



## 73: Lorna Simpson *Untitled (The Failure of Sylvester)* (2001)

Gretchen Sullivan Sorin

Lorna Simpson, though trained as a traditional photographer, is now widely known for exploring African American identity through highly innovative techniques of conceptual imaging.<sup>1</sup> Her black and white photographs evoke influences of paintings, literature, cinema, and other sources, and often are realized through printing processes such as photogravure and silkscreen. Mostly they confront viewers with images of African American women juxtaposed with provocative text. The faces of the black women in Simpson's compositions are never seen. Their backs are turned or their torsos exposed only to the neck or to the nose, but the incomplete yet arresting forms raise questions and spark ideas about the roles, stereotypes, and experience of black women in western society, and encourage questions about such issues as exclusion, invisibility, and race. The women are proud and strong—black sculptures—without names or identities. Their otherness is clear. Dressed in plain gowns and without ornamentation, their femininity is certain, but their sexuality is diminished.

In *The Failure of Sylvester* we view multiple photographic images of a single anonymous African American woman. Sometimes a cameo-like oval frames her head. Sometimes she appears within a rectangle. She faces to the left in several of the images, and in others to the right. In a few she is completely in shadow. As viewers, we must confront this anonymous woman and also our own prejudices. Is this the woman who cleans the house, or cares for the children, or does the laundry? Do we know her? After all, “they all look alike.” Americans dislike being reminded of the persistence of racial discrimination and inequality. Such painful ideas—such painful art—makes us uncomfortable, but *The Failure of Sylvester* forces us to see them. How do historical stereotypes of black women persist today? How do they affect the roles in which we place them?

*The Failure of Sylvester* (and the photographic series of which it is a part) makes use of a traditional American form—the silhouette—to connect viewers with past events and present perceptions. Before photography, silhouette artists, both fine artists and carnival cutters, created detailed images of their sitters through a variety of techniques. The most skillful silhouette cutters were able to capture their sitters’ personalities in the flat profiles. After sketching, the image was then snipped, usually out of black paper, mounted on a contrasting background, and framed. Although inexpensive, these paper cuts were extremely popular with affluent families, offering them an easy method of forever preserving their likenesses, and costing significantly less than a painted portrait. Often identified by name, the figures portrayed in the silhouettes displayed their middle-class aspirations—top hats and ruffles, fancy collars, frills, and jewelry set them apart as people of means. They were individuals to be remembered.

(Facing page)  
Lorna Simpson, 1960–  
*Untitled (The Failure of Sylvester)*,  
2001  
Archival gelatin prints under  
Plexiglas with black vinyl  
lettering, 61 x 41 x 1 in.  
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,  
2003.4  
©Lorna Simpson, Courtesy  
Sean Kelly Gallery, New York



Lorna Simpson, 1960–  
*Untitled (The Failure of Sylvester)*  
(detail), 2001  
Archival gelatin prints under  
Plexiglas with black vinyl  
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©Lorna Simpson, Courtesy Sean  
Kelly Gallery, New York

Silhouettes were wildly popular art forms during the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. They adorned walls and were shared with friends as personal mementoes. But at the time when white Americans posed for their “shadow pictures,” as they were also known, African Americans were held in slavery. Lorna Simpson takes this nineteenth-century art and turns it around using mainstream culture—the customers of the silhouette cutter—as her foil. Her work thus represents women both in the past and in the present.

Robert Henri,  
1865–1929  
*The Failure of Sylvester*, 1914  
Oil on canvas, 41 x 33 in.  
©Christie's Images Limited

The traditional silhouettes of the nineteenth century appear in perfect profile, with the eyes, nose, mouth, and chin clearly delineated to specifically distinguish the individual. Text also accompanies many silhouettes, further confirming the identities of the sitters. In the most desirable cuttings the names both of sitters and artists as well as dates and locations are included. In contrast, Simpson's silhouetted woman in *The Failure of Sylvester* averts her face just enough to prevent us from seeing her features. She is not identified by name. Instead, she appears as the white slave owner, or the overseer, or the owner of a house in the middle of the white suburbs might view her—faceless and anonymous. The accompanying text, instead of naming her, raises questions about her identity.



African American writers and tradition inspired Lorna Simpson to integrate provocative narrative elements in her art. The text, which draws from familiar sources, creates challenging new meanings that address issues of personal and collective identity, gender, language, and African American history. "When I was in school, I read a lot of literature that had a profound effect on me," Simpson told photographic historian Deborah Willis in 1992. "I was really amazed by black writers like James Baldwin, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston.... These writers related black experiences in such interesting ways and for them language became a slippery object. I was really amazed by how much they said in silence."<sup>2</sup> The carefully chosen text in *The Failure of Sylvester* employs words reminiscent of captions in a family album—"mom and dad," and "Minnie"—as well as disturbing reminders of slavery and racism like "octoroon," "wanted poster no. 3," and the abolitionist John Brown. In fact, according to Simpson, "the references within the work are titles of paintings from the 1790s to about 1970, and of films from about 1910 to the 1970s."<sup>3</sup> *Wanted Poster No. 3*, *Octoroon*, and *Mom and Dad*, for instance, are all works by African American artists,<sup>4</sup> while "Minnie" evokes any number of popular-cultural references, many specifically African American.<sup>5</sup> The title of Simpson's work itself comes from a painting by Robert Henri (*The Failure of Sylvester*, 1914) in which a young African American boy, supposedly modeling, has fallen asleep in his chair.

Lorna Simpson was born in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York, in 1960, growing up and attending high school in the Borough of Queens. She studied documentary photography at the School of the Visual Arts in Manhattan, earning a B.F.A. in 1982. She broadened this traditional education by moving to San Diego to pursue an M.F.A. Her master's work at the University of California focused on conceptual photography. Now a leading member of the younger generation of African American artists, Simpson has work in over forty major public collections and has exhibited in many international venues.

Photographic portraiture can be a particularly accessible form of art, as it connects subjects and viewers through their shared humanity. Understanding this, Lorna Simpson continually redesigns and reshapes this relationship between subject and viewer, turning her subjects away from the camera, and replacing the expressiveness of the face with gesture, symbol, and text. Her viewers must work hard to interpret the messages of her portraits—messages that can be both ambiguous and controversial. But her aggressive images challenge us to reconsider how easily we stereotype one another, and may lead us to see through the flat, featureless silhouettes to the three-dimensional persons behind them. In so doing they may coax us to re-explore our own identities.

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