

JEU DE PAUME

# 105

Concorde

# Lorna Simpson

28 May – 1 September 2013





SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER,  
THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED,  
ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY.

*Waterbearer*, 1986

Courtesy the artist, Salon 94, New York, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels

The Jeu de Paume presents Lorna Simpson's first large-scale exhibition in Europe. Whether for still or moving picture productions, the American artist (born in 1960 in Brooklyn, New York) uses her camera as catalyst to question identity and gender, genres and history, race and class, fact and fiction, memory and meanings. Assumptions of photographic "truth" are challenged and qualified—indeed redirected—by the images she creates that are inseparable from the texts she writes to accompany them, or by the soundings she chooses for videos, or by her pairings of vintage photographs with newly made renderings. Works in the exhibition show the artist drawing on traditional photo techniques such as gelatin silver prints in an intimate synthesis with speakerly texts (room 1). They also show Simpson's creation of new combinations, among them serigraphs on felt with writings and images invoking *film noir* (room 2), videos based on historic photographs and her own prior still photos (room 3), constellations of recuperated photo-booth photos with her drawings isolating details from them as well as vintage photographs together with those re-staged by the artist (room 4), and a video focusing on performance as well as time itself and its reversal (room 5). The exhibition route departs from chronological order immediately after the first room to reveal turning

points in Simpson's oeuvre as well as thematic continuities and related images. The earliest pieces in the show are Simpson's performative proto-cinematic photo-texts, beginning with the 1985 *Gestures/Reenactments*, a title literally capturing the work's visual/verbal aspect while also paradigmatically descriptive of what would be her conceptual practice for the next three decades. Simpson's most recent video installation, *Chess* (2013)—itself based on her 2009 epic still photo work, 1957-2009, for which she re-enacted scenes from vintage photos—makes its premiere here in Paris.



*Momentum*, 2010

Courtesy the artist, Salon 94, New York, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels

## room 1

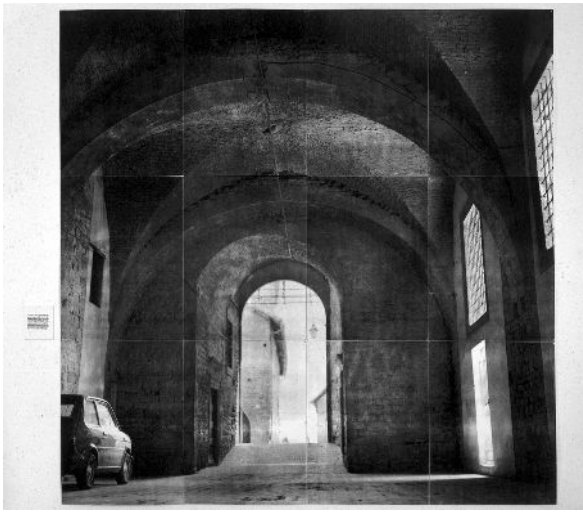
"The theme I turn to most often is memory. But beyond this subject," as Lorna Simpson has said, "the underlying thread is my relationship to text and ideas about representation." Both showing and telling, Simpson's photo-text works, which she began to create in the mid-1980s, raised many of the questions Simpson would address in different ways over the next decades. If the artist was to tell stories, whose would they be, what would they say, what would they look like, and how could a multiplicity of voices convey memory's ever-shifting terrain?

*Waterbearer* (1986) shows a woman from the back, pouring water from an elegant silvery metallic pitcher in one hand and from an inexpensive plastic jug in the other, echoing art historical renderings of women at wells or in the domestic settings of Dutch still-life paintings. As if balancing the scales of justice, this figure also symbolically offers disjunctions of means and class. In the accompanying text, Simpson explicitly addresses memory and the agency of speakers: "She saw him disappear by the river, they asked her to tell what happened, only to discount her memory." In *Stereo Styles* (1988), two ranks of five photographs show the same woman from the back yet with different hairdos while the row of comments in text panel offers an elliptical inventory of comments, such as "Daring," "Sensible," "Long and Silky," "Boyish," or "Country Fresh."

