

Landscapes of Desire

How Music keeps **Xaviera Simmons's** Art in the flow

She is a modern Renaissance woman: In her work, Xaviera Simmons combines every conceivable kind of art form. But the main influences on her have been music, a fascination with landscape, and travel. Jessica Loudis met her for a drink.



Xaviera Simmons. Photo: Courtesy David Castillo Gallery

I meet Xaviera Simmons at a bar in Williamsburg on an unseasonably warm evening at the start of fall. We had planned to get together at her studio in Manhattan, but in the interest of taking a “more fluid” approach to her practice, Simmons is spending less and less time at the studio, and wants to be there only when necessary. She’s tall, with short hair and a kind of casual confidence that suggests she’s not afraid of unfamiliar situations. She’s also perceptive and gracious— she compliments our waiter on his shirt, and at various moments throughout our conversation she checks in to make sure my microphone is working. In lieu of being in the city these days, the artist tells me that she prefers working upstate, where she lives for much of the week, or in dance studios, which she has been frequenting in preparation for an upcoming show at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

The show is on her mind tonight, and Simmons said she’d been thinking a lot about contemporary dance, Jamaican “dagging,” and particularly the work of Yvonne Rainer and experimental Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. She’d also been immersed in what she described as “male homoerotic imagery,” namely Tom Bianchi’s softcore Polaroids of the sculpted men of Fire Island, and the haunting portraits of Alvin Baltrop, a black photographer who captured the clandestine gay nightlife of New York’s Chelsea piers in the late seventies.

Simmons’s work-in-progress, which Yerba Buena’s website describes as a “landscape of desire ... constructed through sound, movement, breath work, language, scent, and taste,” will be part performance, part film, and part sound installation—an homage to various kinds of sensory experience, and a reflection of the range of media of Simmons typically integrates into her work. Fluidity, in other words, is not a problem for her. Simmons describes her practice as cyclical, and, to the uninitiated, it can be difficult to find a way in—her pieces fuse performance, video, photography, sculpture, text, and sound, often in ways that are less concerned with examining the boundaries of a medium than in forcing overlap between them. So, for instance, a piece may begin as a text-based work, then evolve into a film or photo, and then turn into a performance piece or score that evolves into a more polished performance. In *Number Sixteen* (2013), a video that grew out of a project titled *Number Fifteen*, the screen is split down the middle, featuring a black female singer on the left-hand side, and on the other side, a blank canvas. Over the course of an hour, the vocalist sings repertory standards as Simmons improvises an Abstract Expressionist painting, flinging layer after layer of paint—black, white, blue, red—and then scraps of objects, onto the canvas. The work is many things—a painful accounting of African-American persecution and persistence, an exercise in assemblage—but on another level, it’s also a very basic construction of landscape. “I tend to think of my whole practice as landscape based,” Simmons remarked at the bar. “Any photograph I make is a landscape; even in the text and sound works

there's some landscape I'm trying to construct."

Born in 1974, Simmons grew up in New York City in a black Buddhist household that was full of music; she remembers the visual details of her parents' vinyl collection, and their fondness for the sounds of the era, including seventies soul, funk, and R&B. She left to attend Bard, where she studied photography with An-My Lê and Stephen Shore, whose orientation towards landscape provided Simmons with the inklings of what would become the core of her work. "Their practices are all about landscape in the literal sense, and I've taken the idea of working with a 4x5 and being very rigid and strict and expanded it to the idea of the landscape in the physical sense," she said, noting that in addition to thinking about landscape in terms of "the studio, the photograph, sculpture, and text," her work also approaches it "through sound, through voice, through multi-lingual conversations and monologues." In recent years, Simmons has begun producing scored audio works in which a single reader intones repetitively in multiple languages. As the languages gnarl and fold into each other, the pieces take on an incantatory quality that can evoke speaking in tongues—landscape as expanded field.



Index Four, Composition Two, 2013.
Courtesy David Castillo Gallery



Index Seven, Composition One, 2015.
Courtesy David Castillo Gallery



Beyond The Canon Of Landscape, 2008.
Courtesy David Castillo Gallery

Before graduating, Simmons took time off to work as an assistant to Jamaican fashion photographer Walter Chin; a year later, she quit her job to join a group of Buddhist monks on a pilgrimage that retraced the route of the transatlantic slave trade. They walked from Massachusetts to Florida, and later from Gambia to Nigeria. Simmons eventually returned to Bard, and after finishing, she enrolled in Maggie Flanagan's actor-training conservatory in New York, and participated in the "Whitney Program for Independent Study," an elite, theory-heavy finishing school for artists. Her extracurricular activities share the same range as her studies: She's a recognized DJ, and has also studied to become an herbologist and a doula.

