FUSE

A *BOMB* PODCAST

VISUAL ARTISTS

Simone Leigh & Madeleine Hunt Ehrlich

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Simone Leigh is an artist working with sculpture, installation, and video, as well as social practice. In 2018, Leigh was awarded the Guggenheim Museum's Hugo Boss Prize, and her sixteen-foot sculpture, Brick House*, is currently installed on New York's High Line.*

Madeleine Hunt Ehrlich is an artist, filmmaker, and Assistant Professor in Film and Television Production at Queens College, City University of New York. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including a Rema Hort Mann Award and a UnionDocs fellowship.

Chantal McStay Welcome to FUSE: A BOMB Podcast. In each episode, we bring together artists across disciplines to discuss their work and creative practice. We've been taking this approach since 1981, delivering the artist's voice. Here's how it works. We invite a distinguished voice in visual art, literature, film, music, or performance for a conversation with whomever they'd most like to speak with. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. For this episode, we asked artist Simone Leigh who she'd most like to speak with.

Simone Leigh I pick Madeline because I've collaborated with Madeleine for over ten years, and I don't think that people are that aware of our relationship.

CM Simone Leigh is an artist working with sculpture, installation, and video, as well as social practice. In 2018, Leigh was awarded the Guggenheim Museum's Hugo Boss Prize, and her sixteen-foot sculpture, Brick House, is currently installed on New York's Highline. Madeleine Hunt Ehrlich is an artist, filmmaker, and Assistant Professor in Film and Television Production at Queens College, City University of New York. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including a Rema Hort Mann Award and a UnionDocs Fellowship. Artists Simone Leigh and Madeleine Hunt Ehrlich are longtime collaborators and friends. In this episode, they talk about experimenting with new media, the importance of failure in a career, and what it means to be a race woman.

SL When did we first meet?

Madeleine Hunt Ehrlich Hmm. Well, I remember that. I think at the time, I was working in all these different studios and working part-time at Aperture, and I really was so hungry for an artist who was like, looked like me, was interested in the community I came from. And then I was at a Be Black Baby Party, and I met you.

SL Oh, I remember that you had already done the Haitian photography work, and I also remember that you walked around Jamaica disguised as a boy (laughter), which I thought was really fabulous.

MHE My mind was completely blown that you were, at that time in your work, making ceramic plantains.

SL Mmm, mhm.

MHE And I felt an immediate kinship that you recognized the importance of that icon and symbol.

SL Yeah.

MHE And I was also very interested in a kind of vernacular, Caribbean image. And again, really emerging from, you know, the

way art and art history had been taught in schools at that time and the field of the art world at that time, which was—and we've talked about this a little bit recently—about how just even ten years ago, it really was hard to find an entirely black conversation about art.

SL Yeah.

MHE And you were just the...kind of the model of a white male art practice, and the theory that they were interested in, and the ideas they were...just the playing field was completely dominated by that, and you were, at that time, really stuck out as...

SL Yeah.

MHE ...someone completely unintimidated by that.

SL Oh, that's...I mean, that's such a compliment. I didn't think of myself as that. I just felt like I didn't have anything to lose, and I certainly wasn't being an artist because I wanted to make money or anything. You know, I kind of, at that point, realized I wasn't going to stop making work and just sort of embrace being an artist. I guess I didn't expect to be able to get through certain gates anyway, so I didn't see a reason to perform, you know, being some other kind of artist. You know what I mean? I'm just trying to remember how we ended up at the...so the first thing we did was the Studio Museum?

MHE I did different odd jobs in your studio, and that's how we started going to the Caribbean Epistemologies...

SL Seminar.

MHE ...Seminar together.

SL (*Laughter*) It was so great.

MHE It was a really incredible reading group, essentially, of scholars of the Caribbean, from all over the city.

SL One of the many lovely parts of our relationship is that you did Critical Race Theory twenty years after I did, and so it was like a way for me to catch up on all the change, you know, that had gone on, because I was reading pretty much and trying to stay aware as I could, but it's not like going to college twenty years later.