## room 2

Lorna Simpson surprised her audiences in 1994 when she began to print her photographs on felt. Inspired by its materiality after seeing an exhibition of the sculpture of Joseph Beuys in Paris, Simpson questioned whether the medium might be appropriate in a very different way for her work given the perspective afforded her by the passage of time. With the felt pieces, Simpson turned away from photography's traditional paper support, magnified the already larger-than-life-size of the images within her large photo-text pieces to create extremely large-scale multi-part works, and, most critically, absented the figure, in particular, the black woman in a white shift facing away from the camera for which she had received critical acclaim.

Ever-present, nevertheless, were her ongoing thematic concerns. The first felts offered surrogates for the body in a taxonomy of wigs (*Wigs II*, 1994-2006), all photographs Simpson had taken and which were accompanied by voicings "in and around gender" that she had also authored. These were soon followed in the mid-1990s by a series of her photographs of interior and exterior scenes accompanied by long text passages printed on separate small felts that invoked the dialogue and imagery of *film noir*; in these the figure was replaced, as Okwui Enwezor wrote, by "the rumour of the



*The Car, 1995*

Courtesy the artist, Salon 94, New York, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels

body." The texts provoked ideas of surveillance and voyeurism as well as race, class, identity, and memory and collectively were titled the "Public Sex" series. As Simpson explored new mediums, such as film and video in 1997 or found photographs in the late 1990s, she continued to work in parallel with her felt serigraphs. In this room are three related sets of works that, unlike her earlier photo-text pieces, are all based on a personal memory: performing as a youngster, age 12, in gold costume, wig, and body paint in a ballet recital at New York's Lincoln Center. Simpson re-staged such a performance for her video *Momentum* (2010), based her *Gold Headed* drawings (2013) on the video's young dancers, and used vintage souvenir postcards of the Lincoln Center for three 2011 felt works, the exterior views of *Day Time* and *Day Time (gold)* and the interior view, *Chandelier*.

### room 3

*Chess* (2013), Simpson's video installation made expressly for this exhibition, draws on images from 1957-2009, her still photograph ensemble of 2009 (on view in room 4). For both, in a departure from her earlier videos and earlier staged photographs, Simpson herself performs.

In 1957-2009, reenacting scenes from the original found vintage prints with which they are shown,

Simpson is "mirroring both the male and the female character, in dress, pose, expression, and setting." Simpson explains: "When I would mention the idea of working with mirrors [for the *Chess* video] people would often mention the famous portraits of Picasso and Picabia taken at a photo studio in New York by an anonymous photographer who placed the subject at a table in front of two mirrored panels at seventy-degree angles. The result is a five-way portrait that includes views that are not symmetrical and that offer slightly different angles: a surrealist trope of trick photography."

Though the artist first rejected the idea of working with the mirror device used in these historic portraits, which she had seen many times, Simpson decided to take it on fully and reconstruct it in her studio for her new video project after art historian and sociologist Sarah Thornton sent her "a beautiful image of an unknown man of African descent in a white straw hat, which had been in an exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art. It was a five-way portrait probably taken by the same photographer who had taken the portraits of Picasso and Picabia. I could no longer resist or dismiss this idea. I felt that it was demanding my attention."

Shot in Simpson's studio over the weekend of 8 December 2012, *Chess* is comprised of three



**Chess, 2013**

HD video installation with three projections, black and white, sound, 10'25" (loop); score and performance by Jason Moran  
 Courtesy the artist, Salon 94, New York, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels

video projections. For two of them Simpson again plays both female and male chess-players. She no longer mimics the poses and furnishings seen in the still photographs made three years before she was born. The artist now allows the two characters to grow old using a "dissolve that indicates the passage of time as both the characters age with the help of makeup and hair." The third projection shows pianist Jason Moran performing his improvised score for this project, which was based on discussions between artist and composer about "mirroring in music," especially "in the work of musician Cecil Taylor, who employs mirroring in his compositions."

