

Raid the Icebox Now with Simone Leigh: The Chorus, October 11, 2019–December 12, 2020

The Chorus reflects artist Simone Leigh's commitment to sculpturally shaping and defining the presence and voices of women of color throughout history. A sound installation plays in each gallery the exhibition occupies. In it, artists, writers, curators, and historians read texts written by women of color: Saidiya Hartman's essay "Manual for General Housework" (2019), sculptor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet's diaries from her time in Paris (1922–1934), and new text created for this project by historian Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts. This multiplicity of voices alludes to the chorus found in ancient Greek drama. It also suggests Hartman's description of the chorus as "all the unnamed young women of the city trying to find a way to live and in search of beauty." The readings contemplate the experiences and torments of people of color—particularly women—engaged in manual labor willingly or under varying degrees of duress. This exploration continues with the presentation of new figurative work by Leigh and sculptures from the museum collection by Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, Janine Antoni, and Huma Bhabha in the ancient Greek and Roman galleries and a work by David Hammons in the Egyptian gallery. Together, they consider approaches artists have shared over thousands of years and question how instances of colonialism and cultural imperialism seen in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome continue to frame contemporary experiences.

The soundwork in this installation includes mature, racially charged language that directly conveys the intense personal experiences of the women of color who wrote it.

Simone Leigh lives and works in New York. Her sculptures, installations, videos, and performances address the complex realities and challenges of contemporary women of color internationally, in a manner that is both critical and analytical, heroic and celebratory. Leigh's practice is also characterized by a rigorous investment in and dynamic reconsideration of the process of making objects or staging situations, experimenting with new mediums and approaches to give the social, historical, and political themes and explorations in her work an even greater impact.

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CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Simone Leigh, American, b. 1967
108 (Face Jug Series), 2019
Salt-fired porcelain
Courtesy of the artist and Lühring Augustine, New York
TL144.2019

Here Simone Leigh adds some of the facial features of an ethnically African woman to a basic vessel form. The absence of eyes positions this figure as anonymous yet universal, prompting the viewer to consider the power of seeing—and of being seen and recognized.

The significance of being seen and recognized as a woman of color is similarly suggested in Leigh's sound installation, which features readings of texts by sculptor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, writer Saidiya Hartman, and historian Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts. Leigh's placement of new works within this gallery encourages comparisons with objects from centuries past, including the head of a woman (left), the pitcher (olpe) on the pedestal behind, and especially the wine jug (oinchoe) in the form of a woman's head, found in the case to the right.

Simone Leigh, American, b. 1967
Chorus, 2019
Multi-channel sound installation with readings by Leigh, artist Deborah Anzinger, curator Rashida Bumbray, artist and educator Nontsikelelo Mutiti, and historian Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts
Courtesy of the artist and Lühring Augustine, New York TL145.2019

Played in the four galleries hosting Leigh's project, this sound installation features readings of texts by three women of color: from Saidiya Hartman's essay "Manual for General Housework" (2019), sculptor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet's diaries from her time in Paris (1922–1934), and text written specifically for *Chorus* by historian Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts. This installation, and Leigh's selection of works by contemporary and historical artists, contemplates the experience and torments of manual labor, especially as performed by women of color. This view of women's work includes efforts willingly undertaken as well as those forced through extreme duress, placing the legacies of colonialism and cultural imperialism as seen in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome into a more critical light and context.

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David Hammons, American, b. 1943
Rock Head, 2000
Stone, hair, metal stand
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2001.31.1

The hair in this work by David Hammons was gathered from the floors of African American barbershops. By presenting *Rock Head* in this gallery as part of her installation *The Chorus*, artist Simone Leigh encourages comparisons to other portraits nearby—for example, the head of a man (2289–2246 BCE) in the case to the right—and underscores its timeless simplicity despite its humble materials. By positioning Hammons's work with her sound installation, Simone Leigh heightens its evocation of African American historical perseverance through the words of sculptor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, writer Saidiya Hartman, and historian Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts.



Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, American, 1890-1960, (RISD 1918)
Silence, 1920s
Marble
Gift of Miss Ellen D. Sharpe 30.092

Cutting stone. How I love it working alone, I feel so much in contact with myself.
—Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, unpublished diary, December 22, 1925

This bust may be a self-portrait of the artist. Prophet carved it during a productive yet trying period she spent in Paris. Her diary excerpts chronicling this time form part of Simone Leigh's accompanying sound installation. One of RISD's first students of color, Prophet was underrecognized for years. More recently her work has grown in stature and visibility, increasingly becoming a touchstone for artists working today.

Silence characterizes Prophet's translation of abstract ideas or states of being into human form and reveals the tension between aesthetic restraint and emotional affect found in her work. Leigh's placement of *Silence* accentuates the marble's whiteness in representing a person of color, especially considering that the ancient Roman busts were originally painted in a range of skin colors.



RISD MUSEUM

Janine Antoni, Bahamian, b.1964, (RISD MFA 1989, Sculpture)
Chocolate Gnaw (maquette), 1992
Chocolate cube gnawed by the artist (on marble base)
Gift of Aaron Richard Golub 2016.53

This work functioned as Antoni's preparation for *Gnaw* (1992), a larger project that features 600-pound cubes of chocolate and lard the artist gnawed on, using the residue of that process to create chocolate boxes and lipstick tubes. Her exploration of feminine identity through aspects of corporeality, performance, and consumption resonates with artist of color Nancy Elizabeth Prophet's descriptions of hunger, as recited in Simone Leigh's sound installation, and plays off associations of chocolate as a romantic gift given by men to women. *Chocolate Gnaw (maquette)* joins Leigh's *108 (Face Jug Series)* (also in this gallery) in encouraging us to reconsider the design and use of the Greek objects surrounding them.



Huma Bhabha, American and Pakistani, b. Pakistan, b. 1962, (RISD BFA 1985, Printmaking)
Ghost, 2008
Wood, Styrofoam, metal, acrylic, wire
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2019.55

This abstracted construction of the ghost described in the title bears a formal resemblance to the Roman statuary surrounding it. Bhabha's manipulation of found and raw materials reflects her belief that "when you make something with the hand, people respond with the heart." Her emphasis on the manual labor of making art evokes related meditations by Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, heard in Simone Leigh's sound installation. Bhabha's gesture of giving material form to a spirit-entity and the abject appearance of that figure also resonates with the recorded texts of Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts and Saidiya Hartman.

