

# EXPLORING AND TROUBLING THE BOUNDARIES

WITH  
XAVIERA  
SIMMONS

BY LATRIA GRAHAM

*Sundown  
(Number Thirteen).*  
COURTESY DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY

*Ahead of her showing at Art Basel in Miami Beach, we talked to the renowned artist about her newest work and what she wants viewers to understand about the scope of American history.*





Left to right:  
*Sundown*  
(Number Fifteen),  
*Sundown*  
(Number Six),  
*Sundown*  
(Number Seven),  
*Sundown*  
(Number Twelve).

COURTESY DAVID  
CASTILLO GALLERY

ack in 1998, after working for a number of years as a fashion photographer's assistant, New York City native Xavier Simmons was searching for a new way to express her creativity. A chance meeting with a group of Buddhist monks would change the direction of her art. The contemporary multimedia artist found herself compelled to join the group's pilgrimage retracing one of the transatlantic slave trade routes. Along the way, they stopped, meditated, prayed and chanted their way down the East Coast before making their way across the Atlantic.

Her journey wouldn't end until 2000 in South Africa. From there, she hitchhiked through East Africa, eventually making her way to Ethiopia. As she met new people, experienced their culture, learned their customs and tried new food, she searched the faces of those around her for something familiar, for the place her ancestors might have come from. She wanted to know where she belonged.

"African-Americans identify with a continent, but African people, they don't," Simmons says. "They're from Togo, they're from Benin, they're from Nigeria, they're from South Africa. They are that, and then they're in their tribe, and then they're their person. Europeans are not just Europeans. They're French, they're Spanish. But African-Americans . . . we're basically the result of American history."

After reaching this revelation, Simmons knew the work she had to do was home. "I had to ask, 'Who am I here in this country?"

Who are my people?' We don't have a motherland. Africa is 54 different countries. There is no place in Africa that I could ever go that would be my home. I've been all over Africa. Where can I go, and it's like home for me?"

She made her way back to New York City in order to find out. Twenty years after her initial pilgrimage, the questions of identity, belonging and the transient nature of people still drives her creative process, and that thematic chord runs through the majority of Simmons's work, whether it is text-based sculpture, installations, photography or performance-based art.

When she returned to the U.S., Simmons earned her BFA at Bard College and then completed the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program in Studio Art. While enrolled at the Whitney, she also completed a two-year actor-training conservatory program with The Maggie Flanigan Studio to better understand the role the body can play in performance and how to better channel emotions in her artwork. "I wanted to understand how directors work with emotion and also to understand how to use my body as more of an instrument—it's got to be able to help emotions come forward. My images have to do that. Great actors are able to mold and shape emotions." Her work, at times cinematic in nature, seeks to enhance the scope of America's history by teetering on the edge of the unknown in order to provoke conversations that can inform and enrich our world.

Right now, she is preoccupied with language, specifically labels—how they are applied to us, whether or not we accept them and the parameters we create for ourselves in order to project an identity. "I think of myself as a descendant of slaves and not as much African-American," the artist explains. "I check the African-American [box], but then one of my closest friends is Ethiopian, and she also checks African-American. Then my rock star friend, he's first generation Nigerian, he's checking African-American. We're all checking African-American, but we have different experiences. To understand those differences does not negate the connection, but we need to understand that [descendants of slaves] are a particular group with a particular history in this country."

Simmons is interested in the data, the minute, the terms we use to describe ourselves, and her lens encompasses more than the experiences of the descendants of slaves. "I'm interested in all the terms, actually—how people label and identify themselves, what they carry and also, how they're labeled. All these terms . . . they have created how we view ourselves."

For her 2018 site-specific installation titled *Convene*, which took place in the Hunters Point South Park of Long Island City, New York, she dug into the data to understand the cultural composition of Astoria and Long Island City. Her materials for the commission were ordinary: aluminum canoes, paint and some rope, but her use of specific vibrant colors is an abstract provocation about demographics. The canoes, once a method