**room 4**

Lorna Simpson began to collect photo-booth images on eBay, a new direction for her collecting, during the 2000s. She had long used items found during her travels or at flea markets and other vintage sources as costumes and props for her photo-text pieces and videos, beginning with the turn-of-the century white shift that, as the artist recalls, she "bought in a thrift shop in Sicily years before making *Waterbearer*" in 1986, the first of many times it was used (room 1). For each multi-part photo-booth piece, Simpson sets in bronze frames these small, inexpensive shots as well as her drawings of selected details of the

photographs. Self-styled and performed, these photographs were used for a variety of purposes by their now anonymous sitters, ranging from the sober, formal ID photos to glamorized and often theatrically playful mementos. Encompassing photo-booth shots of different sizes from the 1920s to the 1970s (a few in colour), Simpson's constellations of many images for each work offer a collective portrait of self-portraiture (a process implied in the title *Gather*, 2009) and continue her ongoing explorations of identity and memory, explicitly phrased in the title of one of them: *Please remind me of who I am* (2009).

While collecting photo booth images on eBay, Simpson found the first of the vintage photographs—a woman in a tight sweater-dress leaning on a car—that would generate *1957-2009* (2009), also on view in this room. The artist subsequently bought the entire album and re-staged in 2009 each of its some 150 photographs of an anonymous black woman and man in Los Angeles performing for their camera between June and August 1957, perhaps in their hope of gaining movie work in Hollywood or as an independent project of self invention. For *1957-2009*, Simpson reenacted both female and male roles. A selection of these vignettes formed the basis for *Chess*, 2013 (on view in room 3)."



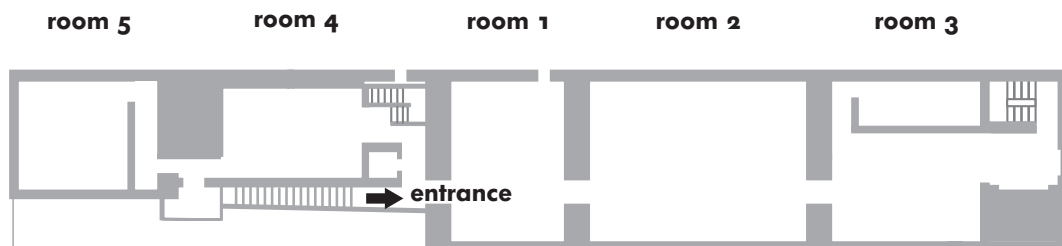
1957-2009 (details), 2009  
Rennie Collection, Vancouver

*Cloudscape*, 2004  
Courtesy the artist, Salon 94, New York, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels

## room 5

Lorna Simpson's video installation *Cloudscape* (2004) isolates one man, Simpson's friend, the artist and musician Terry Adkins, in a dark room, spotlighted as he whistles a hymn and is enveloped in fog. Focusing on the ephemerality of performance, the artist also plays with time by employing a technique afforded by her medium. Simpson runs the video forward and then also backward in a continuous loop, creating new visual and oral/aural permutations of gesture and reenactment. In a reversal of the time sequence, the image remains somewhat familiar while the tune turns into something else, a different melody.

Joan Simon  
Curator of the exhibition



## related events

### ■ panel discussions

"Lorna Simpson : mémoire et sens" ["Lorna Simpson: Memory and Meanings"], directed by **Joan Simon**, art critic and curator of the exhibition

– **session 1:** « Lorna Simpson en conversation » ["Lorna Simpson in Conversation"] with **Thelma Golden**, director and chief curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, **Joan Simon** and **Elvan Zabunyan**, contemporary art historian, art critic and associate professor at the Université Rennes 2

**Tuesday 4 June 2013, 6pm**

– **session 2:** "De la photo au film (noir)" ["From Photography to Film (*Noir*)"] with **Naomi Beckwith**, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, **Kellie Jones**, writer, curator and associate professor in the department of Art History and Archeology at Columbia University, New York, and **Guthrie Ramsey Jr.**, musician, writer, and professor of Music and African Studies at the University of Pennsylvania

**Saturday 8 June 2013, 11am**

– **session 3:** "Réalité et fiction : constructions de l'identité" ["Reality and Fiction: Constructions of Identity"] with

**Thomas J. Lax**, exhibition coordinator and associate programmer at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, **Élisabeth Lebovici**, journalist and art historian, and **Abigail Solomon-Godeau**, professor emeritus in the department of Art History and Architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara

**Saturday 8 June 2013, 2.30pm**

These panel discussions have been made possible through the generous support of the Terra Foundation for American Art.

