

# The Harvard Crimson

## Reading Art: ICA Connections Literature and Exhibitions

By: Tianxing V. Lan | March 10, 2015

Upon entering the Institute of Contemporary Art's exhibition, "When The Stars Begin To Fall: Imagination of The American South," the visitor is immediately confronted with Xaviera Simmons's "The Favorable Outcome of Every Navigation." A huge block of wooden signs, aligned to form a square, displays scribbled white words, such as "ways to seduce and make seed amber" and "resting here and there with a dark lust." This work of mixed media, striking and visually suggestive, demands further understanding of its cultural and political background. It is this desire for contextual comprehension that led to the creation of ICA Reads.

An integration of arts and literature, ICA Reads is a new program that invites visitors to read a recent literary work that had a large social impact and then come to the ICA to find the relationship between the book and the current exhibition. The book recommended for the program's inaugural year is "Citizen: An American Lyric" by Claudia Rankine, a prose poem that addresses racism in daily American life. "When the Stars Begin to Fall," which reflects on black life in America from the perspective of over 35 artists, accompanies the book. "We wanted to come up with a new program to connect contemporary literary voices with contemporary visual arts," says Monica Garza, director of education at the ICA and leader of the program. "We wanted to give people a different way to connect with the works."

Currently, ICA Reads consists of three components: a drop-in book tour, scheduled discussions, and a talk given by the author. Offered on Thursdays through Sundays, the tours feature specially trained guides who provide assistance to help visitors find the relationship between the book and the art in the museum. Meanwhile, at the discussions, a guest speaker talks about his or her own perspective of the book and its link to the works. According to Garza, the connections drawn in the discussions and tours are varied; they can be explicit—like the presence of works by David Hammons both on the book's cover and in the ICA's exhibit—or implicit. "Writers, visual artists, visual performers are all trying to tell a story or share their perspective," Garza says. All of this leads up to the end of the season, when author Claudia Rankine will come to the ICA to discuss the work.

The ICA initiated the program to help their artworks inspire visitors be more interested in the artworks on display. "A lot of contemporary artists are dealing with very important issues of our times, whether it's about environment or identity issues or popular culture, anything of that sort," Garza says. "And of course...a lot of books that are coming out...are dealing with a lot of the same issues." According to Garza, it is a natural step for the ICA to juxtapose visual arts and literature to present a bigger picture to the public.

Since ICA Reads began in February, the program has received great enthusiasm from the literary communities in Boston and Cambridge. Due to the positive response, the museum looks forward to the program's bright future, including a new topic for early next year. "Everyone has been extremely supportive and wonderful about this, and that makes us more enthusiastic to continue this program," Garza says.