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Simone Leigh
Exploring the Power of the Sculpted Female Figure
David Kordansky Gallery
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by Jody Zellen



Following solo exhibitions at both the Hammer Museum (2016-17), the Guggenheim Museum (2019) and a large-scale public art project currently installed on New York's High Line, Brooklyn-based, multi-media artist Simone Leigh is now showing selected new works at David Kordansky Gallery. This exhibition features figurative sculptures in what has come to be known as her signature style, using both bronze and ceramic (glazed stoneware), in addition to works incorporating raffia (a fiber made from leaves from a palm tree native to tropical Africa and Madagascar).

The raffia pieces are the most striking and compelling – *Cupboard XI (Titi)* (all works 2020) – is a human-scaled sculpture of an eyeless nude female figure who rises from an oversized (93 inches wide) raffia hoop-skirt. The glazed stoneware bust has a stoic and commanding presence. The work invites viewing from all sides as one can walk around the sculpture which is dramatically presented alone in the back gallery. *Cupboard X* fills an entire corner of the larger space, rising fifteen feet off the gallery floor and referencing a skirt, as well as a daunting, impenetrable grass hut. The piece is both referential – the use of raffia gives the artworks a folksy appeal while simultaneously locating them in the realm of African art – and a work of minimalism as it is a large geometric form made from non-art materials.

The other works in Leigh's weighty yet sparse installation include the elegant bronze *Sentinel IV*, a towering work that recalls African figurative sculptures, as well as *Martinique*, a white-glazed stoneware sculpture depicting an armless as well as headless woman (similar to *Cupboard XI (Titi)* in the back gallery). Leigh's renditions of the black body vary from elongated abstracted forms to more conventional representations as in the mustard yellow *Figure (1352-Y)*. Although Leigh's figures are not specific, they suggest the ways black women have been depicted over time.

Leigh trained as a ceramicist and does not deny the importance of craft in her sculptures. The quality of her glazes and textured surfaces are exquisite. Her works are, as she says, about "*black female subjectivity*," and as such draw from discussions about feminism and race-relations, yet they are also examples of exemplary craft. Leigh takes materials, form and

location into consideration to make works that explore not only the relationship of the body to space, but the power of the sculpted female figure.

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