

Lorna Simpson Heads



Lorna Simpson, *Blue Love*, 2020, and *Redhead*, 2018, both single-channel digital animation video, 8 seconds on loop. © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

For *Street Views*, projected on the museum's facade from dusk to midnight, CAM presents two digital animations, *Blue Love* (2020) and *Redhead* (2018) by the pioneering conceptual artist Lorna Simpson. Simpson came to prominence in the 1980s as part of a generation of artists who utilized conceptual approaches in photography to challenge the credibility and assumed neutrality of images and language. Her powerful yet ambiguous works raise questions about the nature of representation, identity, gender, race, memory, and history.

Her most iconic works from the 1980s depict African American people staged in a neutral setting, photographed from behind or in fragments—isolated from time or specificity of place. Simpson accompanies these images with her own texts. For example in *Guarded Conditions* (1989), we see a female figure six times, each version depicted in three parts via framed photographs of the head, torso, and legs. Simpson's subtle misalignment of the photographs implies a

fragmentation of the body, perhaps speaking to the violence against Black women's bodies. The title suggests that the woman must protect herself and others from the threats named below the images on plaques: "sex attacks" and "skin attacks."

Since 2010, Simpson has extended these concerns around the nature of representation into several series of collages: *Ebony* (2010–present), *Jet* (2012–2018), *Riunite & Ice* (2014–2018), and most recently, *Earth & Sky* (2016–present) and *Older Queen* (2016–2020). In each of them, the artist sources black-and-white photographs from vintage *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines



Audio Tour

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embellishing the figures with shimmering, flame-like, watercolor hairdos. Simpson renders the heads as closeups, placing attention solely on the subjects' faces and hair, drawing them into greater focus through extreme cropping. "The notion of fragmentation," Simpson explains, "especially of the body, is prevalent in our culture, and it's reflected in my works. We're fragmented not only in terms of how society regulates our bodies but in the way we think about ourselves." *Blue Love* and *Redhead* are an extension of Simpson's *Ebony* collage series in video form. The animated watercolors swirl and eddy, almost as if the paint is still wet, inviting you to decipher this morphing rorschach test.

For the collages, Simpson sources 1950–70s *Ebony* and *Jet* magazine issues from flea markets and vintage shops. Magazines were a popular form of mass media in the mid-century, found in most American homes. *Ebony* and *Jet* focused on subjects of lifestyle, culture, and politics from an African American perspective, a point of view underrepresented, misrepresented, or ignored in "mainstream" media. These publications are significant markers of a turbulent era in the US, which included the Civil Rights movement, the assassination of political and social leaders, and the war in Vietnam. By excerpting unknown figures from these history-laden documents and reanimating them through video, the artist threads together American life then and now. Simpson's images prompt us to rethink the ways we interpret and create meaning as we engage with subjects of different races and genders.

Lorna Simpson (b. Brooklyn) received her BFA in photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York and her MFA from the University of California, San Diego. Her work has been widely collected and exhibited by such institutions as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Studio Museum in Harlem; Aspen Art Museum, Colorado; and Haus der Kunst, Munich, among many others. Her work is in the permanent collections of many prominent museums including the Art Institute of Chicago; Brooklyn Museum of Art; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Lorna Simpson: Heads is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Chief Curator.

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Saturday, February 12, noon



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