Contents

ARTICLES
Buddhism and Silk: Reassessing a Painted Banner from Medieval Central Asia in The Met
MICHELLE C. WANG, XIN WEN, SUSAN WHITFIELD, 8

Joris Hoefnagel’s Insects
MARJORIE SHELLEY, 26

John Haberle’s A Bachelor’s Drawer: Censorship, Geologic Time, and Truth
AMY WERBEL, 43

“The Toughest, Meanest Art I Was Making”: Edward Ruscha’s Books
DOUG EKLUND, 60

An Ode to James Van Der Zee: Lorna Simpson’s 9 Props
EMILIE BOONE, 76

RESEARCH NOTES
Domesticated Partners: A New Analysis of a Sumerian Vessel
BAILEY E. BARNARD, 91

Radiance and the Power of Erasure in an Obsidian Lamaštu Amulet
MIRIAM SAID, 100

Ernst Herzfeld, Joseph Upton, and the Artaxerxes Phialai
HENRY P. COLBURN, 112

New Insights into an Old Collection: Ptolemaic Pottery from Hibis (Kharga Oasis)
JAMES C. R. GILL, 118

A Bat and Two Ears and Jusepe de Ribera’s Triumphant Virtue
VIVIANA FARINA, 125

Carmontelle’s Telltale Marks and Materials
MARGOT BERNSTEIN, 135

The Met’s German Keyed Guitar
DANIEL WHEELDON, 145
Founded in 1968, the *Metropolitan Museum Journal* is a blind, peer-reviewed scholarly journal published annually that features original research on the history, interpretation, conservation, and scientific examination of works of art in the Museum’s collection. Its range encompasses the diversity of artistic practice from antiquity to the present day. The *Journal* encourages contributions offering critical and innovative approaches that will further our understanding of works of art.

The *Journal* publishes Articles and Research Notes. All texts must take works of art in the collection as the point of departure. Articles contribute extensive and thoroughly argued scholarship, whereas research notes are often smaller in scope, focusing on a specific aspect of new research or presenting a significant finding from technical analysis. The maximum length for articles is 8,000 words (including endnotes) and 10–12 images, and for research notes 4,000 words with 4–6 images. Authors may consult previous volumes of the *Journal* as they prepare submissions: www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications. The *Journal* does not accept papers that have been previously published elsewhere, nor does it accept translations of such works. Submissions should be emailed to journalsubmissions@metmuseum.org.

Manuscripts are reviewed by the *Journal* Editorial board, composed of members of the curatorial, conservation, and scientific departments, as well as scholars from the broader academic community. The process is double-blind peer review.

*To be considered for the following year’s volume, the complete article must be submitted by September 15.*

Manuscripts should be submitted as three separate double-spaced Word files in Times New Roman 12-point type with page numbers inserted: (1) a 200-word abstract; (2) manuscript and endnotes (no images should be embedded within the main text); (3) Word document or PDF of low-resolution images with captions and credits underneath. Please anonymize your submission for blind review.

For the style of captions and bibliographic references in endnotes, authors are referred to *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Guide to Editorial Style and Procedures*, which is available from the Museum’s Publications and Editorial Department upon request, and to *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Please provide a list of all bibliographic citations that includes, for each title: full name(s) of author or authors; title and subtitle of book or article and periodical; place and date of publication; volume number, if any; and page, plate, and/or figure number(s). For citations in notes, please use only the last name(s) of the author or authors and the date of publication (e.g., Jones 1953, p. 65; Smith and Harding 2006, pp. 7–10, fig. 23).

The Museum will acquire all high-resolution images and obtain English-language, world rights for print and electronic editions of the *Journal*, at no expense to authors.

Once an article or research note is accepted for publication, the author will have the opportunity to review it after it has been edited and again after it has been laid out in pages. Each author receives two copies of the printed *Journal*. The *Journal* appears online at metmuseum.org/art/metpublications; journals.uchicago.edu/toc/met/current; and on JStor.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin
MMJ Metropolitan Museum Journal

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.
An Ode to James Van Der Zee: Lorna Simpson’s 9 Props

EMILIE BOONE

Fifty years ago, The Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired the largest collection to date in a public institution of works by the African American photographer James Van Der Zee. The acquisition of sixty-six photographs in 1970, and an additional four in 1971, arrived on the heels of the Museum’s 1969 exhibition “‘Harlem on My Mind’: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968,” a controversial show considered today by many scholars as a pivotal moment in the exposure of Van Der Zee’s oeuvre to the greater public. In the mid-1990s, the artist Lorna Simpson turned to Van Der Zee and his studio portraits as source material for 9 Props, an edition of which came to the Metropolitan Museum in 1998 (fig. 1). 9 Props is often interpreted in relation to portraiture, but recent scholarship suggests more nuanced readings of what Simpson...
has described as an homage to Van Der Zee. If *9 Props* is “a close study of Van Der Zee’s photographs at a remove,” what kind of interpretative framework is Simpson offering not only for her own work but also for Van Der Zee’s images?

