

LEARNING NOTES:

Lorna Simpson



Lorna Simpson. Photo: Grace Ahlbom

About Lorna Simpson

Lorna Simpson is a pioneering contemporary American artist who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York NY, where she was born. She came to prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s with her groundbreaking approach to conceptual photography. Simpson studied art on the West Coast of the US in the mid-1980s, becoming part of a generation of artists who utilized conceptual approaches to undermine the credibility and apparent neutrality of language and images.

In 1990, she achieved significant institutional recognition as the first African American woman to have her work shown at the Venice Biennale, Italy, and in the same year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York NY displayed a solo exhibition of her work. For over three decades, her multidisciplinary practice has investigated the nature of representation, identity, gender, race and history. Her layered work deploys metaphor, metonymy and formal prowess to offer a potent response to American life today.



Lorna Simpson, Nightfall, 2026 © Lorna Simpson. Photo: James Wang

What does her work look like and how does she make her work?

Conceptual photography

In her early iconic works, Simpson photographed African American figures in a neutral studio space, viewed only from behind or in fragments, deliberately untethered to a specific place or time. She created striking juxtapositions by accompanying these staged images with her own fragmented text, making what is unseen and left unsaid as important as what is disclosed.

Painting and silkscreen

Her painting practice includes massive, monochromatic works utilizing an iridescent palette of silvery greys and saturated blacks, as well as large-scale works inspired by geological textbooks. She regularly fuses painterly techniques with silkscreen printing, layering ink and acrylic on canvas to create complex surfaces. In larger works such as 'Nightfall' (2026), she pours and layers deep blue pigment to create a soft, glowing effect, demonstrating her skilled control of the flowing medium.

Collage and photomontage

A signature method in her work involves repurposing and reconfiguring found images. In works such as 'Third Person' (2023) and 'Z' (2023), several versions of the same face are discernible. The selection and placement of found images from vintage magazines are juxtaposed with the spontaneous nature of ink layered on top, creating uncanny, dreamlike portraits.



Lorna Simpson, *Previous & Ongoing*, 2026 © Lorna Simpson. Photo: James Wang

Sculpture

Simpson expands her themes into three-dimensional works using a range of materials, including glass sculptures that resemble glistening blocks of ice. She also creates text-based wall sculptures, using individually mounted letters that cast subtle shadows across the gallery walls.

Film and video

Moving beyond static images, Simpson has expanded her formal practice over the past 30 years to incorporate film and video, allowing her to further immerse viewers in layers of historical and psychological paradoxes.



Lorna Simpson, *Constellation*, 2026 © Lorna Simpson. Photo: James Wang

What are the main themes in Lorna Simpson's work?

The instability of language and images

Simpson challenges the perceived neutrality of text and photography. By presenting fragmented stories and isolated figures, her work invites viewers to find their own meaning in images that seem simple at first but reveal deeper layers of mystery.

Identity, race and gender archetypes

A central tenet of her work is the critical investigation of representation, particularly concerning African American identity. Simpson often reuses images from hair and beauty advertisements to reveal how everyday advertising reinforces stereotypes. She layers and combines fragments of faces until they merge into new female portraits, highlighted with bright pink or orange pigment. Their direct gaze confronts the viewer, asserting strength, presence and visibility.



Lorna Simpson, Yesterday/Today, 2026 © Lorna Simpson. Photo: James Wang



Lorna Simpson, Tiger with star spots, 2025 © Lorna Simpson. Photo: James Wang

The duality of presence and obscurity

In works such as 'As far as possible' (2023) and 'NYC Story' (2023), faces become simultaneously present and partially obscured. This approach explores the contrast between outward appearance and inner identity. By combining different faces into a single image, Simpson encourages viewers to reflect on how identity is shaped by both the individual and the way they are seen by others.

Memory, history and archives

Simpson explores the close connection between photography and memory. Using found photo booth portraits, discarded Associated Press photographs, and family archives, she brings together images from the past and present. In works such as 'Night Fall' (2023), she places these figures in new, dreamlike settings that encourage viewers to see them in a different way.

The intersection of beauty, violence and trauma

Much of Simpson's work explores the lasting effects of systemic trauma. Her paintings bring together images of natural phenomena, such as meteorites, and objects associated with violence, including fired bullets. By arranging these forms into compositions that resemble beautiful constellations, she highlights how beauty can sometimes conceal danger.

Creative uncertainty

A key part of Simpson's artistic approach is her refusal to settle on fixed meanings or familiar ways of working. She embraces uncertainty as a creative force.

'I need to be uncertain. It makes me more curious and pushes the boundaries of what quote-unquote makes sense. And I've just noticed when [it does start making sense], you've got to stop. Do something else.'—Lorna Simpson

Questions for discussion

- Simpson often hides information by showing figures from behind, combining different faces, or removing words from historical texts. How does having to fill in the missing pieces change the way you experience her work?
- Simpson has said that old advertisements reflect the politics, values and ideas of their time. What do you think today's advertising and social media will reveal about our society to people looking back in the future?
- Simpson believes that uncertainty is an important part of making art. She has said that when her work starts to make complete sense, it's time to try something new. Can uncertainty or discomfort help you learn, solve problems, or be more creative? Why or why not?
- In works such as 'As far as possible' (2023), Simpson explores the difference between how people appear on the outside and how they feel on the inside. How do the versions of ourselves that we present in everyday life or on social media compare with who we really are?

Glossary

Appropriation

The reuse of existing images or cultural materials to question, challenge, or create new interpretations.

Archetypes and stereotypes

Familiar images or ideas that represent common roles or beliefs. Artists often examine how stereotypes influence perceptions of identity and culture.

Collage and photomontage

Techniques that combine different photographs, found images and materials to create new, layered compositions.

Conceptual photography

Photography that explores an idea or theme rather than simply recording reality. Artists often use staging, text, or unusual combinations of images to create meaning.

Found images and archives

Existing photographs or historical records reused by artists to explore memory, history and changing meanings.

Fragmentation and abstraction

Breaking apart or transforming images to explore complexity, uncertainty and multiple meanings.

The gaze

The relationship between looking, being seen and power, particularly how people are represented in visual culture.

Juxtaposition and layering

Placing different images, materials or ideas together to create contrasts, connections, and deeper meanings.

Metaphor and metonymy

Using images, objects or details to suggest wider meanings. A single element can represent a larger idea, history or experience.

Representation and identity

The ways people, cultures and ideas are shown through images and media and how these representations shape our understanding of ourselves and others.

Systemic trauma

The lasting effects of social and historical inequalities on individuals and communities.

Additional information

- [Lorna Simpson Artist Page](#)
- [‘Previous & Ongoing’ Exhibition Page](#)
- [‘Earth & Sky’ Exhibition Page](#)
- [‘Special Characters’ Exhibition Page](#)
- [Ursula Magazine: ‘The Color of Sound’](#)
- [Artist Profile: Museum of Modern Art \(MoMA\)](#)