

# THE BELIEVER

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## **MOULTING**

By Jane Ursula Harris

March 31, 2015



Simone Leigh, *Moulting*, 2015, installation view  
Courtesy of Jack Tilton Gallery

### **Jane Harris on Sculptor and Installation Artist Simone Leigh**

“I’m thinking about embodiment and architecture, dress and dwelling, containment and interiority,” Simone Leigh tells me as we discuss her current exhibition, *Moulting*, at Jack Tilton Gallery. The stately Upper East Side townhouse seems the perfect space to foreground her ideas, particularly given the issues of race, gender, class, and taste so much of the work engenders.

“Throughout my career I’ve considered the black female bod yas a repository of lived experience,” she continues, “and this show is part of that ongoing meditation.” While its original title, *We the Black Woman*, spoke directly to that intent, Leigh’s desire to avoid narrow, essentialist reading sled to the more evocative *Moulting*.

It's a title that particularly animates the central sculpture in the show, *Covered III* (2015), a 9-foot high dome-like structure, made of steel, and topped with remnants of mason jar glass.

The minimalist work is based on a restaurant in Natchez, Mississippi, called Mammy's Cupboard, the skirts of which patrons enter into to eat, and is a smaller version of a similar work created for *Gone South*, a recent two-person exhibition at Atlanta's Contemporary Art Center (2014). As with so much of Leigh's work, its abstract, reductive form is imbued with layers of subtext, and a conflation of references, that conceptually function like a skeuomorph, alluding both to adaptation and sublimation.

It was through a 1941 black-and-white photograph by the iconic modernist Edward Weston that Leigh first encountered the restaurant (opened only the year before, and astonishingly still in existence), an aesthetic document of American vernacular architecture with no apparent critique. Holding out a tray above her skirt-cum-restaurant, the Mammy figure entreats diners to come inside, and in characteristic Mammy servitude appears to welcome the violation. Beyond the perverse nostalgia associated with a form meant to signify the inhabitation of a black woman's body, what struck Leigh most is what she describes as "the strange sexuality of what was typically an asexual archetype."



Simone Leigh, *Covered III*, 2015 (detail)  
Steel, mason jar glass, and hemp rope  
Courtesy of Jack Tilton Gallery

Perhaps that's why Leigh's sculpture lays bare its armature, and sheds the gaily painted ball gown along with all allusions to the novelty architecture: so that, once inside, the viewer becomes its embodiment—at once spectacle and spectator. The work having shed the gaily, painted ball gown, or any such allusion to the novelty architecture. The destiny to change and adapt implied by the exhibition's title is again evoked in the jewel-like cluster of blue tinted mason jar glass that glints above. Calling our gaze upward, it's a classic representation of Leigh's signature ability to transform everyday materials—especially containers and vessels—into iconic abstraction.

In addition to antebellum associations, other sources recalled in the work are the wide colonial-era pannier skirts seen in Velazquez's famous *Las Meninas* painting of 1658, as well as the contemporary appropriation of Victorian-style petticoat skirts adapted from missionaries by the Herero women of Namibia, who syncretically exaggerate and subvert its form. And that's not all: yet another source of inspiration is the ancient Mousgoum clay houses of Cameroon, which bear the same dome-like shape. Seen in a 1931 catalogue for the Cameroonian Pavilion of the Paris Exhibition, these imagined recreations were ironically and erroneously presented as ethnographic documents of the primitive. In fact their simple structures belie quite sophisticated architectural principles. Playing with this irony, Leigh's installation, *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (2009) first adapted the Mousgoum form for a recreation of the central cage in the 1968 film *Planet of the Apes*.

Of course, one doesn't see these references in the work; rather, they are conceptually implied: felt and suggested like palimpsests—the skeuomorph at work again. Most of the works in the exhibition reveal similar confluences of history and culture, modernism and primitivism, architecture and the body. There's a smaller sister-like dome sculpture, *Cowrie (Pannier)* (2015) shown alongside *Covered III*, that doesn't allow entry. Made of the same steel armature, it's topped by one of Leigh's signature ceramic watermelon-cowrie hybrids, a sculpture scaled to the size of the former, and visually rendered to resemble the latter. The black dots that pattern its sand-colored surface are achieved, the artist shares, through an experimental process where glaze applied with a pastry knife is rock salt fired beyond prescribed temperatures. Like the hoop skirt-cum-hut on which it sits, the watermelon-cowrie shape-shifts between equally resonant associations, moulting and melding in true skeuomorphic form.