MHE And the fact is, because we're educated in the context of a canon that is Western-focused, is that the audience for black artwork aren't necessarily also educated or versed in that canon. And so there's, it's this really funny thing where, when you put a bunch of black artists in a room, chances are they know each other's references.

SL Mhm. Yeah, exactly.

MHE But I really would love to just take a step back and talk about the Be Black Baby Parties, because...

SL Oh, okay.

MHE ...I think it's a really wonderful (*laughter*) part of the, yeah...

SL Well, the Be Black Baby Party was an event that I curated at Recess Activities, and it started when I saw a ten-minute section of Hi Mom!, Brian De Palma's film, that had recorded in either the '60s or '70s. I'm not sure when that film was made, but I know that it was made so early. who's the guy who did Taxi Driver?

MHE Scorsese?

SL No, the actual taxi driver.

MHE Robert De Niro.

SL Robert De Niro was in the film, and his name wasn't spelled correctly. That's how early it was—in the credits.

[CLIP FROM *HI MOM!* DIRECTED BY BRIAN DE PALMA] (*laughter*)

"Yeah. you know, the next thing we do now that you are black, as white people we wanna kinda get to know you better, 'cause you know all white people wanna get to know black people, is that right? That's right, and we want to kinda get to know you better, and kinda socialize with you, and kinda understand what you're about, black people. See because we're white and you're black.

We're black now.

Yeah that's right. You look like—look at her—you see. So we wanna kinda get into your personal lives, you know, just just to be friendly. Okay? So why don't we break up and get to know each other individually. Okay? Yeah, my name is, uh, John Dillinger, you understand?

Hello.

How you doing? Right, listen do you have any ID on you?

Any idea on me?

No, ID—identification.

Yes, uh, my wallet.

No, could I see it for a second?

MHE The scene of Be Black Baby in that film is so timely still.

SL Mhm.

MHE I mean it just never stops being relevant. I wonder if it ever will.

[CLIP FROM "BE BLACK BABY" BY GRADY TATE] be black baby

SL It was Serena Basta and Karen Schneider...

MHE Mmm.

SL ...that I remember, that Serena, like, got up. She had chosen this film. I'd never seen it before. she got up and came over and sat down and put her arm around me right before the scene.

[CLIP FROM *HI MOM!* DIRECTED BY BRIAN DE PALMA]: Be black baby, be black.

SL And I never asked her why she did that, but I probably was the only black person in the room at the time. And I think she was concerned...

MHE During the film screening?

SL During the screening, yeah. 'Cause I saw it for the first time during the screening.

MHE Wow.

SL And I just felt like it was a performance that could have happened the week before in New York.

MHE Right!

SL It was so contemporary.

MHE Right.

SL It just shocked me. And I didn't know what to do with it, so I sent it out to a group of artists, some of who I'd worked with before, or knew in some or other context. And this was what, 2007? 2008? So that became the first Be Black Baby Party. And it was necessary. I mean, it was interesting, for me, also, I was trying to do something. we were kind of in the wake of post-blackness, where nobody liked it. It didn't work for anyone. you know, it was supposed to be an interesting thought experiment. It turned into some kind of, like, baton to wield against Black artists, that they needed to get the race out of their work and grow up and become just an artist.

MHE Hm.

SL You know? And people were casually saying… like, I remember at The Kitchen someone said to me, "He's such a great artist. his work isn't about race." And so that would be like the mark of a real artist if you were of color, is that you had, like, scrubbed all the ethnic markings off of your work. I wanted to respond to that as well.

MHE I know being your friend and being someone who works with you, I know there's always, whether it's a historic event, an organization, a moment in history, there is always some kind of primary text behind the work that is always as thrilling to me as the work, and then I always feel that, you know, it's this insider knowledge that you don't always share about your installations or exhibitions. But one thing that we shared in kind of that way was the Tents...

SL Oh, yeah.

MHE ...as The United Order of Tents, as women who've inspired you and have also inspired me, and it shows up in the work directly and indirectly, right?

SL Yeah.

MHE Yeah.

