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The Village Voice
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531 West 24th Street
New York NY 10011
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
www.luhringaugustine.com

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Apothecary Action: Simone Leigh Gives Healing a New Frame

BY RYAN LEE WONG

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"The Waiting Room," Simone Leigh's show at the New Museum, is both a direct response to a horrific event and a metaphor for resistance in impossible circumstances: It points to the story of Esmin Green, a 49-year-old woman who was forcibly admitted into Kings County Hospital in 2008, when her pastor saw her in emotional distress and called 911. She was left untreated in the waiting room for 24 hours, during which time she fainted and died. Hospital staff failed to act when Green collapsed and later forged the reports of her death.

The exhibition, up at a time when we've witnessed the individual, familial, and collective trauma of ever more black lives ended by police, can be read as a poetic reply to its surroundings: a way to expand, humanize, and re-politicize healing. As the curatorial statement argues, "Carving out a space for health care in its absence may be best understood — historically and in the present — as an act of civil disobedience."

Leigh has realized such a space in the fifth-floor education center of the museum, installing a row of cushions, a sampling of video work, and an apothecary. The most traditional pieces in the show are the video works. *9 o'clock. Try and be pretty* (2016) is a wry found clip from the sitcom *Julia*, in which a white male employer demands that Julia, his new black female hire, meet his (white-centric) standards of beauty and professionalism. Meanwhile, video documentation of Leigh's "Free People's Medical Clinic" (2014) shows a set of care sessions in Bed-Stuy, part of the Creative Time exhibition "funkgodjazz&medicine." It's a revealing pairing: *9 o'clock* highlights the struggles of black women in the workplace, while the other shows how free clinics and experimental spaces might offer a needed counter.

"Free People's Medical Clinic" and "The Waiting Room" mark something of a new direction for Leigh, who is mostly known for her sculptures. Her signature busts, adorned with flowers and shells, build a black, female iconography; the minimally described features of the women suggest that they stand in for many. Leigh reaches into history to find resonant objects and materials like raffia, terra-cotta, porcelain, and stone — an archive of shapes and senses.

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Leigh's attention to the tactile carries into "The Waiting Room," which challenges the idea of an exhibition for the eyes alone. The fifth floor becomes a space for embodiment: sitting on the cushions to meditate, smelling the canisters of dried herbs. It's a place to converse and listen. More than a display of fixed objects, the exhibition is defined by the experiences that will take place within it: a series of discussion groups, acupuncture sessions, massages, lectures, and classes all focused on marginalized forms of knowledge. Herbalist Karen Rose will lead a six-week course on herbal healing; taiko master Kaoru Watanabe will teach drum-making and drumming to LGBTQ youth; performance artist Lorraine O'Grady will answer an audience's questions about aging.

The project stretches the New Museum's galleries: The rose petals and smudge sticks, spiritual healers and singers, contrast starkly with the cold concrete and drywall. It's a productive tension, bringing warmth, color, and smell to the white cube, and one that will continue: This is the first annual "R&D Summer" focusing on art and social justice.

And it's a worthwhile experiment. Alongside organizing and mourning, what could be more essential (or radical) than a deeper attention to the recuperative practices and knowledge of black women in America? In citing Esmin Green's story, Leigh sounds a haunting reminder: Until government structures center and value black life, communities will need to practice healing within and for themselves.

Simone Leigh: 'The Waiting Room'

New Museum

235 Bowery

212-219-1222, newmuseum.org

Through September 18