

LORNA

SIMPSON

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Lorna Simpson (b.1960) was born in the Crown Heights area of Brooklyn, New York. She attended art schools in the state as well as the University of California, San Diego.

Initially, Simpson's work focused mainly on documentary photography but by the early 80s, and the end of her undergraduate training, she had begun to hone a new style, combining photographic image and text.

Applying ideas of language and narrative to still photography allowed Simpson the opportunity to explore the ethnic divisions which were still present in 1980s multicultural America. Her most notable works combine words with cropped photographs of anonymous women and, occasionally, men. Although appearing straightforward, the accompanying text often confronts the viewer with an underlying racism still found by some in American culture.

Simpson's work has since progressed into large-scale felt landscapes and architectural studies accompanied by more explicit narratives. 1997 saw her first foray into film.

In the 1990s, Lorna Simpson made history as the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition in the emerging artists *Projects Series* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. Simpson now lives and works in Brooklyn.



ABOUT THE WORK

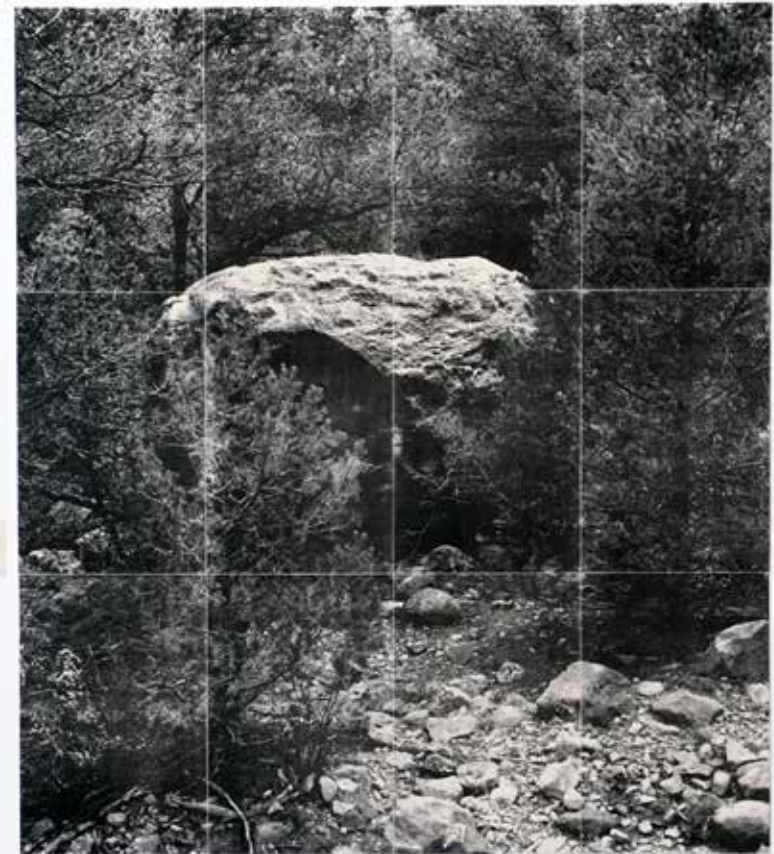
At BALTIC, Simpson's exhibition of photography, text, video and archival material spans a 30 year period in her artistic career.

Her large scale images, abstract photos and narrative texts explore ideas of gender, race, cultural history and memory. Placing these themes firmly within society, Simpson records and questions how these challenges affect and/or manipulate our relationships and experiences.

In a series of interior and exterior scenes printed onto felt, Simpson is influenced by the themes of pessimism, fatalism and menace present in the genre, film noir. Created between 1995 and 2005 using a similar process to that of screen printing, Simpson's serigraph prints explore the now commonplace notion of surveillance and use it to question ideas of ethnicity and class.

In a set of 299 reconstructed photos, the artist re-creates a series of 1950's scenes and roles from a collection of found photographs. Appearing here in her own work for the first time in 2009, Simpson's exploration of role-play, identity and memory continue into 2013 with her 3-channel projection, *Chess 2013*, which sees its premier at BALTIC.