[CLIP FROM *SPIT ON THE BROOM* DIRECTED BY MADELEINE HUNT EHRLICH]: The Order of the Tents is so mysterious that it is almost impossible to obtain any information of the organization, its foundation, its age, its extent, its numbers or strength. The origin of the Order is obscure, or else the reticence of the members has become so fixed a habit on account of the many efforts that have been made to invade it.

MHE The Tents, just to distill, are the oldest continuous group of African American women. Because they were founded during the Underground Railroad, their history is very much oral, as well as

documented. But there are versions of the story that say they were founded in the 1840s in Philadelphia in the tent cities by a highly organized group of black women, running from the South up to the Northeast, who are doing everything from providing medical care for one another, pooling their resources, and also, you know, have a strong sense of protecting one another.

SL There was that disastrous performance video at PS1.

MHE Oh my gosh. I forgot about that.

SL And I probably would have never even stumbled upon The Free People's Medical Clinic and then the Tents if not for that.

MHE One thing that I've really loved that we've talked about is how productive failure can be in process.

SL Yeah...

MHE And it can be really terrifying, especially for where I'm at in things, where I feel every dollar for my projects. And it sometimes feels just very precious. But one thing I know we've talked about is just how failure is this unavoidable part of things. or perceived failure, right?

SL No, like real failures. I mean, one of the things that I struggle with is the mythology around what an artist is, that they produce masterworks, and they're almost like a...What is it, Midas? that touches things and they turn to gold? And especially when they have work that has market value, there's expectation that everything they do is a masterpiece. And with that romantic background, you know, I have to try and explore new materials and forms, like film and video, and it's oppressive. But that was a particularly upsetting failure because so many artists that I respect and love were in the room when we played this video, and it just didn't make any sense at all for what I was asked to do. And I do value those experiences, and I do feel like they're just...Yeah, like you were saying, they're just necessary.

MHE Right.

SL You know, they're just a necessary part of the process.

MHE But one thing I wanted to also point out that I really admire in your practice that I also have been thinking about in my own work, and generally, is the instinct for community building around art-making. There is this really wonderful quote that I've been holding very close that was said to me by Mabel Haddock, who's this, I would call Queen of Black film. (laughter) Who's done a lot for black filmmakers in the last maybe thirty, forty years. And she and I were in a conversation where she talked about, Well, you know, if there is a black aesthetic in film and art, it is to tell the stories of communities and not just individuals.

SL Mmm.

MHE And thinking about that instinct as being inherently one that comes from a politic of decolonizing, right? But in your practice, you know, on the one hand, you're a master sculptor. But on the other hand, you're always creating, right? You're also always engaging and creating space, holding space.

SL I think that I'm just really good at strategy. I think I'm a good strategic thinker. (laughter) I do, I do.

MHE There's a politic to it, too.

SL Oh, yeah, definitely. I have politics. And I feel like sometimes I would describe myself as, um, what do you call that, like, a race woman. And I wanted to have that competence somewhere in my practice, and I just had a knack for ceramics. It also started me on my research because when I was eighteen, I went to the Smithsonian African Art and did a residency there over the summer where I worked with the ceramic curator and realized that only missionaries had collected a lot of the information about West African pots, and so became also aware of this, like, failure of the archive, that it wasn't going to be there for me, with the things I need access to.

MHE Just to also piggyback a little on what you were saying about this idea of the master, and I feel like there's a tension in what I'm about to say, because on the one hand a part of trying to approach art-making and storytelling as from a position of black feminism is, I believe, or I'm coming to believe, about this idea, as we were talking about earlier, of the community and not just the individual. And if we don't make visible the ways that labor is interconnected, then we'll never...we will kind of erase permanently the great contributions of black women over the course of history. Like if we don't make visible all the conditions of art-making...then the White House was officially designed by whoever's name is on the blueprints.

SL Mhm. Yeah.

MHE Or, you know, the streets of DC are officially laid out by whatever white person's name is on those plans, as opposed to Benjamin Banneker or the many, you know, the many black laborers who actually are responsible for all this architecture, like incredible design.

