

# Film projects put conceptual artist's pictures in motion

By Neil Kendrick

**A**s a conceptual artist and photographer, Lorna Simpson is used to working in sporadic bursts of activity. But unlike many artists, Simpson doesn't have a disciplined work ethic by which she always can be found in her studio. She is only at work when there's a specific project she is determined to complete.

"It's like a crazy, mad rush," said Simpson, one of the many internationally known artists participating in inSITE97, opening Sept. 26.

"I have an idea . . . and then it's up to the last minute. There's always drama around it and then it gets done and I'm happy. But I almost kill myself and everyone else involved."

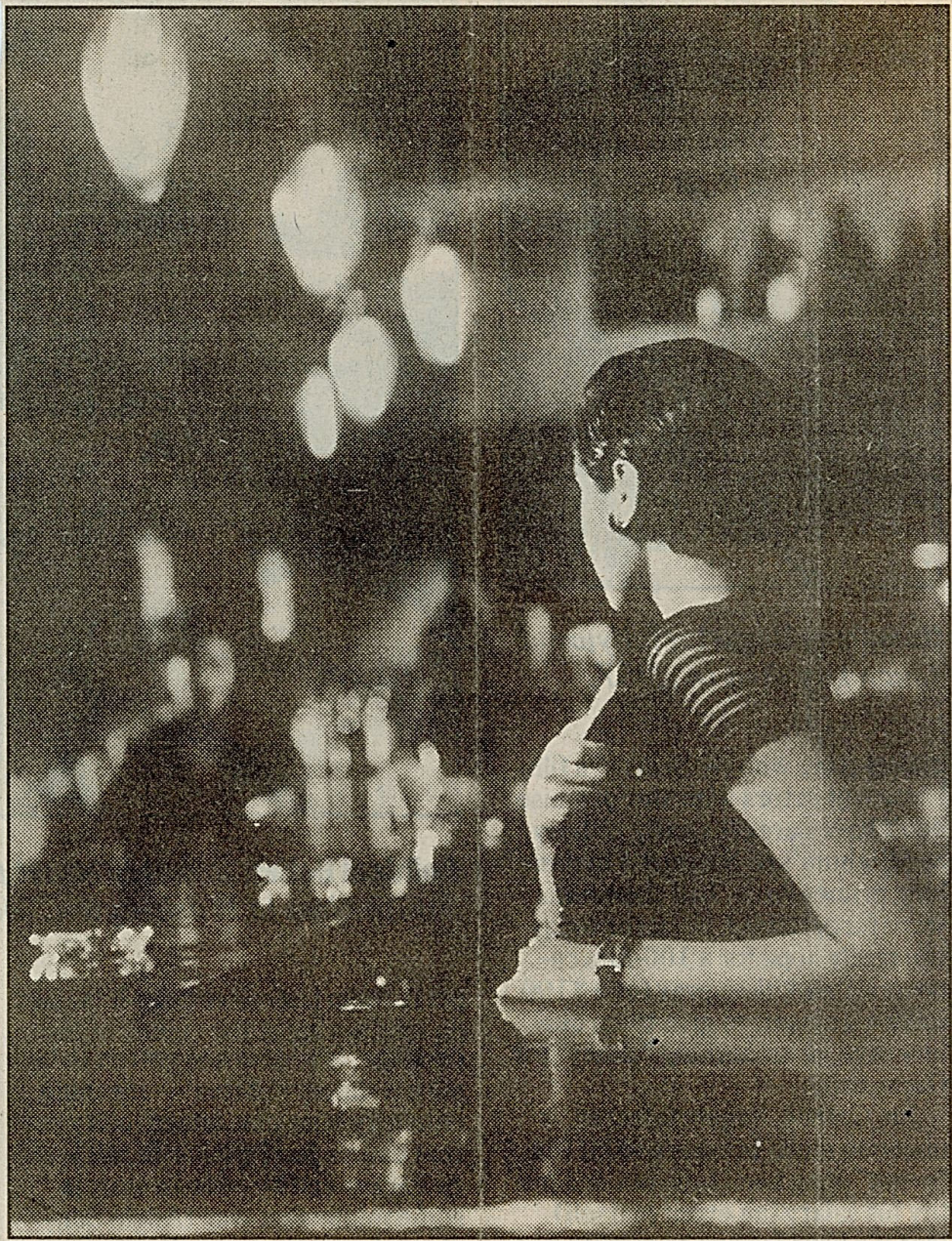
For her inSITE project, the Brooklyn-based artist is exploring the realm of filmmaking. And she's finding that her old methods are no longer an adequate means to an end.