As a genre, portraiture has a clear set of norms: it depicts individuals while suggesting a time, place, and set of character traits through intentional positioning, props, and settings. In the Van Der Zee photographs referenced in *9 Props*, the subject is often in the center of the composition, looking toward the viewer, and the background and other details symbolically imply aspects of the individual’s social standing and character. For the art historian Shawn Michelle Smith, *9 Props* reframes the aspirational politics of early twentieth-century Harlem by offering each subject the possibility of new imaginings, free from historically contingent assumptions about gender, sexuality, and class mobility. As a departure from gifting the portrait’s subject with new outlets of becoming, this article privileges the viewer. The importance of Van Der Zee’s photographs lies less with the individuals he captured and more with the material and aesthetic decisions he made in service to the viewer’s experience of looking. Building off the philosopher Vilém Flusser’s statement that “photographers, it is true, do not work but [. . .] they create, process and store symbols,” one can begin to unpack how Simpson’s project recasts the symbols that Van Der Zee has stored in his images, and the prop, as the art historian Sara Blair has suggested, becomes an intriguing point of entry for understanding *9 Props* as an ode to Van Der Zee’s work.

Much of the writing on photographs of African Americans concerns how Black subjects image and imagine themselves, and *9 Props*, in part, depends upon the ways in which a prop, at its most basic level, requires the viewer to construct a scene or story. Recognizing how Simpson took her cue from Van Der Zee and the narrative woven around his work and life enables the viewer to use the concept of a “prop,” through its various definitions, as a central platform of engagement, one that compels them to find and create meaning in the ordinary through a sense of imagination. Examining Simpson’s motivations and processes for making

---

**fig. 2** Lorna Simpson. *Waterbearer*, 1986. Gelatin silver print with vinyl lettering, 59 × 80 × 2¼ in. (149.9 × 203.2 × 5.7 cm). Private collection

**SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER, THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED, ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY.**
9 Props opens up a more expansive reading of Van Der Zee’s imagery, presenting an interpretative framework not only for deciphering her own work and its evocation of absence and touch, but also for accessing the photographs of Van Der Zee’s portraits in ways that illustrate how parallel readings of the works can bring an intrinsic relationship between imagination and African American photography into view.9

AN HOMAGE
Referred to as a photo-text project, Simpson’s 9 Props is a portfolio of nine waterless lithographs printed on wool felt panels that are exhibited in a grid.10 This type of offset lithography, also known as siligraphy, uses a water-repellent silicone plate.11 Different from traditional lithography, in which moisture resists ink, siligraphy operates on the basic principle that ink does not stick to silicone rubber. Each panel contains a highly saturated black-and-white photographic print that depicts a piece of glassware, positioned on a table in front of a nondescript background. These objects are based on vases, goblets, martini glasses, and other props culled from nine Van Der Zee photographs, the majority of which were taken in the early twentieth century.12 Centered underneath each image is a text detailing the title and date of the source photograph, followed by Van Der Zee’s name and a description of the Van Der Zee photograph to which the panel refers.

The glassware in 9 Props was created during Simpson’s 1994 artist residency at Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington. Simpson had initially intended to use her residency to construct an installation of vibrating glass objects, but that preliminary idea lost its appeal once she understood more about the culture of glass and became captivated by the theatricality of glassblowing.13 While searching for a new direction, Simpson took a trip to Seattle, where she found and purchased a book that she already had at home, the catalogue for the National Portrait Gallery’s 1993 Van Der Zee exhibition, which helped to inspire aspects of the larger conceptualization of what would become 9 Props.14 To the chagrin of the ambitious gaffers assigned to assist Simpson, she requested that they simply blow replicas of Van Der Zee’s props,15 and in the end, William Morris and Dante Marioni produced a number of large, smooth black-glass vessels.16 After the residency concluded, Simpson shipped the pieces to her New York studio, where she photographed them. She later sent the images to 21 Steps in Portland, Oregon, where they were handprinted on wool felt, a material with distinct tactile properties resulting from its compressed but visible fibers.17

From a photograph of Simpson taken during her time at Pilchuck (see fig. 4), it is evident that she requested the creation of glass objects that do not appear in 9 Props, one of which resembles the pitcher from her 1986 photograph Waterbearer (fig. 2). Additionally, the sheets of paper with cutout shapes and sketches tacked on the wall behind the artist provide clues to the intermediary steps involved in the translation of the props from the Van Der Zee photographs reproduced in the catalogue to the blown glassware,
suggesting that Simpson first recreated the vessels as basic linear shapes. Simpson also used some of the glassware from Pilchuck in two visually familial works that came before 9 Props. In the first, *VanDerZee Props* (1994), black blown-glass vessels are arranged on a steel shelf with corresponding text above each of the objects (fig. 3). In the second, *Van Der Zee Prop Vase* (1994), a photolithograph print on paper with text, the same vase later employed in the 9 Props panel “Reclining nude” appears, although shot from a different angle. As forerunners to 9 Props, the vessels arranged on a shelf and the photolithograph establish a lineage of similar reoccurring forms.

