

## Facing Difference: The Black Female Body

LORNA SIMPSON'S photograph *Waterbearer* was reproduced in 1987 in one of the early issues of *B Culture*, a progressive black newspaper of arts and culture that was fresh beyond all belief. For a brief moment in time *B Culture* was the expressive space for everything radical and black—it was on the edge. Of course, it disappeared. But not before publishing a full-page reproduction of *Waterbearer*.

After carefully pressing my newspaper copy with a hot iron, to remove all creases, I taped this page on the wall in my study, awed by the grace and profound simplicity of the image: a black woman with disheveled hair, seen from the back, pouring water from a jug and a plastic bottle, one in either hand. Underneath the photograph were the subversive phrases.

*She saw him disappear by the river  
They asked her to tell what happened  
Only to discount her memory.*

Subversive because it undoes its own seeming innocence, Simpson's portrait is reminiscent of Vermeer's paintings of working women—maids standing silently by basins of water in still poses that carry no hint of emotional threat. Yet Simpson's language brings a threat to the fore. It invites us to consider the production of history as a cultural text, a narrative uncovering repressed or forgotten memory. And it declares the existence of subjugated knowledge.

Here in this image the keeper of history, the griot, the one who bears water as life and blessing, is a black woman. Her knowledge threatens, cannot be heard. She cannot bear witness. She is refused that place of authority and voice that would allow her to be a subject in history. Or so the phrases suggest. Yet this refusal is interrogated by the intensity of the image, and by the woman's defiant stance. By turning her back on those who cannot hear



*Lorna Simpson. The Waterbearer. 1986. Silver print. 40 1/2" x 70." Courtesy of the artist.*

her subjugated knowledge speak, she creates by her own gaze an alternative space where she is both self-defining and self-determining.

The two containers are reminders of the way history is held and shaped, yet the water that flows from each is constant, undifferentiated, a sign of transcendent possibility, a reminder that it is always possible to transform the self, to remake history. The water flows like a blessing. Despite changes, distortions, misinformation symbolized by its containers, the water will continue to sustain and nurture life. It will redeem. It is the water that allows the black woman figure to reclaim a place in history, to connect with ancestors past and present.

The black woman in the photograph understands that memory has healing power. She is not undone, not in any way torn apart by those dominating gazes that refuse her recognition. Able to affirm the reality of her presence—of the absent him whose voice, unlike hers, might be listened to—she bears witness to the sound of the water and its meaning for her life. Hers is a portrait of serenity, of being, of making peace with oppositional history.

Few contemporary American artists have worked with images of the black female body in ways that are counterhegemonic. Since most black folks in the United States are colonized—that is think about "blackness" in much the same ways as racist white mainstream culture—simply

being a black female artist does not mean one possesses the vision and insight to create groundbreaking revolutionary images of black females. Simpson's reimagining of the black female body not only presents these images in a new way, she does so in a manner that interrogates and intervenes on art practices in general. To do this, she turns her back, in a manner not unlike that of the figure in *Waterbearer*, on art practices that have been traditionally informed by racist and sexist ways of thinking about both the female image and blackness.

Living in white-supremacist culture, we mostly see images of black folks that reinforce and perpetuate the accepted, desired subjugation and subordination of black bodies by white bodies. Resisting these images, some black folks learn early in life to divert our gaze, much in the same way that we might shield a blow to the body. We shield our minds and imaginations by changing positions, by blocking the path, by simply turning away, by closing our eyes.

We learn to look at the images of blackness that abound in the popular cultural imagination with suspicion and mistrust, with the understanding that there may be nothing present in those images that is familiar to us, complex, or profound. Our eyes grow accustomed to images that reflect nothing of ourselves worth seeing close-up. As a survival strategy, aware black folks often cultivate a constructive disregard for the power of the image. Some of us just dismiss it.

