THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Xaviera Simmons with Marcia E. Vetrocq

"I think it's really important to consider new ways of seeing and new ways of living, new ways that can become politically tangible, should we act as a group with compassion and creativity."

Portrait of Xaviera Simmons, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

I spoke with Xaviera Simmons on March 10, which is to say during the final days when one might reasonably and honorably have a conversation without mentioning the ferocity of the coronavirus. On that day, her work was on view in a recently opened solo exhibition in the Great Hall of NYU's Institute of Fine Arts, and she was planning the fabrication of a monument commissioned by Socrates Sculpture Park for a three-person show scheduled to open on May 16. The former show closed early, and the opening of the latter has been postponed. Yet Simmons's remarks about her determination to foreground racial injustice, reparations, and prison abolition as fundamental issues in her art have only come to seem more urgent since March, as deaths from Covid-19 have been disproportionately high among Black and Latinx Americans, and prison reform activists and journalists have detailed the cruel vulnerability of incarcerated individuals.

Born in New York in 1974, Simmons has exhibited her work since 2005, following experiences that include earning a BFA at Bard, participating in the Whitney Independent Studies Program and the Maggie Flanigan Studio Actor Training Conservatory, and—even before all of that—completing an 18-month walking meditation organized by monks that retraced the transatlantic slave trade from Massachusetts across the Caribbean and the Atlantic to Africa. Resourceful and prolific, Simmons makes art that ranges across media—photography, performance, painting, video, sound, sculpture, text—as if there had never been any boundaries between them in the first place.

Marcia E. Vetrocq (Rail): Let's start in the present, which is busy and vivid, and draw your earlier projects into the conversation as we go along.

Xaviera Simmons: My political interest and investment has grown and my practice has expanded exponentially in just these last three years or so. I have always been engaged politically, even as a younger person, but now I am always pushing and pulling against aspects of the political inside my practice, with politics as clearly foundational. I feel like the political—being a citizen and thinking about the intricacies

of the United States and its engagements across the globe—that's all percolating at a faster pace. I am contemplating how to both work politically and hold on to a rigorous creative practice at the same time.

Rail: You're participating, with Jeffrey Gibson and Paul Ramírez Jonas, in *MONUMENTS NOW*, which Socrates Sculpture Park has characterized as an exhibition that seeks to address the role of monuments in society and commemorate underrepresented narratives.

Xaviera Simmons, Index Six, Composition One, 2013, Chromogenic color print, 50 x 62 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery.

Simmons: For me, first of all, I think at this point we have to regard language as labor, right? And we have to continue shifting the narrative. When I think about monuments, it's not that indigenous or

First Nations people or the descendants of American chattel slavery have never had monuments of any kind. It's that white America, particularly as represented by the local, state, and federal governments, has terrorized the impulse of monumentality out of those groups, in which my own ancestry rests. I think that it's important to frame it that way, because there is an impulse, it seems, across cultures and generations and time, to imagine, dream, or construct bigger than the self. I'm sure that has to do with group myths and spiritual practices and relationships to land and community, and other ideas pertaining to the body, personhood, humanity, or reaching toward something beyond ourselves. I think that whiteness has worked consistently as the force of terror and the police state in the United States, and therefore it has worked against monumental thinking when it comes to the first people who inhabited this place and to mixed race, quote-unquote Black people. I think it takes labor to undo not only this ideology but also the language that forms who gets to construct the monument. Then, hopefully, you can see the monument anew and the idea of these monuments at Socrates not as someone being given the opportunity to do something that a group has never been able to do before, but almost like a natural release or an impulse that is a part of the kind of thinking in which we are all indoctrinated, especially in the West. The pressure of oppression and suppression has built up in the United States, and it can't really hold any longer. I don't know if White people comprehend that their very privileges rest on the pressure felt by the others. This pressure has been maintained by physical, legal, and violent forces across the spectrum of our existence here. And this exhibition is one way to reduce the pressure just a little bit.