Intriguingly, Simpson’s artistic process for 9 Props alludes to a kind of repetition with an intentional difference in which she never loses sight of the work’s referential origin and her initial interest in Van Der Zee’s work. As the artist later explained, she “re-photographed these [the glass vessels] as a kind of homage to James Van Der Zee.” By “re-photographing” as opposed to “photographing,” Simpson demonstrates a sustained engagement with the original images as props for her own work. As an artist would use a camera obscura, Simpson employs technology to trace all the contours and tones of the vessels in the meticulous settings of Van Der Zee’s portraits and translates them into a new medium, selecting and changing details along the way. From a staged studio to a photograph to a glass object and back to a photograph, each prop is reworked again and again through time, material, and space. On another level, this reiterative process parallels Van Der Zee’s own expansive engagement with the craft of photography. For example, Van Der Zee would choreograph highly composed portraits, develop a range of prints, and then enhance these images with hand-coloring or superimpose the same image with another. At each stage, he would thus often build upon the previous one to transform the image into a new iteration.

The nine photographs Simpson selected as source material for 9 Props are a mere fraction of the tens of thousands taken and often printed in multiples by Van Der Zee, whose career began in 1911 when he started as a darkroom technician at Hahne & Company department store in Newark, New Jersey. About five years later, he opened his first photography studio on 135th Street in Harlem within the neighborhood’s liveliest area. His dynamic output includes studio and on-site portraits, street scenes, mortuary photographs, reprints, enlargements, and prints enhanced by handwork. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s in particular, Van Der Zee...
produced a number of skillfully composed portraits that feature props, ranging from domestic items, such as chairs, side tables, and rugs, to scenic painted backdrops and even a paper cutout of a seated dog. Although he took a hiatus after closing his last studio in 1969, Van Der Zee later returned to photography during the last years of his life. In these portraits of well-known African Americans, the veteran photographer incorporated many of the very same props that he had used decades previously to craft his aesthetic vision. Retrieved from storage, the old studio props were dusted off, mended up, or in the case of the backdrops, recreated, in order to fulfill a new role within nostalgic compositions.

**THE PROP**

As a noun, “prop” refers to a beam or pole used to keep an object in position or something that serves as a source of assistance or support. As a verb, it most commonly means to position something for support, but it can also be used colloquially to recognize influence and convey respect—namely, “to give props.” In the same decade that Simpson made *9 Props*, this colloquial usage was starting to become popular in hip-hop prose when acknowledging the importance of one’s predecessors. While Van Der Zee received increasing recognition after his inclusion in “Harlem on My Mind,” with a solo exhibition in 1970 at the Lenox Public Library in Massachusetts, a PBS documentary devoted to his career in 1977 and an appearance on the *Dick Cavett Show* in 1978, and honorary degrees from Seton Hall University in 1976 and Howard University in 1983, the early appreciation of his work was most often confined to its documentary value within the cultural climate of Harlem, separated from other art world discourses.

In part, Simpson attempts to address this exclusion through *9 Props*. As she explains in an interview published in 1996:

*To me, Nine Props [sic] has historical content. For instance, many people within the art world don’t even know who James Van Der Zee is. Not that [9 Props] position[s] his work in a way that allows a lot of information to be gleaned, but on a certain level it’s engaging a part of art history that does not seem of interest to the contemporary art world. The academy’s canon has nothing to do with James Van Der Zee.*

Simpson recognizes Van Der Zee through *9 Props*, but more importantly, she moves Van Der Zee into the contemporary art sphere. By using his photographs as a primary source, *9 Props* does the work of a traditional prop—it supports and sustains. In this case, it does so within a context that transcends the particular time period listed within each panel of *9 Props* and prompts the viewer to consider Van Der Zee’s applicability to contemporary artistic production. A cadre of Black cultural producers, including the author Toni Morrison, the filmmaker Julie Dash, and the artist Isaac Julien, have cited the impact of Van Der Zee on their work, evidence that the photographer has gained a somewhat silent foothold throughout various instances of Black cultural production. Such artistic engagements across time and medium often begin with an encounter and result in a nod of recognition, like that of Jean-Michel Basquiat painting a portrait of the aging Van Der Zee after the photographer took a formal studio portrait of the younger artist (fig. 5). Each of these instances supports and sustains innovative engagements with Van Der Zee’s photographs that can reframe how his work is considered.

Moreover, Simpson gives “props” to Van Der Zee by privileging the visual details of his images in her descriptive texts. In “A man in his bedroom,” the scene is presented cinematically:

*A man stands on the far left of the room with a pipe in his mouth. He is dressed in a smoking jacket with a shirt and tie, with his right elbow resting on a dresser and a ring on his finger. The bed has a satin cover with a small stuffed animal positioned at the center of the pillows. Behind the bed hangs a rug, off of the backboard a fringed lamp, and above hangs a chandelier. In front of a curtained window a standing lamp shines on the portrait of a full figured woman. On the right side of the room is a dresser with an ashtray, small boxes, and a candle and vase.*

With few exceptions, the text in each of the nine panels progresses in a way that begins with the person within the portrait and concludes with a mention of the specific prop that Simpson recreated and re-photographed, thus delaying the viewer’s ability to locate that prop within the described scene. Simpson asks the viewer to conjure or imagine Van Der Zee’s compositions first, even though the prop is the sole object depicted within the panel.

