



Lorna Simpson

HAZE

13 May–8 October 2023

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Serlachius Museum Gösta

“I think my reasons for being an artist are twofold. It’s to have a voice, and secondarily as a way of thinking about my own experiences.”

Lorna Simpson (b. 1960) is one of the most influential figures in US contemporary art today. A pioneer of conceptual photography, her practice spans various media, exploring themes related to the history and contemporary reality of American culture. Marking her Nordic debut, *Haze* presents a selection of her works from recent years, with a focus on her new series of monumental ice landscapes.

In a career now spanning over three decades, Simpson has continued to

raise important questions concerning identity, race, and gender through works that question and challenge understandings of memory and history. The artist’s early photographic works combine fragments of language and imagery that sometimes suggest violence and trauma, evoking the enigmatic and complex nature of words and images. Throughout her practice, Simpson has continued to draw on photography and representation, expanding to various media including film, video, painting, drawing, and sculpture.

“The experience of making the work – what it takes to make it and the way that it comes to me – is more important than anything else.”

What lens do we look through?

How are notions of identity, race and gender constructed? This overarching question runs through Simpson’s entire practice. In exploring this theme, she offers a rich commentary on the implications of meaning and representation throughout history.

The title of the exhibition draws attention to the ambiguous nature of perception – how does what we see compare to what we think we see? Our perspective on the past is invariably limited and narrow: only a small fragment of history is recorded in archives, museums and media reportage, and ‘truth’ is subjective and can thus be discriminatory or exclusionary. Human memory is furthermore unreliable – it has been proven to be unstable and manipulable. Simpson refrains from offering clear-cut answers, instead leaving her work open to multiple interpretations and associations. How does prejudice affect perception, and how has the history of representation played a role?

Alternative readings of history form a recurring theme in Simpson’s art, illustrated by her use of found images from old *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. Founded in 1945 and 1951, these publications

focused on African American lifestyle, culture, and politics, chronicling issues otherwise unrepresented by mainstream media coverage such as *Life* magazine. Simpson discovered her grandmother’s collection of original copies in 2010, and began using the magazines as source material for her collages. In interviews, Simpson has said that collage offers a way for her subconscious “to play.” When divorced from their original context, the old advertising images begin to look almost surreal, lending themselves to altogether new interpretations as Simpson explores the historical mechanisms of representation.

In her latest collages, Simpson combines two surprising elements: pin-up images from the 1950s and 1970s and astronomical charts from the 19th and early 20th centuries. By excising the bodies of the models and replacing the figures with windows into the expansive cosmos, Simpson’s figures transcend physicality.

Ice metaphors

Haze presents Simpson’s most recent output, with a focus on her monumental Ice Series, which features mixed media paintings based on text fragments and photographs mined from archives. The Serlachius show marks the most





Lorna Simpson, *Mirror Mirror* (part of work), 2023. Collage on paper, 5 parts. © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

comprehensive exhibition to date of her paintings spanning the period between 2017 and 2021.

Her blue-dominated paintings occupy a borderland somewhere between the abstract and the figurative, evoking melting glaciers in a manner that might be interpreted as a commentary on climate change. For Simpson, however, ice primarily symbolizes the increasingly gloomy, inhospitable atmosphere of American society. If we think of the old saying 'only the tip of the iceberg', Simpson's glaciers invite us to contemplate what has been excluded from the picture and relegated to invisibility.

Ice has been a recurring motif in Simpson's art of recent years, symbolizing both change and permanence. The word itself invokes the theme of equality.

A person can be 'frozen out' of society and keeping someone 'on ice' can refer to imprisonment. In the United States, prison inmates are ineligible to vote, which means that detaining a person is essentially an act denying them the opportunity to have their voice heard in society.

The paintings in the exhibition revel in deep shades of blue, a colour that carries various symbolic meanings in many cultures. Blue is also associated with

blues music or a depressed mood. In 2019, Simpson stated that the blue palette of her paintings illustrates nightfall and the darkening ethos of the Trump era in the United States.

The exhibition is a collaboration with The Kunstmuseum Thun, Switzerland. Its curator is Laura Kuurne, Head of Collections and Exhibitions at the Serlachius Museums.

Influential artist

Simpson was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1960. She studied art at the School of Visual Arts in New York and completed her master's degree at the University of California San Diego in 1985.

Simpson's work has been the subject of numerous solo shows at important exhibition venues, such as at New York's Museum of Modern Art, MoMA, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Jeu De Paume in Paris, and Haus der Kunst in Munich.

She has been invited to take part in major international exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale in Italy (1990 and 2015)



and Documenta in Kassel, Germany (1987 and 2002). She was awarded the J. Paul Getty Medal in 2019.

Text: Laura Kuurne
Translation: Silja Kudel

The quotes are from a 2019 interview with Thelma Golden, Director and Chief Curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem.

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