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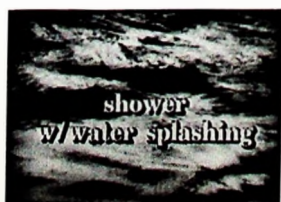
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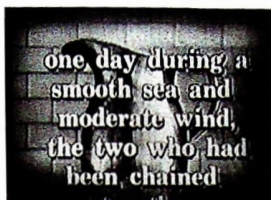
An Interview with Lorna Simpson

by Thelma Golden

Early on Lorna Simpson acknowledged that words weren't enough. Or sometimes too much. And most often inadequate to describe the complexity of feel and emotion. Her art practice, which began with documentary photography, matured in a style that joined photographs with text to explore a range of formal and ideological concerns. She harnessed a highly peripatetic voice to an acute sense of image to create an astonishing body of work.

This new installation, *Standing in the water*, signals an inspired departure. Consisting of three separate but interrelated components, the work is centered around a video and combines objects and images in unexpected forms. One enters the space around a diaphanous off-white fabric scrim. The scrim cuts the space off from the outer sculpture court space, creating a conscious divide between inside and out. On the floor, leading progressively to the video monitors imbedded in the far wall, are three 5 x 12-foot lengths of felt. The felt pieces are printed with a photograph of the ocean. Each of the three wave images becomes subtly clearer as the viewer moves from the entrance of the gallery to the video monitors. The felt pieces are punctuated with 12 x 12-inch glass squares, each etched with a photograph of a pair of shoes. The images, although the same on each square, range from light to dark, which visually insinuates varying levels of depth. The video is shown on two 2 x 4-inch monitors, one directly on top of the other, placed at eye level. The image on the top monitor is of a water pitcher, that on the bottom of moving waves. Both have text that continuously scrolls down the screen and describes water in a variety of manifestations. The video is accompanied by a soundtrack comprising a multitude of water-involved sound effects.





What follows is a small part of an extended dialogue Lorna Simpson and I have been having for a long time. We talk about everything, her work, my work, her life, my life, everything. This ongoing dialogue led to the realization of this new installation. After indicating my desire to continually challenge the gallery space and notions of site specific work in general, Lorna expressed her desire to work three dimensionally and expand her relationship to photography, text, and media. In this conversation, held a few weeks after the installation opened, we discuss the results.

TG: Could you talk about the ideas that led up to this piece and specifically about the title?

LS: "Standing in the water." ...I think that in working with water there's initially the problem of it falling into a religious connotation. I didn't want the piece to be read as a work about baptism or about walking on the water or wading in the water.

TG: Water has profoundly religious connotations; purification, redemption by water.

LS: I wanted the viewer to experience the power of being mesmerized by the water, stopped dead, standing in the water. So I don't want the title to refer to a religious experience, but really to the body and this experience of confronting water in all of its meanings.

TG: Water also has cultural meanings, but it seems as if you are working toward less rooted meanings. You've used references to water in other work. What surprised me most about this work was the image of the silver water pitcher in the video, which I immediately recognized from one of your seminal early works, *Waterbearer*, of 1986. Water was also an integral component of *5 Rooms*, the installation you created in 1991 for "Places with a Past" in Charleston, South Carolina, in collaboration with Alva Rogers.

LS: In this particular piece, for the first time, my use of water is more about its sensuality, its seductive surface. This is what drew me back to using water in my work. In earlier work the reference was more specific—*Waterbearer* is about memory and disappearance, the Charleston piece



was about the Middle Passage. Both these references appear in a way in this work, but what made me want to use water again was the stylistic change going on in my work and the desire to create a different set of references or parameters. So in my decision to avoid the figure and other elements that I consistently used in the past, I am allowing myself to approach my ideas from a variety of new perspectives.

TG: How did these interests come into the piece?

LS: The picture I used to create the water image in this piece is actually from a photograph in a book which shows the effect of varying sound waves on water and the particular wave patterns the different sound waves create in an artificial environment. Something about the way those waves look is mesmerizing.

TG: What also struck me about this work is something you have already referred to: the absence of the figure.