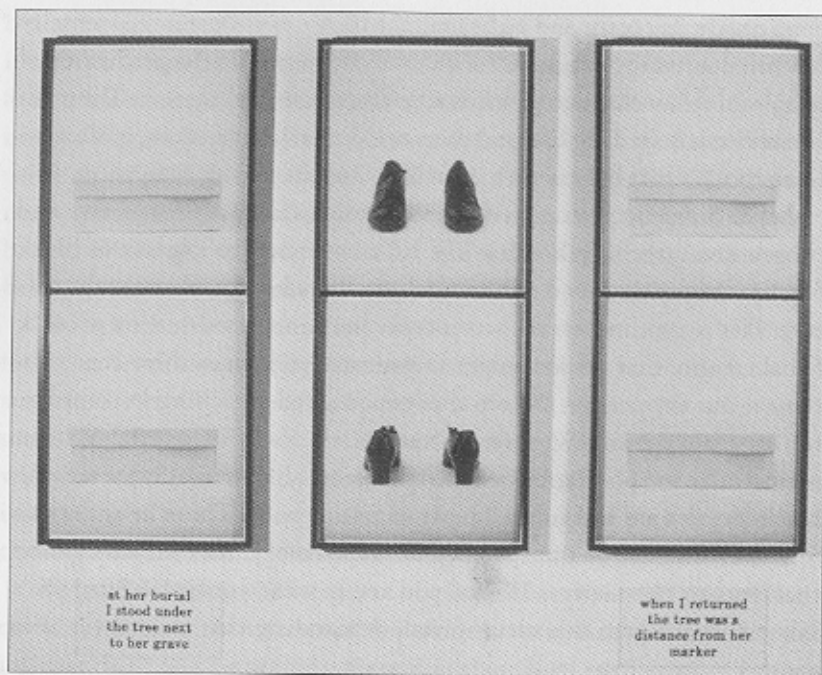
Given this cultural context, we are often startled, stunned even, by representations of black images that engage and enchant. Creating counterhegemonic images of blackness that resist the stereotypes and challenge the artistic imagination is not a simple task. To begin with, artists have to engage in a process of education that encourages critical consciousness and enables them as individuals to break the hold of colonizing representations. Once that process is completed, they then have a space to map a new terrain—one that can emerge only from an imaginative inventiveness since there is no body of images, no tradition to draw on. Concurrently, even after the images are in place the art world may lack a critical language to speak to the complexities these images evoke. To see new and different images of blackness is to some extent shocking. Since images that are counterhegemonic are necessarily provocative, their seductiveness, their allure lie in the freshness of insight and vision. They fulfill longings that are oftentimes not yet articulated in words: the longing to look at black-

ness in ways that resist and go beyond the stereotype. Despite the tenacity of white supremacy as a worldview that overdetermines the production of images in this society, no power is absolute to the imagination. The practice of freedom in daily life, and that includes artistic freedom, is always a liberatory act that begins with the will to imagine.

Lorna Simpson's images of black female bodies are provocative and progressive precisely because she calls attention to aspects of black female identity that tend to be erased or overlooked in a racist sexist culture. Her work counters the stereotype. In the accepted version of black female reality that predominates in mainstream images there is no subtlety to our experience. We are always portrayed as lacking in complexity, as transparent. We are all surface, lacking in depth. Within mainstream art photography the vast majority of images representing black females are full frontal views of face or body. These images reaffirm the insistence on transparency, on the kind of surface understanding that says to the viewer, "What you see is what you get." Simpson's images interrogate this assumption, demanding that the viewer take another look, a closer look.

When I look at images of the black female body in Simpson's work, I see recorded an understanding of black female presence that counters racist/sexist stereotypes through the pronounced rejection of the fixed static vision of our identity that exists in the popular imagination. Yet Simpson's concern is not to simply interrogate, set the record straight. She wants us all to look again, to see what has never been seen, to bear witness.

Beginning with the understanding that common racist and sexist stereotypes of black female identity insist that our reality can be easily understood, that we are not mysterious, we confront images, in Simpson's work, that defy this norm. In general, in this culture, black women are seen and depicted as down to earth, practical, creatures of the mundane. Within sexist racist iconography, black females are most often represented as mummies, whores, or sluts. Caretakers whose bodies and beings are empty vessels to be filled with the needs of others. This imagery tells the world that the black female is born to serve—a servant—maid—made to order. She is not herself but always what someone else wants her to be. Against this backdrop of fixed colonizing images, Simpson constructs a world of black female bodies that resist and revolt, that intervene and transform, that rescue and recover.



