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Xaviera Simmons' "Convene" Canoes Serve as a Reminder of U.S' Immigrant DNA

By Drew Clayton



Xaviera Simmons

Convene

2018

Installation view at Hunter's Point South Park in Long Island City

Aluminum canoes, paint, rope

Photo by Kyle Knodell

Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami

Anyone walking along Long Island City's waterfront this summer may stumble upon an art installation without realizing it at first. A few steps from the Hunter's Point ferry stop along the East River lies a series of brightly colored canoes installed directly on the ground with a few stacked in pyramidal configurations. Vertical bands of vibrant red, blue, green, yellow and orange run along each boat in seemingly random yet rhythmic patterns.

This Queens locale is central for recreational kayaking and is a hub for ferry commuters,

so it would be understandable to mistake this installation for a summer pop-up boat rental station. However, this seemingly innocuous project reveals a series of untold, political, and site-specific narratives about Queens and its rich, international fabric and invites a larger dialogue about the importance of multiculturalism on a national level.

This temporary public artwork, *Convene*, is New York-based artist Xaviera Simmons' most recent sculptural project that addresses and visualizes notions of community and identity through careful research. Upon closer examination on the genesis of this work, it is revealed that the colors on each canoe correlate to national flags of both historical and current demographics of Astoria and Long Island City, two neighborhoods that have experienced dramatic changes and expansions over the last few years.

Convene, which was commissioned through SculptureCenter's Public Process program, is also meant to portray the significance of the boat as a mode for transportation, method for trading resources, or a vessel for exchanging ideas. Not only is this work a compelling visual examination of divergent cultures, it is also an uplifting celebration of New York's international DNA during an unnervingly xenophobic time period in recent history.

Simmons' work spans a variety of artistic mediums, namely photography, video, performance, sound, and installation. On her multidisciplinary practice, she notes, "The individual mechanics of each of my studio's projects work to inform the others. Text works almost always lead to photographs, while photographic projects can take me on a tangent of sculpture, performance or choreographic space. The interplay of location, purely formal considerations, language and local geography formed the basis of the project... how might I produce a work that invites and works subversively at the same time."

On a conceptual level, Simmons' practice is connected by her implementation of bespoke research methods to understand various communities around the world. For instance, in 2010 at Duke University's Nasher Museum, Simmons created a multimedia project that explored North Carolina's rich musical roots with a suite of exceptional photographs installed in an intimate space accompanied by music from a vinyl record she produced for curator Trevor Schoonmaker's exhibition, "The Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl." These works, created as part of a residency program, culminated in a public event outside the museum that invited art enthusiasts, music lovers, and the general public to gather and reflect upon this geography's important place in music history.

At its core, *Convene* shares a similar objective of togetherness with her North Carolinian excursion, however, with slightly more sinister, urgent, and politically-engaged undertones. Situated almost directly across from the United Nations, *Convene* offers a horizontal parallel to this monumental edifice that is meant to stand for diversity and togetherness, embodying the various cultures, colors and personalities that make up this worldwide network. As the United States, a nation founded by immigrants, continues to persecute the immigrants and communities that make up this country, art

seems like one of the few forms of communication to connect a united force against bigotry and racism.

“It was important to me that I keep the criticality that I feel regarding our current political climate within the framework of an inviting sculptural object,” Simmons notes. “That’s the tension that I attempted to touch within this work.”