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Topic; Cultural Feminism through artwork installation of *Brick House*

Research Question; To what extent does Simone Leigh sculptural artwork installation, *Brick House*, symbolically represent cultural feminism in the context of women of color?

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Artist; Simone Leigh

Title; Brick House

Medium Bronze and Clay

Year; 2019

New York Public Park.

Introduction

Simone Leigh's visual artwork comprises an array of media, including but not limited to sculptures, social performances, installations, and social practice. In the past, Leigh has described her artwork as auto-ethnographic with a particular focus and interest in feminism. Her works are expressly informed by the history and experiences of marginalized women of color and strive to reframe their harsh realities as central to society. The Brick House is an artwork that is a sculpture with a combination of a form of a skirt, a clay house, and the head represented as crowned by cornrows of braids. This research paper assesses the extent to which the artwork is symbolic and represents the ideals of cultural feminism. The visual analysis part of this paper is informed by the artistic elements that the artist has employed on the monument to convey a message of representing the marginalized women of color within the modern-day space(Leigh). The fact that it is a public monument strategically placed in the middle of New York is a significant part of its message regarding the social realities of women of color (Halley). As a symbolic representation of women of color, this artwork installation is analyzed using cultural feminism as a theoretical framework bound to guide the analysis process. This research is essential because it provides a contextual understanding of the role of visual artwork in societies that have marginalized women. By employing the artistic element in the formation of this artwork, this research paper assesses the integration of the cultural aspects that also inform the artwork with the artist's background being an ethnographer and a feminist. **Research Question;** To what extent does Simone Leigh's sculptural artwork installation, *Brick House*, symbolically represent cultural feminism in the context of women of color?

Description of the Artwork

Brick House is a sixteen-foot-tall bronze sculpture informed by the image of a woman of color whose head is crowned with afro-framed cornrows. The cornrows on the head of the Brick House are developed to form four braids. The body part forms a dome-like shape with patterns of ridges that move from the neck to the upper body part. It has a torso with imagery of a skirt and a clay house. The sculptural installation stands on the Plinth and stares down 10th avenue in New York(Halley). It is raised at the entrance of the elevated park of the former Central Railway in New York. Notably, the eyes of the image of the woman represented by the artwork are not open and appear as if closed. The color of Brick House resonates with that of black women from marginalized communities. It is dark and shiny, blending with the backdrop of the skyscrapers' mirrors, making it appear more appealing to the viewer. However, there is a sharp contrast with the environment in terms of the modern setting and the traditional features of the artwork installation(Leigh).

Formal Analysis

The visual and physical textures of Brick House play an important role in enhancing the message of cultural feminism for women of color in marginalized communities. Simone Leigh's artwork is formed from materials that are drawn from clay and bronze, which gives it a rough texture. The rough surface, particularly from the clay, resonates with the artwork's symbol, essentially a representation of women of color from west Africa and the Southern U.S. The fact that it has a rough texture also evokes the feeling that the women of color have been reeling in

the backdrop of modernity that has not strived to address the position of women from marginalized communities (Leigh). For this reason, the use of bronze and clay gives the artwork a rough texture that resonates with the overall thematic concern that Leigh communicates using Brick House.

The rough texture also informs the plight and resilience of the women from the southern U.S and West Africa. As a staunch feminist advocating for the empowerment and equal opportunities for women from marginalized communities, the artwork's dull and rough texture provides the viewers with a feeling of resilience that women are subjected to even in the wake of the increased calls from the feminist activists to address the plight of women. The braids and the decorated pattern of the torso add to the texture of roughness, making the viewer develop a feeling of sympathy towards the object. However, the choice of materials such as bronze and clay is also ingeniously used to represent the power of resilience that the women of color have, given that they come from patriarchal societies with oppressive systems that regard women as inferior(Leigh).

Another crucial artistic element that has been used in the artwork is colour. Leigh as ingeniously used the dull black colour to represent a gloomy mood that the oppression of women in marginalized communities experience. It is imperative to note that the clay and bronze that dominate the material used in the sculptural work blend with the dull colour bound to reinforce the meaning of the message that the artist conveys to the viewers. The dull colour symbolically represents women who have been silenced by the sociocultural changes in the modern world. The choice of the dull and dark colour to be a part of the Brick House is an exciting aspect that draws the viewer's attention to develop an emotional attachment to the artwork through the harsh

realities it is subjected to through the social systems and beliefs that are oppressive. It is imperative to note that the colour of the painting is reinforced by the texture formed by the materials used, bronze and clay. Notably, the low intensity of the artwork is attributable to the use of cultural feminism in which Leigh explores the social belief system that is anchored on presenting the female gender as weak and inferior. Arguably, the usage of black colour is also essential to depict a woman who is resilient and has maintained her indigenous identity(Halley). The social-cultural changes have not eroded the identity of the women from the indigenous societies. Unlike the bright colour that would elicit a happy mood and feel for the viewers, the choice of dull and dark colours for Brick House is also bound to make the viewers experience an emotional attachment associated with sympathy.