*"For me, the spectre of race looms so large because this is a culture where using the black figure takes on very particular meanings, even stereotypes. But, if I were a white artist using Caucasian models, then the work would be read as completely universalist. It would be construed quite differently."*¹



ABOUT THE WORK

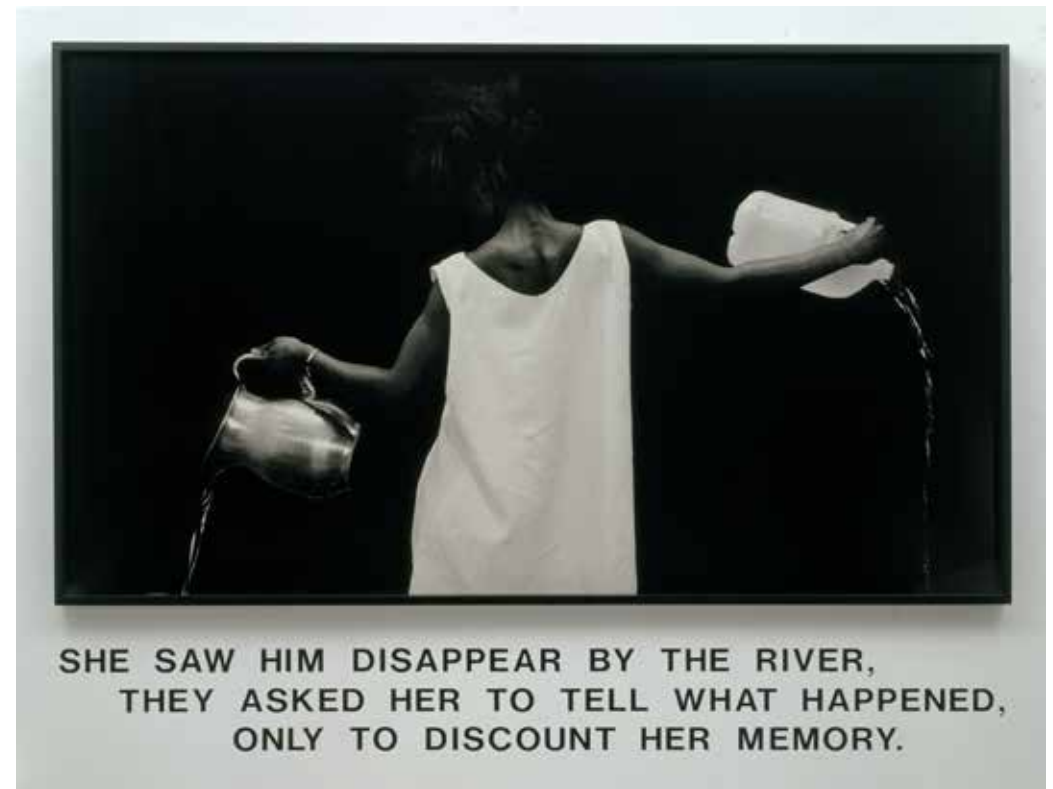
Simpson's *Waterbearer* 1986, a black and white non-traditional portrait presented alongside a suggestive fragment of text, is characteristic of the artist's work.

The woman in Simpson's photograph has her back to the viewer. She is wearing a white, loose-fitting dress, holding a silver jug in one hand and a plastic bottle in the other. With raised, outstretched arms the woman pours a steady stream of water from each container.

The accompanying text reads '*She saw him disappear by the river, they asked her to tell them what happened, only to discount her memory.*'

Her posture is reminiscent of Lady Justice, the moral personification of a just legal system, however the accompanying text suggests a distinct imbalance or inequality in the way the photographed woman has been treated. Although asked for her account of a mysterious event, her statement, or memory, is ignored.

Simpson's work is so often intentionally ambiguous. The jug and bottle in *Waterbearer* may simply be the items used to draw water from the river. Or perhaps the containers' disparate materials; a silver coloured jug with ornate handle contrasting with an unlabelled plastic bottle; represent the two ends of the economic, social or even gender-related spectrum.



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- What is the significance of photographing the woman in *Waterbearer*, from behind?
- What can you see? What is hidden?
- What clues does the artist give about the woman's identity and social standing?
- Think about being treated as an unreliable narrator. Who, if anybody, has the power to validate or invalidate someone else's account of events?
- How might the image be interpreted if the text were not included?

*"Simpson's portrait is reminiscent of Vermeer's paintings of working women-maids standing silently by basins of water. Simpson's language brings a threat to the fore"*²

In Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer's (1632–1675) oil painting, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, c.a.1662 the image's central figure opens a window with her right hand whilst holding a silver water jug in her left. The water pitcher in Vermeer's painting references cleansing and purity.

The jug in Simpson's photograph may represent receiving something good and nourishing. The plastic container suggests a less satisfying experience.

