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Simone Leigh, in the World

The acclaimed sculptor holds court at the U.S. Pavilion in the Venice Biennale, where she explores the burden of colonial histories and the promise of Black feminism. She begins by thatching the roof.

By Siddhartha Mitter April 14, 2022

Simone Leigh, inside the United States Pavilion at the 59th International Venice Biennale, with her new glazed stoneware work, “Jug” (2022).Credit...Sarah van Rij for The New York Times

Simone Leigh was on the phone from Venice. It’s not all here yet, she told me.

She had been installing her exhibition of bronzes and ceramics in the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale — one of the most prestigious commissions in the art world, and the first time it has been awarded to a Black female artist. This edition of the Biennale had been delayed a year by Covid-19, and, Leigh reported, it has not been spared disruptions: “Satellite,” a 24-foot bronze female form with a concave disc for a head, destined for the forecourt of the Pavilion, was in transit, not certain to arrive in time for next week’s opening.

But Leigh was unperturbed. The pièce de résistance exceeded her hopes. She was giving the building a makeover: A neo-Palladian structure with white columns that waves to Jeffersonian architecture, it has gone African, with a thatched roof that drapes partway down the facade, supported by a discreet metal armature and wooden poles.

Seeing the work of her architect Pierpaolo Martiradonna and his team, what struck Leigh was the rich fullness: the shagginess of the thatch, the forest effect of the wood poles. She was into it. “It has an over-the-top Blackness that I really like,” she said.

The concept was “1930s African palace,” she said — a notion that takes aim at the Colonial Exposition held in Paris in 1931, in which France and other powers showed off their territories, featuring replicas — or amalgams — of local architecture and sometimes “natives” brought in to inhabit them.

Beyond this, Leigh is making a pointed connection to the shared history of global exhibitions that includes the Biennale itself, with its classic national pavilions from the interwar years. In the heyday of Modernism, nations saw no contradiction between flaunting the colonial “civilizing mission” and their high-art achievements.

In Venice, Leigh confronts these parallel histories by turning the building itself into a sculpture, said Eva Respini, the chief curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, which is presenting the pavilion show. “She’s taken these two ideals and enmeshed them to create something entirely her own.”

Leigh, 54, is hovering near art-celebrity status. She won the Hugo Boss Prize in 2018, took part in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, and even prompted a market kerfuffle last year when she left the mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth just 21 months after joining, landing at the smaller Matthew Marks Gallery.

She had a memorable and widely-seen success in “Brick House,” her bronze sculpture on the High Line. For two years, until May 2021, the 16-foot-tall bust of a Black woman with a rounded torso and cowrie-tipped braids presided impassively above the traffic — without eyes, thus with no gaze to meet, as though withholding private thoughts.

A counterpoint to the Far West Side’s skyscrapers, it was a triumph of sculpture and urban design. “Brick House” will also be seen at the Biennale’s international exhibition, where work by 213 artists — the vast majority women — will be shown in two vast spaces, the Arsenale and the Giardini, from April 23 through November 27th.

The Pavilion commission — which is awarded by the State Department, and will lead into Leigh’s first museum survey, at the ICA, in 2023 — represents the culmination of a journey to scale. “I never thought I would be able to work literally with architecture,” she told me at her home in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, during one of several interviews for this story. “Most artists don’t get this opportunity to see their ideas writ large in this way.”

It is also a chance to share her inspirations — from her study of philosophy and ethnography to the history of Black and African art and objects — in ways that no single sculpture can convey. These interests stoke a core concern of her art practice: Black female subjectivity — the sense of self of Black women in the world, their histories, their work, their inner lives.

“The less ‘important’ objects in African art are ones that enter the domestic sphere and are changed by daily or ritual use, by care and love,” Leigh said. “They bring me back into the realm of women’s labor.”

Rashida Bumbray, who curated Leigh’s 2012 breakthrough exhibition at The Kitchen, in Chelsea, and is organizing with her an international convening of Black women artists and scholars in Venice in October, said that the Biennale would assemble the ideas and methods Leigh has honed for decades “in one place — this time to the nth power.” And the promise of the Biennale, with its international audience, is propelling Leigh out into the world.

Seeing Beauty in the 'Horrifying'

Leigh was living in a yurt in rural Virginia in 1992 when a book fell into her hands that would shape her thinking straight through to Venice: a 64-page souvenir photo book from the 1931 Paris colonial fair.

A Virginia heiress had set up the hippie-ish pottery community where Leigh was learning to use an anagama — a Japanese single-chamber "cave" kiln that fires for days at a time. The woman's father had left a collection of photography books; she asked Leigh to organize it and select a book to keep.

