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Noah Becker's

**WHITEHOT
MAGAZINE**

of contemporary art

"The Best Art In The World"

Simone Leigh Wins Hugo Boss Prize: Searing Vision



By JAN CASTRO, May 2019

Panoptica, 2019. Terracotta pipe and chimney, steel, and raffia. 125 x 120 inches (317.5 x 304.8 cm). Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

[The Hugo Boss Prize 2018: Simon Leigh](#), *Loophole of Retreat* at Guggenheim

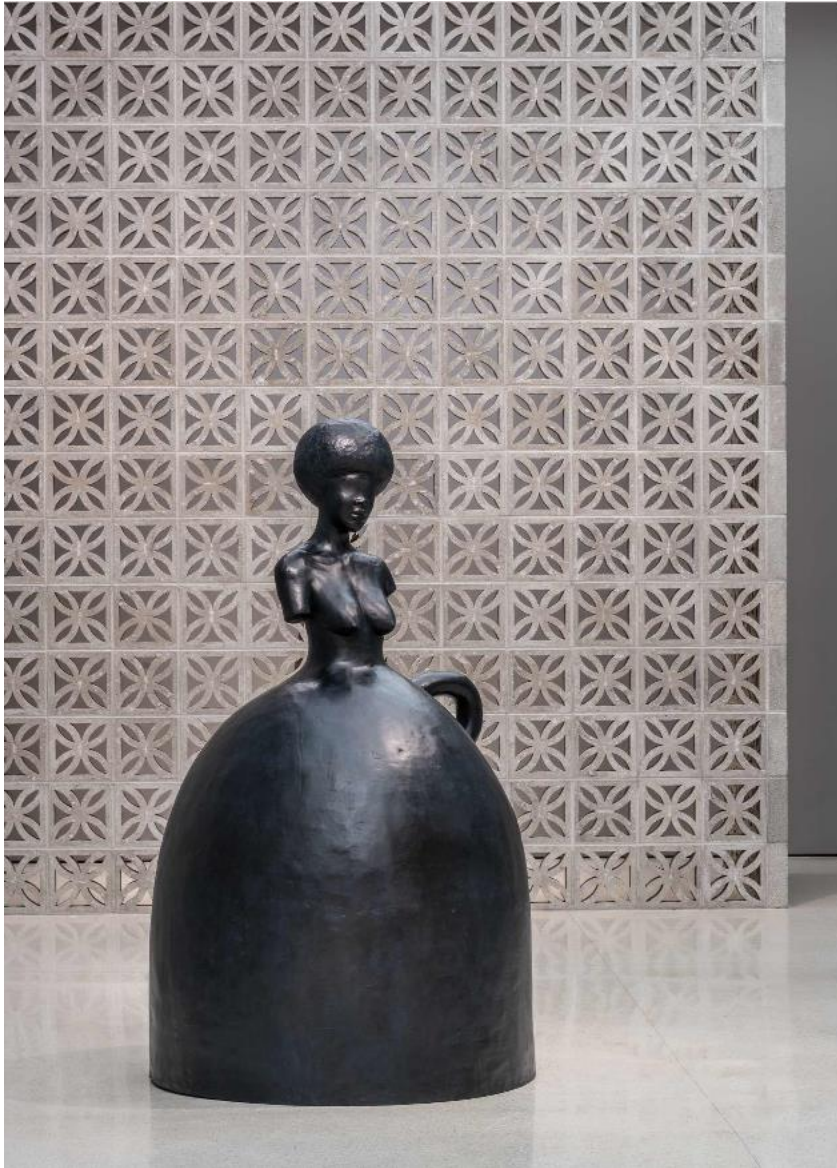
April 19 - October 27, 2019 Curated by Katherine Brinson, Susan Thompson, Amara Antilla

Simone Leigh's arc of ascendancy as an artist is based on a searing vision that uses a black female's perspective to re-frame art history, contemporary art, and life. Her Hugo Boss Prize exhibit at The Guggenheim Museum is *Loophole of Retreat*. This title refers to an 1861 journal in which Harriet Jacobs recounts hiding in a crawl space in her grandmother's home for seven years to escape from slavery. She became an abolitionist. The title *Loophole of Retreat* becomes an extended metaphor for the ways black women have survived unbearable conditions and nurtured their own imaginations and talents.



Loophole of Retreat, 2019. Concrete blocks and sound, 6 min., 44 sec. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Sound work produced in collaboration with Moor Mother

This title *Loophole of Retreat* is also used for a 2019 work in the exhibition --over 150 years following Jacobs' ordeal: a black revolutionary pregnant female jailed in 1978 in Philadelphia gives birth in her cell as others gather around her and make noises; in this way, she can spend time with her newborn. This narrative is symbolized by a stoneware vessel on a plinth behind concrete blocks that both create a boundary and let in light. Inside the high concrete wall, the vessel could be a womb or a heart; it seems like a body part that has three rows of braids or suture stitches up its sides. A soundtrack from Moor Mother seems like noise but listen....