- Describe a situation where you received something that made you feel good about yourself. Describe one when you didn't.
- Do you think of yourself as someone who usually gets enough or as someone who doesn't ever get enough?



IN MY OPINION

Five Day Forecast 1988, comprises five monochrome photographs depicting the torso of a black woman wearing a loose, white shift. Displayed close together in a horizontal row, each photograph views the same woman, from the front, with her head and legs cropped out of the images. Her arms are folded tightly across her chest, emphasising the wrinkles in the fabric of her clothing; appearing both guarded and defiant.

Five plaques, titled with the days of the week from Monday to Friday, accompany each of the photographs. As the title of the work emphasises, this structure suggests a diary, timetable, or, meteorologically, a 'forecast'. The similarity of the pose in the photographs, however, suggests the drudgery of repetition with little variation on the horizon.

Ten words accompany the images; *Misdescription, Misinformation, Misidentify, Misdiagnose, Misfunction, Mistranscribe, Misremember, Misgauge, Misconstrue* and *Mistranslate*. The words, with their negative connotations, imply a repeated breakdown in communication and understanding; in personal, professional and perhaps even racial relationships.

Spend time looking at *Five Day Forecast*. What are your immediate thoughts?

- What do the subtle changes in the subject's body language tell you about how this person feels each day? How do the accompanying words impact this?
- What other words might you attach to this set of images?
- What other poses do you associate with Simpson's ten words?
- Photograph your torso each day across one week. How are your images different from each other? How are they the same? Think about the decisions you made prior to being photographed. Which decisions did you make on purpose? Which were unconscious?
- Choose a set of words to accompany your own images.
- Choose a set of words to accompany you today. Do the same tomorrow. What has changed?

IN MY OPINION

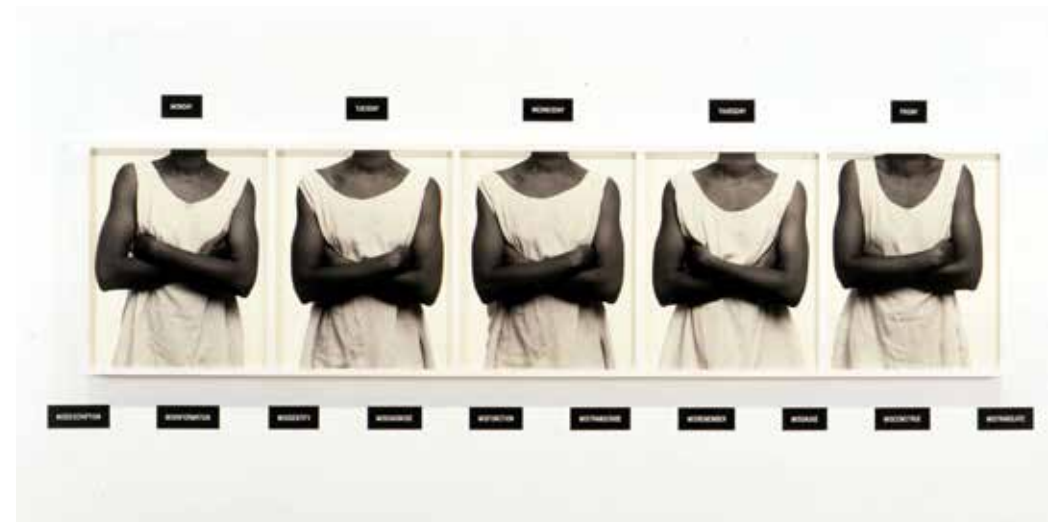
Five Day Forecast 1988, explores ideas of gender and gender labels.

Simpson continues to expand this theme in *Wigs II* 1994-2006. A series of different sized photographs of disembodied wigs hanging on the artist's wall is interspersed with a selection of texts investigating femininity and culturally accepted notions of gender, sexuality, fashion and beauty.

Simpson talks of two blocks in Brooklyn filled exclusively with wig shops. From each she bought one wig; the most outlandish, stereotypical or interesting. These are the wigs photographed in her work. Taking inspiration from Joseph Beuys' felt sculptures, Simpson printed these images onto a heavy cream felt similar to that used between the plates and roller of a printing press or in heavy duty manufacturing.

In *Wigs II*, Simpson includes a short reference to 1920's performer, Gladys Bentley. After spotting an advert for a male pianist at a Harlem speakeasy, or illicit drinking club, Bentley began performing in what was traditionally seen as men's attire; white dress shirts with stiff collars, bow ties and jackets teamed with short, close-cropped hair. As a black, female, openly gay, cross-dressing performer living and working in New York during Prohibition, Bentley was required to seek permission to wear trousers in her act.