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### ■ Young Visitors' Tuesday Tours

tour of the exhibition by **Kellie Jones**, writer, curator and associate professor in the department of Art History and Archeology at Columbia University, New York, curator and writer

**Tuesday 25 June 2013, 6pm**

### ■ publication

*Lorna Simpson*

Texts by Naomi Beckwith, Marta Gili, Thomas J. Lax, Joan Simon and Elvan Zabunyan

Available in French and English, 240 pages, 29 x 33.5 cm

Co-edition Jeu de Paume / FEP / DelMonico

Books-Prestel Publishing, €49.95

## Jeu de Paume – Concorde

### exhibitions

28 May – 1 September 2013

■ Lorna Simpson

■ Ahlam Shibli. **Phantom Home**

■ Satellite Programme 6, **An Exhibition – An Event. Suite for Exhibition(s) and Publication(s), Third Movement**

until March 2014

■ Virtual Space, **Print Error: Publishing in the Digital Age**

<http://espacevirtuel.jeudepaume.org/>

### forthcoming exhibitions

15 October 2013 – 26 January 2014

■ Erwin Blumenfeld

■ Natacha Nisic. **Echo**

■ Satellite Programme 6, **Suite for Exhibition(s) and Publication(s), Fourth Movement**

### practical information

1, Place de la Concorde, 75008 Paris

access via the Tuileries Gardens,

Rue de Rivoli entrance

[www.jeudepaume.org](http://www.jeudepaume.org)

<http://lemagazine.jeudepaume.org>

information +33 (0)1 47 03 12 50

Tuesday (late opening) 11am–9pm

Wednesday to Sunday 11am–7pm

closed Monday

■ **exhibitions:** admission: €8.50; concessions: €5.50  
*free admission to the exhibitions of the Satellite Programme*  
**Young Visitor's Tuesday:** free admission for students and visitors under 26 every last Tuesday of the month from 5pm to 9pm

■ **guided tours and workshops:** free admission on presentation of the exhibition ticket of the day  
**Tours for individual visitors with guides from the Jeu de Paume**

Wednesday and Saturday at 12.30pm

### Family Tours

Saturday at 3.30pm

by reservation on +33 (0)1 47 03 12 41/[rendezvousenfamille@jeudepaume.org](mailto:rendezvousenfamille@jeudepaume.org)

### Young Visitors' Tuesday Tours

every last Tuesday of the month at 6pm

■ **panel discussions:** €3 or free admission on presentation of the exhibition ticket of the day

## Jeu de Paume – Château de Tours

### exhibition

22 June – 20 October 2013

■ Bruno Réquillart. **Poetics of form**

### forthcoming exhibition

9 November 2013 – 1 June 2014

■ Vivian Maier

### practical information

25 Avenue André-Malraux, 37000 Tours

information +33 (0)2 47 70 88 46

Tuesday to Friday 2pm–6pm

Saturday and Sunday 2.15pm–6pm

closed Monday

free admission

**guided tours:** Saturday at 3pm

This exhibition has been co-organized by the FEP – Foundation for the Exhibition of Photography, Minneapolis, and the Jeu de Paume, in association with the Haus der Kunst, Munich



The Jeu de Paume gratefully acknowledges special support from **NEUFLIZE VIE** for this exhibition.



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In partnership with:



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Les Amis du Jeu de Paume contributes to its activities.

cover:

**Chess, 2013**

HD video installation with three projections, black and white, sound, 10'25" (loop); score and performance by Jason Moran  
Courtesy the artist, Salon 94, New York, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels

All photos: © Lorna Simpson

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