Rail: I'm wondering about the difference between "monument" and "monumentality" and the significance of scale in *Monuments Now*. I'm thinking of the memorial in Mississippi to Emmett Till, which has been vandalized repeatedly although it's little more than a roadside marker. On the other hand, when Trump proposed an executive order in February to impose classicism as the style for federal buildings—an expression of whiteness if ever there was one—I immediately imagined the daily affront to Trump of David Adjaye's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, which was

constructed during the Obama administration. So, in terms of form, scale, and sheer presence, how have you been thinking about your own design for a monument?

Xaviera Simmons, Sundown (Number Eleven), 2018, Chromogenic color print, 60 x 45 inches, Edition of 3. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo.

Simmons: I'm going to take it back a little bit. In 2008, I did a community oriented project with the Public Art Fund in conjunction with the Bronx Museum called *Bronx as Studio*. It was a free portrait studio. I went throughout different neighborhoods in the Bronx and made photographs inside the communities. The end result was the interaction between the community members and me and the photographs that I hand-printed and sent to the participants afterward. Last year I participated in a wonderful Public Art Fund podcast. We were a group of women—myself, Kate Gilmore, and Paola Mendoza—and in that conversation I said that with my 2008 project the organization almost segregated the kind of work that I could make, that Black, Latinx, or Asian artists could make. That is to say that by constantly asking non-White artists (White artists produce the majority of large-scale works) to produce "community based works," organizations showed almost a mistrust of non-White artists with respect to the material and financial resources that support work on monuments or to work in monumental way when it comes to creative forms. I have a problem with that, obviously, because artists constantly need to hone their skills and experiment in different ways. So for me, it is really important to be invited to construct and

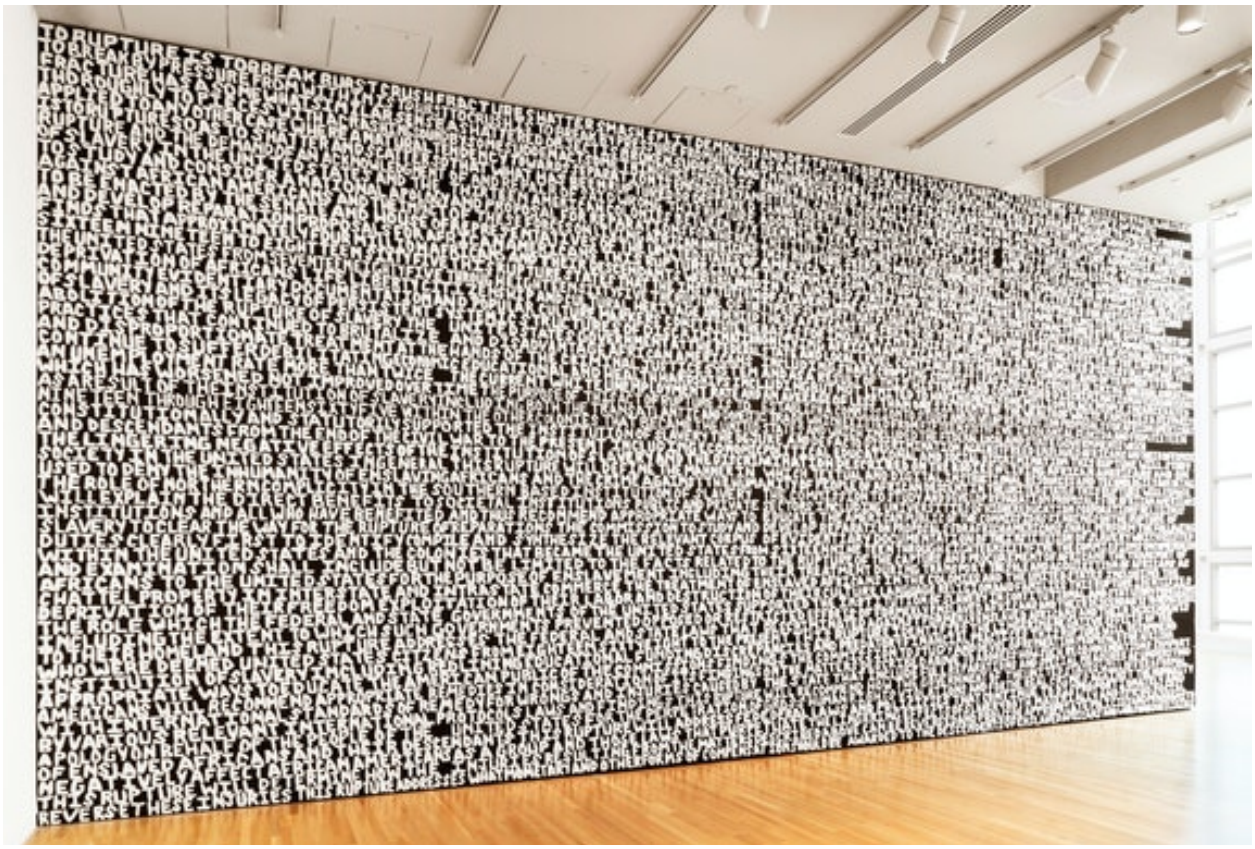
contemplate monuments at Socrates and other spaces. And I have really run with it at Socrates. I'm making three large-scale works that use heavy materials, like steel, plaster, or large chunks of wood. It's a challenge, but I feel it's something that has to happen on this landscape from an artist like me.

