

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
July 1990

PROJECTS: LORNA SIMPSON

July 6 - August 26, 1990

An installation by New York artist Lorna Simpson is the summer PROJECTS exhibition, opening at The Museum of Modern Art on July 6, 1990. Organized by Jennifer Wells, curatorial assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture, PROJECTS: LORNA SIMPSON consists of photographic works incorporating texts dealing with questions of identity, race, and gender. The exhibition continues through August 26.

Beginning in the early 1980s, Simpson addressed social issues in a series of photographs taken on the streets in New York, Africa, and Europe. Frustrated with the assumptions that viewers made while looking at these photographs in a gallery setting, she abandoned her journalistic approach in favor of staged photographs made in the studio. Her recent photographic images and texts question the way in which women--primarily black women--are classified and analyzed by a larger society. The images simultaneously reveal just how ingrained racist and sexual stereotypes are in contemporary visual imagery and language.

In the works in this installation, Simpson has photographed "portraits" of her models, focusing on such details as a back or an arm, and has paired these isolated images with loaded words and phrases printed on plastic plaques. Although she reveals the color of the models' skin or the texture of their hair, for example, she never completely exposes their faces. By purposely concealing the individual's identity or expression, the artist actively encourages viewers to become aware of how the act of looking creates meaning.

In the brochure accompanying the exhibition, Simpson is quoted as stating, "The viewer wants so much to see a face, to read 'the look in the

eyes,' or the expression on the mouth. I want viewers to realize that that is one of the mechanisms which they use to read a photograph. If they think 'How am I supposed to read this, if I don't see the face?' they may realize that they are making a cultural reading that has been learned over the years, and then perhaps see that it is not a given."

The repeated depiction of hair in her photographs demonstrates its cultural significance to the artist. Simpson's childhood haircuts were an annual ritual during which her hair was braided, then cut; the braid was saved in a plastic bag to keep it from those who could bring bad luck. In *I.D.* (1990), for example, she juxtaposes a model's back with a knot of hair. The image of hair is paired with the word "identify," suggesting that the dominant mode of labeling is by such a physical trait as hair texture, even though no other information is given about sex, race, or age.

Born in 1960 in Brooklyn, New York, Simpson received a B.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts, New York, and an M.F.A. from the University of California, San Diego. Her work has been featured in recent individual exhibitions at the University Art Museum, UC Berkeley (1990), the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford (1989), the Josh Baer Gallery, New York (1989), and the Mercer Union, Toronto (1988). The artist lives and works in Brooklyn.

The PROJECTS series is made possible by generous grants from The Bohen Foundation and the Lannan Foundation with additional support from The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art. Future exhibitions in the series include PROJECTS: KIKI SMITH (November 9, 1990 - January 2, 1991) and PROJECTS: MICHAEL CRAIG-MARTIN (March 8 - April 23, 1998).

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For further information or photographic materials, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.