The fair glamorized colonialism, yet the book was also beautiful, Leigh told me. "It has some really well done 'noble-savage' photography," she said. "And you really feel the architecture — the camera relates your body to the buildings."

The Paris fair was one of the last of its kind before World War II scrambled the geopolitical order. It was sprawling, with new modernist halls and replicas of structures like the Angkor Wat temple. The United States Pavilion copied George Washington's Mount Vernon, with cottages for the colonies: Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, Samoa, Alaska, Hawaii, the Virgin Islands.

Other buildings mixed ethnographic detail with wild conflations. The separate territories of Cameroon and Togo were given a joint pavilion whose architects drew on Cameroon's Bamoun-Bamileke cultures for a wood structure with a tall thatched dome.

The whole enterprise has attracted scholarly studies, including books by the architectural historian Patricia A. Morton in 2000 and the art historian Steven Nelson in 2007. But in the yurt, Leigh was struck by what the images demonstrated: how colonial depictions could elevate cultures while generating new ways to dismiss them.

Her background had primed her to appreciate these ambiguities. Growing up in Chicago, a daughter of middle-class Jamaican immigrants, she was used to toggling daily between worlds — West Indian, African American, white.

During visits to Jamaica she grasped how colonialism and resistance, rather than contradictory, produced complex, continually renewing, social values and aesthetics. "I think like someone from the Caribbean," she said. "I like how complicated it is, seeing beauty in something that was horrifying at the same time."

Her father was a Nazarene pastor, and home life in Chicago followed "extreme" strictures, she said, but she attended public schools where her friends were "weirdos and people with fundamentalist backgrounds." The West Indian community was small, but around them was the rich African-American culture of the South Side.

In high school she read Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks. At Earlham College, a Quaker school in Indiana (she argued to her parents that it was a Christian institution), she got into ceramics — and majored in philosophy. She was drawn to French feminists like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

Leigh told me that it occurred to her recently how much her new work reflects the influence of her hometown's abundant public art. "I realized that it's a lot like sculpture that I grew up with in Chicago — the Mirós and Picassos all downtown," she said. "It's a similar scale, a similar presence." She had found her zone, and it was there all along.

Traditional Objects, New Meanings

Leigh's work has expanded greatly from the ceramics that she presented in 2011 as an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and in 2012 at The Kitchen, which included interpretations of household objects like water jugs and fantastical suspended pieces bristling with cowries and gold-tipped quills.

She was already in her 40s when those shows drew notice. The commitment to ceramics had kept her outside the art-world mainstream, while abstraction — she never made usable objects — separated her from the pottery scene. She felt removed, too, from tendencies toward conceptualism in Black American art at the time.

But in Africa, where she began traveling in 2007, she found artistic and intellectual kinship. In South Africa, artists like Dineo Seshee Bopape, Kemang Wa Lehulere and Nicholas Hlobo were boldly using earth and common objects. "They were working with material culture and not running away from it," she said.

In Nigeria, the curator Bisi Silva, who fostered contemporary art at a center in Lagos, became a mentor. "I wrote to her, 'Whatever you do, I want to do it with you,'" Leigh said. (Silva died in 2019, at 56.) In Namibia, Leigh met activists seeking recognition of the Herero genocide committed by the German military between 1904 and 1908. A Herero headdress stylized from dozens of ceramic roses became a motif in her art.

Leigh's first outdoor project, commissioned by the Studio Museum in Marcus Garvey Park in 2016, made her African influences explicit. It consisted of three hut-like structures built of clay with thatched roofs — inspired by imbas, "kitchen houses" in rural Zimbabwe, where valuables are kept and meetings held.

But the huts had no entrances — a move that gave them a brooding, hermetic energy, as if they were protecting secrets. It also alluded to a social reality — the way kitchen houses are locked up when a family emigrates.

By making the huts solid, Leigh communicated how traditional objects accrue new meanings, said the Zimbabwean artist and designer Nontsikelelo Mutiti. "Contemporary life allows those objects to have another potency."

The imbas drew curators' eyes and sparked a studio epiphany when Leigh placed a small ceramic head on the maquette of a hut. "That's how those busts started that have house-like bodies," she said of the hybrid form that became a signature.

In her 2018 Hugo Boss Prize exhibition of new work at the Guggenheim Museum, she proposed further riffs: a ceramic bust whose skirt had a jug-handle; a raffia dome from which a stove pipe rose. A breeze-block wall in the gallery evoked domestic architecture in dwellings through the Global South.

