

Calisto Duce

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The Shift Dress

Lorna Simpson was a multimedia artist who started in the late 1980s. *Lorna Simpson's Fabricated Truths* by Nika Elder focuses on some of her earlier works, specifically her shift-dress works that were made from 1986 to 1989. The main argument of the paper is how Lorna Simpson uses photography to explore how race is a stereotype, with the preconception and misconception that comes with newly formed works dealing with race. Looking into the evidence that Elder provides throughout the text I'm going to explain why I'm in a neutral role towards the argument.

There's one main thing people think of when they hear about The Shift-Dress Works, and that is the shift dress. The shift dress is a plain white dress. depending on which piece from the series of works you're looking at, the dress is usually undefined and a plain white.

Nika Elder describes the dress as:

Unfinished, untailed, and uniform- the characteristics that define it and outrun contemporary referents are precisely those that bring it into dialogue with the quality of the clothing made by, and provided to, the enslaved on plantations in the colonial period and the early republic. (Elder, Page 41)

She talks about the implications of the dress and how it can be seen in the face of the Shift-Dress Works. In the reading, Elder talks about how the shift dress being made of cotton, and in the context of the dress being on darker skin, leads to the historical implications of

slavery. After reading what Elder says about the shift dress and the context that can be made about the dress, I asked myself, “Would this context be considered had the model’s skin not been black?” I think the obvious answer is no. If the models in these images had been white, they wouldn’t convey the same meaning. Later in the paper, Elder mentions how Simpson used the dress as a way to allude to gender. Elder mentions Simpson’s response to Eugenie Bruno in how the shift dress is meant to symbolize female. Simpson restates this in a different interview with Deborah Willis. When looking at the works dealing with the shift dress, my immediate thoughts were about the gender of the model. I made the assumption of a woman because of dresses being associated with women. I didn’t make the connection with race. Elder mentions this as well by bringing up Cindy Sherman and her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980). There is a clear difference between the two artists and their work, with Sherman being the subject of all her photographs while Simpson is assumedly not. We see the mention of Douglas Crimp and how he views Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* as representation of female stereotypes and how critics don’t view her work as a self portrait despite her face being the subject. However, with the Shift-dress works critics view it as the opposite, “But critics read Simpson's shift-dress works in exactly the opposite way: as literal or figurative representations of the artist and her experiences as a black woman.” When reading this information, I thought it was a little odd that critics would view the works in this way. For me, I think they’re the opposite. With the earlier quote, I thought about how there’s this collective need to make everything a black person does within the arts or in general be about “Their experiences with being black” or the works being representational of themselves. This is something that’s touched on by scholars Kellie Jones and Huey Copeland. “Their work on Simpson calls out the art world for a false multiculturalism that includes, acknowledges, and discusses the work of artists of color only in terms of race.” (Elder, Page 47)

This follows the same argument that Elder is trying to make, but she states that maybe Simpson's work was a conscious effort to explore the culture concept of race. I don't agree with Elder's response here and I explore a bit more on that later on in this analysis.

When looking at Simpson's works, we see the use of letters and words in place to help hide the models' faces or to relay a message. We see three examples of these in *You're Fine* (1988), *Untitled (Two Necklines)* (1989) and *Easy for Who to Say* (1989); all of the works have plaques with singular words on them. These words can be used as descriptors for these faceless Black models, excluding *Untitled (Two Necklines)* whose words are all things that form a circle; this piece is also slightly different, with it having an ending phrase as well. My original thoughts when reading about these works and their use of words, I thought about how each could be used to label a slave. Elder also mentions this similarity later in the paper with the mention of two advertisements for runaway slaves, Mary Mackendish and Henrietta. I want to preface this by saying I have prior knowledge of how enslaved people were kept track of like items. The information that enslaved people were kept track of like how an accountant would list items in an office is not told in the American School System. I think these words could also be the way to describe woman in general.

Throughout the paper, Elder brings up different artworks, artists, art critics and implications. With the argument that Simpson is trying to explore race in the form of a stereotype with photography and the notion hollywood gives it. I see her reasoning with all of her evidence however, I think Elder may also have fallen into the category of those with, at the very least, a misconception. While her arguments make sense I think Simpson's Shift-dress works don't deal with race. I do think they deal with being a woman but not a black woman. For example, the information of the shift dress makes sense and the idea is there conceptually. However the way

Simpson talks about the shift dress as “female” makes me think that the material of dress wasn’t a thought in her mind. I also think the evidence with the material is a bit of a stretch, how do we know the shift dress is made of cotton? There’s also the work *She* (1992) which isn’t a shift dress work but is a work that deals with being a woman as it features a woman in a mans suit. There’s also this quote from the paper:

While these revisionist arguments are certainly necessary and true, we might also consider whether Simpson anticipated and perhaps even orchestrated the critical reception that her work received. Considering her training, it is entirely plausible that she broached photography as a conscious means to explore the cultural construction of race. (Elder, page 47)

This quote from Elder made me think more on what she was saying. I understand that she wants to do a dive into Simpson’s works and that she agrees with the revisionist argument. I think what puts me off with this quote is that she says “Simpson broached photography as a conscious means.” If you want to make a claim that someone is doing something, then the claim would be unconscious not conscious. Besides these few points I can see the argument that Elder is making.

