

Xaviera Simmons Elevates Queerness

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By [Mallika Rao](#)



Xaviera Simmons's *Red (Number One)* (2016)

Courtesy David Castillo Gallery

On a recent sunny afternoon, the artist Xaviera Simmons sat in the window of a Pakistani restaurant in view of the Ace Hotel, in Manhattan. Pointing to a group of loc'd and kurta'd men outside, she explained the homoeroticism of her latest work, *Coded*, as part of the artist's duty, in the Trump era, to open the imagination, so all people are seen as human. "I want to bathe the world in images that, first, could give you pleasure and, second, help you to open the potential to see what men [like these] could be doing," she told me. "In five minutes, two...could go up into the Ace Hotel, and that's their magic. We need to see that."

For *Coded*, which runs at the Kitchen December 8–9, her choreography replays imagery conceived with only men in mind, but through a cast of women. Inspiring pleasure by channeling masculine homoeroticism through female bodies might, she hopes, expand a viewer's sense of love. To her, "the gaze" — that sociological construct — isn't always a bad thing, but gay sex, she asserts, remains taboo even "to liberal eyes."

Simmons herself isn't queer. She grew up bouncing around the city — Queens, Harlem, other parts of Manhattan — in a multivalent household: black and Buddhist, stocked with a large record collection and her mom's friends. A writer, her mother followed a Japanese variant of Buddhism and offered entry into communities Simmons wasn't born to. "I'm in a heterosexual relationship," Simmons told me. "So that I guess classifies me, and I'm putting that in quotes, as being 'heterosexual.' But at the same time, I'm a New York female. I'm from here. I grew up in a New York that was very diverse.

My mom's best friends in the Seventies and Eighties were queer and gay men." She refers to *Coded* as a sort of "family album."

The piece is named for the codes of conduct that govern subcultures, like the one that used to exist at the Chelsea piers, where families from, say, Ohio, now routinely roam. But in the 1970s, the place was transformed by gay men cruising — a practice reliant on codes. A gaze implied consent, partly because of the exclusivity of the location, as when the photographer Alvin Baltrop (gay, black, and a cab driver), snapped portraits of men locking eyes with him, seemingly granting permission to an equal.

Simmons's new interpretation of this history began with "Pier 54," a photography series she shot a few years ago for a High Line commission. That project responded to a flashy 1971 show at the piers that involved only men, many of whom became titans: A young Richard Serra produced work, as did Vito Acconci and John Baldessari. The High Line commissioned only women artists, and Simmons found herself deep in research, digging up gay portraiture of the Seventies. As she worked, she began to develop a link between these images and the body language of daggering, a form of dance found in Jamaica that captivated her for similar qualities of "strength and tenderness."

That work acted as a blueprint for the first iteration of *Coded*, this summer's mixed-media installation, which was likewise dominated by female subjects and rich with male homoerotic energy. For part two, the conversion is to performance. Simmons hired dancers, all of whom, save a narrator, are women of color. This was by chance; they were simply the people around her, and they brought in knowledge of Haitian movements and other dancehall gestures that have been woven — along with gestures referencing some of the Chelsea portraiture and Buddhist breathwork — into the final, hour-long performance. It is the longest piece of choreography Simmons has attempted; while she has had formal training in acting, she is a self-taught dancer.

The first *Coded* was praised for its sensuality, but now Simmons says she is interested in the second half of a sensual moment: the deflating chest, after a shudder. If the show is a way of seducing people into caring about a subculture they might otherwise marginalize, she hopes to facilitate "a group breath" in the midst of the fun. She draws up a scenario of two lovers — audience and performer. "If you listen closely to their breath, you're in tune with what you're doing right or wrong for them," she says, "or what they're doing right or wrong for you."