In discussing the general role of text, curator Okwui Enwezor articulates its relationship with historiography. He writes:

*If history is text and its interpretation is anchored in reading (a debate prevalent in semiotic studies) Simpson’s work seems to recover the patterns of its writing. Her*
Lorna Simpson’s work seems to insist that it is those who possess the power of speech who not only narrate history but determine its outcome. In her work the hitherto disempowered subject reclaims this primal function of historiography, to tell the story from her own unique experiences, recollections and perspectives, to inscribe and assert her subjectivity, to recover both popular and private memories. Although Enwezor puts the onus on the disempowered subject as the one responsible for shifting the possibilities of interpretation, it is more appropriate with *9 Props* to give this august role to the viewer. With Simpson’s text leading the way, the viewer is able to imagine a different approach to Van Der Zee’s work, thereby contributing to an expanded historiography.

While Van Der Zee and his work have been interpreted within an art historical framework that privileges neat time periods, artistic movements, and a singular talented artist, *9 Props* enables a rethinking of Van Der Zee’s impact and therefore presents an amendment to the narrative that illuminates his work. If *9 Props*, as curator Jontyle Theresa Robinson posits, serves as a witness to Van Der Zee’s sixty years of history, then this history can be imagined differently. Though Simpson notes that *9 Props* has “historical content,” her project eschews a chronological presentation of Van Der Zee’s oeuvre. In fact, the display of the nine identically sized panels in a neat rectangle visually reinforces a sense of timeless uniformity. Furthermore, the date of the source photograph is largely irrelevant to the structure of the piece, as a panel with the year 1926 is positioned next to a panel with the year 1976, a detail discernible only from the descriptive texts. Here, historical readings are discouraged, despite the historical context from which Simpson draws, and the viewer can recreate each portrait personally with little regard to the specificity of each image’s time period.

Simpson’s approach to Van Der Zee’s work was also arguably informed by interpretations offered in the exhibition catalogue she bought in Seattle. In her essay “They Knew Their Names,” the photography historian Deborah Willis provides an overview of the significance and aesthetic value of Van Der Zee’s photographs. Importantly, she discourages a reading of Van Der Zee as “a neutral observer of his times,” and as a photographer who produced “a visual record of the emergence in America of the African American middle and upper classes”; instead, she frames Van Der Zee as an innovative artist and one of the creators of the Harlem Renaissance’s visual culture. Similarly, by omitting the language of respectability and upward mobility in the descriptive texts, Simpson allows Van Der Zee’s photographs to be seen as a generative site of meaning as opposed to a reinforcement or confirmation of an accepted historical narrative built on class-based racial progress. Simpson’s approach to Van Der Zee’s work lingers on the visual elements of his photographs as opposed to being tethered to preconceived understandings of his work that tend to structure their interpretation.

Additionally, in *9 Props* Simpson has made central and beautiful that which is most often marginal or,
within the context of the nineteenth century, invisible
and cumbersome. As a creator of ideas that have con-
ceptual weight, Simpson contributes to an enduring
conversation on props that has pivoted in various direc-
tions.34 When considering the purpose of the headrest,
a common prop in nineteenth-century photography
studios, the theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes
in *Camera Lucida* states, “a device was invented, a kind
of prosthesis invisible to the lens, which supported
and maintained the body in its passage to immobility:
this headrest was the pedestal of the statue I would
become, the corset of my imaginary essence.”35 For
Barthes a prop stills, inhibits, and stifles—it is the
antithesis of a support. In his 1931 essay “Little History
of Photography,” the philosopher Walter Benjamin
writes of props in a similarly charged and exasperated
tone; they no longer fade into the background but
instead play an uncanny role. He comments on what he
calls the “nonsense” of the studio setting, explaining
that “[t]his was the period of those studios—with their
draperies and palm trees, their tapestries and easels—
which occupied so ambiguous a place between execu-
tion and representation, between torture chamber and
throne room.”36 Whether squeezing one’s “imaginary
essence” or occupying an unsettlingly ambiguous place,
the prop in studio photography is more than a mere
object, it is a player in a staged performance, stilled by
the lens shutter.

By moving the prop from a marginal position to
center stage, Simpson translates Van Der Zee’s works
on two levels. The first shift is from vernacular culture
to high culture: photographs once displayed on clients’
home mantels, in store-bought frames or wedding
albums, are transformed into contemporary works of
art with white frames. The second shift speaks to
Barthes’s and Benjamin’s interest in turning the prop
into something less ordinary. In Simpson’s hands, the
prop is not a stifling and liminal device but an appealing
conceptual outlet for the viewer. Simpson gives the
viewer permission to imagine the possibilities of Van
Der Zee’s photographs by interpreting the mundane as
a valuable tool of cultural work and a means for imagi-
native reflection.