SL Yeah.

MHE And so it's really, I think, a crucial part of revising. That is, not just having the kind of European auteur, but also making space for these different ways that there's many kinds of labor that depend on each other to make things. I feel like that's something you do intuitively in your practice.

SL I do think that sometimes...I think it's intuitive, but I think also its strategic. Like, at a certain point I realized, with these things that you have to write alongside shows, wall text and whatnot, that it was helpful sometimes to point to these kinds of events. Or also, I came to a realization at a certain point that, you know, the larger audience doesn't know who AfriCOBRA is. At that point, no one had. The work of The Free People's Medical Clinic had been largely forgotten. And then what was wonderful about doing that project was learning about the Tents and their strategy of secrecy, which, being an artist, we're always like seeking to gain more visibility for the work, and it

was really wonderful to think, like, why not go in the other direction? And I really have learned so much from those women.

So I'm going to talk about Rashida Bumbray, who's become like an ongoing curator, a very close friend, another artist who I collaborate with often, was guest curator at Creative Time for Black Radical Brooklyn. And I was one of four artists that were doing large installations in Bedford-Stuyvesant, in a neighborhood that used to be called...or adjacent to a neighborhood that used to be called Weeksville, and that was basically absorbed into Bed-Stuy. In the Weeksville archive, I found a conversation between two Tents and also became aware or very shocked that me and all my extremely well-educated friends had never heard of the Tents, that they had really been that secret that. I mean, maybe if I grew up in the South, I would have been aware of them, but it was so shocking to me, and I remember calling this Virginia number, and it's actually Lodis who picked up the phone. And she said, "United Order of Tents." And I was so shocked that it wasn't, like, a myth that I had to hang up and call back because I was literally like, Can't deal! *(Laughter.)* And so that's how it started.

[MUSIC CLIP FROM *SECRETS OF THE TENTS* DIRECTED BY MADELEINE HUNT-EHRLICH, PRODUCED BY KAITLYN GREENIDGE AND SIMONE LEIGH]

MHE We ended up going down there for a national conference for Southern District Number One together with the writer Caitlin Greenidge who had worked at Weeksville and had recorded that original oral history.

SL Yes.

MHE And, this is a few years back, and, as a result of that experience, or I think the Tents have manifested many times in your work, and I began a journey that you really, in some ways, you know, pushed me to. (laughter) You know, there just were things that needed to be done to support them. And one thing I've discovered, since doing different kinds of work with the Tents, and for them, as

well as making artwork also inspired by their history, is that there are a number of different loose, informal collectives of black women in different disciplines who have also seen the need to do this work, which I find really fascinating in this kind of wonderful way, that the instinct actually mirrors the organization itself. The instinct to preserve finds a similar form to the organization itself. It's really lovely.

SL Yeah, you know, in thinking about the Tents at that time, when the Free People's Medical Clinic was up, is when the Mother Emanuel Church was attacked by the white supremacists, and, several people who were in prayer on Wednesday, Wednesday night prayer service—I just can't get over that part of it—were murdered. And that same church, after Nat Turner's rebellion, all of South Carolina, they banned black churches, and all those churches went underground. That church met for thirty-five years in secrecy.

MHE Right.

SL So I feel like the lethal nature of being black outside spurred on a lot of this strategy of being secret. It was like very practical, but I also realize that is something very useful to us now. So we went down with Kaitlyn, who had asked to do a piece on me, and when I discovered that she was the woman who had recorded, made that recording, when she was an archivist at Weeksville, and she had this gig with Lenny Letter, we decided to do it together. And so this was the, I guess this is like our fourth project together at this point. I mean, I'm not even privy to all the things that you're doing with the Tents now. But I know that their whole archive is like now in the Smithsonian because of Madeline.

MHE Yeah.

SL She did that. And then there's these wonderful films that you've been making,

MHE When I got to the process of finally saying, okay, I would like to make a film...

SL Mhm.