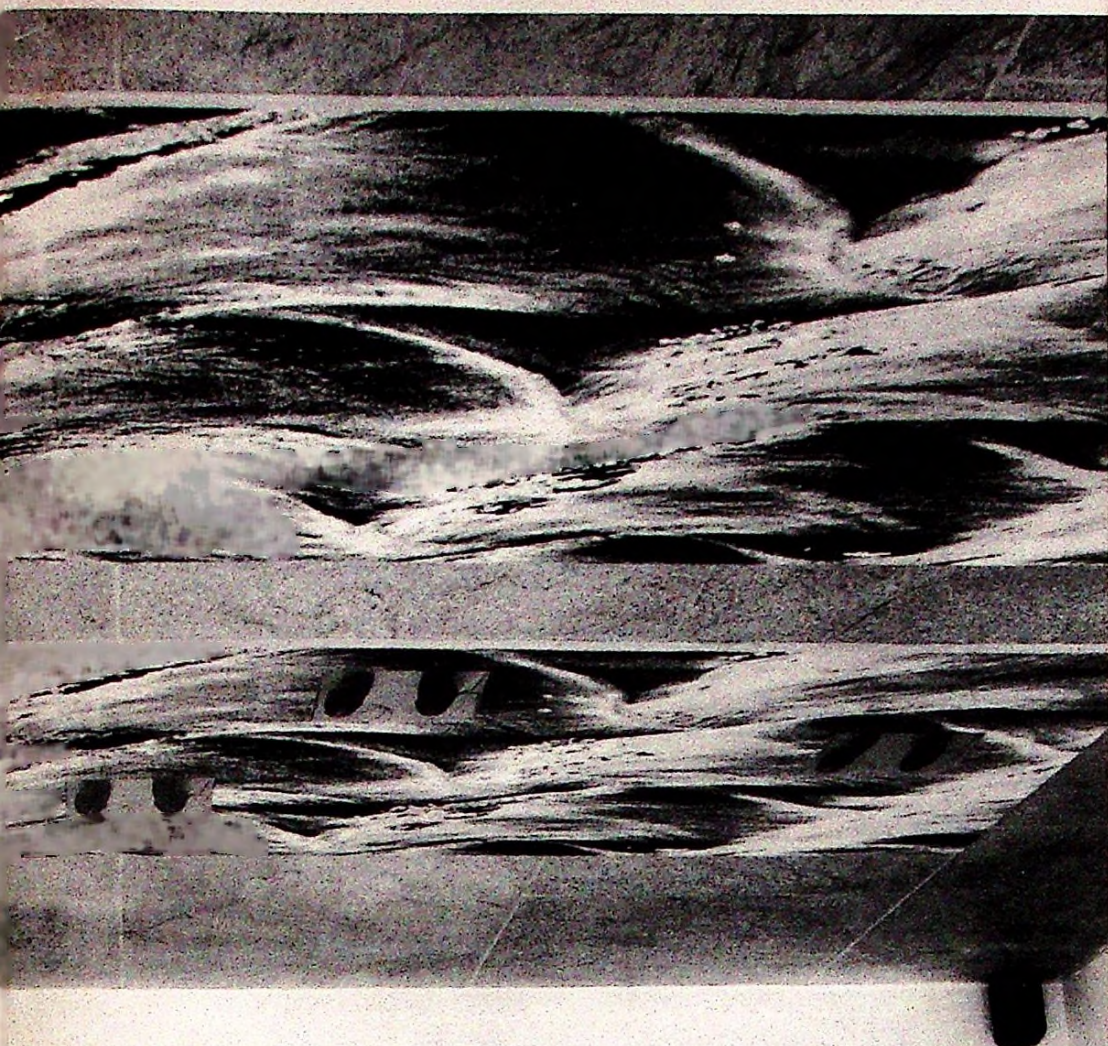
LS: You mean the figure in its totality.

