room Underground will provide a safe space for in-depth engagements that will occur out of the public view, offering intimate classes to ongoing and newly affiliated New Museum partners.

HERBALISM: LEARNING HOW TO HEAL YOURSELF WITH PLANTS

Six-Week Workshop Series with Karen Rose
SATURDAYS
JULY 8, JULY 15, JULY 22, JULY 29, AUG 5, AUG 12
2–PM

The founder and owner of Sacred Vibes Healing and the Sacred Vibes Apothecary in Brooklyn, Karen Rose is trained in Eastern and Western herbal medicine and is personally dedicated to empowering individuals to make informed decisions regarding their health and well-being. For this in-depth course at the New Museum, she will draw from over fifteen years of experience as a community, clinical, and formulary master herbalist, and will focus on how women may be inspired lives using the energies of plants.
Salvation is the Issue

THE WAITING ROOM

Abuse

JUNE 22

SIMONE LEIGH

EPT 18

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“Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room” marks a new chapter in artist Simone Leigh’s (b. 1968, Chicago, IL) ongoing exploration of black subjectivities, particularly those of women. In her work, Leigh demands that the concerns, roles, and rights of women of color are recognized as central, rather than pushed to the margins. Her exhibition and residency at the New Museum considers the possibilities of disobedience, desire, and self-determination as they manifest in resistance to an imposed state of deferral and debasement. Whereas discourses of patience, pragmatism, and austerity often underscore political debates surrounding the failures of public health care and related conditions, Leigh finds inspiration in parallel histories of urgency, agency, and intervention within social movements and black communities, past and present. Troubling the notion of separate narratives, she implicates violent, institutionalized control and indifference as the conditions under which forms of self care and social care can become radical or alternative.

Focusing specifically on an expanded notion of medicine, “The Waiting Room” references a wide range of care environments and opportunities—from herbalist apothecaries, to muthi [medicine] markets in Durban, South Africa, to meditation rooms, to movement studios—and involves a range of public and private workshops and healing treatments. Blurring the distinction between bodily and spiritual health, or between wellness and happiness—and, in doing so, countering the perception of holistic care as a luxury good—Leigh convenes practitioners who view social justice as integral to their work. The project also takes into account a history of social inequalities that have necessitated community-organized care, traditionally provided by women, from the United Order of Tents (a secret society of nurses active since the Underground Railroad) to volunteers in the Black Panther Party’s police-embattled clinics active from the 1960s to the 1980s. “The Waiting Room” suggests that creating a space for wellness may require both the making of a sanctuary and an act of disobedience against the systematic enactment and repudiation of black pain.

This project developed out of an earlier iteration of Leigh’s socially engaged work “Free People’s Medical Clinic” (2014), organized by Creative Time, which provided free treatments and workshops over the course of four weekends in the former Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, home of Dr. Josephine English, the first black OB-GYN in the state of New York. At the New Museum, Leigh continues her involvement with professionals in the field of holistic health, while creating a new installation and a private, “underground” series of intimate, in-depth workshops and classes for community partners. Additionally, a series of talks, performances, and events conceptualized as medicinal dialogues on aging, disobedience, abortion, healing performances, and toxicity are offered throughout Leigh’s residency.

“The Waiting Room” inaugurates the Department of Education and Public Engagement’s annual R&D Summers, a research and development residency and exhibition program that foregrounds the New Museum’s year-round commitment to community partnerships and to public dialogue at the intersection of art and social justice. Each R&D Summer will take the form of a residency and an exhibition.