MHE ...inspired by the Tents and these women and their history, I was really counseled by that secrecy...not even because I think they, in their current iteration, value the same level of secrecy they once did, but from my own education, as designed by myself, that we've talked about, that you build, from my understanding of post-colonial theory, and really thinking about the idea that I would just sit down and say, here's the history, really comes from, in some ways, a kind of Western or colonial impulse, like a manifest destiny impulse. I felt really, um, really like that...the right approach was to use abstraction.

SL Mm. Mhm.

MHE And—

SL And opacity.

MHE Right. And it was just really clear that that was what was appropriate. And there is an argument for the need to preserve history and share history, and that's really important work. And then there's also the importance of the ways that abstraction has been an important boundary and way of preserving dignity...

SL Mhm.

MHE ...and kind of protecting the personhood of black women or marginalized folks.

SL Yeah. Because I think that there's this capitalist impulse that happens whenever something beautiful or precious or new happens. Like, how can we codify this? How can we make it valuable, which, as soon as the Lenny Letter piece came out, we had, like...HBO asked us if they could do a piece on the Tents, and they told us really frankly that they were only interested in their secrets.

MHE Right, that was the direct quote.

SL (*laughter*) So it was really, I remember the embarrassment of the women that had to deliver this request. And they, I think before it, they were like, we know that you're not gonna really be interested in this at all, but we're just gonna ask you…

MHE It really speaks to the importance of being able to see ourselves as envisioned by ourselves, because I think the impulse is always going to be from someone else to just, you know, pull up your skirt.

SL Yeah.

MHE And I think that there's a great experience that we can have of seeing ourselves through black women's eyes, all, entirely, exclusively.

SL Yeah.

MHE But I'm always thinking, too, about—and this is very much in conversation with you, Simone, in conversation with my own mother, in conversation with really all these different black women artists who I really consider a part of my kind of art mothering—I'm always also thinking about the importance of our gaze and how little we know about it still, and how much we're trying to talk to each other about it. And that really informs how I approach film—making film, form, the citations in the work—is that project of the black female gaze.

SL One of the things—and this is why I was saying earlier that I think that I'm strategic—is that I started to say that my work is primarily for a black-women audience.

[CLIP FROM *WOMEN'S WORK* DIRECTED BY JA'TOVIA GARY]: I'm aware of having lots of other audiences, but that's probably the audience I have most in mind. It just didn't seem like a limited thing to me. I think that's a pretty broad audience.

The thing that was most successful for me about saying that is it attracted so many relationships that I have, with Lorraine O'Grady, with Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, started with them asking me why I was saying that, and are acknowledging that they were really relieved to hear it. And so it sort of attracted like-minded thinkers and gave me an automatic...and it started to produce the audience that I wanted to have.

MHE Right.

SL So...

MHE I think a lot of younger folks, and I'll include myself, appreciate you for pioneering in that way. And, you know, I think that the relationships that you're talking about, relationships you've built over the course of this process, but I think that even ancillary or within the ways you've activated your exhibition spaces, other people have formed other relationships. So I think it's actually a kind of ripple effect.

SL Yeah.

MHE And I think about, again, when I was just getting out of school in my early twenties, there really just…you know, my mom is an artist, and I grew up in New York with many artists, but there still was a sense of the scarcity of mentorship that came from black women who had art careers. It's invaluable, and I think that we carry each other with us in so many ways.

SL It's really true. A lot of my mentees usually end up educating me. But, there's this thing that's happening now where I really feel a responsibility, because so many people are watching, especially young black artists. You know, I want to say thank you, Madeleine, for educating me over all these years in such a kind way. *(laughter)* And especially letting me know what I don't know. And I really appreciate it.

CM This episode was recorded at Pioneer Works, a nonprofit

Cultural Center dedicated to experimentation, education, and production across disciplines. FUSE is produced by Libby Flores, Director of Audience Development and Digital Production at BOMB. It is co-produced and edited by Myra Al-Rahim and Sophie Kazis with production assistance by Ethan Premison. I'm Chantal McStay, Associate Editor at BOMB Magazine. Our theme music is "Black Origami" by Jlin. Additional music by Ray Suen. Be sure to subscribe to FUSE wherever you listen.