**FOUND OBJECTS, ABSENCE, AND TOUCH**

Simpson started to incorporate found objects in her
work about the time she made *9 Props*. One notable
example is her mixed-media sound installation
*Hypothetical?*, from 1992, which features instrumental
mouthpieces, discovered at a local thrift store, in addi-
tion to a newspaper clipping and photographs. The 2011
exhibition “Lorna Simpson: Gathered” at the Brooklyn
Museum presented hundreds of original and found
vintage photographs of individuals of African descent,
sourced by the artist from eBay, flea markets, and thrift
stores. Simpson’s practice of collecting and recontextu-
alizing vernacular photographs in particular, many of
which share social functions similar to those of Van Der
Zee’s work, illustrates an ongoing interest in finding new
outlets of meaning through old, everyday photographs.

In the later work *1957–2009 Interior* (2009), which
was included in the 2011 exhibition, Simpson juxta-
poses found images of a young African American
woman with portraits of herself replicating the poses
and settings of the original photographs (fig. 6). Her
staged response creates a “fictionalized narrative in
which the two characters appear to be linked across
history in a shared identity or destiny.”37 Here, the side-
by-side arrangement invites the viewer to compare and
contrast what at first glance appear to be identical
images. Yet, upon closer inspection, the images slowly
reveal themselves as different. Certain props in the
found photograph—like the cigarette in the woman’s
hand, or the vases behind the piano in the image on
the left in figure 6—are omitted in the recreated scenes
featuring Simpson.

Though absence is central to both *1957–2009
Interior* and *9 Props*, the former relies primarily on sight,
while the latter withholds visual clues. In “Woman with
“a goldfish bowl,” the text invites the viewer to notice the absence of the woman, the butterfly she gazes at, and other details found in Van Der Zee’s photograph (fig. 7). Here, Simpson uses the juxtaposition of text and image to draw attention to incompleteness while bringing into focus the role of imagination. The incompleteness of *9 Props* is even suggested by its title—a prop is an object that enhances or supports another object, but only one object is depicted. She continues this theme of absence in the image, in which the viewer sees a bowl, the table on which it is placed, and an atmospheric background. Although the panels convey a sense of timeless uniformity, each of the vessels has a different position on the table: some are on corners, some appear to be closer to the center. While the actual panels fit into a neat rectangular grid, the table within each of the images does not linearly correspond to the following table. Instead, the discontinuities highlight the fragmentary nature of the project, which encourages the viewer to be transported somewhere else.

Yet, as much as *9 Props* encourages imaginative leaps divorced from a specific time period, the work itself came about within a very particular historical context. The art world changed dramatically in the 1990s. Often defined by the watershed 1993 Whitney Biennial, the decade is memorialized in art history for pushing gender, race, sexuality, and other topics relating to identity to the forefront of artistic practices and criticism in ways that still resonate years later. Additionally, the Biennial facilitated a kind of conversation that appealed to both enthusiastic museum visitors and an expanded audience drawn from a wider social sphere. Shifts in museum acquisition and exhibition practices also gave women and artists of color opportunities for exposure in the art world.

The 1990s were pivotal years in Simpson’s artistic development. By 1995, she had completely stopped creating three-dimensional installations and had begun to focus almost exclusively on photographic impressions printed on wool felt—her new preferred material. Felt first appears in Simpson’s work in 1994, when, in her own words, she “decided to investigate the surface.”

In *9 Props* the thickness of the felt gives the panels dimension while the visible fibers suggestively trigger the viewer’s desire to touch the textured surface. Similarly, within Van Der Zee’s oeuvre, photographs function intrinsically through their materiality. Through one’s imagination, to pick up, pin, and notice the oval frames of the four Van Der Zee lapel buttons found within the Metropolitan Museum’s collection is to foreground their tactility (see fig. 8). In parallel ways, Van Der Zee’s photograph *Woman with a Goldfish Bowl* and the corresponding panel in *9 Props* both call attention to touch. Van Der Zee altered the physical surface of the original photograph by hand, meticulously etching or painting the butterfly, enhancing the delicate lines around the woman’s facial features, and hand-coloring the bouquet. The text in the corresponding panel also specifically mentions the “painted” butterfly and notes that the woman’s hand “rests on the rim of the bowl,” prompting the viewer to imagine the artist’s hand as well as the feel of the glass bowl. *9 Props* asks viewers to reframe the tactility of Van Der Zee’s photographs as a driving force of interpretation. Doing so supports a different approach to his work than existing histories have afforded.

**The Nude**

During the 1990s, a second shift occurred in Simpson’s art—the figure disappeared. Having established her reputation through evocative depictions of the Black female form, Simpson made a marked change with what has come to be known as the “bye, bye black girl” moment. In her felt works, Simpson often focuses on
objects that, at first viewing, have no direct correlation to Black life. As the art historian Huey Copeland argues, Simpson’s frustration with her artwork being interpreted as analogous to the social or political lives of Black individuals informed her “figurative retreat.”46 Understanding the reasoning behind Simpson’s omissions lends itself to thinking in parallel ways about Van Der Zee’s images. Instead of considering the social lives of his subjects, what if the nuances of each photograph’s materiality, its relationship to abstract forms, and its haptic qualities took center stage?47 Through Simpson’s reframing, Van Der Zee’s photographs can also be read through an attempt to retreat from the figure and an embrace of imaginative evocations of gesture, touch, and shape.

