

Looking | Reading | Feeling Image | Text | Body

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“We all know a classic Lorna Simpson photograph when we see one,” art historian Kellie Jones states at the opening of her 2011 essay on conceptual photographer Lorna Simpson’s nearly three-decade career.¹ The statement, not as simple as it appears, leaves its meaning fairly open-ended. Jones follows up with an explication: “...those elegant black female figures, their backs to us, rejecting any familiarity and yet communicating with us feverishly in accompanying messages located just beyond the borders of the image.” Jones’s casual, almost too casual, opening line is supported by hard descriptive detail. What makes that opening address, the collective “we all” of it, so seductive is also what makes the statement perplexing—and false when left to stand on its own. Jones has subtly invoked an unsettling truth: “we all” come to Simpson’s work with expectations about what we will see—black female bodies, photographed from behind, with strategically placed lines of text. But what if the formula changes? What if one of the variables is substituted for another? If what makes a “classic Lorna Simpson photograph” is its familiarized exchange with the viewer—both a familiarity with Simpson’s signature photographic styles and a presumed familiarity with cultural tropes of race and gender in visual culture—what happens when that weighty exchange dramatically changes form?

¹ Kellie Jones, “(Un)Seen and Overheard: Pictures by Lorna Simpson,” in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 82.

In 1994, Simpson began screen-printing photographs onto panels of industrial felt, in a cycle of production I am calling the Felt Period. In these experiments with a new materiality, Simpson also began to change the aesthetic content: her “elegant black female figures” suddenly vanished (fig. 1). The discomfiting erasure of the figure from these photographs was commented upon at the time by critics and curators well acquainted with the artist’s previous work. In an interview with curator Thelma Golden, for example, Simpson is asked whether her transition away from the black female figure has been symptomatic of exhaustion with talking about identity—specifically race and gender—and its relationship to the body. To this query Simpson responds: “Not really... I am just trying to work through these issues without an image of a figure. My interest in the body remains.”² In this short exchange, the terms “figure” and “body” are pulled apart from one another and considered separately: the “figure” is what is missing from Simpson’s felt work. The “body” is what remains.

² Huey Copeland, “‘Bye Bye Black Girl’: Lorna Simpson’s Figurative Retreat,” *Jeu de Paume Magazine*, May 2013. First published by the College Art Association in *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 62–77.

The word “figure” has many meanings. However, within the context of photography, “figure” typically connotes both “an object noticeable only as a shape or form” and “[a] bodily shape or form, especially of a person.”³ Therefore, the “figure” can most usually be understood as a visual depiction of the “body”—a pictorial representation of the physical form of a human being. One necessitates the other, but only in one direction—for the figure to be present, the body has also had to be present at some point; however, the body does not require the figure’s presence to exist. The body can exist on its own, un-pictured. The figure holds significance solely in its flattened and hollow visual depiction. The body, on the other hand, has a phenomenological life—it extends beyond the picture plane and into the physical, experiential world. For Simpson, who until this point in her career had been so easily defined through her depictions of the black female figure, the choice to remove the figure, but simultaneously to insist upon the presence of the body, allows us to privilege who exists within and outside of these marked borders of identity.

³ Merriam-Webster online, s.v. “figure,” accessed March 15, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/figure>.

Where, then, does the body exist within Simpson’s felt photographs when the figure is removed? The Felt Period shortly follows Simpson’s exchange with Golden, beginning with the 1994 series Wigs (portfolio), featuring twenty-one individual black-and-white images of store-bought wigs printed onto white felt panels (fig. 2). The use of



SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER,
THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED,
ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY.



fig. 1 Lorna Simpson, *Waterbearer*, 1986; Silver gelatin print, vinyl lettering; 59 x 80 x 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.

fig. 2 Lorna Simpson, *Wigs (portfolio)*, 1994; Twenty-one felt image panels, fourteen felt text panels; Overall: 72 x 162 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

felt also signals a dualism: “felt” refers to the photographs’ material surface and, at the same time, invokes the memory of touch or strong emotion. Bodies feel and bodies are felt. Yet, there are no depicted bodies, no human figures, in *Wigs (portfolio)*, only objects meant to stand in metonymically for those figures, meant to invoke the body. *Wigs* are devices that represent a lack—in this case, a lack of hair—and are being used by Simpson as a part to represent the whole.

Next to skin, hair is the biggest signifier of racial difference. Together both hair and skin constitute an “epidermalization” of race.⁴ This terminology was originally put forth by Martiniquais psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which Fanon recounts being held within the frightened and frightening gaze of a white child on a bus. The term was then redeployed by queer theorist Judith Butler, as a tool of analysis in the 1991 acquittal of the Los Angeles Police Department officers charged with the brutal public assault, caught on video, of black motorist Rodney King. Butler, using Fanon’s theory to develop the concept of a racial epidermal schema, argued that it was an inherently racist mode of perception that allowed for white jurors to read King’s prone and battered body as violent and threatening.⁵ It is this “epidermal” mode of perception, perpetuated by the visualization of race through the black body, that by the early 1990s had stultified the reception of Simpson’s work, and it is this history in which her black female figures remain caught, making her decision to remove them from the picture plane necessary. Critic Okwui Enwezor describes this predicament in Simpson’s work as “double displacement:”⁶

The first displacement connects to the question of what it is to be black and female. This frame represents the universal and the particular in her line of enquiry. The second displacement is on the narrower subject of what it means to be African American and American simultaneously.⁷

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008). Originally published as *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952).