Rail: Can you share more about the design of the three works?

Simmons: I was interested in looking at how I could make a work that bodies could move around. I wanted to think about the viewer's interaction with the outer parts of the work, the texture and shape, as well as the interior of the work, as in the presence or absence of text. But I was also thinking about policy, political potential, and promises—the promises that the United States government and public intellectuals have given and haven't kept, especially those lofty promises that would have changed the trajectory of the material conditions of the descendants of chattel slavery. The government of the United States has made untold numbers of promises that have just not been kept.

As for the form, I'm thinking of modern artists whose practices I am excited about, from Richard Serra—a complicated figure but one whose works and thought processes I think about as a sort of pinnacle of white power structures and creativity and capitalism—to Louise Bourgeois, Mark di Suvero, Giacometti, Elizabeth Catlett, Kara Walker, and so many of my peers who work large-scale. I am thinking about their ability to experiment and work with a range of materials. I am thinking about materials that I am really attracted to, materials that have a sturdy softness to them: clay, earth, plaster, etc. But then text works make up two of the monuments, and one work is simply a pause that is really about looking at the materials, the different shades of the color black, and thinking about the different textures and the formal conversation my work is having with some of the works by artists I mentioned before. So I am trying to work both ways, thinking about the content and thinking about the forms. One work is overtly politically engaged and one is about promises. And one is much more abstract.

Rail: When I looked at the Socrates website yesterday, I saw a photograph of a large, four-panel text work by you—labeled untitled and from this year—in which the word "rupture" is reiterated. Is that new painting related to your 2017 text work called *Rupture*, which took as its starting point the House bill for reparations introduced by the late John Conyers? Is the new text painting related to the monument for Socrates?



Xaviera Simmons, Rupture, 2017, Acrylic on wood, 16 x 42 feet. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo.

Simmons: No, it's not part of the monument. *Rupture* was produced at the Wexner Center. Usually my text works are a lot more abstract, or rather I would say they're not linear in how the language is formed. But *Rupture* was the first time I mostly used a single text, the bill H.R.40, which John Conyers and others had been putting forward for 25 years or more. I say "mostly" because I changed the language of the bill a bit. I wanted the audience to be really overwhelmed by the text and its possibilities and to contemplate the rupture of contact, the rupture of this union, the rupture of massacres, the rupture that

whiteness has caused and the rupture of all things related to the institution of slavery, which ruptured humanity itself. *Rupture* is one text work that is very specific to the harms that have been perpetrated by the United States and to the need for repair. I called it *Rupture* because we are a fractured, under-compassionate society as a whole, and I am an optimist.

Rail: I'd like to introduce a couple of brief quotes from Zadie Smith's essay in the February 27 issue of the *New York Review of Books* on Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus*, the monumental work that opened last October as a six-month installation in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern. In a discussion of the pros and cons of permanence, Smith writes, "Monuments are complacent; they put a seal upon the past, they release us from dread." She also quotes Kara Walker's observation on the anesthetizing effect of permanent monuments: "When you have monuments or commemorative things that just exist, they sit there and they disappear." What's your response to that?

