

LORNA SIMPSON

American, born New York, NY, 1960

Stack of Diaries, 1993

Photo linen panel, glass, steel, 81 1/2 x 28 1/4 x 18 inches (overall)

Edition of 5

Gift of Peter Norton, 2016.4.53

The artist Lorna Simpson made her name in the New York art world of the late 1980s with works that wedded large-format photographs of Black women, often with their backs turned away from the viewer, with elliptical phrases printed on plastic placards. In these pieces, Simpson deployed and cross-wired formal strategies associated with conceptual, feminist, and other post-Minimal aesthetic practices in order to chart Black women's vexed positioning—as both object of property and subject of violence—in the modern era. In 1992, however, the figure began to disappear from Simpson's art, replaced, as in *Stack of Diaries*, with sculptural surrogates that nonetheless remained bodily in scale and address.

Comprised of a photograph of spiral-bound notebooks hung directly behind a modernist steel shelf lightly stacked with glass plates, this piece not only refuses to picture a body, but also frustrates our access to the artist's words. "[W]ithin a year the carefully maintained entries she made were maintained by him": such phrases, affixed to the glass plates with vinyl letters, suggest tantalizing fragments of an otherwise lost story of gendered relation, while the photograph holds out a mountain of interior thoughts, which, like the diary form, are rendered private sites of encounter. Here, then, rather than imaging the "Black woman" as a transparent site of visual inspection, Simpson insists on the opacity of that figure and of any means of conjuring her. Like the human itself, the work's materials must be confronted on their own terms; their meaning is generated as much by absences and gaps as by what is visually made manifest. In this way, Simpson's art limns the historical lacunae that continue to both shape and deform our understanding of the centrality of Black female bodies, thoughts, and labors to the making of the world.

—Huey Copeland

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