In conclusion, I am neutral to the argument that Elder is making. With the provided evidence, I can’t say for sure that I disagree or agree with the idea that Simpson is exploring race as a stereotype with photography. Some of her points make sense; such as the one where she talks about the words in the pieces. However, I think not enough of her evidence is concrete, it feels like a lot of reaching. Those are my final thoughts on *Lorna Simpson’s Fabricated Truths* by Nika Elder based on what I said do you agree or disagree with Elder’s argument?

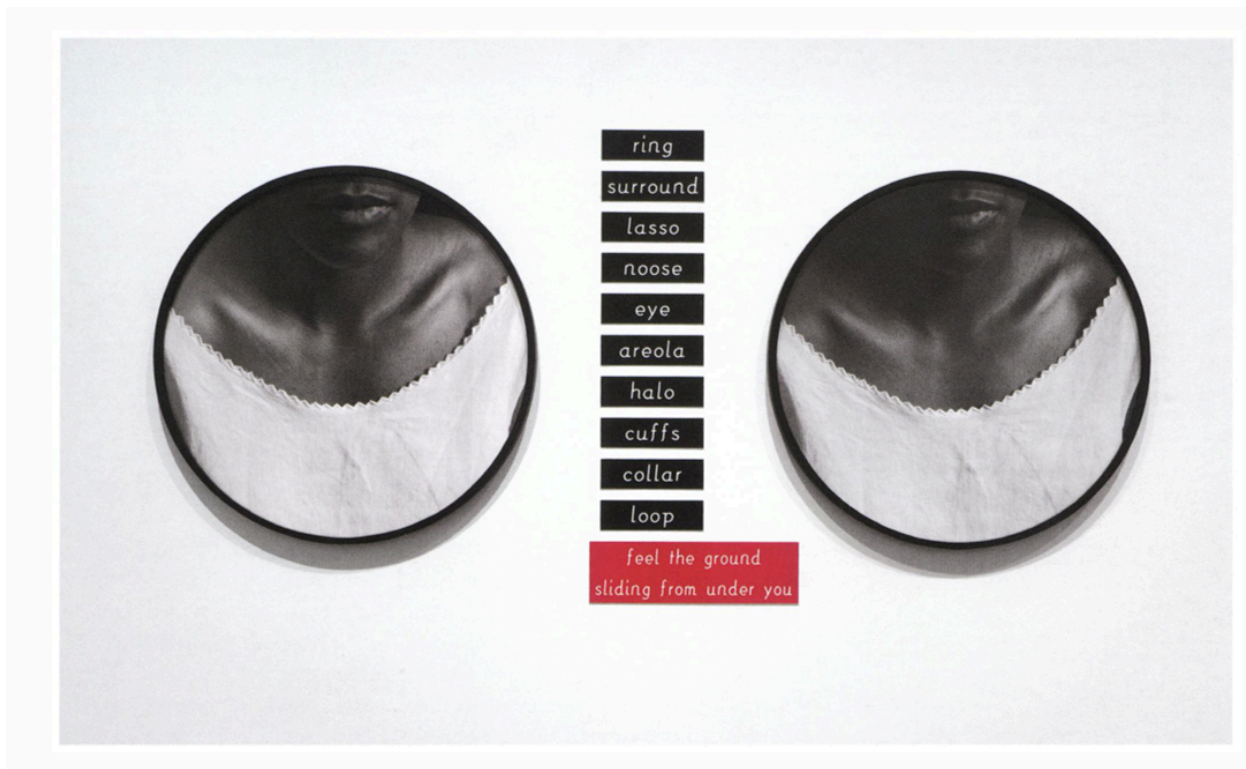
Work Cited

Elder, Nika. "Lorna Simpson's Fabricated Truths." *Art Journal*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2018, pp. 30-53.

JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45142690?seq=1>.



Lorna Simpson, *Your're Fine*, 1988



Lorna Simpson, *Untitled (Two Necklines)*, 1989