Space is also an element of the artwork that Leigh has used in this artwork to reinforce the theme of cultural feminism representing women of colour. Notably, the artwork is strategically placed right in the middle of the park, surrounded by modern skyscrapers. Since Leigh is interested in presenting women who have been neglected in the wake of the massive creation of awareness among women and the call for their empowerment, the artwork has been placed in the middle of the busy city life where the viewers are bound to focus on its existence. The negative space that comprises the modern-day structure, including the railroad and space in the park, is meant to give the viewers an acute sense of thought to determine what the artwork represents (Halley). Arguably, the sharp contrast between the artwork installation and the modern background illustrates the cultural differences women from marginalized communities face in the wake of modernization. The anatomy of architecture is an artistic element that Leigh has effectively used in Brick House., which has a measurement of 16feet height. The size is enough

for the viewers to focus on since it covers a considerably adequate space compared to the negative space in the backdrop dominated by modern skyscrapers. For this reason, the space as an artistic element has been used effectively by the artist to reinforce the place of women from marginalized communities.

Apart from the space Brick House occupies, there is the element of the form that Leigh has used effectively in this sculpture to represent native women symbolically. The head of the artwork has been decorated with cornrows and braids that resonate with those of the native women. Ideally, the form of the sculpture work is typically expressed in terms of the identity of the native women, particularly the African Americans and the Southern Americans. Since Leigh's artwork is based on the expression of the auto-ethnographic and culture, the combination of the decorative patterns on the head and the torso amplifies. Most importantly, the artwork's composition of bronze and clay reinforces the meaning of cultural influences that represent marginalized communities. Both bronze and clay are primarily associated with their use in the traditional setting where the native women are still reeling under the domination of the patriarchal systems (Benescu, 9). The idea of installing the artwork against the backdrop of a building made of steel and glass towers erected right in the middle of the earlier and older industrial brick building is symbolically significant in terms of the aesthetic value and interpretation of the artwork installation. Leigh is raising awareness through her artwork of the place of women in the emerging modernized lifestyle. There is a need to protect the interests of women from marginalized communities and preserve their identities in the wake of the changing demographics and cultures. As part of the anatomy of architecture representing the women from west Africa and Southern Africa, Leigh strives to illustrate that such women should also have a

place in the fast-changing landscapes and the architectural designs of the buildings engaging in negotiations.



Figure 2. *Brick House*; Simone Leigh

Another significant aspect of form that Leigh has effectively used in *Brick House* is the use of shape. As a three-dimensional shape dimensional figure, it is essential to note that Leigh has employed both the rough the smooth texture on the neck and the head. The contrasting texture makes it possible for the viewers to perceive the different materials used in the composition. Since the native women inform the work of the west African and Southern U.S, the contrast in appearance helps the artist to emphasize using this work on the existence of the identities of the women from the marginalized communities. Whereas the cornrows represent the indigenous women of the southern U.S, the dark complexion used in the artwork resonates with the black women from West Africa. In light of the research question herein, Leigh has successfully made it possible to combine aspects of two cultures and represent women through the framework of cultural feminism.

Most importantly, form as a dominating artistic element makes it possible for the viewers to perceive the sharp contrast in the representation of women from marginalized communities (Halley). The torso part of the artwork has significantly used the patterns of the decoration in the shape of traditional beads that represent women from the communities that have majorly denied women the opportunity to take part in influential decision-making processes (Frueh, 165). The fact that the artist has employed a structure that dominates the audience's view makes it possible to convey a message of having a place for women to take part in the significant decisions of society. Symbolically, the artwork installation is strategically placed in the middle of a city that represents the modern society where women have been relatively empowered to take part in the central decision-making process.

Cultural Functions of the Artwork

Simone Leigh is an auto-ethnographer who uses her artwork to inform the public about the cultures and address the plight of women in marginalized communities. Through her artwork, she can shed light and advocate for action to eliminate the existing stereotypes used in the past to oppress women. The *Brick House* conveys an important message about the central and significant place of women's cultures from marginalized communities. For example, the cornrow hairstyle originated in West Africa. It was explicitly used for the beautification and identity of the female, particularly those traded in America to work as enslaved people.