Lorna Simpson. *Magdalena*. 1992. Color polaroids, plastic plaques. 63" x 78." *Courtesy of the artist.*

Her images of black female bodies are initially striking because so many of them are not frontal images. Backs are turned, the bodies are sideways, specific body parts are highlighted—repositioned from the start in a manner that disrupts conventional ways of seeing and understanding black womanhood. This shift in focus is not simplistically calculated. The intent is that viewers look beyond the surface, ponder what lies beyond the gender and race of these subjects. Inviting us to think critically about the black female subject, Simpson positions her camera to document and convey a cultural genealogy based not on hard but on emotional realities, landscapes of the heart—a technology of the sacred. Whereas female bodies in this culture depict us as hard, low down, mean, nasty, bitchified, Simpson creates images that give poetic expression to the ethereal, the prophetic dimensions of visionary souls shrouded in flesh. Evoking traditions that honor the goddess, she depicts black women in everyday life as if our being brings elegance and grace to whatever world we inhabit. Black female bodies are black madonnas in Simp-

son's work. In union with the earth, in touch with ancient properties, they embody the sacred. Charlene Spretnak contends in *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* that "When we experience consciousness of the unity in which are embedded, the sacred whole that is in and around, we exist in a state of grace. At such moments our consciousness perceives not only our individual self, but also our larger self, the self of the cosmos." This perfect union of body and spirit is there in the photograph *You're Fine*, where the black female body is surrounded by medical terminology and labels that define her as subordinate, that reduce her to disembodied parts as though she were subhuman. Yet the image that accompanies this text shows a black female reclining with an aura of serenity and repose in the midst of dehumanization. This flesh transcends the limits of domination and oppression which would confine and contain it.

Often Simpson playfully and ritualistically juxtaposes images of black females that interrogate the stereotypes by overtly naming them, imaginatively, while conveying more radical disruptions at the same time. While series like *Five Day Forecast* and *Three Seated Figures* overtly articulate the mundane terrorism of racist objectification, images like the one presented in *Necklines* contextualize this dehumanization by addressing the history of slavery—a continuum of domination that moves.

Though commemorating and re-membering the past, reconstructing a useful legacy for the present, many of Simpson's photographs articulate the convergence of public and private reality. In *Time Piece* a black woman dressed in black is framed from behind, her story suppressed by the omnipresence of death. The litany that stands alongside this image tells us that death continues, that it is inevitable, that the specifics of black female death matter to few, that the details are not important. The recovery of meaning to black female death is enacted by the photographer, by she who wills recognition.

This abiding sense of memory and sustained grief is present in the series of photographs *Magdalena*. Here it is an empty shoe box, an image of shoes that bear witness. They are the everyday artifacts, left behind, that trace the dead back to the living. These artifacts converge and overlap with the reality of death and dying recorded in the text that bears witness: "at her burial I stood under the tree next to her grave." Yet this memory is juxtaposed with a second narrative that records a different

reality: "when I returned the tree was a distance from her marker." In trying to gather the evidence to name black female experience, the reality and diversity of lives, the facts are muddled, our memories unclear. How to name accurately that which has been distorted, erased, altered to suit the needs of other?

Simpson's photographs name that which is rarely articulated—a technology of the sacred that rejoins body, mind, and spirit. The plain white shifts worn by various black female figures in Simpson's work, like the simple garments worn by monks, are a repudiation of materiality. It is the spirit that matters, the soul flesh shrouds and hides. Beyond the realm of socially imposed identity, the limitations of race and gender, one encounters the metaphysical. Transcendent experiences, like death and dying, put into perspective the finite nature of human activity, the limits of human will and power. Despite all that is imposed on black female flesh, no coercive domination is powerful enough to alter that state of grace wherein the soul finds sanctuary, recovers itself. Simpson's work offers us bodies that bear witness. Through these images subjugated knowledge speaks—remakes history.