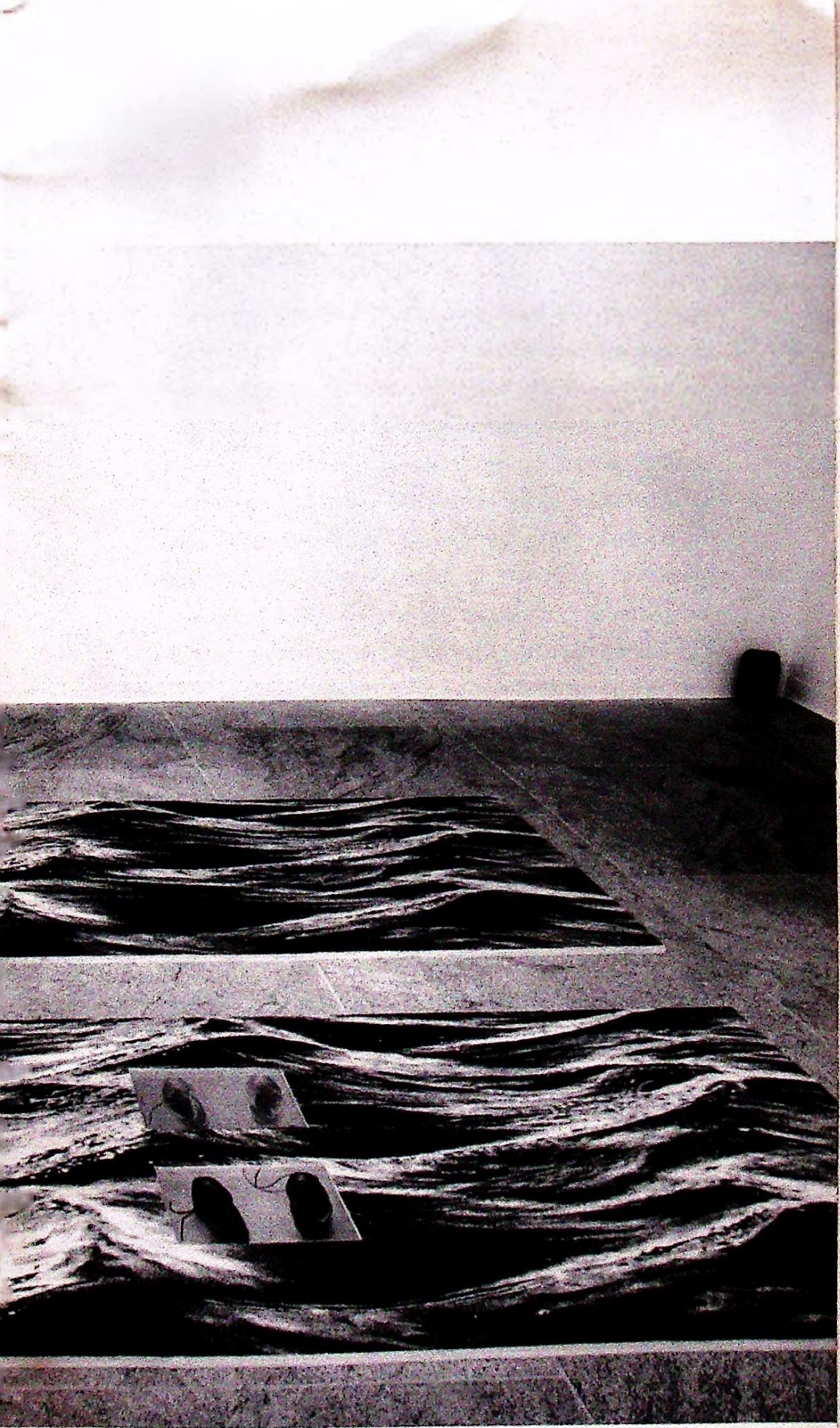
TG: Yes, because the image of the shoes in this work is a cipher for the human figure—the part as symbol for the whole, a device also used before. But the figure, your colored, gendered figure, seems to have moved out of the work. Our colleague Kellie Jones, our homegirl, art historian, and curator, and I have only half jokingly referred to this shift by titling the new piece “Bye, Bye Black Girl.”

LS: Oh, no!!! (She laughs)

TG: But I think I understand this shift. When I first came to know your work, I connected with it on a very personal level, and as I continued to spend time with it I held my “specific” reading to be a general one. I saw “myself” but I knew the work was about a variety of experiences. I am sure the loaded connotations of the engendered, colored body, the black woman’s body, made it seem hard for the work to be read as very localized, very specific. It was always interesting to me, for example, that the simple white shift you used in many works to clothe your models was often read as a slave girl dress or sometimes a hospital shift. Never as, say, a designer dress or a non-western costume.

LS: A lot of the same over-determined connotations are continually applied to the work.







have created this new way of working, with a new visual vocabulary. I feel a great sense of possibility when I work without the constraints of "knowing" my work.

TG: Everything is wide open.

LS: Completely open. I had been working in a consistent way for almost ten years. I knew how to do it. Now I think I am challenging myself more. I surprise myself. It has made me more relaxed, more open to experiment.

TG: Central to your work has been your use of text in conjunction with images. In your earlier work, the text and the images remained somewhat separate, as two discrete objects. Text captioning photograph. In this work you join the text and image in the form of the video. Let's talk about this difference.