For this reason, the aesthetic elements that the artist has employed mainly convey an aspect of cultures that are still evident in the present day but have their origin drawn from a different cultural context(Benescu 8). Leigh's use of the cornrows on the head of Brick House is purposefully to communicate the culture and identity of women in the context of the

marginalized community. Notably, a significant function of the artwork installation used in this case of Brick House is the transmission of culture from a generation to modern-day women of colour. Ideally, they can trace their history and identity through the representation that is provided by the artwork installation. In line with cultural feminism, Leigh aims to ensure that the place and identity of indigenous communities are not compromised but reinforced through the works of art.

Another significant element of Brick House that is used to affirm women's identity is the name of the artwork, which is drawn from the form constituting clay and bronze. Ideally, native women from marginalized communities were regarded as inferior within the context of male-dominated societies. Arguably, women were regarded as weak through their physical attributes, which has been a major challenge of the gender stereotypes for women from marginalized communities. However, through this artwork installation, Leigh uses a concrete element to convey that women from marginalized communities are resilient. The title of the artwork is symbolic and translates to a brick house, which captures the viewer's imagination to focus on the stature of the artwork as a brick house. Ideally, a brick house is known to be resilient and would stand against bad weather and climate changes; for this reason, Leigh's choice of title reinforces the female identity through the use of artwork. It conveys a cultural significance in the modern-day world and the place of women in marginalized communities.

The use of beads as part of the torso decoration is a significant aspect of the indigenous women in marginalized communities. Since the artwork plays a pertinent role in transmitting the cultures, the Brick House is dominantly using the beads on the torso to communicate the identity of women who have not been part of the feminist movement that advocates for equal

opportunities for women. The fact that it has been placed right in the middle of busy streets depicting modernization, the form of artwork installation is representative of the traditional identity of women. Leigh expresses the concerns of an ethnographer interested in advocating for the rights of women who have been sidelined in the wake of calls for women's empowerment(Helley). Additionally, body adornment for women is attributable to the identity in cultures where women are identified by their physical attributes through their dressing. Leigh uses aesthetic visual attributes that are related to feminine identity.

Cultural Feminism Analysis of Brick House

Leigh's artwork, *Brick House*, is informed by cultural feminism in that it uses the female anatomy to communicate the significance of women's identity. Ideally, cultural feminists deconstruct the existing stereotypes between male and female anatomies within the cultural context. The shape of the artwork reveals the female anatomy that is bound to represent women's dominating position in society(Benescu,7). It is imperative to note that the size of the sculpture also reinforces the identity of women, which also resonates with ideologies of cultural feminists who strive to value the qualities of women as superior. The torso part of *Brick House* dominates the artwork and the viewers' focus. As part of promoting women's liberation from the gender stereotypes associated with female physical attributes, such as the anatomy of their bodies, this is an important aspect of cultural feminism. *Brick House* is also aimed at depicting feminine qualities that are shared with women across different cultures. For this reason, an element of cultural feminism dominates *Brick House*, as is evident in Leigh's aesthetics and artistic elements. Another pertinent aspect of the artwork is the shared cultural feminism ideology in the shared values among women from all cultures and races. Instead of addressing the plight of

women according to their cultures and race, cultural feminists are interested in identifying the commonplace for women across different cultures. Consequently, Leigh strategically places the Brick House in the backdrop of a society that has a mixture of women from various cultural backgrounds who have been a part of advocating for women's empowerment. In the wake of the reforms and creating awareness among women from marginalized communities, the artwork effectively answers the research question herein by ascertaining the extent to which Leigh has employed the artistic elements to address inclusive cultural feminism.

The representation of the black women using the artwork is attributable to the cultural context that informs the artwork. Black women from marginalized communities still reel under the oppressive systems that are meant to suppress their ability to make critical choices by themselves. Instead, they are dominated by patriarchal systems (Lugones, Maria & Elizabeth 494). The idea of installing a sculpture representing the harsh realities of the African women in the middle of the city public park addresses their issues with the focus of presenting them to the entire world. The display of the Brick House in public proves the replicating experiences and identities of women across cultures in the world. For this reason, the *Brick House* is a representation that is not only limited to showcasing the realities and identities of black women but extends to representing women who have been reeling under oppressive male-dominated systems.

