

Brooklyn Museum

Teacher Resource Packet

Lorna Simpson: Gathered

January 28–August 21, 2011



Lorna Simpson: *Gathered*



About the Artist

Born in 1960 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, Lorna Simpson attended the High School of Art and Design and the School of Visual Arts in New York and received her MFA from the University of California, San Diego. Simpson studied documentary photography in college but became disenchanted with what she considered to be the role of the viewer and photographer as voyeur (someone who spies on people engaged in intimate behaviors). To complicate this role, she began to produce photographs that hide or obscure the faces of her subjects, changing the power balance between the viewer and the subject of the photograph.

Her first critical recognition came in the mid-1980s, for a series of large-scale artworks that combined photographs and text to challenge views of gender, race, identity, culture, history, and memory. Simpson often draws her subject matter from African American history and issues of identity. She uses the human figure to examine her ideas of objective “truth” and the ways in which gender and culture shape our interactions, relationships, and experiences.

About the Exhibition

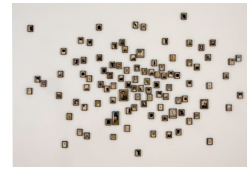
Simpson's work in *Lorna Simpson: Gathered* focuses on the themes of identity and the cultural weight of history. The exhibition explores the artist's ongoing interest in using photographs from African American history to call into question the perspective of photographs as objective truth. For example, in the series *'57/'09*, Simpson pairs found images with her own photographs to create new contexts and meaning. This ambitious project includes hundreds of photographs of African Americans from the late 1950s that Simpson collected from eBay. Incorporating them into her work, she challenges the assumption that archival documents are an objective reflection of history and reveals and explores their subjective nature.

About the Artwork

The artwork *Please remind me of who I am* (2009) juxtaposes found photo-booth photographs with small drawings that use “washes” (diluted ink) to create abstract forms. The abstract nature of the drawings suggests a parallel to the unknown histories of the photographs that have been “washed away.” Most of the photographs date from the 1940s and 1950s, when Jim Crow laws (state and local laws enacted in the United States between 1876 and 1965) mandated racial segregation in public facilities, with a supposedly “separate but equal” status for Black Americans. During this time, photography became an important tool for African Americans such as Gordon Parks (1912–2006) and Roy DeCarava (1919–2009), whose photo essays documented race and racism in the United States.

Photo booths grew in popularity during the 1940s, offering soldiers and their loved ones a quick and easy means of producing four pocket-sized photos for the price of a quarter. The booths provided a modern version of more traditional studio portrait photography by removing the photographer and empowering the individual to choose his or her own pose. Photo booths were also an important tool for the African American population during the Jim Crow era, when a large number of Black Americans migrated from the South to northern industrial cities in hope of finding better work and a less hostile environment. The photographs were often sent to family back home to show that the sitter was faring well.

Please remind me of who I am references this history and addresses Simpson’s interest in the construction of “truth.” By presenting these photographs as a group, she creates a new context for them. By using found photographs, she highlights the unknown identity of each individual and questions why so many of these images became separated from their original owners. She is interested in exploring how certain histories or memories can be lost, found again, and presented in a new way to tell a new story.



Description of the Artwork

Please remind me of who I am juxtaposes fifty black-and-white found photographs with small ink drawings.

The photographs and drawings are interspersed and arranged in a cloudlike cluster. The images are hung very close to one another in the center of the grouping and become less dense toward the edges. Although the individual photographs and drawings are small, ranging in size from approximately 2 by 2 inches to 5 by 7 inches, the entire composition spreads out to cover the surrounding wall area. In each photograph a seated figure, shown from the waist up and posed before a curtain, faces the viewer. Certain individuals appear to be smiling, while others have relaxed expressions. All wear clothing typical of proper attire in the 1940s and 1950s, such as hats and coats. The composition of the images, combined with the subjects’ appearance and clothing, suggests that the photographs were taken in a public photo booth.

Questions for Viewing

Look closely at this artwork. What do you notice?

Select one photograph to study. What clues can you find about the time period when it was taken? Consider the figure’s pose, clothing, and hairstyle. How is this figure similar to or different from those in other photos nearby?

The balance of power between subject and viewer is often an important issue in Simpson’s work. This piece is titled *Please remind me of who I am*. In your opinion, are these the words of the subject, viewer, or artist? What does this title suggest?

Simpson recycled photographs she found on eBay in order to make this artwork. Why might she have chosen to do this? How would this artwork change if she used photographs of people she knew or recognized?

What other visual clues can you find about the context and history of these photographs? For example, some of them look as if they were cropped. Was someone cut out of the image? How are photographs taken as mementos treated by their owners? How does viewing them as art make you think about them differently?

If you were going to create an artwork made from found objects, what would you choose to include? Why?

Activities

Drawing

Sylvia Wolf, the photography curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, thinks that Simpson “never tells the whole story, or she tells an open-ended story and forces us to complete it in a way that draws attention to our own belief systems.”¹ Choose one photograph from *Please remind me of who I am* such as the one below. Use a blank sheet of paper and draw a square in the center with plenty of room around it. Sketch the person in the photograph inside this square. Create a story for this person by drawing his or her surroundings on the rest of the page. Where is this scene taking place? Are other people present? What are they doing?



Literature

Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *The Invisible Man*, is narrated in the first person by an anonymous African American man and follows the story of his life. Pick one of the found photographs of anonymous individuals from *Please remind me of who I am* and imagine you are an author like Ellison, writing a first-person account of a life story (in other words, use “I,” “me,” and “my”). Who are you? What was your childhood like? Why are you taking this photograph and what will you do with it? Remember, you are writing historical fiction, so it may help to do some research about African American history from the 1940s and 1950s to make your story believable.