In “Reclining nude,” Simpson does something distinct. Though the figure is still physically absent, the title and text connect to the overarching interest in the female body within Simpson’s larger oeuvre. As Jones emphasizes in writing about Simpson’s turn away from the Black figure, “for decades [African American] artists found it difficult to describe the nude black female visually. After centuries of rape and abuse under slavery, even the erotics of personal pleasure were hard to imagine.”44 In its place, Simpson represents the reclining nude through the image of a tall vase with a rounded bottom and an upper section that angles outward like an extended crown. Below it, she offers this description:

A smiling woman rests her face on her right arm as her left arm crosses her breasts. Fabric is draped over the edge of the couch, around her hips and continues to the floor. Her legs are exposed, knees bent, and her left foot is tucked under her right. Flowers are strewn over the edge of the couch and on to the floor. An upside down vase sits on the floor, as if its position and the arrangement of flowers has been disturbed.

From this text the viewer can recreate an intimate scene of a woman comfortably posing with a smile across her face. Importantly, Simpson carefully separates the description of the more chaotically arranged props from that of the serene nude. Given the rarity of early twentieth-century photographs of the Black nude body
in affirmative representations, Van Der Zee’s photograph reveals the unlikely kinds of visuality that existed and thrived before the Black photographer’s camera during the Harlem Renaissance era (fig. 9). Moreover, with the body described as resting, bending, and sitting, the photograph becomes more than a historically exceptional example. Instead, through 9 Props, Simpson seems to suggest that the extraordinary aspects of Van Der Zee’s nude photograph are the representational possibilities he offers not to the subject but to the viewer as an occasion to linger on provocations of line, movement, touch, and sight.

Simpson’s composition in “Reclining nude” also provides the viewer with an additional alternative vantage point. First, this panel is the only one in 9 Props that does not feature a near exact replica of one of Van Der Zee’s props: the vase is missing the sturdy arms that grace the sides of Van Der Zee’s corresponding vase. Second, the vase appears in Van Der Zee’s photograph, and is described, counter to the one in the panel, as an upside-down object, echoing the arrangement of the heeled shoes in Simpson’s two-panel work from 1993—Upside Down, Right Side Up (fig. 10). As Simpson explains, the significance of this positioning of objects is indebted to the historical depictions of the body: “In Western art the representation of a figure upside down is death. So this is about absence of someone missing—that double absence of death.” While images of Saint Peter crucified head-down support Simpson’s statement about Western art and death, this quotation more importantly illustrates the expansive ways Simpson explores themes of absence throughout her larger body of work and brings these relational reflections on Van Der Zee to the fore.

Describing the vase as upside-down but featuring it as right side up may also remind the viewer of Simpson’s propensity toward the unconventional backward positioning of the Black female body. By depicting Black
women from behind, Simpson invites the viewer to look at women from a certain vantage point. This compositional device disrupts normalized patterns of viewing and offers another angle or approach. The backward figures serve the same purpose as the upside-down vase described in “Reclining nude.” 9 Props encourages viewers to approach Van Der Zee by sidestepping his subjects, gestures that make it difficult to engage with the existing historiography surrounding the photographer forever linked to the Harlem Renaissance era.

To read Simpson’s 9 Props as a kind of source material that supports and extends the history of Van Der Zee in a different direction is to offer a powerful interpretative framework supported by one’s imagination. As Simpson references larger themes that thread throughout her oeuvre, she gives the viewer an opportunity to begin to recast Van Der Zee’s work as well.

**A DUET**

At a lecture given in 2010, Simpson highlighted the importance of her own biography to her creation of 9 Props. Presenting before a slide of Van Der Zee’s Beau of the Ball (fig. 11), she recalled that both her parents had cameras, which she was allowed to hold but not to use. She then explained how she acquired her first camera as a child: “I remember cutting out coupons on the back of the Kleenex boxes to get a Polaroid camera. Since I had a cold I had enough boxes to get a camera which I later got that spring and I had that camera everywhere.”50 This experience has notable parallels with Van Der Zee’s own account of how he obtained his first camera: after coming upon an advertisement that promised a camera as a prize for selling packets of lady’s powder, he successfully sold the required amount and was rewarded with a camera, a few glass plates, and chemicals for developing.51

Although Van Der Zee’s experience preceded Simpson’s by nearly a century, she seems to have intentionally told this story in order to frame her artwork through her engagement with Van Der Zee’s biography as a photographer. As Simpson writes on her artistic practice more generally, “When presented with the opportunity to provide my own writing on the inner workings or the events behind the scenes of my work, I find that the elements that stand out the most are the anecdotal and coincidental moments that have perforated the plans I had originally envisioned.”52 In this case, the coincidental moment pays dividends in terms of putting Simpson and Van Der Zee in conversation across time in ways that cannot be gleaned from just looking at their work. In short, she uses the genre of biography to create a mirrored narrative.