Leigh's Venice show presents fresh advances: her first portrait, "Sharifa," a colossal likeness of the writer Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, one of her closest friends. The bronze has a geometric lower body from which one foot protrudes in a gesture that Leigh attributed to Egyptian statuary.

At the foundry, Rhodes-Pitts helped model the form for another bronze, "Last Garment," being shown in Venice — a washerwoman, bent over and kneading a garment in a reflecting pool. The source was a vintage postcard from Jamaica, a trope in colonial depictions. The work is as figurative a piece as Leigh has made — as if reaching through the souvenir to engage the person whom it both depicted and diminished.

In taking on these images, Rhodes-Pitts said, Leigh was "working with traces of the colonial stain — these things that the culture can't look away from even while insisting that they are marginal."

The process gets emotional. For months, Leigh worked on ceramic pieces based on an 1882 staged photograph by James A. Palmer, a white photographer in South Carolina who made souvenir images of Black people. The picture showed a woman at a table with a face jug, the kind made by potters in the region, with a sunflower rising from it. (It is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which calls the work "culturally offensive").

The image has a bizarre origin story: It was based on press depictions of Oscar Wilde, who visited the United States that year and was portrayed first as a monkey, then as a Black woman — a consommé of racism, misogyny, homophobia and xenophobia.

Reinterpreting the scene in two ceramic works, Leigh morphed the features on the face jug into giant cowrie shapes and gave the uncredited sitter — whom she called "Anonymous" — a cylindrical lower body. Still, the violence of the premise was getting to her. "I was uncomfortable with seeing this tableau being built in the studio over time," she said.

In February, Leigh remade her sculpture of "Anonymous" in papier-mâché and raffia and set it on fire on the Red Hook waterfront. Inspired by the burning of Vaval, the Carnival King effigy, in Martinique, the scene forms the climax of "Conspiracy," a 24-minute film by Leigh and Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich that will run in the pavilion.

The film begins with Leigh in her studio, then features the abstract jazz vocals of Jeanne Lee and readings from Zora Neale Hurston and the Yale art historian Robert Farris Thompson. As the effigy burns, the artist Lorraine O'Grady watches in witness. The film, Hunt-Ehrlich said, presents "the art in conversation with the influences, but also with the community."

For Leigh, the ritual of burning the effigy was therapeutic. "It gave me so much relief," she said. "I never get to destroy my work in that way."

A Global Conversation

Two days before Leigh left for Venice, we met at her brownstone. We spoke over green tea at the kitchen island, with Margot, her recently acquired puppy, nearby. A rolling garment rack in the living room was loaded with her outfits for the journey.

As her sculptures have grown, so has her enterprise. She has a vast studio in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, with five assistants and an impressive range of kilns. She makes her bronzes at Stratton Sculpture Studios, a foundry in Philadelphia, constructing the clay models on site at full scale.

But she is not seeking endless expansion. “I have always made my own work and I want to continue to make my own work,” she said. Her investment, she added, aimed to carve out space — physical and mental — for hands-on making. “What looks like big right now has a lot to do with my self-care.”

She has titled her Venice exhibition “Sovereignty.” The name rings like a statement of self-determination. But the claim is not just on her own behalf: After she was awarded the Venice commission, some 500 Black women in the arts gathered on a Zoom call to celebrate. There were tears, said Bumbray, who helped organize the call. “It was a moment to acknowledge that she exists because of this whole community, and we exist because of her.”

Leigh has reiterated that Black women are her primary audience, and she has insisted on bringing that audience with her into institutional spaces, so that her art is not experienced in isolation but as part of a cross-generation exchange.

Lorraine O’Grady, who at 87 is a pillar of the art world and a mentor to Leigh, said the younger artist refused to separate the audience that enables her work — Black women — from the market and institutions that consume it.

“Simone is certainly aware of all the other audiences out there, trust me,” O’Grady said. “But we’re talking about something very deep, which is the audience with whom you have interior conversations as you work, in order to shed light on issues that have received no light for centuries.”

Leigh’s October convening in Venice, “Loophole of Retreat,” aims to bring together hundreds of Black women from every continent, including O’Grady. It will build on an event by the same name in 2019 at the Guggenheim, one of Leigh's proudest achievements. The title refers to the crawl space where Harriet Jacobs, author of the 1861 autobiography, “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” avoided her enslaver for seven years while still observing the world and planning for freedom.

For Leigh the image epitomizes how Black women possess agency, no matter what. “The tendency when people hear Black women’s stories is to focus on what happened to them, not the intellectual labor and creativity they brought to the situation,” she said. “My work is about what they did from those compromised positions — the labor, the care, the love, the ideas.”