LS: I have been moving more and more into video. The floor pieces, the felt with the glass plates, are very static and I wanted the work to have a kind of fluidity that would complement the soundtrack. So that's why I used the looped image of moving water on one of the monitors to contrast the still images of the waves printed on the felt. The other monitor has an image of a water pitcher. There I was working both with a play on words, pitcher vs. picture, referring to the thing and the image as well as the conjunction of the image of the ocean and that of the pitcher, which is a vessel or container of water.

TG: What is the relationship between the top and bottom images?

LS: The top monitor, with the image of the pitcher, carries the descriptions of things that occur in water, and the bottom monitor's texts, over the ocean image, are a literal description of the soundtrack.

TG: How did you create the soundtrack?

LS: I culled sounds from a library of sound effects and edited them together.

TG: The sounds range from highly evocative to very mysterious to weirdly symphonic. They include a bathtub filling with water, a fire hose....

LS: A garden hose spraying, water dripping in a bucket, footsteps through water.



TG: Spliced together to create something oddly musical.

LS: Yes. I picked effects that were clear and discrete, which had their own beauty and sound, somewhat Cageian.

TG: The text in your work has always ranged from the journalistic to the poetic, from the vernacular to the technical, and the descriptions in this piece are now different. I am going to read some of them and I would like you to talk about the sources and/or the meanings. "They were both shot while collecting water from the public water spouts in Bosnia."

LS: The news and the newspapers of the past months. I was thinking about the association between political crisis and water.

TG: "Flooding the rice fields on purpose."

LS: Reference to the acts of insurrection by enslaved Africans.

TG: "Her vagina and buttocks are suspended in liquid in a jar in Le Musée de l'Homme."

LS: A fact about the Venus Hottentot, Sarah Baartman, a South African woman who was displayed as an oddity in Paris early in the century.

TG: "The promise of showers."

LS: World War II concentration camps.

TG: "One day during a smooth sea and moderate wind, the two who had been chained together somehow made it to the deck, through the netting, and jumped into the sea."

LS: A description from a narrative of the Middle Passage of two Africans jumping ship.

TG: "First time pissing in a pool, first time pissing in the ocean."

LS: Everybody's done it!

TG: "Disappeared by the river"—is that a reference to your work *Waterbearer*?

LS: Yes.

TG: Where is this going...?

LS: I cannot say where the work is going right now. I can say it addresses several issues that I have developed in earlier work but I don't think I have ever known exactly the evolution of the next body of work ahead of time.



TG: Is the absenting of the figure a way to bring forward the issues that have consumed you in past work but have been somewhat obscured in this less figurative approach? By denying viewers a figure are you disallowing them a place to "site" the issues so specifically, as you have similarly denied access to a face in the past?

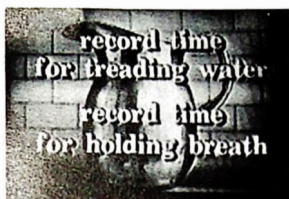
LS: Not really, I wanted to get away from a figurative representation of the body. It was actually a purely selfish maneuver I developed in order to make *Standing in the water*. The formula for working with the figure was such a contained set of elements that it got to a point where for me to expand as an artist I had to abandon the formula and create a new one in order to move further. In some ways, I don't feel I have abandoned everything because in *Standing in the water* there are texts which deal with issues I have explored before. There are references to the Middle Passage and the idea of the occupation or "ownership" of land that refer to both African and Native American histories. So there are references in the text to the body and to the black body within the American context and what that experience has meant over time. So I haven't abandoned the body, I am just trying to work through these issues without an image of a figure. My interest in the body remains. The text in this piece refers to both political and personal concerns.

TG: So the meaning attached to the figure is still there. *Standing in the water* also continues your interest in working three dimensionally—beginning with your early screen pieces, which were meant to be viewed in the round, to the Charleston installation, to your installation in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, *Hypothetical*, to your 1994 piece *Group Dynamic*, which directly precedes *Standing in the water*. Is this concern ongoing?

LS: Intensely! I have more of an interest in working in installation or architecturally.

TG: But those two-dimensional works relate to the installations because quite often you included objects within the figured images; now you are making objects and placing them in the foreground.

LS: When I was in art school in California in the early 1980s Conceptual art practice was prevalent. It wasn't about making precious objects or making



an elaborate installation to represent an idea, but rather a more conceptual approach to how one might get the idea across with some expediency, with efficiency. I think I still work in this manner.