The influence of her travels and interdisciplinary training comes through in all her work, but particularly in her photography—Simmons often appears as a character in her images, posing in sublime landscapes like a mythical figure or early American explorer. In *Into the Sea (Nomad)* (2009) from the Deutsche Bank Collection, Simmons stands majestically in a calf-high field of wheat, with a red scarf draped over her head. Arms wrapped in front of her, Simmons glances off into the distance, as if channeling a heroine from an Edward Hopper painting. Her work is unmistakably steeped in the great tradition of modern American landscape painting, from early Impressionists such as Winslow Homer to the Realism of Andrew Wyeth. In other images, she poses as photographer / ethnographer, peering at the wilderness through large-format cameras.

She is also interested in cultural landscapes. This is reflected by the works in which Simmons shields her face with legendary album covers in different natural settings. They are records by black musicians who since the 1970s have had a strong impact on American pop culture, as well as Simmons's own life. She once said in an interview that when she listened to Grace Jones's version of *Use Me*, it made her feel like "crying while walking in a thunderstorm." She wears albums such as *Warm Leatherette* (2002), and *Roberta Flack Black Afro* (2009) as if they were masks, fusing them inextricably with her own cultural identity.



Day, 2008. Courtesy David Castillo Gallery



Into the New Sea (Nomad), 2009. Courtesy David Castillo Gallery

Vinyl alternates between being medium and material in Simmons's oeuvre. She's used albums to construct wall sculptures, double as camouflage, and sometimes even to capture sound. For her 2010 project *Thundersnow Road*, commissioned as part of an exhibition on contemporary art and vinyl records at Duke University's Nasher Museum, Simmons embarked on a road trip through North Carolina, where she shot images inspired by the state's geography and disturbing racial history. She then gave the photographs to fifteen musicians and asked them to produce accompanying songs or original sound works, which were collected into a limited edition vinyl record. These photographic works are called *Sessions*, and she appears on many of them with instruments in mythical, symbolic landscape compositions.

Politics and history figure heavily into her work, and particularly in her text-based sculptures, which are built on words she's "collected" over time from films, texts, and conversations. Her performances are also often explicitly political: In 2013, Simmons spent nearly a year working on an archival project with MoMA in which she staged a series of performances relating to the Museum's history of political engagement. During this time, she appeared in the lobby of MoMA wearing a red prison uniform, with works by artists represented in the collection such as Agnes Martin and the Guerilla Girls, and posters saying "Erase Sexism at MoMA," in protest of the disadvantages women artists have.



Roberta, 2009. Courtesy David Castillo Gallery



Warm Leatherette, 2002. Courtesy David Castillo Gallery

These days, Simmons says, she tries to be "tighter" when making photos, texts, and sculptures, and "looser" when producing performances and installations. The boundaries between them, however, are porous. In her *Index* series, figures in the shape of bodies are wrapped in fabric and objects, including jewelry, animal skulls, beads and plants, and then photographed, usually at waist-level. Faces are never visible, and it's not clear if the bodies are human at all. These images, which recall the colorful *Soundsuits* of Nick Cave, are more sculptural, diverging from Simmons's earlier, more classically "photographic" works. "I think there was a time when I was really committed to photography, now I need photography to work in different ways," she observed. "I need it to think cinematically, I need it to think sculpturally; I need sculptures to think like photographs, I need sound to feel like sculptures or performance. I need these mediums to push past what I would expect from them."



Harvest, 2010. Courtesy David Castillo Gallery



Harvest (detail), 2010. Courtesy David Castillo Gallery



Archive as Impetus, 2013. Performance, MoMA, New York.
Courtesy David Castillo Gallery



Archive as Impetus, 2013. Performance, MoMA, New York.
Courtesy David Castillo Gallery

When we meet, she has just recently installed a work in the new Pérez Art Museum in Miami, a 16-by-61-foot wooden panel consisting of hand-painted words pertaining to the color blue, and loosely to the ocean. The text of *The Wandering Night Sea* (2014) alternates between taking the perspective of the ocean itself and that of a seafaring migrant drifting between Haitian Creole dialect, Spanish, and English. Spend enough time with the work, and patterns start to emerge: It slips in and out of landscapes, rhythms, and themes, lulling the viewer with visual and linguistic repetitions.

Simmons sees being an artist as akin to being a jazz musician—good ones “learn their spine” and are able to improvise from there. The trick, of course, is striking the right balance between technical virtuosity and experimentation. That’s something she’s working on, in dance and audio engineering classes, in new performances and paintings, and in her photographic and film practices. All this juggling would be a source of stress for many artists, but Simmons has embraced it, made it central to her practice. “Even if it’s a mess,” she reflected before we leave, “I like rigor.”