



Xaviera Simmons's photograph *One Day and Back Then (Seated)*, 2007.

Fiction becomes fact in the theatricalized photographs of Xaviera Simmons. Portraying women in idyllic landscapes, the New York-based artist creates engagingly equivocal narratives. In *One Day and Back Then (Seated)*, 2007, a strange female figure sits rigidly in a high-backed woven chair placed within a prison of tall reeds; she is unabashedly naked except for an Afro wig, red lipstick, and head-to-toe black body paint. The image is sparse, striking, and loaded with implications.

Despite the fact that, as in this memorable instance, Simmons sometimes uses herself as the model, she doesn't think of her photographs as self-portraiture. "I try to invoke characters that could have existed underneath these landscapes," the artist explains. "Of course, the landscape itself is the most important character." Born in New York City in 1974, Simmons received a B.F.A. from Bard College in 2004. She spent two years retracing sections of the transatlantic slave-trade route. Later, she studied acting at the Maggie Flanigan Studio in New York, "in order to become a better director."

Simmons is currently an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem (where she will participate in open studios on May 6). She seems especially fascinated with the ways that photography, sculpture, performance, and installation converse with one another. Her ongoing "Index Series," for instance, is an exceptional set of photographs of assemblages placed underneath lifted skirts. In some, dangling hair braids are festooned with masks, bones, and memorabilia—talismanic formations that become a kind of physical scrapbook. Simmons strives "to mold the images themselves to become more sculptural, even though they're flat photographs," as she puts it.



Xaviera Simmons.

For recent sculptural installations, like *The Hunter's Guide* (2012), the artist hangs scraps of wood—each hand-lettered with words or phrases, such as "Twine," "Blue Beads," "Jawbone," "Rope," and "Dirt"—in a tight cluster. Culled from magazines, conversations, song lyrics, and novels, these text fragments become evocative substitutes for the objects themselves. The works sometimes take up nearly an entire wall and resemble vernacular signage. Each cryptic accumulation of written flotsam feels like a rescued poem.

Simmons is represented by Nicole Klagsbrun in New York and David Castillo Gallery in Miami, where prices for her sculptural installations begin at \$22,000 and photographs at \$10,000. In these works, the artist mines the landscape—physical, textual, cultural—for real and imagined histories.

—Doug McClellont

Doug McClellont is a New York-based writer, curator, and critic.