

**EXHIBITION ADVISORY****Exhibition:** *Simone Leigh***Dates:** May 26, 2024–January 20, 2025**Location:** LACMA, Resnick Pavilion  
CAAM, Gallery 1 & Theater Gallery

(Image captions on page 6)

(Los Angeles, CA—May 7, 2024) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the California African American Museum (CAAM) present *Simone Leigh*, the first comprehensive survey of this celebrated artist's richly layered practice and her most expansive exhibition on the West Coast to date. Presented across both institutions, the exhibition explores dozens of key works from throughout Leigh's career, including pieces from the artist's landmark 2022 Venice Biennale project. Marking the final stop in *Simone Leigh's* national tour, this joint presentation offers visitors the chance to experience a range of works not shown at previous venues, including the artist's lesser-known chandelier works and a new sculpture titled *Untitled (after June Jordan)* (2024).

Over the past two decades, Leigh has situated questions of Black femme, or female-identified, subjectivity at the center of contemporary art discourse. Her sculpture, video, installation, and social practice explore ideas of race, beauty, and community in visual and material culture. Informed by a rigorous attention to a swath of historical periods, geographies, and artistic traditions of Africa and the African diaspora, Leigh often combines the female body with domestic vessels or architectural elements to point to unacknowledged acts of labor and care, particularly among and for Black women. While Leigh—one of the most respected artists of her generation—has exhibited in prominent museums throughout the United States, this survey invites audiences to experience the breadth of her work for the first time in Los Angeles.

*Simone Leigh* is organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and Eva Respini, Deputy Director and Director of Curatorial Programs, Vancouver Art Gallery (former Barbara Lee Chief Curator, ICA/Boston), with Anni A. Pullagura, Assistant Curator, ICA/Boston. LACMA and CAAM's co-presentation is curated by Rita Gonzalez, Terri and Michael Smooke Curator and Department Head, Contemporary Art, LACMA, Naima J. Keith, Vice President, Education and Public Programs, LACMA, and Taylor Renee Aldridge, Visual Arts Curator, CAAM.

Gonzalez and Keith noted, "The exhibition's two-decade scope allows unprecedented insight into how Leigh elevates and monumentalizes moments that have been obscured, as she continually pushes the boundaries of her materials with new methods and larger scales."

"Because Leigh's work is in conversation with Black feminist thought through a global lens—past, present, and future—this show allows our regionally specific institutions to focus on diaspora in ways that challenge concepts of local and global, and that connect seemingly disparate contexts of African (American) history throughout the world," Aldridge added.

"We are thrilled to bring this historic exhibition to Los Angeles in collaboration with our colleagues at CAAM," said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. "Simone Leigh is such an important voice in contemporary art, and our collaboration with CAAM is a powerful way to bring her first major exhibition on the West Coast to the widest audience possible."

Cameron Shaw, CAAM Executive Director, said, "In addition to broadening the audience engagement for this significant exhibition, the collaboration between LACMA and CAAM offers a rich opportunity to consider Leigh's work within our distinct institutional contexts and histories, underscoring the dynamic and nuanced layers in the artist's practice around how perspectives on Black femme identities are shaped and by whom."

### **Exhibition Organization and Highlights**

Divided across two venues, the exhibition will present the range of Leigh's intersectional practice. CAAM's chapter will emphasize Leigh's innovative cinematic collaborations while LACMA's will spotlight large-scale sculptural works. Both venues will present pieces featured in the 2022 Venice Biennale.

#### *trophallaxis*, 2008–17

For two decades, Leigh has been creating large-scale chandelier sculptures. *Trophallaxis* refers to a biological exchange from one organism to another. With this nomenclature, Leigh casts breast-like forms from watermelons. Each bulbous form is suspended from the ceiling and attached with antennae. There are no identical shapes

because some of them have cracked gold plated areolae, boot-prints, lattices, and irregularities. This work showcases the change and continuity in Leigh's chandelier works and breast forms that appear on her figural sculpture throughout her career. (*On view at LACMA.*)

*Breakdown, 2011*

For the film *Breakdown*, Leigh and Liz Magic Laser mined "female hysteria" scenes from soap operas, movies, and reality TV shows. The mezzo-soprano opera singer Alicia Hall Moran was invited to sing the scripts using historical African American song styles. The final film project indexes an improvisational series of breakdowns that centers and encourages emotional release for those occupying a Black femme embodiment. (*On view at CAAM.*)

*my dreams, my works must wait till after hell, 2011*

*My dreams, my works must wait till after hell* is a collaborative work between Leigh and Chitra Ganesh, under their duo moniker, Girl. In the 14-minute-long film, an original score by composer Kaoru Watanabe plays as the viewer is presented with the back of a Black femme figure, while the subject's head is submerged in gravel. The piece holds a passive tension, as the subject's inhalation and exhalation are the only movements taking place throughout the entire film, while the stones appear to consume their head. The title references the Gwendolyn Brooks poem "my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell," and suggests certain kinds of agonies and near endings that an artist encounters. (*On view at CAAM.*)