⁵ Judith Butler, “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia,” in *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15–22.

⁶ Okwui Enwezor, “Repetition and Differentiation: Iconography in Lorna Simpson’s Racial Sublime,” in *Lorna Simpson* (New York: Abrams and American Federation of Arts, 2006), 114.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The figure/body dichotomy established in the exchange with Golden thus exposes a dualism that runs throughout Simpson’s work. The simultaneity of presence and absence is both an affirmation and a negation of identity: black is and black ain’t.⁸ In *Wigs*

(portfolio), the store-bought wigs both invoke a cultural fascination with black hair and show us empty, body-less objects that highlight artifice and construction as much as the sublimation of a feminine ideal predicated on whiteness. A second felt series, 9 Props, uses vases blown in black glass as figures—that is, as literal props or stand-ins for unpictured bodies (fig. 3).⁹

⁸ I am borrowing this phrase from late filmmaker Marlon Riggs's 1994 documentary *Black Is...Black Ain't*, which explores the complexities of race, gender, and sexuality and the inability to subsume these identities under one monolithic definition or mode of expression.

⁹ Limiting the scope of analysis, the Felt Period refers to the years between 1994 and 1998 when the production of works on felt was most significant: *Wigs (portfolio)* (1994), *Wigs II* (1994–2006), *9 Props* (1995), *Public Sex* (1995–98), *Still* (1997).

Later in 1995, however, the Felt Period takes an even more unexpected turn. With the unveiling of the series Public Sex, the figure—the visual depiction of the body—has completely absconded. The individually subtitled photo-text works combine imagery of public and semi-public spaces with cryptic, mostly narrative text panels, all printed on felt and arranged in a grid, which as a whole is roughly life-size. The title heightens the mystery of the empty scenic locations and the subtle eroticism of the text, driving home the “felt” pun with a dark humor. Felt is a dense material made from “natural wool fibre [sic]...stimulated by friction and lubricated by moisture...”¹⁰ The process by which the material is created coyly parallels the act of sex.

¹⁰ “The History of Felt,” Torb & Reiner Online Shop, accessed December 2015, <http://www.torbandreiner.com/felt-history-general>.

Compared to Wigs (portfolio) and 9 Props, the absenting of the figure in Public Sex feels more totalizing and extreme. For instance, in The Park (1995), we are presented with a massive, God’s-eye view of Central Park at night, with the lights of the city framed behind it (fig. 4). Even if one wanted to make out individual figures moving in the dark, it becomes impossible—the vantage point is too high, the ink that renders the trees too dark, the proximity one is allowed to an artwork in a gallery too distant. In this tableau that Simpson has designed, our collective desire to see, and to see clearly, is used against us, as the work invites pondering but denies our gaze anything concrete to latch onto. Denying the figure increases our desire to see it again.¹¹ These voyeuristic—and scopophilic—desires are then mirrored in the narrative of the disembodied subjects in The Park’s paired text panels:

Panel 1: Just unpacked a new shiny silver telescope. And we are up high enough for a really good view of all the buildings and the park. The living room window seems to be the best

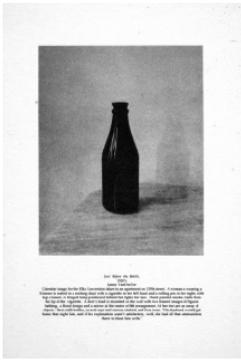


fig. 3 Lorna Simpson, *Just before the battle*, from the series *9 Props*, 1995; 3M heat-transferred felt panel in a linen clam-shell box: 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

fig. 4 Lorna Simpson, *The Park*, from the series *Public Sex*, installation view, 1995; Six felt image panels, two felt text panels: Overall: 68 x 67 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

spot for it. On the sidewalk below a man watches figures from across the path (fig. 5).

Panel 2: It is early evening, the lone sociologist walks through the park, to observe private acts in the men's public bathrooms. These facilities are men's and women's rooms back to back. He focuses on the layout of the men's room—right to left: basin, urinal, urinal, urinal, stall, stall. He decides to adopt the role of voyeur and look out in order to go unnoticed and noticed at the same time. His research takes several years. He names his subjects A, B, C, X, Y, and O, records their activities for now, and their license plates when applicable for later (fig. 6).

[11](#) Jones, "(Un)Seen and Overheard," 86.

Though the actions of the subject in each panel—their shameless gazing—remain consistent, the tone and the gravity of their actions change dramatically. Acts that could be described as curious in the first panel would almost definitely be described as invasive and potentially predatory in the second. The invocation of science and research brings to mind how photography has a legacy not only in fine-art making but also in practices closely associated with racially biased modes of quantification, including eugenics and criminalization.

