

Untitled: an interview with Xaviera Simmons

New York, Apr. 2014: Xaviera Simmons is a New York-based artist whose practice manifests in performance, photography, sculpture, installation, sound, video, and more. That dynamic interdisciplinary material is fueled by research, contemplation, and feeling, three modes that enable Simmons to not only reflect the complexity of the human condition but also empathize with it. No subject would seem unconquerable: she tackles history, the landscape, and the human figure within it; she plays with cultural narratives as well as stereotypes, and her work is somehow capable of reflecting problems while facilitating a transformative, aesthetic experience. Simmons' work is currently featured in *When the Stars Begin to Fall - Imagination and the American South* at the Studio Museum in Harlem.



Xaviera Simmons, *Composition One For Score*, 2010, Color photograph, 40 x 50 in; Courtesy of the artist

Caroline Picard: How do you decide what medium to employ when addressing a particular concept?

Xaviera Simmons: There is simply no way that I can work in one medium and be fulfilled as an artist. Period! I like to think of my practice as one of weaving, where elements are folded into each other. I am always sketching, researching, going through texts, writing, looking online, and seeing exhibitions; that's how things come together. I never try and stifle the flow, meaning if I cannot produce something right away it will be written down and stored for later reference. I wish that my studio could keep up with the amount of production I would like to do, but things have to be paced, I suppose.

Sometimes an idea or concept needs to be worked out in more than one medium. For instance, I spent a few years looking at international illegal migration patterns and how migration plays out on land and sea. I couldn't just make one photograph about that; I also produced sound works on the topic, a text/sculptural work, and a video. Elements from that project begin to pique my interest in other ways, and those elements lead me to produce something else, often in another medium.

I am working to have less censorship in my practice these days, and hope that will start to show more and more. I am working to produce works towards topics and ideas that don't sit as comfortably with me or my studio style. Simple topics, like Antarctica or scientific blueprints, and more complex topics from images of mutilated bodies and mutilated landscapes, to sexual orgies, to drug addiction, or even the myriad ways hard and softcore pornography pervades, etc. I haven't really worked with things like [that]... So we will see how they play out in the studio.

CP: Have you always been interested in the human figure?

XS: Yes. I have always been interested in the human figure. Probably because it relates to my passion for history: I have always been excited by the multitude of ways the human figure can be negotiated, tamed, manipulated, etc. Having a fascination with the human

figure also means having a fascination with the human being: a fascination or interest that ultimately expands my ability to have compassion for my fellow human beings. That's a life long practice but actually answering the question acts as a catalyst to live up to this idea of openness, inquisitiveness, and compassion for the breadth of human experience.



Xaviera Simmons, *Underscore Installation Still*, 2014, Installation, Performance and Film, Commissioned by The Aldrich Museum Of Contemporary Art; Courtesy of the artist

CP: *How do you undermine expectations about how to read images by troubling (often unexamined) assumptions implicit in cultural narratives?*

XS: I hope that I am able to undermine expectations and shift narratives and open up other ways of viewing and other ways of thinking. I really hope that my works achieve those goals. I spend a lot of time contemplating images, listening to sounds, watching, and feeling. It goes back to that idea of compassion and empathy. A really great actor can open up his or her ability to have compassion and empathy for the character they are playing and play themselves all out with their role. That's my goal with my work, to play out the multitude of characters and ideas and concepts fully. I try to tap into my subconscious, melding that with the top and middle layers of information I have accumulated in order to produce a work. I like to work in between animal instinct and human craftsmanship. That's probably and

hopefully where any undermining comes from. There has to be a push and pull between the guttural/instinctual and the more habitual craft or technical pursuit.

It would be easy for me to produce works that followed a straight narrative, given my position as a Female American of African/Native American/European descent. There are thankfully many roads paved to explore that narrative; I could follow along with those roads faithfully, but I tend to see my practice as being about that and then some... Other interests have to come into play, interests that are part of my interior, as well as interests that speak to diverse communities, mediums, concerns, and projects. For instance, I love the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk's memoir *Istanbul*. It has shaped how I view image and text in every possible way. It's also shaped the way I view Europe and Asia, and—more simply—the relationship between travel and home with a capital H. These are all ingredients in my work. Having been a working DJ for ten years, I have a real keen engagement with sound, and my knowledge of sound affects the way I make both sculptures and photographs. You can't listen to headphones and music for so long without it giving breath to your bloodstream.



Xaviera Simmons, *Index Two, Composition One*, 2013, Color photograph, 40 x 50 in; Courtesy of the artist

CP: *Can you talk a little bit about how your Index series came together?*

XS: I wanted to move into the studio and away from the landscape. I actually produced one piece, titled *Beyond The Canon of Landscape* in 2007. This was my first Index. I didn't come back to the idea surrounding that piece until 2010, when I started teasing out ideas surrounding the Indexes. It's been a little over three years now and I am onto *Index Six* (there are six sets of Indexes, *Index One-Index Six*) thus far. Each set of Indexes has a certain number of compositions. So there are, for example, four compositions in the series *Index One* and then six compositions for *Index Four*.

I wanted to work in a straight series, just as I wanted to think about building sculptures, and building narrative landscapes in sculptures—specifically sculptures that only exist in the photographic realm. I like using the language of sculpture in a photograph, and I like to use the language of photography in some of my sculptural works.

I also have a huge collection of *National Geographics* and I love to collect images, so I wanted a space to work out some of my reactions to that collection of magazines, and to the idea of collecting in general. Ideas surrounding collecting, artifact, sculpture-as-photograph, and ways to produce a landscape in modern language.

CP: *You recently did a reenactment of Yoko Ono's Cut Piece; how does that play into your own ideas about historical reenactment?*

XS: I am in contact with Yoko via Jon Hendricks who handles her Fluxus works. I have been working with Yoko's score *Cut Piece* since 2006, when I was a student in studio art at the Whitney Museum's ISP program. The curatorial students asked me to engage the score for their exhibition and I have since folded it into my own practice. I have performed that score probably five times over the years; each time it feels new, different, and fresh. Yoko has said that when someone else works with that score they are *performing* the score. It's not a reenactment. She doesn't like it framed that way, which I appreciate. She says to say, "performed by..." Because, especially with that piece, the work isn't a reenactment; it's

happening on site to my body with the audience's engagement. There is no repetition when I engage the score. I take it in as if it were my own and I know that Yoko wants it that way. I tend to slant on the side of Yoko. When an artist uses another artist's score, I don't think that is a reenactment. It's more of an interpretation, like a classical or jazz musician. When a contemporary musician decides to engage with the scores of say, Nina Simone or Erik Satie, they aren't reenacting. They are taking in the information from the score and interpreting the score in their own way, sometimes very directly and sometimes in a more abstract manner. I believe it's very important for the development of an artist's craft to engage with other artists. Sometimes that means engaging with someone else's color palette, themes, or directly with their scores. This is how we practice, this is how we develop and grow through engagement. Great art making happens in relationship to other things, things besides the mediums themselves.

—Caroline Picard

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