Simmons: I think it's so interesting right now that you're asking me this question about impermanence or permanence when you're talking to me as a Black person who's a descendant of chattel slavery on all sides of my lineage. It's so interesting that we are going for, "Well, can you think about impermanence," when there aren't many permanent markers in terms of my cultural narrative. I feel it's very Eurocentrically dominating in a way to ask that question, because it's almost refusing to allow the idea of a permanent marker produced by a Black person in this country to remain, to even have the opportunity for the mind of the producer to think about permanence.

Rail: To clarify, the observations that I read, which suggested certain problems of the permanent monument, were quotes from Zadie Smith, a writer with Jamaican and English parents, and Kara Walker, a Black American artist. Smith was discussing Walker's *A Subtlety* and *Fons Americanus* in terms of the expressive and symbolic value of impermanence itself.

Simmons: I can agree. But then I don't really believe in permanence. This is a difficult thing for me to advocate really, but I'm going to advocate for it in this context. I grew up Buddhist and, though I do not practice a form of Buddhism any longer, the ideas are embedded in me. I do not believe in this language that's being put forth, because none of this is permanent and there will be a time when none of this exists in any form. No one and nothing is permanent, and in Buddhism you contemplate that fact. But I'll tangle with this language just for fun and for the sake of this conversation, with "permanent" being a hundred years of our lifetime, or maybe a few generations more, maybe a couple hundred years. I disagree with Zadie Smith and Kara Walker in this context. I think that a particular group has had permanence abounding in different landscapes, and that in order to change the collective history in this country, you need some permanent markers of a shift in consciousness. Most if not all of the permanent structures are Eurocentric, and they are tied to the Eurocentric way of living, being, creating, and existing. The United Daughters of the Confederacy were not interested in impermanent markers. They were interested in permanence, so that they could then also infiltrate textbooks, media, and anywhere they could to change the narrative of a war that their forefathers lost and to continue to oppress others. I think it would be very prudent to have more permanent answers to that, more permanent reminders. But again, I want to put in there that permanence means nothing to me really. It doesn't exist. I admire and love Kara. She is one of my favorite artists

Xaviera Simmons, Untold Acres, 2018, Chromogenic color print, 55 x 65 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery

ever, ever, ever. Who else can work that beautifully straight from head to hand? She's a master. But I am saying that permanence is impossible anyway. Otherwise, Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* would exist. It may still exist in government archives somewhere. But that monumental object is gone from where it was. Things leave and they decay, no matter how weighty they are.

Rail: This year you've been a visiting professor at Harvard, where you were named the inaugural Solomon Fellow in the Department of Art, Film, and Visual Studies. In November, you engineered an ambitious event on campus. How did you structure that event and what did you intend for the participants to experience?

Xaviera Simmons, Elegant, 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 180 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery

Simmons: It was called *Malleable Forms—Define Abolition*. As the first Solomon Fellow, I was asked to talk to different classes and also to give a lecture. But, as is my practice, I'm going to push it to do something else. I invited 15 speakers plus my students in the class, which is a rigorous and highly concentrated class dealing with the political and the creative. We talk about everything from prison abolition, which was the crux, to the divesting of whiteness and

everything in between, because that's really what we're dealing with—whiteness as an object and oppression as an object.

Harvard has the most amazing thinkers. It has influenced our entire world. It is the oldest higher education institution in the United States. Obviously, it was founded with the help of much slave labor and slavery-derived monies. There's no point in me going into an institution like that and being meek or not being my true self as a teacher. My true self is going to go there as a teacher to investigate, interrogate, and try to understand, first, why I would be teaching there and, second, what limits I can push inside that space. They told me that no one had really ever done what I did with *Define Abolition*. But what I did and what I hope that the group did was to push the acknowledgment that Harvard benefits from the prison-industrial complex through its investments, and that the students must push the institution for change. The institution also perpetrates whiteness beyond itself, because it is seen across the world as this most fundamental institution. But it barely acknowledges slavery as its foundational asset. And it doesn't acknowledge that it continues to keep whiteness alive at the highest level. Harvard embodies white supremacy, which is a difficult thing to shake, but then again, most institutions in the United States are objects to keep white supremacy intact.