While The Park explores looking, The Bed (1995) considers the counter-perspective of those being looked at. In this diptych, Simpson presents two images of empty beds with white sheets (fig. 6). It is not immediately clear whether these are separate beds in separate rooms or whether they are before-and-after shots of the same bed, the same room. The text panel is equivocal:

Panel: It is late, decided to have a quick nightcap at the hotel having checked in earlier that morning. Hotel security is curious and knocks on the door to inquire as to what's going on, given our surroundings we suspect that maybe we have broken the "too many dark people in the room" code. More privacy is attained depending on what floor you are on, if you are in the penthouse suite you could be pretty much assured of your privacy, if you were on the 6th or 10th floor there would be a knock on the door (fig. 7).

The text shifts tonally, as in the panels for The Park, between the sensual and the ominous. Simpson suggests a relationship between surveillance and the missing figures in the image—but were they asked to leave, or were they forced to? The unidentified

Just approached a new shiny silver telescope. And we were high enough for a really good view of all the buildings and the park. The dining room window opens to the deck and back. On the sidewalk below a man watches figures leave across the path.

It is early evening, the lone rectangular table through the park, to observe private acts in the men's public bathroom. These facilities are men's and women's rooms back to back. He focuses on the layout of the men's room, slight left, back to center, white, central wall, wall. He decides to adopt the role of voyeur and look out in order to get unobscured and unobscured of the same view. He researches the use of a man. He names his subjects A, B, C, D, and E, records their activities for time, and their diverse plans when applicable for later.



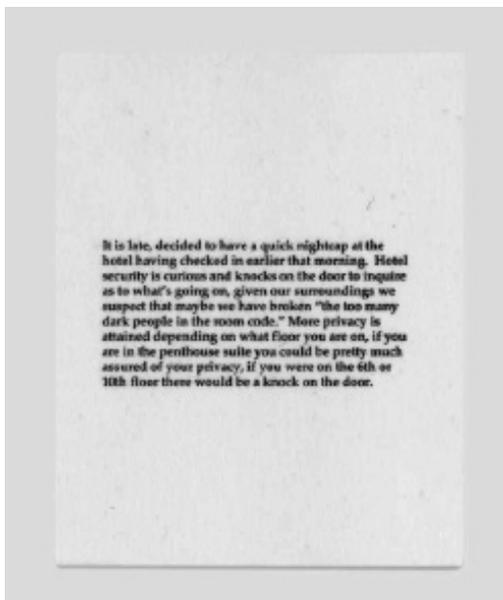


fig. 5 Lorna Simpson, *The Park*, from the series *Public Sex*, detail of text panel.

fig. 6 Lorna Simpson, *The Bed*, from the series *Public Sex*, installation view, 1995; Four felt image panels, one faelt text panel; Overall: 36 x 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

fig. 7 Lorna Simpson, *The Bed*, from the series *Public Sex*, detail of text panel.

subjects in this diptych are described as “dark people,” and it is this that has apparently prompted the hotel security’s response. The implication being that it is the darkness of the “dark people,” their visible skin color, that has caused the threat. Butler asserts in her essay that the racial epidermal schema “pervades white perception” and “interpret[s] in advance ‘visual evidence.’”¹² In the text’s description, the visual evidence is the couple’s dark skin, suggesting that the black body cannot evade its skin color and, therefore, is forever caught in the racial epidermal paradigm. However, as viewers, we never see the couple, never see their skin, and are never afforded this visual evidence. The black figure—the visualized image of the black body—may be confined within a visual schema of difference, but from our vantage point, the black figure does not exist.

¹² Butler, “Endangered/Endangering,” 16.

In Simpson’s felt works, the body is detached from its visual effigy, the figure. But what does this detachment allow Simpson to do? Jones’s essay cites a common misconception that Simpson’s work is specific to the experiences of black womanhood. Because Simpson chooses to work with the black female figure, Jones adds that these works—which implicitly explore the history of racialized violence, trauma, and the aftermath of American slavery—are also often believed to be reflective of the artist’s own experiences as a black woman. The black female figure in Simpson’s photographs has been uncomfortably coupled with Simpson’s black female body.

Art depicting black women can only possibly be about that actual experience; somehow there seems to be no room for wider or “universal” interpretations, no place for “others” to imagine themselves in that picture, in that skin...¹³

¹³ Jones, “(Un)Seen and Overheard,” 104.

But this is ultimately what The Bed asks us to do—to imagine ourselves in that picture, in that skin. We are asked to feel the white heat of a phantasmic racial gaze as we experience the implied body through our own, suspending, for a moment, the culturally prescriptive contextual information the figure contains in its very outline.

Public Sex problematizes the notion that “we all know a classic Lorna Simpson photograph when we see one.” These works question who all constitutes “we all,” what “knowing” really means, and what marks Lorna Simpson as a photographer and an artist in the midst of this culturally defining moment of the 1990s, the end of twentieth-century art. Removing the figure from the picture plane opens the possibility of broadening the kinds of bodies, the kinds of lived experiences “we all” imagine when we engage with Simpson’s work.