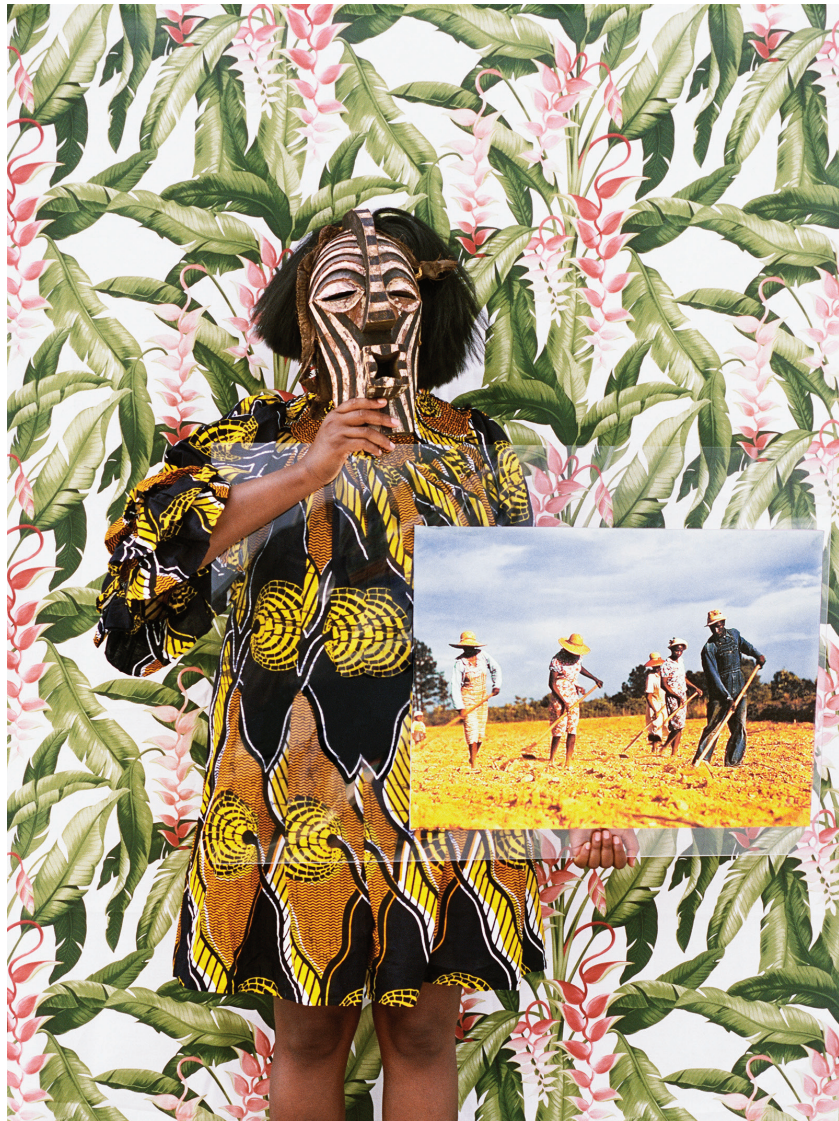
of transportation to move goods and people from one place to another, are painted the colors of the national flags of countries whose citizens previously or currently populate the area, helping residents realize their proximity to one another.

This isn't Simmons's first foray into the linguistic boundaries and labels, but now she is using them to enhance the scope of America's history. Her ability to poetically layer memory, textual history and archival photography on top of modern color schemes is her specialty, exemplified in the recent exhibition *Sundown Towns*. The term was shorthand for all-white municipalities that enforced segregation through a series of discriminatory local laws barring non-white people from the area after the sun went down. The rules were often enforced by violence.

In the *Sundown Town* series, repetition, color and geometry all work in tandem to create lush, vibrant backgrounds, presenting a sense of serenity and warmth before the archival element forces a shift in perspective, leaving viewers with a feeling of displacement when they are unable to reconcile the two. Simmons is imploring viewers to hold two divergent focal points in their heads at once and to continue turning over the nonlinear narratives and lived histories long after leaving the gallery space. She challenges our understanding of the notion of belonging, expounding upon the transient nature of the descendants of slaves and forces us to reconsider the concept of home.

In *Sundown (Number One)*, the scene seems almost pastoral—a woman





Left to right:  
*Sundown*  
(Number Ten),  
*Sundown*  
(Number Five),  
*Sundown*  
(Number NINE).

COURTESY DAVID  
CASTILLO GALLERY

in a West-African patterned dress stands in front of a wallpapered backdrop of plumeria colored flowers and greenery holding a brightly colored photo . . . of slaves or sharecroppers picking cotton.

In *Sundown (Number Four)*, the primary character, clothed in a dress reminiscent of the flour sack florals of yesteryear, literally carries history on her back in the form of a photograph. Set against a backdrop of boxwood bushes, two children near the front of a ramshackle clapboard house stare unflinchingly at the viewer from their black and white photograph.

Art critics and collectors are receptive to the work that Simmons is creating. Her pieces reside in permanent collections at a number of New York art museums including the Guggenheim Museum, The Museum of Modern Art and The Studio Museum in Harlem. The High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, as well as the Perez Art Museum in Miami, also contain a number of her pieces. Her artwork has received mentions in or graced the pages of publications like *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *Essence Magazine*, *Artforum*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *New York Magazine* and *Hyperallergic*.

One of her favorite artistic events is Art Basel in Miami Beach. “What’s beautiful about coming to Miami and being at Art Basel in particular is that you have many different types of people looking at your work in a way

that they wouldn’t before because it’s a place where people come intentionally to look at artwork,” she says. Simmons also recognizes that while the art fair is intended to be a commercial transaction, its existence has a higher purpose: “It’s interesting to have your work be historically critical but also part of the commercial landscape that art fairs bring. To penetrate people’s historical narrative and to be able to do that and also have them want to have these objects to treasure and collect them and take care of them and be stewards for them. It’s an honor. It’s introducing stewards to the art that they are going to decide to take care of and to nurture, so it can be a part of our world’s collective memory.”

This year, she is part of a group exhibition at the David Castillo Gallery, where a number of her pieces from “Sundown Town” will be on display with several of her text sculptures and her fur and wood compositions titled *One (Blue Frost)*. The piece looks fairly innocuous until the top of the table comes into view. Dressed in an outfit similar to the pattern of the fur colored chairs, there’s a picture of Xaviera Simmons lacquered into the wood. In the photograph, she is pouring over a map of the African continent, as if she is still searching for something.

“Yes, these things can decorate homes, but they can do more than that. They also can inspire dialogue, and through that dialogue, change the way we interact with history.” ■