Jug, 2019. Bronze, edition 1/3. 84 1/2 x 49 5/8 x 48 3/4 inches (214.6 x 126 x 123.8 cm).
Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

The vessel is central to the artist's vision. The most complex of the four sculptures here is *Jug*, 2019. This bronze 214.6 cm. tall has a bell skirt that alludes to that of the royal princess, a child, in the foreground of *Las Meninas*, 1656. Velazquez's curious painting changed the history of art because the artist self-consciously put himself into the center of the painting. His outward gaze at the king and queen, whose portrait he was, presumably, painting, also draws in and focuses on viewers. Leigh's bell (or jug)- shaped skirt has a handle on one hip. The upper body's bare breasts are a woman's, not a girl's. Jugs are a colloquial and sometimes pejorative term for breasts. The figure has no arms, a possible reference to ancient times when an incoming regime would damage the outgoing regime's art, and also a suggestion that the figure is handicapped by circumstances or cannot help herself. The figure's large 70's-style Afro hairstyle alerts viewers to a time when Black Power and embracing Afrocentric themes was on the rise. *Jug* is both a

unified form and a mashup of centuries of art that is obliquely representative of black women's stories and lives. A vessel is also a void and a container; Leigh suggests that much of value that perhaps has been hidden from sight lies within.

The face without eyes is the opposite of the artist's direct gaze in *Las Meninas*. The gaze, and, in particular, women's gazes in art, are often considered to show their self-consciousness. So what could "eyeless" mean? At a conference titled *Loophole of Retreat* on April 27th, Lorraine O'Grady speculated that this signified not the Sophoclean blinding of Oedipus by external forces nor the wisdom of the blind prophet Tiresius but "self-blinding in order to see oneself more clearly" or "to pay deep attention to the interior: the question is: how brave and how honest will we be when we look inside?" O'Grady also struck a Platonic note when she spoke about "what one is willing to see and bring back to the community." After doing some research, I found that there are some blind black women who are important historically, including Harriet Tubman, born in 1820, and known for leading many blacks to freedom through what was called the Underground Railroad. As a teen, Tubman was injured by a racist throwing a hard object at her head, and this left her partially blind. The ways that people and women can be "blind" are literal and symbolic. However, hiding one's eyes and using one's eyes to look inward is a new direction in art. I speculate that all of the above metaphors for blindness may apply. *Jug* manages to span the history of art since Velazquez and to also look ahead. A blind is also a place hunters hide behind to target their prey. This sculpture shows ways that the black woman has been hidden, yet, at the same time, this large bronze has a quiet dignity. So, like hiding in plain sight, *Jug* brings forward the universal significance of black women's lives.



Sentinel, 2019.

Bronze and raffia, edition 1/3. 78 x 65 1/2 x 40 1/2 inches (198.1 x 166.4 x 102.9 cm). Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

Another bronze, *Sentinel* 2019, shows a large black eyeless female head with a large Afro wearing a raffia broom-like shape and beside a large ridged tube shape that could be a giant pipe

or a small tubular house. The title suggests watchfulness, and the modest size of the adjacent structure suggests that it is important to protect one's home, however humble. Another sculpture, *Panoptica*, is triply a figure, a vessel, and a type of bell-shaped dwelling made from layers of raffia. The terracotta chimney pipe in the center of the roof of the dwelling could also be a torso attached to a bell-shaped skirt. *Sentinel* and *Panoptica* both seem to refer to the nexus of female protectors and modest dwellings.

In addition to the four large sculptures, Leigh has opened wide the door for black female creators and historians. Her untitled film, (M*A*S*H) is a symbolic depiction of the United Order of Tents founded by black female nurses in 1840 to both heal the wounded and to collectively provide life insurance so that each nurse was assured a good burial. Two films by Madeline Hunt-Ehrlich continue the theme of black women in history. *Spit on the Broom* is a surreal journey that includes the United Order of Tents and a couple that jumps over a broom to marry. *A Quality of Light* is the first part of a trilogy; it intermixes the story of Hunt-Ehrlich's composer grandmother's battle with dementia with archival footage and quotes from revolutionary poet Aimé Césaire. A takeaway broadsheet by Saidiya Hartman imaginatively riffs on *The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner*.

The five-hour *Loophole of Retreat* conference on April 27 celebrated Leigh's art and theories in the broader contexts of her earlier projects and projects by black feminists based in Berlin, Washington, D. C., and other locations. With black and mixed race feminists in the majority in the Guggenheim's sold-out theater, the presenters were literally speaking to each other about strategies to overcome centuries of issues that need to be addressed and how to rise. The handfuls of black men and white women and men in the audience were mostly friends of the participants with their own thriving careers. So part of this story is that participants and audience all seemed to subscribe to the notion that art can inspire and empower not just individuals but whole communities. **WM**



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