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“Toward the Same Sea”: Critical Cosmopolitanism at the Perez Art Museum Miami

By Mostafa Heddaya | July 6, 2015

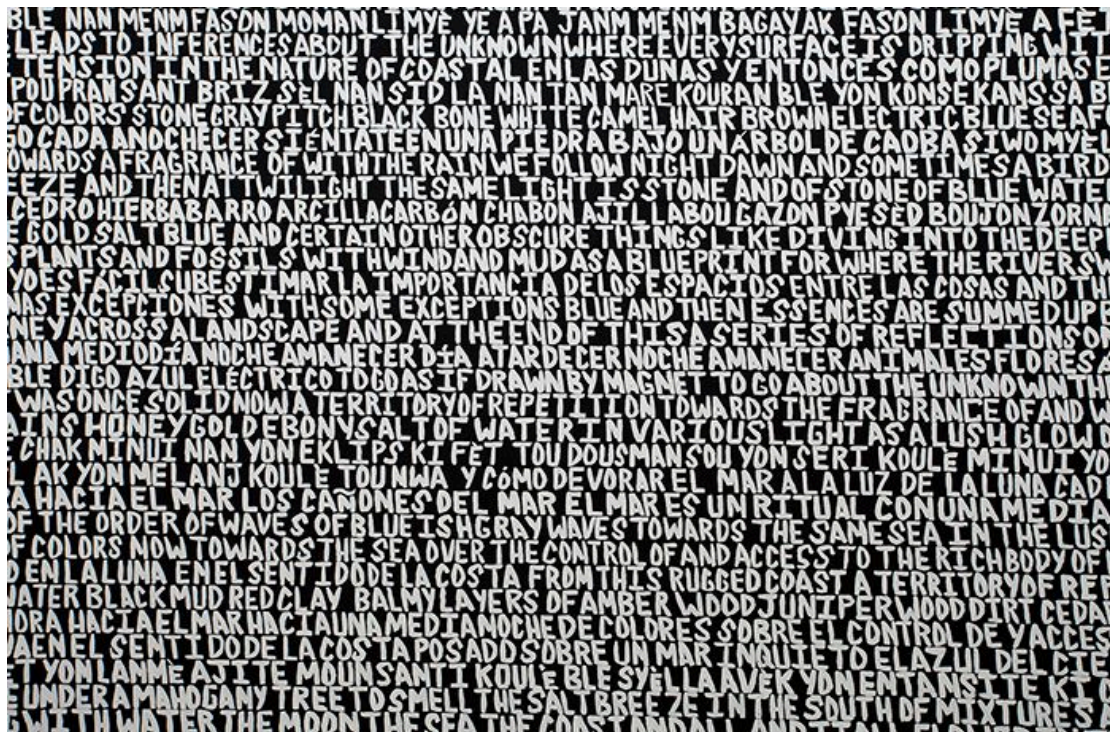


Xaviera Simmons
Super Unknown (Alive in The), 2010
50 Chromogenic prints
90 x 320 in

“In the now irrevocable state of cultural contact that is one effect of colonialism, there are pressing conflicts about the extent to which the formerly colonized ought to define themselves vis-à-vis Western influences, how this choice might affect the achievement of political goals, and the distance between the formerly colonized collectivity and the person who ‘speaks for’ it.”

—Jeannie Suk, *“Postcolonial Paradoxes in French Caribbean Writing”* (Oxford University Press, 2001)

The unpunctuated phrases proceed from floor to ceiling, lines of white acrylic handwriting on black wood washing over the viewer-reader, a fugue of Spanish, English, and Creole. Some fragments linger: “...the order of waves of bluish gray waves toward the same sea...” This textual mural by Xaviera Simmons, *“In the Lushness of,”* 2015, centers the exhibition *“Poetics of Relation,”* at the Perez Art Museum Miami (PAMM). The show, on view through October 18, is a sophisticated effort by PAMM’s Tobias Ostrander and guest curator Tumelo Mosaka, inspired by the Martinican poet Édouard Glissant’s book of the same title. Glissant offers up a poetics of hybridity, and Ostrander and Mosaka bring together six international artists with a shared stake in the concept of unmoored marginality that the poet proposes: Hurvin Anderson, Tony Capellán, Ledelle Moe, Yto Barrada, Xaviera Simmons, and Zarina Bhimji.



Xaviera Simmons
 In the Lushness of (detail), 2015
 Wood and acrylic painting
 16 x 61 ft

Identitarian exhibition making in the West is often grounded in a universalist notion of pluralism, a blinkered approach that, despite outward gestures of sophistication, eschews critical engagement with difference in favor of intellectually lubricating an increasingly globalized art system. Although it is without a doubt true that recent efforts as disparate as an African art fair in New York and the Guggenheim branch in Abu Dhabi have marshaled simplistic arguments about pluralistic cultural exchange to facilitate the naked accumulation of capital and soft power, not all intercultural, identity-oriented artistic presentations are compromised by ulterior motives or well-meaning but misguided universalism.