*Kool-Aid, 2011/2023*

*Kool-Aid* comprises multiple blown-glass, breast-like vessels filled with salt and illuminated by colored light. *Kool-Aid* references the manifesto used by the collective AfriCOBRA, which was born in Chicago out of the 1960s Black Arts Movement. An acronym for African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, AfriCOBRA was founded to establish a Black aesthetic. The group's poetic manifesto centered political ideologies along with visual elements, such as mimesis, repetition, symmetry, and, most significantly, color, and used these devices to advance Black nationalist ideologies of that era. As their manifesto states: "We want things to shine to have the rich luster of a just-washed 'Fro' . . . We try to create images that appeal to the senses—not to the intellect . . . Coolade colors for coolade images for the super real people." *Kool-Aid* is a celebration of the values established by AfriCOBRA, which emphasized the lyrical use of color, paired with utopic creeds around Black collectivity and artmaking. (*On view at CAAM.*)

*Jug, 2019*

*Jug* combines forms associated with vessels, architecture, and the body. The artist once described this approach through the term "skeuomorph," an object in which aspects of a previous or original form remain in the new interpretation. Here, a large-

scale jug composes the bell skirt, while a woman's torso stands in for the vessel's mouth. This composite form carries a sense of strength and permanence, appearing, in the artist's words, "as something solid and enduring." With her figurative sculptures, Leigh's use of abstraction allows her to explore states of being, rather than representative portraits. (*On view at LACMA.*)

#### *Cupboard, 2022*

*Cupboard*, a towering bell-shaped form covered in raffia, invokes both vernacular architecture and women's dress. As references for these domelike forms, Leigh has pointed to the 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition, which established the hut within a colonial iconography. Effectively reenacting the colonialist project while it was still ongoing, France mounted the exposition to display the cultures and peoples of the lands then under colonial control. In *Cupboard*, Leigh brings these varied histories to the surface in a form that recalls gathering places or dwellings, topped here by a cowrie shell, another of the artist's recurring motifs. (*On view at CAAM.*)

#### *Last Garment, 2022*

*Last Garment* references C. H. Graves's *Mammy's Last Garment*, a collectible stereoscopic photograph of a Jamaican laundress made in the late 19th century. Stereographs like these were made for a growing Anglophone Caribbean tourism industry, encouraging white travelers to visit the colonized British West Indies. Stereotypical images of this type, often created without the full consent of the people depicted, illustrate the subjects' lack of sovereignty over their own representation. Leigh counters this voyeuristic impulse through a monumental interpretation, centering the anonymous woman in a large reflecting pool, and using over 800 individual rosettes for the figure's hair. (*On view at LACMA.*)

### **Publication**

The exhibition is accompanied by a major scholarly catalogue, co-published by the ICA/Boston and DelMonico Books, which illustrates exhibition highlights as well as installation views from Leigh's Venice presentation. Serving as the first comprehensive publication on Leigh's work, the catalogue features newly commissioned essays by over 15 leading scholars, historians, and writers; writing by Simone Leigh; and an introduction by Eva Respini.

### **About Simone Leigh**

Over the last 20 years Simone Leigh has created a multi-faceted body of work incorporating sculpture, video, and installation, all informed by her ongoing exploration of Black female-identified subjectivity. Leigh describes her work as auto-ethnographic, and her salt-glazed ceramic and bronze sculptures often employ forms traditionally associated with African art. Leigh first began exhibiting her work in the early 2000s and she has had one-person museum exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum, New York; The Tate Gallery, London; and the Studio Museum in Harlem,

among other institutions. In 2014 she presented *The Free People's Medical Clinic* in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, a project commissioned by Creative Time. Her work was included in the 2012 and 2019 Biennial exhibitions at The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and she is the first artist to be commissioned for the High Line Plinth; her monumental sculpture *Brick House* was unveiled in April 2019. In 2022, Leigh represented the United States at the 59th Venice Biennale with her exhibition *Simone Leigh: Sovereignty*. Her work was also included in the Biennale's central exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams*, for which she was awarded the Golden Lion for Best Participant. Her work is in the collections of The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; The Art Institute of Chicago; and the ICA/Boston, among others.

**Credit:** This exhibition is organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston.

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The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston gratefully acknowledges its philanthropic partners for this exhibition. Please click [here](#) to learn more.

**About LACMA:** Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of nearly 152,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

**Location:** 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90036. [lacma.org](http://lacma.org)

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**About CAAM:** CAAM explores the art, history, and culture of African Americans, with an emphasis on California and the West. Chartered by the State of California in 1977, the Museum began formal operations in 1981 and is a state-supported agency and a Smithsonian Affiliate. In addition to presenting exhibitions and public programs, CAAM houses a permanent collection of more than 5,000 works of art, artifacts, and historical documents, and a publicly accessible research library. Admission to CAAM is free.

**Location:** 600 State Dr, Los Angeles, CA 90037. [caamuseum.org](http://caamuseum.org)

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Image captions: (Left) Simone Leigh, *Last Garment* (detail), 2022, installation view, *Simone Leigh*, the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2023, courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, photo by Timothy Schenck, © Simone Leigh; (center) Liz Magic Laser and Simone Leigh, in collaboration with Alicia Hall Moran, *Breakdown*, 2011, courtesy the artists and Matthew Marks Gallery, photo by Timothy Schenck; (right) Simone Leigh, *Cupboard* (detail), 2022, courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, photo by Timothy Schenck, © Simone Leigh