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BY GLEN WARCHOL THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE
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(Scott Sommerdorf | The Salt Lake Tribune) Xaviera Simmons is the latest internationally recognized contemporary artist to be invited to exhibit in the UMFA's SALT series. Here, she poses near the pieces of "landscape of words" Monday, November 14, 2011.

Utah Museum of Fine Arts exhibits show the art of the wanderer

The images of Xaviera Simmons, a photographer, actor, DJ and sculptor, might evoke déjà vu in Utahns.

Her work is the latest in a series of "salt" exhibits that showcase emerging contemporary artists at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts.

As a people who live in a fantastically beautiful topography, Utahns must endure endless attempts to capture the meaning of that landscape in paintings, photographs and song, not to mention large-scale earthworks and sculptures.

On the other hand, there's New York- and Paris-based Simmons, whose work springboards off the deep traditions of Western landscape art into the more adventurous realms of contemporary art. You'd think Simmons would feel at home installing her work at the UMFA, which has an illustrated history of scenic art in its collection.

In fact, as Simmons created artwork for "salt 4," in public view at the museum, it was the abstract landscapes of Utah painter Doug Snow that stared down on her.

At the core of Simmons' show are four large-scale photographic landscapes, all including Simmons in the foreground. But "they aren't self-portraits," she says. Instead, she terms them "landscapes containing characters."

What's more, the locations of her landscapes are never revealed. "It's a stage," she says, in which Simmons (she's also a trained actor) portrays the "traveler," making her way to an unknown somewhere.

"I'm interested in people bringing their own dialogue to the landscape and the character," the artist explains. "I leave the location nebulous. I want to keep an open-ended narrative with the landscape."

The images of Simmons, sometimes with her large-format camera in a canyon or just puzzling over a map in the desert, are purposely reminiscent of the first photographs taken of the West more than a century ago.

Coincidentally, two unrelated exhibits currently on view in Utah resonate with Simmons' work: an exhibition of 19th-century photographs of American Indians at the Maynard Dixon Home in Mt. Carmel and an exhibit at the Brigham City Museum of residents and vistas whose names and locations have been lost to history.

Simmons' work explores the myths, lore and isolation of the nomad, whether it be an explorer, gypsy, pilgrim, pioneer or, to use a politically

loaded term, immigrant. "I've seen so much landscape," says Simmons, whose wanderings include a two-year walking pilgrimage retracing the trans-Atlantic slave trade routes.

Just when the viewer begins to get comfortable with her enigmatic photographic landscapes, Simmons takes it in an entirely new direction with the "landscape of words" that she created last week in the UMFA's Great Hall.

The installation, which covers most of a wall of the "salt" exhibit space, required Simmons to rummage through the Web, National Geographic magazines and local trash heaps with equal diligence. "I'm a word collector," she explains.

Simmons then lettered the words — "sun-bleached Tangiers," "ethnic minorities," "dirt roads," "pickup trucks" — onto the pieces of discarded wood she scavenged from around Salt Lake City.

"I can't work without referring to literature," she says. "It's another landscape to me."