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Press Release

Lorna Simpson Unanswerable

Hauser & Wirth London

1 March – 28 April 2018

Opening: Wednesday 28 February 2018, 6 – 8 pm



Lorna Simpson's inaugural exhibition at Hauser & Wirth London, 'Unanswerable', features new and recent work across three different media: painting, photographic collage and sculpture. Simpson came to prominence in the 1980s through her pioneering approach to conceptual photography, which featured striking juxtapositions of text and staged images and raised questions about the nature of representation, identity, gender, race and history. These concerns are reflected throughout the exhibition to present the artist's expanding and increasingly multi-disciplinary practice today.

Simpson continues to develop the language of the found image as a source for her work, incorporating photographs from her collection of vintage Ebony and Jet magazines from the 1950s to the 1970s. These publications focused on subjects of lifestyle, culture and politics from an African-American perspective and are credited with chronicling black lives and issues so sorely under-represented elsewhere in the media. The material has both a personal and a wider cultural significance for Simpson who describes how the magazines, 'informed my sense of thinking about being black in America and are both a reminder of my childhood and a lens through which to see the past fifty years of history.'

Through layering and collage, Simpson's recent works reconfigure imagery of the female form and reflect the artist's ongoing exploration of, and response to, contemporary culture and American life today. An installation, entitled 'Unanswerable' (2018), is composed of over 40 individual photo collages each of which is unique and created from original source material and archive photography. A series of female protagonists are often the focal point of the images and Simpson splices these with architectural features, animals and natural elements to create scenarios that are at once poetic and arresting. In this way the artist deftly suggests compelling new narratives that emerge from the unexpected settings and contexts.

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The theme of natural elements appears as a metaphor throughout the exhibition and in new sculptural works as glistening 'ice' blocks made of glass and, in one instance, an oversized 'snowball' made of plaster on top of which a small female figure perches precariously. The combination of the absurd and the association of the expression 'to snowball', alludes to an unstoppable force that gathers momentum with the potential to slip out of control. For Simpson, ice has a significance since it recalls the expression to be 'on ice', or in prison, as well as Eldridge Cleaver's 1968 book 'Soul on Ice', written while the renowned activist was incarcerated in Folsom State Prison. Prison is where one does time and is an enforced form of isolation from wider society. And yet, Simpson remarks, 'There's something about ice that has come into the work that indicates either freezing or endurance.'

In further works, such as '5 Properties' (2018), Simpson creates an interplay between the sculptural elements, calling into question the distinction between the plinth and the whole. A bronze head rests on top of copies of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines and a block of glass 'ice'. Another stacked sculpture comprises piles of magazines glimpsed through thick glass cubes that distort the cover imagery and lend an impression of being anchored or weighed down. An additional work features bronze casts of a laundry basket from which the artist has created cages to enclose the 'ice' blocks.

In the last few years Simpson has taken up the medium painting for the first time in two decades, creating works using hazy washes of ink and acrylic over gesso. In works, such as 'Ice 4' (2017), Simpson layers the appropriated imagery and Associated Press photographs of ice, glaciers and smoke with nebulous washes of saturated ink which partially obscure the source material. The smoke plumes signal upheaval and discord

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in nature and society in reference, perhaps, to images of riots following police brutality past and present that Simpson has more explicitly illustrated in other related works. Barely discernable strips of newsprint typography allude to wider issues in society. Here, as elsewhere, the artist is sparing with colour; her disciplined palette consists of inky blacks, greys, and a startling acid blue that has only recently appeared in her oeuvre, contributing to its atmosphere of bristling movement. Deftly navigating the territory between figuration and abstraction, these paintings cut through the calculated glamour of magazine imagery with the brute force of the natural world. As the artist explains, 'Conceptually, this is in tandem with what I'm experiencing emotionally but also what I feel is going on politically: the idea of being relentlessly consumed.'

Further panel paintings in the exhibition offer a complex treatise on time, underscoring the present's umbilical relation to the past. These paintings convey a moment of stasis and depict women in tandem: one half of the canvas features a figure reclining in bed, the other a figure teetering on a window ledge or captured in the act of falling or jumping. These perilous scenes introduce a mirroring or doubling effect that is cinematic in sensibility; the eye flicks between the 'frozen' frames which, in the case of 'Montage' (2018), are spliced together and recall a film strip. Simpson uses the devices of extreme cropping and close-ups to hone in on sections of the bodies portrayed. As she explains, 'the notion of fragmentation, 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.'

About the artist

Lorna Simpson was born in Brooklyn, where she continues to live and work. She received a BFA in photography from the School of Visual Arts, New York, and an MFA in visual arts from the University of California, San Diego. Over a career that spans three decades, Simpson has participated in distinguished international exhibitions such as the Hugo Boss Prize at the Guggenheim Museum, New York NY, Documenta 8 and 11, Kassel, Germany, and the 44th and 56th Venice Biennales.

Simpson has exhibited extensively, both nationally and internationally, recent exhibitions include the Atrium Wall project, MCA 50th Anniversary, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago IL (2017); 'Lorna Simpson: Hypothetical?', Fisher Landau Center for Art, Long Island City NY (2017) and 'Focus: Lorna Simpson', at Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth TX (2016). A survey retrospective, 'Lorna Simpson' opened at the Jeu de Paume, Paris, France (2013) before travelling to Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2013); Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK (2014) and the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover MA (2014). Other key exhibitions include 'Lorna Simpson: Gathered', Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn NY (2011); 'Recollection: Lorna Simpson', Walker Art Center, Minneapolis MN (2010) and 'Lorna Simpson: Duet', The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York NY (2007). Her first mid-career survey, 'Lorna Simpson' was exhibited at Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles CA (2006); Miami Art Museum, Miami FL (2006); The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York NY (2006) and The Gibbes Museum, Charleston SC (2006).

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Ice 4, 2017
Ink and acrylic on gessoed wood panel
259.1 x 365.8 x 3.5 cm / 102 x 144 x 1 3/8 in
Photo: James Wang

Unanswerable (detail), 2018
Found photograph and collage on paper
41 framed photo collages
762 x 304.8 cm / 300 x 120 in. approx.
Photo: James Wang

Montage, 2018
Ink and acrylic on 5 gessoed fiberglass panels
170.2 x 635 x 3.5 cm / 67 x 250 x 1 3/8 in
Photo: James Wang