In fact, to address two artists and their extensive engagement with photographs resonates with Simpson’s own description of 9 Props as an homage. As suggested by the phrase “to give props,” an homage acknowledges the worth and value of another person. To let this concept of a “prop” take the lead reinforces how Simpson’s work can push the boundaries of historical knowledge and specificity while handing the interpretation over to the viewer to follow whatever imagining 9 Props may elicit.53 With its exchange of forms between Simpson and the gaffers, Simpson and the printers at 21 Steps, and most notably Simpson and Van Der Zee, 9 Props is built on a duet between collaborators.54 The viewer, standing before 9 Props, becomes an added interlocutor within the work’s lineage. Through a range of textual details, visual forms, and supporting clues, the viewer is forced to labor over the experience of seeing 9 Props in order to imagine on their own terms. Such an engagement means that the narrative surrounding 9 Props is always being amended, even when these imaginative musings are absent from art’s published history.

**EMILIE BOONE**

Assistant Professor of Art History, African American Studies Department, CUNY, New York City College of Technology
NOTES

1 Schoener 1969; Cooks 2011, pp. 53–86; Cahan 2016, pp. 31–108.
2 For example, art historian Huey Copeland (2013, p. 65) uses the term “antiportrait” to define an aesthetic style common to this and other works by Simpson. See also the MMA online catalogue entry for 9 Props, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/490687; Villaseñor 1996, pp. 73, 74; and Eckrich 2014.
3 Smith 2020b, p. 92.
4 Ibid., pp. 92, 103. Additionally, Smith argues that 9 Props “gives props” to Van Der Zee and his visions of Black futurity and the future worlds Van Der Zee and his subjects conjured. Ibid., p. 92.
5 “Becoming” is a reference to Stuart Hall’s well-known use of the term. According to Hall, cultural identities are undergoing transformations through instances of “becoming” as well as of “being.” Hall 1990, p. 225.
6 Flusser 2005, p. 25. To situate Flusser within the larger discourse on imagination and photography, see Morris-Reich and Olin 2020, p. xix.
7 Blair 2007, p. 255.
8 See Campt 2012, p. 5.
9 Scholarship on photography and imagination includes a range of topics such as spirit photography and other intentionally modified, fictional photographs. In this article, imagination is what one does with one’s eyes closed when one is not seeing. Morris-Reich and Olin 2020, p. xvi. Such a definition aligns with Smith’s use of the term when considering 9 Props; Smith 2020a, p. 134. My use of the term imagination is also informed by Kara Keeling’s writing on the Black radical imagination as defined as “work(ing) with and through what exists in order to call forth something presently absent: a new relationship between and within matter.” Keeling 2019, p. 34. For a succinct summary on the black radical imagination, see ibid., pp. 34–36.
11 Ozelle 1994, p. 11.
12 The nine Van Der Zee photographs referenced in 9 Props are (from top left) Woman with a Goldfish Bowl, 1923; Beauty Salon, 1926; Benny Andrews, 1976; A Man in His Bedroom, 1931; Dinner Party with Boxer Harry Wills, 1926; Reclining Nude, 1920s–40s; Just Before the Battle, 1920s; Max Robinson, 1981; and, lastly, Tea Time at Madame C. J. Walker’s Beauty Salon, 1929. The MMA has prints of Dinner Party with Boxer Harry Wills, Reclining Nude, and Tea Time at Madame C. J. Walker’s Beauty Salon.
13 Simpson 2010.
14 Willis and Birt 1993.
15 Simpson 2010.
16 See the 1996 program catalogue of the Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, Washington. Both Morris and Marioni are established glass artists. Three works by Morris are in the Met’s collection (MMA 1994.388a–d; 1995.221.1a, b; 1995.221.2a, b).
17 Smith 2020b, p. 94.
19 Simpson 2010.
20 Ibid.
21 The studio on 135th Street was the first of four successive studios that Van Der Zee operated in Harlem.
22 Scholars have yet to critically consider the props found in Van Der Zee’s photographs. Other attributes within his photographs’ composition are often privileged. For example, Victoria A.-T. Sancho has written about the tactile surface of his photographs and how his employment of double exposures has carried him beyond the use of props; Sancho 1998, p. 56. See also Birt 1989, p. 39.
23 Willis and Birt 1993, p. 69.
25 For example, Charlie Ahearn insists that “Nas’s ‘Genesis’ was like a voice crying out in the desert; almost nobody was giving props to the pioneers back then, and I feel the track helped spark curiosity in the minds of the youth as to the origins of this thing we call hip-hop.” Dyson and Daulatzai 2010, p. 262.
26 Villaseñor 1996, p. 75.
27 Morrison credits a funerary photograph by Van Der Zee and the photographer’s description of the circumstances surrounding the death as early influences for her novel Jazz (1992); Gillespie 2008, p. 78. For the referenced photograph, and its description, see Van Der Zee, Dodson, and Billops 1978, p. 84. In Daughters of the Dust (1991), Dash employs the cinematic device of a layered dissolve as a conscious tributo Van Der Zee’s practice of superimposing images in some of his photographs; Pidduck 2004, p. 113. Julien claims that the mise-en-scène style in his film Looking for Langston (1989) is indebted to Van Der Zee’s photographs; Julien 2013, p. 48.
30 Robinson 1996, p. 35.
31 Simpson’s intended ordering and display of the nine panels are in the 2019 guidelines in the object file for 1998.456.5a-j, Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, MMA.
32 As Enwezor writes, “her work pushes the boundaries of historical knowledge and specificity.” Enwezor 1996, p. 51.
33 Willis and Birt 1993, p. 8.
34 For example, in “Frames of Mind,” Lucy Lippard notes how the ways in which props support a narrative are often dependent upon the deletion or subtraction of information. Along similar lines, she explains that a prop serves to efface or envelop the actual self: Lippard 1997, unpaginated. For an alternate way of thinking about the photographer as prop within a Cameroonian context, see Zeitlyn 2010.
36 Benjamin 1999, p. 515.
38 Lippard 1997, unpaginated.
40 Copeland 2014, pp. 26–27.
41 Jones 2002, p. 68.
43 Jones 2002, p. 68.
44 Ibid., p. 63.
45 This phrase was first used in a conversation between curator Thelma Golden and Kellie Jones mentioned in Golden 1994, unpaginated. See also Copeland 2005.
46 Jones 2002, p. 80. “Figurative retreat” is a term used by Copeland (2005) to describe Simpson’s absenting of the Black female figure.