Making the transition from photography to film, Simpson is finding pre-production planning to be critical. Fortunately, her 25-minute, 16mm film, "Call Waiting," is built around stationary camera shots.

"Just in terms of budget, a stationary camera is a nice, little money-saver," Simpson said with a laugh.

"Call Waiting" is a series of phone conversations in which characters speak in Chinese, Punjabi, Spanish and English. Although the characters are separated by language and distance, they are linked by a shared confusion about personal relationships, and life in general.

According to Simpson's written outline for "Call Waiting," this open-ended knot of interweaving lives remains unresolved and ambiguous. The callers find themselves trying in vain to express what they really mean. Phone connections are made yet rarely understood. Despite the obvious language barriers, the premise of Simpson's film suggests that the affairs of the heart know no boundaries.



LORNA SIMPSON

**Making connections:** *Lorna Simpson's film, "Call Waiting," will explore boundaries, personal and otherwise.*

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## Comet's trail

Long before her film projects, Simpson's career had left a comet's trail of accolades since she earned a master of fine arts degree in 1985 from the Visual Arts department at the University of California San Diego.

As an emerging artist in the mid-1980s, she created enigmatic, photographic images juxtaposed against cryptic language. Those pieces usually involved the female figure or its implied presence via hair. Without being pedantic or preachy, Simpson's postgraduate work offered edgy commentary on the slippery dynamics of race and gender. Such was the case with "Wigs," a 1994 installation of lithographs presented at Balboa Park's Museum of Photographic Arts.

"If (the work) is still-image and text, it becomes this thing of puns and reversals and, somewhat, the structure of language and the way that you interpret it," Simpson said.

"And after you read it, it may echo or it may suggest something else other than what's seen in the image or what's actually stated. There's a certain amount of subtlety to that, because you can spend time reading the text or you can hold the text in your head and re-think it."

Simpson's photo-based mind games have been exhibited in arts institutions around the globe, ranging from New York's Whitney Museum of American Art to being the first black female artist to represent the United States at the much-revered Venice Biennale.

Despite the spotlight focused on her ongoing body of work, Simpson is anything but the reclusive artist gorged with self-importance. When the 36-year-old artist talks about how her life and art are intertwined, her candid observations are coupled with a disarming sense of humor. She knows that art is only part of her life experience. And once the work leaves her studio, it takes on a life of its own, as part of a larger dialogue in the world at large.

"Call Waiting" brings Simpson's

art full circle to her days as a graduate student with an avid interest in film. After all, Simpson said she left her hometown of New York City partly to immerse herself in California's history as a hotbed for conceptual art.

While at UCSD, Simpson also studied film theory with Jean-Pierre Gorin, a onetime collaborator of French new-wave director Jean-Luc Godard, during his days with the radical Dziga Vertov group of the late '60s and early '70s.

"I've always had an interest (in film), but didn't pursue it because I didn't have the money to do that and the photographic work at the same time," Simpson said. "So within the past year-and-a-half, opportunities have come to me where I'm able to fashion these small pieces."

She was invited to participate in an artist-in-residence program at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio. On a visit to the facility, Simpson said she noticed that the Wexner Center had an AVID computer film editor and access to other state-of-the-art film equipment. It was a chance to put her filmmaking ideas into action.

With Wexner funding the project, Simpson hired Columbus-based cinematographer-editor Tom Hayes,

along with a small crew, and began working on her 16mm film, "Interior/ Exterior Full-Empty."

The simple narrative of "Interior/ Exterior . . ." unfolds as a series of vignettes, with characters sharing humorous, anecdotal tales about personal relationships. As with Simpson's photographic work, the characters are mostly young African-American women not unlike herself.

Instead of being pawns in a conceptual-art stratagem, however, Simpson's characters are lively conversationalists with a pulse. They are never at a loss for words, whether the topic is a friend's extramarital affair or trying to find their niche in a changing job market.

While the dialogue moves at a brisk pace, the camera never moves. Simpson guides the viewer's attention to minute details within the frame. Instead of dazzling the eye with elaborate, moving shots, the film emphasizes long takes in which characters fade in and out of scenes.

