

Simone Leigh, *Sphinx*

Like much of Simone Leigh's (American, born 1967) work, *Sphinx* layers references from across history and cultures. The sphinx is central in Egyptian, Asian, and Greek mythology. Leigh quotes perhaps the most recognizable iteration of this figure, Egypt's Great Sphinx of Giza. Depicted in a recumbent position, this colossal form presides over the landscape, projecting immense power even while at rest. *Sphinx* maintains the regality of its antecedent but replaces the pharaoh's head and lion's body with two recurring motifs in Leigh's work: an afroed Black woman and a Quonset hut, a prefabricated steel structure mass-produced in America during World War II. During the Civil Rights movement, natural hair became a symbol of pride and liberation for African Americans, broadcasting to the world that people of color would define themselves moving forward.

Leigh's depictions of female-identified figures are notably lacking in facial features. Slight indentations take the place of eyes, and ears are often covered by hair. As writer Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts has mused: "Though without eyes, [the sculptures] are not without affect. How many emotions can be read from the tilt of a chin, the slope of a nose?" The subject in *Sphinx* does not need to see to broadcast that she is in control. While her body and gaze may be absent, the straightness of her neck and the level angle of her head suggest that this woman is upright—she is standing in her power and she is not backing down.



Simone Leigh (American, born 1967), *Sphinx*, 2021, bronze and platinum leaf, 48 x 38 x 24 in., Museum purchase with funds from Polina and Robert Schlott and the Rose Marie Baumgarten Art Endowment Fund, 2022.7