- Think about scenarios where dressing up, or being in disguise, is celebrated.
- In what situations is changing your identity received negatively?
- Are there some things that are typically associated with one sex and not the other?
- How does society influence your ideas of gender?



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

1957-2009 2009, comprises 123 vintage and contemporary black-and-white photographs. Simpson presents images of a young African American woman and an occasional male figure from photographs found in flea markets and on online auction sites with self-portraits of herself in which she acts as a doppelganger for both models.

In the original photographs from 1957, the woman and man pose in staged shots around Los Angeles. The woman has coiffed hair, styled make up and neatly pressed clothing that is, at times, revealing for her era. Simpson replicates, with precise detail, the poses and settings of the original photographs, arranging the work in grid patterns.

Appearing in her own work for the first time, Simpson speaks of how uncomfortable she felt in front of the camera and how physically taxing she found arranging her body into the pinup poses of the 1950s woman.

- What assumptions, expectations and stereotypes related to a woman's appearance are prominent in society?
- How are these stereotypes reflected in the media or advertising?
- Explore gender identity in other cultures and at different times in history. How do these ideas compare with your original understanding?
- In what ways do they influence your own behavior and those of the people around you?
- What do you think about yourself?
- What do other people think of you?
- Which opinion holds the most value? Are there any situations where this might change?



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

In *Twenty Questions (A Sampler)* 1986, Simpson utilizes the traditional circular presentation of Nineteenth-century portraiture. Four, identical, repeated photographs of a subject with her back positioned to the viewer, her features and neck concealed by lush, pomade-groomed hair, are accompanied by a set of five questions that invite the audience to make judgments about her; *Is she pretty as a picture, Or clear as crystal, Or pure as a lily, Or black as coal, Or sharp as a razor.*

The repetition of the image is reminiscent of a police lineup and its nineteenth century forerunner, the mug shot. This system for creating photographic records of criminals was created by Alphonse Bertillon, a French police officer and biometrics researcher. The line-up can be an agent of both identification and mis-identification. Simpson parodies this system using a self-repeating image which calls on the viewer to choose which question correctly identifies the subject.

The piece is titled *Twenty Questions* after a spoken game in which one person chooses an object that will act as a mystery solution; other participants try and guess the object by asking twenty questions with 'yes' or 'no' answers.

*"These designations clearly implicate more than they resolve, and a further litany of questions is provoked: Who wants a "pretty" picture? What connotations are there for a black person if a white flower functions as a common symbol of purity? Why "or"? Why can't this girl be "black as coal" and pure at the same time? What's purity, anyway, and whom does it serve? And, perhaps most importantly, if this girl were sharp as a razor (my favorite choice), what would she most like to cut and why? Of course, we can all think of potential answers. But Simpson leaves our acculturated imaginations to come up with the responses."*⁴



HERE'S ONE I MADE EARLIER

Find a space. Sit comfortably. Watch *Momentum* 2010.

*"The film represents a dance performance I did as a child...When it came time to perform, I wished I was in the audience—I was painted in gold paint, with an Afro and toe shoes, very Vegas, and I wanted to see that.... In 1974, I would've become a dancer had it been in me to make a connection in the dark to an audience."*³

- **Think** about the movements the dancers make whilst performing.
- **Consider** the moments between dances. Describe the movements here.
- **Reconsider** the dancers' body language and facial expressions. What do they tell you?
- **Try** recalling a memory you might want to revisit.
- **Do** your own 1 minute performance.
- **Be** the artist. Use your mobile phone to make your documentary.
- **How** comfortable do you feel as a performer
- **Imagine** how *Momentum* might change if the dancers were not painted gold and wearing wigs.
- **Find** an un-noticed or overlooked part of this film. Point it out to someone.
- **Draw** the movements, steps, spins and shuffles.
- **Make** a sculpture from paper to represent these movements.
- **Fold** your arms like one of the dancers in the film. How is this gesture perceived by others?
- **Stop** and think about how to describe this film to someone else.
- **Start** to think about your role as the 'audience'. How comfortable do you feel?



HERE'S ONE I MADE EARLIER

The way we look at art can no longer be thought of as a neutral act. The viewer is an important and contributory element in any work, bringing ideas, opinions, judgements, past experiences and prior knowledge.