Simone Leigh, *Cowrie (Sage)*, 2015  
terra cotta, porcelain, sage, string, wire, steel  
Courtesy of Jack Tilton Gallery

The use of abstraction to manifest this slippery process of facture and meaning is evoked more pointedly in the faceless “face jug” Leigh creates that sits protectively nearby. These colloquial vessels, often associated with racist caricature, feature bulging eyes and toothsome grimaces which are now believed to have been originally created by slaves. Having been denied tombstones, the slaves fashioned them as grave markers to ward off evil spirits. With characteristic finesse, Leigh’s adaption forgoes the gruesome specter of such figuration, leaving instead on her unglazed version just a ghostly pattern of circular thumb-prints.

It’s no surprise that Leigh describes her sculptural practice to me not just in skeuomorphic terms but as a kind of auto-ethnography, “where art and vernacular forms serve as points of departure in installations that combine found objects and those made by hand.” Having once been on a PhD track to become a cultural anthropologist, I understand auto-ethnography as a type of cultural analysis that begins in subjectivity. It’s a form of self-study that connects personal experience to cultural experience, evoking the old feminist maxim, “the personal is political,” as well as post-colonial critiques devised to undermine notions of objectivity (particularly in representations of the “other”).

I ask Leigh if this is what she means, or if she's doing the inverse, taking cultural tropes freighted with history and embedding in them some aspect of her own subjectivity—that "lived experience" of the black female body she speaks of. She replies tellingly: "I have always thought of auto-ethnography in the first sense. However, I agree with you that I often work in the other way you describe—'taking cultural tropes (or objects and materials) freighted with history.' I would say that I embed them in my own autobiography. More and more I realize that my work is basically autobiographical."

Much of this autobiography is, of course, cultural, as it is for all of us. Leigh is the child of West Indian immigrants, and some of her material references, like the Wedgwood blue slips that have covered her trademark ceramic plantain forms, or the brightly colored plastic buckets that have housed them, conjure this background. But it's her experiences in the world as well that shape her work.

For example, she first encountered that catalog on Cameroonian Mousgoum houses while living in a yurt in her early 20s. Years later, this led her to a book by Steven Nelson, *From Cameroon to Paris: Mousgoum Architecture In and Out of Africa* (2007), which implied that Josephine Baker's body was replaced by these "huts" as a new iconography of the black female body. By 1931, over 1/3 of the human population was under French imperial rule such that the conflation of Baker with sub-Saharan Africa became literalized in her title, "Queen of the Colonies". The association took hold of the artist's imagination.

That might be why connecting the room of hoop skirt forms to one featuring a table of refined black ceramic busts, each crowned by variously styled Afro-puffs rendered in delicate Wedgwood blue roses, is a Baker-esque banana skirt sculpture.



Simone Leigh, *Skirt*, 2015  
colored porcelain, gold leaf, steel, wire  
Courtesy of Jack Tilton Gallery

Hanging just out of reach, the black glazed and gold leaf porcelain “fruit” of *Skirt* dangles above us: forbidden, elusive, unattainable, and free. It’s reminiscent of a seminal moment in Baker’s career, when—incensed by American censors who found her topless costume too risqué—she created a dagger-like version of her legendary banana skirt, with menacing pointy forms now jutting from her busts as well as her waist and buttocks.

A skeuomorph of the dancer’s own design, and a cutting response to yet another attempt to control and define her exotic otherness (the performance of which Baker always retained power over), it’s a story of adaptation, and self-determination—themes that are essential to Leigh’s remarkably resonant work. For in the end, *Moulturing* is, like all skeuomorphs, about a destiny to change, the power of mutability, and the momentum embodied therein. Where does Leigh see her enchanting abstraction going next? “After years of thinking of the skeuomorph in relation to objects, I’m ready to extend these ideas to performance.”