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ART & DESIGN | GALLERIES OF NEW YORK: FIVE ARTISTS

## Distinct Prisms in an Ever-Shifting Kaleidoscope

By WILLIAM GRIMES APRIL 16, 2015



Simone Leigh's ceramic and multimedia sculptures are on view at Tilton Gallery. Credit: Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

## Simone Leigh

Simone Leigh was happily taking courses in philosophy and cultural studies at Earlham College in Richmond, Ind., when she made a fatal error. She began making ceramics.

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This was not part of the plan. “I tried not to be an artist for a really long time,” she said in an interview at Tilton Gallery, [the site of her current show](#), “Moulting.” “But at a certain point I realized I was not going to stop doing it.”

The studies did not go to waste. Her sculptures, videos, installations and performances draw on her reading in feminist theory, anthropology, postcolonial theory and the politics of race and identity. “It wouldn’t be interesting to me to make the work if I only had a formal interest,” she said. “The artwork is more about the theory part than the materials.”

The materials are arresting. “Moulting” includes several of her signature shapes and forms, notably the plantains and cowrie shells that allude to her Caribbean heritage, the tiny blue porcelain rosebuds that she arranges into African hairstyles and the giant hoop-skirt armatures that invoke not only the antebellum South but also the Herero tribe of southern Africa, which adopted the style, and Cameroonian huts.

Ms. Leigh, who lives and works in Brooklyn, grew up in Chicago, with Jamaican parents. After graduating from Earlham, she held on to the idea of becoming a social worker, but an internship at the National Museum of African Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution, pulled her back into the world of ceramics, as did a stint near Charlottesville, Va., where she lived in a yurt and learned how to use a Japanese wood-fired anagama kiln. Art took over.

Her first important show, scheduled to open on Sept. 13, 2001, at the Rush Arts Gallery in Manhattan, was postponed and then ignored after the World Trade Center attack. “I had worked really hard for that show, I had just gone through a divorce, and I didn’t know how to pick up the pieces after that,” she said.

She rebounded with an exhibition at Momenta Art in Brooklyn in 2005, which included “White Teeth.” The work, five panels of sharpened porcelain teeth, honored the memory of Ota Benga, a Congolese pygmy with pointed teeth who was put on display at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition and the Bronx Zoo. She has exhibited steadily ever since.

This summer, at the Denniston Hill Art Colony in Woodridge, N.Y., she plans to reimagine the 1964 Japanese film “Woman in the Dunes” as a large-scale installation, replacing the male lead with a woman.

“It may not even work,” Ms. Leigh said. “But I’m O.K. with it when my work fails. When you’re a ceramist — .” She stopped, and burst out laughing.