Whether for still or moving picture productions, Lorna Simpson (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, qualified, even 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. They also show Simpson’s creation of new combinations—among them serigraphs on felt with writings and images invoking film noir, videos based on historic photographs and her own still photos, constellations of recycled photo-booth photos with her drawings isolating details, vintage photographs combined with those re-staged by the artist, and finally, a video focusing on performance as well as time itself and its reversal.

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 proto-cinematic photo-texts, beginning with the 1985 Gestures/Reenactments, a title literally capturing the work’s visual/verbal aspect while also describing 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 North American premiere at the Addison.
“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 adjectives, such as “Daring,” “Sensible,” “Long and Silky,” “Boyish,” or “Country Fresh.”

As early as 1995, allusions to film would become part of the linguistic and imagistic arena of the artist’s works collectively titled the “Public Sex” series, in which the texts provoked ideas of surveillance and voyeurism as well as race, class, identity, and memory. The Park (1995) reorients the point of view of Alfred Hitchcock’s Rear Window (1954). The narrator of one text panel talks about using a telescope to spy from the windows of a high-rise on the nearby buildings and park, while the other speaks of a character in many guises (sociologist, voyeur, sting operator) observing private acts in a men’s room. With The Rock (1995) the actual language of film (in this case, that of John Waters) began to enter the work: “Female Trouble: Divine has just left home after an argument over a Christmas gift…”
GALLERY 204

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). The artist subsequently bought the entire album and in 2009 re-staged each of its 150 or so photographs of an anonymous black woman and man in Los Angeles performing for the 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 in images that are shown alongside the vintage prints. A selection of these vignettes also formed the basis for Chess, 2013 (on view in gallery 205).

GALLERY 205

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

In 1957-2009, 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 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 jazz pianist Jason Moran performing an improvised score for this project, himself echoing the mirroring theme through a score in which one of his hands re-enacts the gestures of the other.
**Gallery 206**

Lorna Simpson’s video installation *Cloudscape* (2004) isolates one man, Simpson’s friend, the artist and musician Terry Adkins (1953–2014), 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 the reversal of the time sequence, the image remains somewhat familiar while the tune turns into something else, a different melody.

**Gallery 207**

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. 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 color), Simpson’s constellations of many images for each work offer a collective portrait of self-portraiture.

**Galleries 208 & Stairwell**

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 used in a very different way for her work. With the felt pieces, she 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, accompanied by voicings “in and around gender” that she had also authored.

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. Three related sets of works, 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 finally used vintage souvenir postcards of Lincoln Center for three 2011 felt works, the exterior views Day Time and Day Time (gold) and the interior view, Chandelier.

Joan Simon
Curator
All photos: © Lorna Simpson

Cover: Chess, 2013, HD video installation with three projections, black and white, sound, 10’25” (loop); score
and performance by Jason Moran
Courtesy of the artist, Salon 94, New York, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussel

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