The artwork deviates from radical feminism by presenting women's anatomy as a physical attribute that gives them identity as it is installed through the anatomy architecture for public display. Leigh conveys a message of pride in the physical attribute of women. Right from the head and the torso, the artwork is informed by the artwork conveying a message of women

taking pride in their physical attributes presented through the anatomical structure and form. Most importantly, Leigh deconstructs the gender stereotype associated with women with their anatomy as inferior. Thus, the ideals of cultural feminism have been used effectively in the formulation of the artwork to represent women of colour.

Leigh also conveys the message of equality of power using Brick House. Ideally, in male-dominated societies, women are placed below men in the social hierarchy of power, making it difficult for women to participate in decision-making. However, by using the Brick House as an artistic work, Leigh advocates for equality of power for both men and women. The structure of the head and torso represent the female anatomy in public, which is symbolically important concerning a representation that translates to the position of women in modern-day society(Halley). The fact that the artwork has been installed in modern-day society conveys a message that it is possible to have a fair representation of women, even those from marginalized communities. For this reason, Leigh successfully used artistic elements to represent the ideals of feminism for women of colour. Brick House consists of the head and torso balanced evenly to reinforce the message of the representation of women of color (Frueh 157). Ideally, balance allows the viewer to pay attention to the parts of the artwork evenly since every element is important in conveying the themes and message of the artwork. Additionally, there is a balance of colour for the head and the torso, which are dominated by dark and dull hues. With the Brick House influenced by the identities and cultures of women from marginalized communities, then its visual appeals are significantly resonating with women of color.

Discussion

Leigh's choice of artistic elements in the formation of Brick House has significantly helped reinforce the theme of feminism and represent women of colour. Ideally, the cultural and historical context of the artwork is important to the overall understanding of its position of Leigh when installing Brick House. The visual appeals and aesthetic on the head convey the feminist art message of women's representation of the choice of color and resonates with the overall

message of representation of women of color. Notably, dull color gave the viewers a feeling of sad emotion that is required to convey the oppression women of color undergo in male-dominated societies (Benescu 7). On the other hand, the choice of aesthetic elements in the artwork reinforces the representation of women from marginalized communities. For example, the choice of cornrows on the head of Brick House resonates with West African women in the epoch of slavery. As such, there is a significant cultural and historical attachment to the work through the pattern of materials she has used in Brick House.

Additionally, the combination of materials such as clay and bronze for the making up of the sculpture of Brick House resonates with the idea of women's empowerment since the materials are part of illustrating the resilience of women from marginalized communities. It is not only artwork with artistic elements but an important part of deconstructing the gender stereotypes that women are inferior. A closer assessment of the Brick House reveals it as a representation of women who have maintained their identity and have significantly contributed to the efforts of the liberation of oppressed women. Most importantly, artistic elements such as space and hue have been used by Leigh to aid in the representation of women's identity and their role in the development of awareness that makes it possible to liberate those who are reeling under the domination of men(Leigh). The fact that the idea of Brick House is drawn from cultural feminism, the strategic position of the artwork installation provides a sharp contrast between modern city life and the traditional representation of women of color.

Evaluation

The Brick House is part of Leigh's artwork contributing to her call for women's empowerment. Ideally, the representation of women of colour from marginalized communities is evident

through the usage of artistic elements that reinforce the meaning. The viewers can perceive the representation of women's cultures through the decorations, such as the cornrows and beads that dominate the sculpture's head and torso. Leigh has successfully integrated the two aspects of cultures and identity through the materials used, the bronze and clay symbolically representing the women of color (Frueh, 154). By using cultural feminism as a guiding theoretical framework for assessing the artwork, it is evident that Leigh uses the artwork to advocate and empower women who are reeling from male domination. A rough texture dominates the composition of *Brick House*, which translates to the resilience of the native women from marginalized communities. It is imperative to note that the research question that informed this paper was to assess the extent to which Leigh has represented cultural feminism within the context of women of color (Frueh, 153). The artistic elements such as color and texture have an identity that resonates with that of the native women from west Africa and the Southern U.S through the cornrows beads used for the aesthetic values of *Brick House*.

Conclusion

The *Brick House* is a monumental public artwork representing women of color from marginalized communities. Simone Leigh employs artistic elements that include but are not limited to color, texture, space, and aesthetics to represent women's empowerment through art. By installing the artwork in the middle of the public city park in the backdrop of the modern architectural designs of skyscrapers, Leigh has conveyed a message of women's empowerment even amid modernization. The sharp contrast between modernity and tradition does not translate identity crisis for women of color. The research question has been answered successfully through

the critical assessment of the artistic elements and the theory of cultural feminism employed in the analysis of Brick House.

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