

# XAVIERA SIMMONS REPRESENTS AMERICA IN ITS TOTALITY

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE KNODELL



XAVIERA SIMMONS, CONVENE, 2018, INSTALLATION VIEW AT HUNTER'S POINT SOUTH PARK, LONG ISLAND CITY, NEW YORK. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY, MIAMI.

The idea of a place versus the actuality of a place. Artist Xaviera Simmons set out to investigate how these discrepancies came to exist in the demographic makeup of Astoria and Long Island City. Many New Yorkers lacking a personal relationship to the area limiting it to a single impression leaving entire populations that have called the area home for generations are ignored.

Enter *Convene*, Simmons' sculptural installation of aluminum canoes that aims to dig deeper at how assumptions surrounding communities come to be formed and why distinct populations in certain areas are overlooked. The public art project sits along the East River in Hunter's Point South Park in Long Island City with the bustling waterway and skyline of Manhattan creating a remarkable backdrop. Each canoe is painted with striking, colorful designs representative of national flags corresponding to the diverse historical and contemporary populations of the neighborhoods. "I wanted people to have a way in. I wanted them to recognize themselves a bit inside of this space," Simmons says.

Opening on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, *Convene* was commissioned through the SculptureCenter's art education program Public Process, a summer program for high schoolers exploring public art, urban planning, and architecture. The three-week intensive culminates with participants voting on a proposal they'd like to see come to life as a temporary public artwork. Simmons was honored to be chosen by these young people, who she believes are sharper and more discerning in their tastes and decision-making than many adults.

Simmons' artistic practice often includes an anthropological tie. In *Convene*, Simmons addresses migration and the movement of groups, revealing a rich assortment of peoples from every corner of the world. To create the work, Simmons looked at population data, as well as the language and available information supplementing it, abstracting what she learned to create the canoes. In her research, Simmons realized that whole populations were not represented.



Simmons' motives for creating *Convene* can read as an exploration into the history of New York's immigration patterns, beginning centuries ago and just as important and relevant in today's America. "You can't associate a flag without thinking of the politics of the space," Simmons explains. In this vein, Simmons made sure to represent the Japanese, South Korean, Ghanaian, Italian, and Pan African communities, among others, that call Long Island City and Astoria home.

In her practice, Simmons is straightforward in her storytelling. The artist purposely made *Convene* even more explicit than her other work. “I made sure to include most of the countries that Trump tried to enact a travel ban against that also have sizable populations here. I tried to un-censor because you don’t see these flags,” Simmons says.



The chosen form of the canoe has dual meaning. In addition to the piece residing along a major waterway that once served as an entryway for early settlers into the area as a means of transportation, canoes were also used for escape. *Convene* addresses the multiple meanings a canoe may have, whether being used for leisure and pleasure, travel or departure.

Simmons believes that when creating a work, “artists have to go with the thing that either breaks their heart or makes them fall in love.” The data behind *Convene* effected the artist in both these ways. Like many Americans right now, Simmons is a concerned about where our country is going and what we as a nation are thinking about. Simmons explains, “If this [*Convene*] is a little dent into that concern, that’s all I can do right now.”

*Xaviera Simmons: Convene is on view at Hunter’s Point South Park, Long Island City from May 23 – August 19, 2018*