1. Quoted in Barbara Pollack, “Turning Down the Stereotypes,” *ARTNews* (September 2002): 139.

Resources

American Federation of Arts. *Lorna Simpson: A Resource for Educators*. http://www.afaweb.org/education/documents/Simpson_resource_packet-final.pdf

This web resource provides images of Simpson's previous work and provides questions and activities for the classroom.

“Artist Talk: Lorna Simpson.” <http://channel.walkerart.org/play/artist-talk-lorna-simpson/>

This 2010 webcast from the Walker Art Center features Simpson talking about her work and career. A discussion of works in the exhibition begins at 4:53.

Cotter, Holland. “Exploring Identity as a Problematic Condition.” *New York Times*, March 2, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/02/arts/design/02lorn.html>

This webpage includes the *New York Times* review of Simpson's 2007 retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Jones, Kelly. *Lorna Simpson (Contemporary Artists)*. London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2002.

Kellie Jones (New York-based art historian and curator who specializes in art of the African Diaspora, Latin American art, and contemporary art) places Simpson's work in the context of African American history and culture as well as that of recent self-portraiture in photography and performance. The book also includes a focus on the artist's film work with contributions by curators Thelma Golden and Chrissie Iles.

Lorna Simpson. Contributions by Okwui Enwezor, Helaine Posner, Hilton Als, Isaac Julien, Thelma Golden, and Shamim M. Momin. New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the American Federation of Arts, 2006. Created to accompany a retrospective of Simpson's work, this book includes essays by curator and critic Okwui Enwezor, *New Yorker* writer Hilton Als, and a conversation with the artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien, and curator Thelma Golden. It includes 126 reproductions of Simpson's art.

Lorna Simpson Studio. <http://lsimpsonstudio.com/>

Lorna Simpson's website features images of the artist's work, both past and present, images of exhibitions in which her work has been included, and an official biography.

Resources, continued

Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House, 2010.

Isabel Wilkerson uses the stories of a sharecropper's wife, a citrus farmer, a surgeon, and others to paint a larger picture of the "Great Migration," the exodus of six million African Americans from the Jim Crow South to the North and Midwest. The author weaves together history, sociology, and narrative into a comprehensive and engaging book.

Wright, Beryl J., and Saidiya V. Hartman. *Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer*. New York: Universe Publishing; Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992.

This catalogue from an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago presents an overview of the traditional ways of representing and seeing the black female body and a discussion of the ways in which Simpson critiques and resists this tradition.

This packet was written by Maya Valladares, Senior Museum Educator, with assistance from Alexa Fairchild, School Programs Manager, and Sarah Giovanniello, Research Assistant, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.

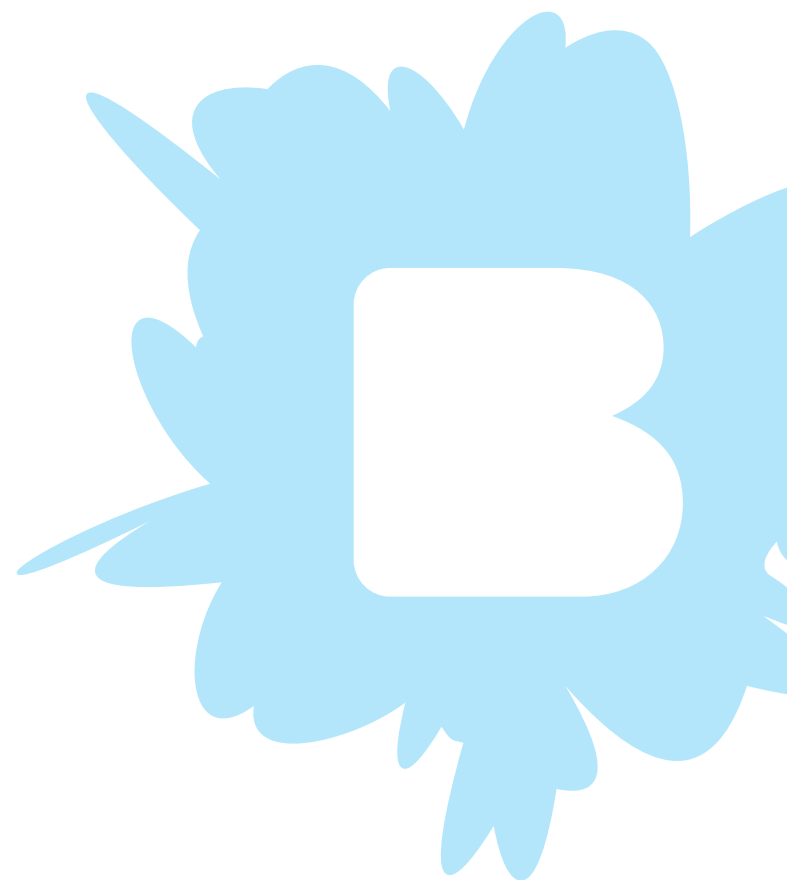
Lorna Simpson: Gathered is organized by Catherine Morris, Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum.

This exhibition is made possible by the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation.

Generous support was also provided by the Rennie Collection, Vancouver, and Bob and Nancy Magoon.

Page 2: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders (American, b. 1952). *Lorna Simpson*, 2007. Epson inkjet photograph. Collection of the artist, courtesy of Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery. © Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

Cover, pages 4, 7–9 (details); pages 3, 6 (overall): Lorna Simpson (American, b. 1960). *Please remind me of who I am*, 2009. 50 found photo-booth portraits and 50 ink drawings on paper, installation dimensions variable. © Lorna Simpson, 2009. Collection of Isabelle and Charles Berkovic, Brussels



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