- Describe Lorna Simpson's approach to her audience? What, if anything, does she want you to do? How does she want you to respond?
- How do you act when you look at a photograph like *Waterbearer*? What do you think? What do you say? How do you feel?
- What about when you watch *Momentum* or *Cloudscape 2004*? Do you act differently in front of photographs on the wall to videos projected in a dark space?
- As the viewer, are you a participant, a bystander or a voyeur? Are you all of these? Are you something else altogether?

*"Most issues of importance cannot be photographed"*⁵

Photographer and curator, John Szarkowski, said this in his 1966 book *The Photographer's Eye*. Referencing the assassination of US President John F Kennedy, Szarkowski commented that although film footage and stills of this event exist, they cannot begin to convey or explain the political, social and emotional significance of the incident.

- Do you agree with Szarkowski?
- Can film and photography ever truly capture a moment in time?
- To what extent do you believe the film and photography imagery you see?

Select images from a wide variety of daily newspapers and consider what each image conveys.

- If a picture is worth a thousand words, what are your selected pictures telling you?
- Consider what the photographer has been able to capture in each shot and what elements might be 'missing'.
- Re-examine the article that accompanies each image. How well do they work alongside each other?

Which is more emotive, the text or the image?

- How applicable is Szarkowski's opinion to Lorna Simpson's work?
- What, if anything, is missing from Simpson's work?

Think about a moment in your life that caused an emotional, social or even political change in your thinking or behavior.

- How would you represent it in one single, still image?
- What would you show to your audience?
- What would you hide?
- How important is it for an artist to be emotionally open and honest with an audience?
- If you did this, consider how vulnerable you might feel?

HERE'S ONE I MADE EARLIER

Lorna Simpson's work challenges and questions. Her images and texts suggest and explore issues of stereotype, injustice, vulnerability and rumour. These subjects can be considered highly politicised.

Actions and words can change the way things are, or what they might become. Fill a piece of paper with one statement that alters something in the world. Repeat it. Say it out loud, over and over to make it true.

- Borrow the language of political protest to emphasise your message. Tape your sign to a pencil to create a mini placard. Announce your manifesto.

Share a conversation with others. Stand close together. Slowly, walk backwards away from each other and continue your discussion. Do not raise your voices. Continue backwards as far as you can then walk slowly back together continuing your conversation.

- How do you feel?
- What did you hear?
- What did you mishear?

Time, context, and interpretation can all influence meaning. Consider ways in which meaning gets changed.

Pass a thought along a line using Chinese Whispers. What is the result? How does the original message change as it is filtered through different participants? How is it diluted? How is it strengthened?



FURTHER RESEARCH

LAYLAH ALI/DAVID ANTIN/ELEANOR ANTIN/TERRY ATKINS
ANTHONY BARBOZA/ROY DECARAVA/ZORA NEALE HURSTON
ISAAC JULIEN/GLENN LIGON/LARRY RIVERS
DONALD RODNEY/MARTHA ROSLER/SHAHZIA SIKANDER
ALICE WALKER/KARA WALKER/CARRIE MAE WEEMS

LITERACY KEY WORDS

race

film noir

gender

validation

anti-portrait

serigraph

sex

stereotype

disembodied

doppelganger

audience /
viewer

narrative

screen print

identity

universalist

disguise

identification

politicised

figurative

ethnicity

ambiguity

NOTES FOR TEACHERS

Contemporary art is incredibly diverse and wide ranging and can be used to support teaching and learning as part of an entire learning experience.

Contemporary art challenges, exposes and explores cultural and social issues and identities, investigating their meaning through a wide range of practices. BALTIC's programme aims to build pupils' confidence and encourage aspirations, develop their visual language and creative thinking as well as furthering their artistic skills, encouraging students to offer opinions and take risks in response to such visual, cultural and creative stimuli, safe in the knowledge that art has no 'wrong answer'. Contemporary art can be used to generate creative thinking in all subject areas, supporting and offering transferable learning across the curriculum.

BALTIC offers a variety of workshops, talks, artist sessions and research opportunities for primary, secondary and post-16 students. Many are free.

To book a session, arrange a visit or chat about an opportunity, please contact our Schools and Colleges Programmer, Vicky Sturrs on 0191 440 4929 or vickys@balticmill.com

LORNA SIMPSON WORKSHOP

SUITABLE FOR EYFS, KS1&2 AND SEND, FREE

Working in the Level 3 gallery space, pupils will respond directly to Lorna Simpson's work through a combination of questioning, word-matching, performance and making. Working individually, in pairs and as a group, pupils will discuss and debate the key themes in Simpson's photographic work including identity, disguise, gender and stereotype and respond practically.

