Projects 23 : Lorna Simpson : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 6-August 26, 1990

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Simpson, Lorna

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projects 23





lorna simpson

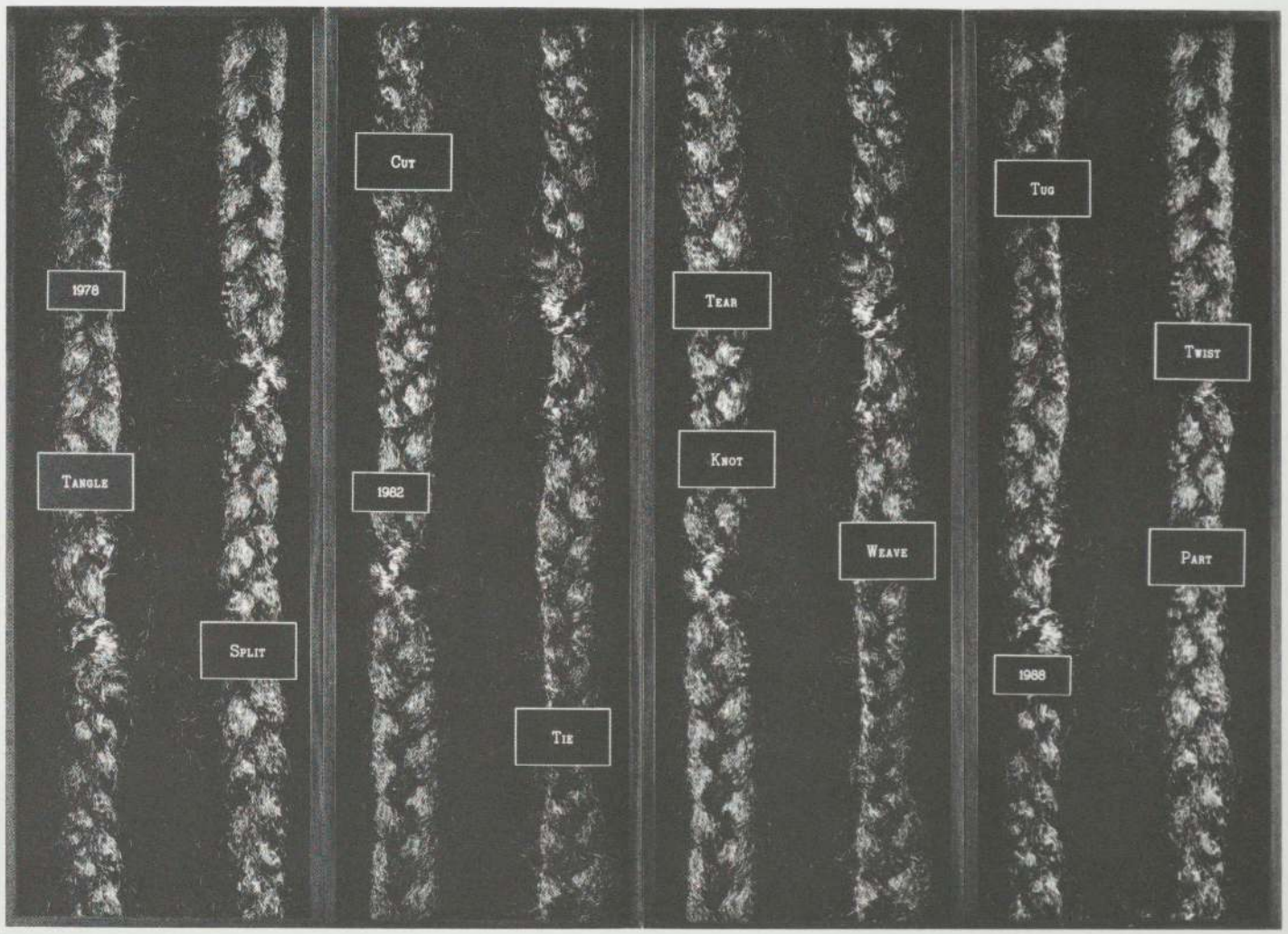
The Museum of Modern Art
New York
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Since the early 1980s, Lorna Simpson's work has addressed issues of identity, race, and gender. Her first photographs document street life in New York, as well as in Africa and Europe. Once these works were exhibited, however, Simpson became frustrated by viewers' assumptions about their content and began to work with models in the more controlled environment of her studio, an approach she continues to use today. Although Simpson's themes remained consistent through this move, her concerns expanded to include the role of the viewer in imparting meaning to an artwork.