In revisiting Glissant, who rejected “universal culture” as “the alienated reverse side of the uniquely Western pretension to exercise universal control,” “Poetics of Relation” proposes a framework for considering artistic projects linked to questions of so-called marginality today. Comprising painting, sculpture, text, and video, the exhibition’s works look at migration, diaspora, and identity through a lens that stresses the specificity of difference without invoking an impermeable or unbridgeable marginality. In this review I will focus on three artists in the exhibition — Yto Barrada, Xaviera Simmons, and Zarina Bhimji — who, in turning accounts of marginality outward, propose distinct visions of subjectivity that are both cosmopolitanist and, somehow, other. Their art makes marginal experience porous through a sensitively promiscuous relationship with dominant or domineering discourses, an approach linked to the thought of Glissant.

This may seem a mystifying construction: “Cosmopolitanism” has not been (and perhaps never can be) fully rehabilitated from connotations of louche complicity in empire and other forms of globalized exploitation, and indeed it is not a term that comes up, at least curatorially, in the literature of the exhibition (a catalogue is forthcoming). The geopolitically marginal subject — “diasporic,” “immigrant,” and so on — bereft of class and legal status, has emerged as a quasi-euphemistic appellation applied universally to those who cannot speak and those, like artists or writers, who do. By introducing the concept of cosmopolitanism, we might establish an important distinction between the unspeaking, and thus truly marginal, subject and the authorial voice of the artist who may, for various instrumental reasons, be falsely presumed to be a spokesperson for a broader population. A critical cosmopolitanism does not run from difference but instead creates an opening for engaging with and contextualizing its construction.

The pieces by Barrada, Bhimji, and Simmons displayed in “Poetics of Relation” address difference from positions consistent with what Glissant calls a “poetics that is latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible.” This critical cosmopolitanism takes on radically different forms across the works of these artists, but the manifestations are united by a common commitment to the rhizomatic nature of Glissant’s poetics. In her video “Hand-me-downs,” 2011, Barrada, who was born in Paris and lives and works in Tangier, narrates her childhood over French tourist footage found in flea markets, completing her autobiography with film linked to Tunisia’s colonial domination. In another video, “Beau Geste,” 2009, the patchwork is subtler: Barrada chronicles a community effort she organized in Tangier to save a palm tree on a vacant lot threatened by construction (under local law, living palm trees cannot be cut down for building projects). In both films, a sovereign dimension is introduced into the frame of the personal and authorial. Whether through films of French tourists or the concrete used to patch the root system of the tree menaced by real estate development in Tangier, the artist adapts and reconfigures the representations or logics of power in a composite style reminiscent of Glissant.

Similarly, Bhimji’s two films — “Jangbar,” 2012-15, which follows the Kenyan railway constructed during the imperial “Scramble for Africa” at the turn of the last century, and “Yellow Patch,” 2011, which considers the history of trade between India and Africa — approach the remnants of colonial systems from the perspective of a former colonial subject. London-based Bhimji, who was born in Uganda, reconstitutes the landscape in her own gaze, a mode of filmic subjectivization that adopts a painterly eye to reclaim dominated landscapes. New York artist Xaviera Simmons differently critiques the documentary gaze in the “Superunknown (Alive In The),” 2010, a Google Images-like grid, four images tall and 10 wide, of press and surveillance pictures of migrants at sea, precariously adrift on improvised vessels. The subtle pixelation and manipulations of the photographs’ aspect ratios point to the human and machine systems that mediate this form of witness. Simmons’s wall-length hand-written stream-of-consciousness text piece “In the Lushness of,” the work in the exhibition most closely tied to Glissant’s poetics, records the purported thoughts of a sea traveler moving between Spanish, English, and Creole. Despite giving the appearance of European avant-garde literary strategies, Simmons explains that the fragments of text that make up the multilingual prose poem are in fact snippets appropriated and adapted from various media she encounters, like glossy magazines.

What’s crucial about Barrada, Bhimji, and Simmons is that their work ruptures the assumption of universal witness coded into more dangerous understandings of pluralism, recentring artistic autonomy in an authorial, rather than homogeneously identitarian, claim. The bad faith of a pluralism that celebrates difference but codes it as similarity, smothering its radical potential under a wet blanket of Western universalism, is replaced with a highly idiosyncratic mix of claims across time and space, claims made possible by negotiating an artistic proposition in relation to dominant cultural forms from a position of marginality — for example, by appropriating form and content from photojournalism or glossy magazines (Simmons), landscape painting and documentary film (Bhimji), or tourist artifacts (Barrada). This dislocated rootedness evades what the thinker Jalal Toufic has called “the revengeful logic of similarity” in favor of something like Glissant’s “Antillanité,” proposing a method for conceiving of marginality and lodging it in relation to dominant discourses without recapitulating the trauma of universalist ideology.

“Latter-day cosmopolitanism can be set up as an ‘effect’ of the globalization of globalization,” the writer and curator Tirdad Zolghadr argued in a 2005 essay, “Bonus Miles: The Case for Cosmopolitanism,” proposing that cultural workers communicating transnationally ought to consider the existence of a shared framework for discourse as an opportunity to lay bare “matters such as colonialism and class privilege.” Such an approach acknowledges the structural dimensions of artistic discourses born of marginality and, in so doing, offers a way out of the limitations of pure pluralism, which as Hal Foster pointed out in 1982’s “Against Pluralism,” “plays right into the ideology of the ‘free market’; it also conceives of art as natural, when both art and freedom consist entirely of conventions.”