TG: You are moving around both sculptural and architectural practices. With this work, you not only made objects but altered the gallery space to contain the objects.

LS: I think this is derived from work by other artists that I have had in the back of my mind.

TG: Like....?

LS: Although I don't think of my work as similar, I feel an affinity to the work of David Hammons and Vito Acconci. Seeing both of them work in many, many different environments and seeing how they "work" these environments—this has been very influential for me. And some of the works of Louise Bourgeois.

TG: That's interesting because I think an important component of her work is beauty, even when the subject is ugly. Even when the subject (or text) of your own work belies this, beauty is also a leitmotif. Curator Lowery Sims spoke about your transgressive, yet subtle emphasis on the beauty of your models. These new objects, which comprise part of the installation, also are beautiful. My sense is that in your object beauty is paramount in your formal vocabulary. Are there any other artists, specifically photographers, who influence and inform your work?

LS: Certainly Adrian Piper, Carrie Mae Weems....there are lots of links. I'm very interested in process and try to see and understand process—sometimes I'm much more interested in the process than in the completed work.

TG: This piece seems to indicate a beginning and an end in the progression of your work. It feels like a transition. I won't say change because....

LS: Why??

TG: Because change seems very final and this work, along with the successive bodies of work before it, has gradually encompassed new elements without fully abandoning everything that came before.

LS: I am working on a new show right now, and while I have something of an idea of what it might be, for the first time I really don't know because I



Lorna Simpson

Born in Brooklyn, New York, 1960

Studied at The School of Visual Arts, New York (BFA, 1982);

University of California, San Diego (MFA, 1985)

Lives in Brooklyn, New York

One-Artist Exhibitions

1990

The Portland Art Museum, Oregon, "Perspectives 15: Lorna Simpson"

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, "Lorna Simpson: Projects 23"

University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach,
and University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley,
"Centric 38: Lorna Simpson"

1991

Josh Baer Gallery, New York

Colgate University, The Gallery of the Department of Art and Art History,
Hamilton, New York, "Lorna Simpson"

1992

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, "Lorna Simpson:
For the Sake of the Viewer" (traveled)

Temple Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia,
"Lorna Simpson" (traveled)

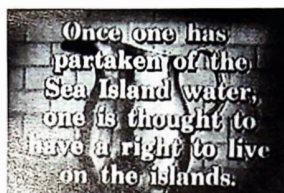
Josh Baer Gallery, New York

Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

1993

John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, "Lorna Simpson: Recent Work"

Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, California, "Lorna Simpson"



Selected Group Exhibitions

1988

Inter Latin American Gallery, New York, "Autobiography:
in Her Own Image" (traveled)

1989

The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, "Constructed Images:
New Photography" (traveled)

1990

Milwaukee Art Museum, "Word as Image: American Art 1960–1990"
(traveled)

Venice, Italy, XLIV Biennale di Venezia, "Aperto '90"

Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary
Art and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, "The Decade Show"

1991

Josh Baer Gallery, New York, "An Exhibition of Work by Gallery Artists"

Spoleto Festival, Charleston, South Carolina, "Places With a Past:
Site-Specific Art in Charleston"

Indianapolis Museum of Art, "Power: Its Myths and Mores in American Art,
1961–1991" (traveled)

Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin, "Schwarze Kunst:
Konzepte zur Politik und Identität"

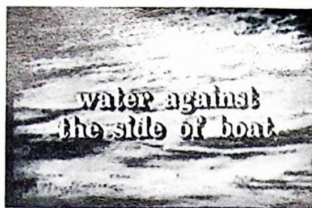
Artists Space and Simon Watson Gallery, New York,
"The Abortion Project" (traveled)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, "1991 Biennial Exhibition"

1992

Barbara Krakow Gallery, Boston, "Somewhere Between Image and Text"

Rochdale Art Gallery, Lancashire, England, "The Fortune Teller"



Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, New York,
"Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine"

Fukui Fine Arts Museum, Fukui City, Japan, "Dream Singers, Story Tellers:
An African-American Presence" (traveled)

1993

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, "1993 Biennial Exhibition"

P.P.O.W., New York, "Disorderly Conduct"

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut,
"Fall from Fashion"

Center for the Fine Arts, Miami, Florida, "Photoplay" (traveled)

The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, "In Transit"

William Weston Clarke Emison Art Center, DePauw University,
Greencastle, Indiana, "Object Bodies" (traveled)

Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, "The Theatre of Refusal:
Black Art and Mainstream Criticism"

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