Using a portrait-like format, Simpson isolated elements from the documentary photographs, focusing on details—a back or arms—never disclosing the sitter's identity. Implicit in this strategy is her intention to deny the viewer an opportunity to examine the model's expression, a conventional means of "reading" a photograph. So that her intention can be more easily understood, Simpson pairs her straightforward close-ups with words or short texts, carefully selected and situated on simple, generic plastic plaques (ubiquitous in offices and public places).

Simpson's recent photographic images and texts question the way in which women—primarily black women—are classified and analyzed by a larger society and, simultaneously, reveal just how ingrained racial and gender stereotypes are in contemporary visual imagery and language. This theme is perhaps most clearly articulated in a 1989 work *Easy for Who to Say*, a series of five large-format color Polaroids in which oval plaques obstruct the model's face but not her skin color or hair texture. Etched in scarlet on each plaque is a vowel, and a corresponding word is printed beneath each image: Amnesia; Error; Indifference; Omission; Uncivil. Angry, bitter, and critical, these words strongly suggest denial and untruths, and comment on the often forgotten history of African-American women and of minorities and women in general. In *Untitled* (1989), three photographs of a female torso, clad in a simple white shift, are each matched with a clear plastic plaque bearing a verb: prefer; refuse; decide. The juxtaposition of image and text is calculated and intriguing and seems to suggest a selection process, although just who does the choosing—artist, model, or spectator—remains unclear. While this triptych has been interpreted as a statement about abortion, it might also be read in more general terms, for example, as a comment on the way in which men view or judge women.



***1978–88*. 1990. Four black-and-white silver prints, thirteen plastic plaques; 49 x 68" (122 x 170 cm). Edition of four. Courtesy Josh Baer Gallery, New York. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson**

Whereas her earlier pieces are decidedly political and often functioned as contemporary commentary, Simpson's new body of work, featured in this *projects* exhibition, signals a more intimate investigation of her themes. Recurrent in this group is the use of hair—almost always braided—as the central element in each photograph. For Simpson the significance is both personal and universal. The artist recalls her childhood haircuts as an annual ritual: her hair was braided and then cut, the severed piece retained in a plastic bag to prevent its falling into other hands, which could bring bad luck. At the same time, Simpson uses hair as a vehicle for the consideration of race and identity since hair often reveals more about ethnic and racial background, and thus ourselves, than does eye color or body shape and height.

In *I.D.* Simpson juxtaposes an image of the back of a model with a knot of hair. The absence of the figure in the left panel is paired with the word "identify," strongly suggesting that the dominant mode of labeling, or identifying, is by a physical trait such as hair texture. The artist gives us no other information about sex, race, or age, and yet, because we are not exempt from the mechanisms of racism and sexism, we might presume to identify the model as a black female. The right panel features the back of a model, whose short hair is at the same latitude as the knot. The plaque on this panel reads "identity," and, as Simpson has given us a figure, implies that identity has to do with the individual. The irony is that the model's identity is not fully divulged, and ultimately we are left without an exact description of the person. In *Outline* Simpson again combines an image of the back of a model with one of a braid of hair, this time arranged to correspond to the neckline of the model's dress. Affixed to the left panel is a plaque with the word "back;" on the right, a short list of simple, seemingly unrelated words: lash, bone, ground, ache, and pay. Together, the left and right panels propose a linguistic game. But depending on the sex and race of the viewer, the significance of the words formed will be very different.

Simpson uses braids of hair in *1978–1988* to signify the passing of time and a longing for the past; each year's cut braid marks time. At certain points on the braids is a date or a word. These words—cut, tangle, knot, weave, part—refer to how we control or manipulate hair, but they could also describe the handling of rope, thus altering the tone of the piece. For Simpson this work is a personal narrative about the tension that can exist between people and the stages of a dissolving relationship.