47 Campt 2017, p. 9.

48 Jones 2002, p. 69. Also see Powell 1997, p. 146.

49 Wilkes 1993, p. 20.

50 Simpson 2010. Simpson also describes her first camera in a conversation with Joan Simon (2013, p. 183).

51 Willis and Birt 1993, p. 30.


54 I thank Jennifer Farrell and Liz Zanis of the Met’s Department of Drawings and Prints for framing the process of printmaking as an active collaboration between an artist and a printer.

REFERENCES


Dyson, Michael E., and Sohail Daulatzai, eds. 2010 Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas’s Illmatic. New York: Basic Civitas Books.


Lippard, Lucy 1997 “Frames of Mind.” In “From the Background to the Foreground: The Photo Backdrop and Cultural Expression,” Afterimage 24, no. 5 (March–April), unpaginated.


Pidduck, Julianne 2004 Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and the Past. London: BFI.


Robinson, Jontyle Theresa 1996 “Passages.” In Jontyle Theresa Robinson et al., Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists,


Van Der Zee, James, Owen Dodson, and Camille Billops 1978 The Harlem Book of the Dead. Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Morgan & Morgan.


ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

Buddhism and Silk: Reassessing a Painted Banner from Medieval Central Asia in The Met: © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford: fig. 5; bpk Bildagentur / Vorderasiatisches Museum, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany / Photo: Olaf M.Tebbner / Art Resource, NY: fig. 3; Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY: fig. 6; Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art: figs. 1, 2, 4; Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago: fig. 7

Radiance and the Power of Erasure in an Obsidian Lamaštu Amulet: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art: figs. 1–3; Photo by Miriam Said: fig. 5; © The Trustees of the British Museum: fig. 4; Courtesy of the Yale Babylonian Collection. Photography by Klaus Wagensonner: fig. 6

Ernst Herzfeld, Joseph Upton, and the Artaxerxes Phialai: © James C. R. Gill: figs. 2, 3; Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art: fig. 10; Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Peter Zeray: figs. 1, 4–9

New Insights into an Old Collection: Ptolemaic Pottery from Hibis (Kharga Oasis): © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY: fig. 10; Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Leiden, the Netherlands: fig. 6; Photo by Marjorie Shelley: fig. 5; © The Trustees of the British Museum: fig. 8; Zeeuws Museum, Middelburg, The Netherlands. Photo by Ivo Wenneges: fig. 9

Ernst Herzfeld, Joseph Upton, and the Artaxerxes Phialai: Photo by Henry Colburn: fig. 3; Photo by J-F de Lapérouse: figs. 2a, b; Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art: fig. 1

A Bat and Two Ears and Jusepe de Ribera’s Triumphant Virtue: © 2020 Carl Andre / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo by MBAC: fig. 10; © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY: fig. 7; Seymour Rosen. © SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments: fig. 6; © Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY: fig. 2; © Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian: front and back covers, figs. 4, 5, 6, 11, 12; © Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art: fig. 9; © Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian. Photo by Robert McKeever: fig. 1; © Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian. Photo by Paul Ruscha: fig. 3

“The Toughest, Meanest Art I Was Making”: Edward Ruscha’s Books: © 2020 Carl Andre / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo by MBAC: fig. 10; © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY: fig. 7; Seymour Rosen. © SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments: fig. 6; © Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY: fig. 2; © Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian: front and back covers, figs. 4, 5, 6, 11, 12; © Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art: fig. 9; © Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian. Photo by Robert McKeever: fig. 1; © Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian. Photo by Paul Ruscha: fig. 3

An Ode to James Van Der Zee: Lorna Simpson’s 9 Props: Photo by Russell Johnson: fig. 4; © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth: figs. 2, 3, 6, 10; © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art: fig. 1; © Donna Mussenden Van Der Zee: figs. 5, 7, 11; © Donna Mussenden Van Der Zee. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art: figs. 8, 9