This session is tailored to the needs of your group, making it age appropriate, for EYFS up to the top of Key Stage 2. It lasts 1 hour and is suitable for up to 35 pupils.

INTRODUCTION TO... LORNA SIMPSON

SUITABLE FOR KS3,4, POST-16 AND SEND GROUPS, FREE

This half an hour session includes an introduction to key works and themes in Lorna Simpson's Level 3 and 4 exhibition. Her photographic pieces and film works explore identity, gender, race and disguise, offering an opportunity for discussion and debate. Students will respond to key artworks, offering thoughts and opinions, asking and answering questions and making judgments designed to stimulate thoughtful reflection.

This session is tailored to the needs of your group, making it age appropriate, and lasts 30 minutes. Introduction to.....tours are suitable for a maximum of 30 pupils.

NOTES FOR TEACHERS

ARTIST STUDIO SESSION

SUITABLE FOR EYFS, KS1,2,3&4, POST-16 AND SEND
£100 HALF DAY, £200 FULL DAY + VAT

Practical art workshops delivered by one of BALTIC's experienced artist facilitators develop your pupils' creative inspiration, influences, skills and techniques. Artist Studio Sessions give your pupils the opportunity to get initial inspiration for projects, develop new artistic practices, work closely with a practicing artist and take creative risks.

Use the exhibitions as a focus, come with a ready-designed project, or leave it to BALTIC to create a bespoke session from your ideas and desired outcomes.

BALTIC's artist team have diverse interests and workshop skills can include sculpture, printing, textiles, installation, photography, drawing, animation and sound work to name only a few.

Artist Studio Session's can take place at BALTIC or at your school and include all materials.

CROSS CURRICULAR OPPORTUNITIES

- Cross Curricular Opportunities
- Art, Craft and Design
- English
- History
- PHSE

USEFUL LINKS AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BALTIC

balticmill.com

BALTIC Multimedia Database

archive.balticmill.com

BALTIC Primary School Resources Bank:

balticmill.com/learning/schools-and-colleges/primary--early-years/resources

BALTIC Secondary School Resources Bank:

balticmill.com/learning/schools-and-colleges/secondary-colleges/resources-secondary

Lorna Simpson

<http://lsimpsonstudio.com/>

Lorna Simpson on Studio 94

www.salon94.com/artists/detail/lorna-simpson

REFERENCES

- 1 Pollack, Barbara, Turning Down the Stereotypes ARTNews (September 2002) p139
- 2 Hooks, Bell, Lorna Simpson: Waterbearer Art Forum (September 1993) p137
- 3 Simpson, Lorna in It's interesting to be unsure: A Conversation with Lorna Simpson. ArtMag by Deutsche Bank <http://db-artmag.com/en/72/feature/its-interesting-to-be-unsure-a-conversation-with-lorna-simpson/> (accessed 10.04.14)
- 4 Valdez, Sarah in Lorna Simpson: Echoes of the Unspoken, 2006, in Art in America, Brant Publications <https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.digication.com/M07dd09de90e31bda8416e411dcc4a65b> (accessed 10.04.14)
- 5 Szarkowski, John in Durden, M (ed) in Fifty Key Writers in Photography, Routledge, 2013, p231

IMAGE CREDITS

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Lorna Simpson
Chess 2013

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

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Lorna Simpson, *The Rock* 1995.
Installation image at BALTIC,
Gateshead.

Photo: Colin Davison. © 2014 BALTIC
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Lorna Simpson
Waterbearer 1986

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

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Lorna Simpson
Stereo Style 1988. Installation image at
BALTIC, Gateshead.

Photo: Colin Davison. © 2014 BALTIC
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Lorna Simpson
Five Day Forecast 1988
Collection of Lillian and Billy Mauer
© Lorna Simpson

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Lorna Simpson
1957-2009 2009. Installation image at
BALTIC, Gateshead.

Photo: Colin Davison. © 2014 BALTIC
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Lorna Simpson
Twenty Questions (A Sampler) 1986
Private Collection, New York
© Lorna Simpson

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Lorna Simpson
Momentum 2010
HD video, color, sound, 6:56 minutes
Courtesy the artist; Salon 94, New York;
and
Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels
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Lorna Simpson
Cloudscape 2004. Installation image at
BALTIC, Gateshead.
Photo: Colin Davison. © 2014 BALTIC
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