Lorna Simpson's force as an artist comes not only from her stark and compelling images and inventive use of language but from her intention to actively implicate the spectator in the creative process. By refusing to disclose her model's facial expression (and, therefore, identity) the artist encourages the viewer to look beyond the immediacy of the images and to engage in a dialogue with the work. As Simpson explains, "The viewer wants so much to see a face, to read 'the look in the eyes,' or the expres-

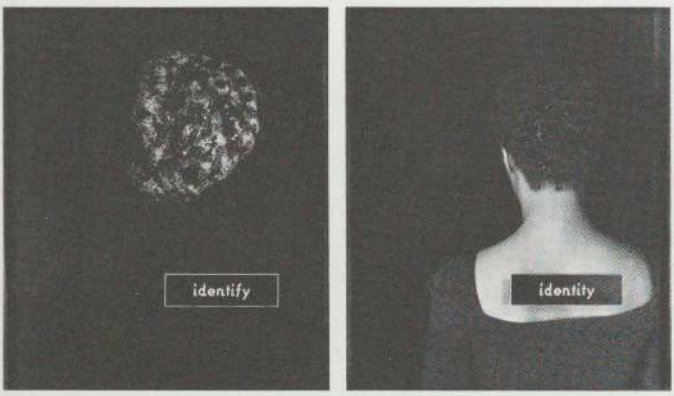
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sion on the mouth. I want the viewers to realize that that is one of the mechanisms which they use to read a photograph. If they think, 'How am I supposed to read this if I don't see the face?' they may realize that they are making a cultural reading that has been learned over the years, and then perhaps see that it is not a given."

Jennifer Wells
Curatorial Assistant
Department of Painting and Sculpture



***Untitled*. 1989. Three Polaroid color prints, three plastic plaques; triptych, overall 25 x 70" (63.5 x 177.8 cm). Collection Miani Johnson and Bruce Ferguson**



***ID*. 1990. Two black-and-white silver prints, two plastic plaques; diptych, overall 49" x 7' (122 x 210 cm). Edition of four. Courtesy Josh Baer Gallery, New York. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson**

Front cover: *2 Frames*. 1990. Two black-and-white silver prints, one plastic plaque; diptych, overall 36" x 6' 2" (90 x 185 cm). Edition of four. Courtesy Josh Baer Gallery, New York. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson

Projects is a series of exhibitions designed to introduce to the public work by contemporary artists. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments. The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from The Bohen Foundation and the Lannan Foundation.

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biography

Born Brooklyn, New York, August 13, 1960
Lives and works in Brooklyn

education
University of California, San Diego. MFA, 1985
School of Visual Arts, New York. BFA, 1982

selected individual exhibitions

1990 University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach; University Art Museum, Berkeley. *Centric: Lorna Simpson* (brochure)

1989 Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. *Lorna Simpson/Matrix 107* (brochure)

Josh Baer Gallery, New York (catalog)

1988 Jamaica Arts Center, Queens, New York

Mercer Union, Toronto, Canada

1986 Just Above Midtown, New York. *Screens*

selected group exhibitions

1990 Venice Biennale. *Aperto 90* (catalog)

1989 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *Image World: Art and Media Culture* (catalog)

The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. *Constructed Images: New Photography* (catalog)

Alternative Museum, New York.
Prisoners of Image 1800–1988: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes (catalog)

1988 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
The Binational/Art of the Late 80's (catalog)

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.
Utopia Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Culture in Recent Sculpture and Photography (catalog)

selected bibliography

Fairbrother, Trevor. "Lorna Simpson" (interview), *The Binational/Art of the Late 80's*. Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art and Museum of Fine Arts, 1988

Jones, Kellie. *Lorna Simpson*. New York: Josh Baer Gallery, 1989

Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Beyond the Simulation Principle," *Utopia Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Culture in Recent Sculpture and Photography*. Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1988, pp. 83–100

Trend, David. "Black and White Photography," *Afterimage* (Rochester, N.Y.), vol. 13, no. 10 (May 1986), p. 12