The film places the viewer in the position of a voyeur eavesdropping on the characters' lives. But the implied voyeurism isn't menacing. Rather, the piece draws you in as a funny confessional where the viewer laughs with the characters rather than at them.

Simpson's collaboration with Hayes and company proved to be a fruitful one. And when it came time to work on the inSITE97-commissioned piece, "Call Waiting," she simply reassembled the same crew.

"Interior/ Exterior . . ." will premiere in September as part of a film installation of laser-disc projections at the Wexner Center. Subsequently, Simpson will debut "Call Waiting" at a public downtown location yet to be determined, once inSITE97 gets under way.

Simpson is quick to admit that she didn't have any practical, hands-on film-production experience before these projects. But having a strong background in photography and the fact that Simpson knew exactly what she wanted were considerable advantages.

"I would say what I wanted and it would happen," Simpson said. "I wouldn't have to worry, Was the sound working? Was the camera loaded right? So I really loved that a lot."

It also didn't hurt that the novice filmmaker had been on several film sets. They ran the gamut, from watching local independent film-



makers at work on weekend film shoots to being on the set of Spike Lee's 1989 hit film "Do the Right Thing."

"In the neighborhood I live in, there's always somebody making a film in Fort Greene," Simpson said. "It's kind of the wannabe film capital of Brooklyn. It really is. It's somewhere to be on the weekend in the summer."

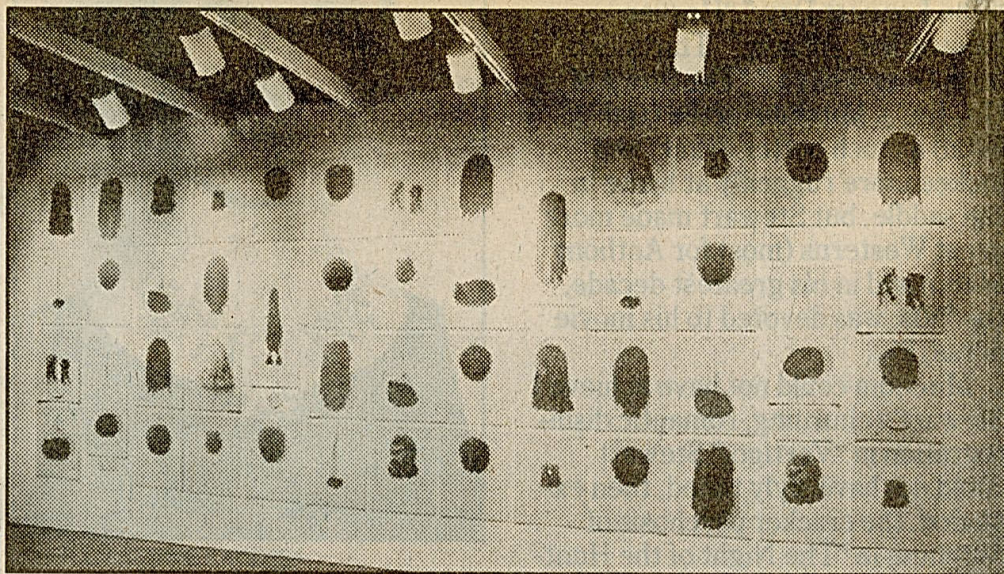
The real challenge, however, was learning to translate her concepts through the actors' performances. Making the transition from photographer to writer-director, Simpson had to relinquish some of the control one has as a solo artist. The collaborative nature of film is totally different from working in the secluded space of an artist's studio.

During the filming of "Interior/Exterior . . .," once Simpson told the actors the story, she encouraged them to ad-lib their dialogue, she says. With "Call Waiting," she was ready to work with a more scripted format.

"You start out in one place and end up in a completely different place than you began," said Simpson, elaborating on her artmaking process. "What has been really fun about these projects is that I know when I begin on something, I envision how it's going to look. It's always different than what it turns out to be."

"And that's kind of nice," she added. "I actually don't mind that because then it's something about process and . . . the way that ideas play out finally in the end."

**NEIL KENDRICKS** is a San Diego arts writer.



**Hair pieces:** *Lithographs depicting female hair were the centerpiece of Lorna Simpson's 1994 exhibition "Wigs," which examined gender issues of power and perception.*

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