When you talk about abolition, you also have to talk about nourishment, because abolition means not just, "okay everybody, you're free from all oppression and prison." It's about what other world you would want to build. So while we dissected the institution of Harvard and prison abolition, we also nourished ourselves with food, with sound, with collaboration, and with rest. As for what the students got out of it, some of the participants were mature, so they had their ideas about abolition or about white supremacy. There were some White speakers who had never spoken about whiteness before. One White curator at Radcliffe College who gave a presentation had never broken down their clear relationship to whiteness in the Harvard community of students and colleagues before, which is mind-blowing to me, because that community is the epicenter of whiteness. What I mean by whiteness is not just confined to physical complexion. I also

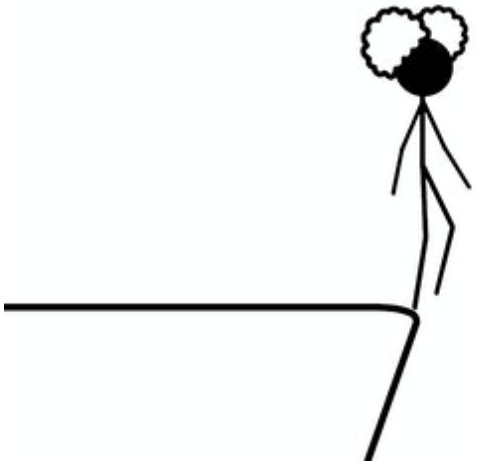
think of it as an object, even a goal. Most people come to the United States to assimilate to some aspect of the construction of whiteness. No one comes to the United States to be part of the bottom and to struggle to liberate people. They come here for the advantages that this country has, which are questionable unless you already have whiteness as your particular foundation.

It was important to have my students mix with thinkers, so that they didn't feel like the thinkers were above them, and they wouldn't get into the hierarchy of a lecture, just listening as part of an audience. So the "performance" was layered—a student and a thinker, a student and a professor, a student and an activist. I wanted the students to know that you have to engage on multiple levels in order to feel more pleasure, some form of happiness and less despair, and also to understand that this is all intermingled, and that you can actually shift systems, though it takes coordination, collaboration, and a lot of effort. So how do you work to shift those systems, whether you're going to be an artist or you're going to go off ten years from now and be a politician, but with an artist's mind? I know that these students are not all going to be visual or performing artists. But I want them to think much more abstractly than they would if they hadn't taken my class no matter what they decide to do later on.

Xaviera Simmons, Posture, Installation View, 2020, The Institute of Fine Arts - NYU. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo.

Rail: Let's turn to *Posture*, your current installation in the Great Hall at Duke House, which is the Upper East Side home of NYU's Institute of Fine Arts. Let's begin with the composition. Your museum and gallery exhibitions are emphatically multipart. They involve photography, video, sculpture, painting, performance, and sound, and they lay claim to spaces that visitors move through. For *CHORD*, your solo presentation with David Castillo Gallery at the 2019 Armory Fair, your installation was necessarily restricted to the area of the booth's platform. Now, with *Posture*, you've positioned multiple elements as a frontal tableau in a narrow space. I understand that the design was inspired in part by your study of Brâncuşi staging his studio for photographs. Can you share more about how *Posture* came together for you?

Simmons: The Institute invited me to show works in the exhibition space, which is not a formal gallery but a small area in the entrance hall with no walls for hanging works. This was an interesting proposition, because when I produced *Archive as Impetus* at MoMA in 2013, the museum requested that I not produce anything that would exist on the walls there. So I have experience with that type of exhibition condition.



Xaviera Simmons, Capture, 2019, Two-channel video (video still). Courtesy the artist and David Castillo.

I travel to Europe, and particularly Paris, quite often as my partner lived there for many years, and I would go to the studios of historical artists, the ones we all learn about in our Eurocentric art history classes. Even though they're staged now, even though Brâncuşi staged his studio for prospective clients, it's still amazing to see it as a set, as a space to imagine an artist working in. With Brâncuşi, I was most attracted to how he was using the pedestal, thinking about how I can work with the pedestal to make my work shift. I kept ruminating about how the large-scale photographs could come into the Great Hall.

It came to me that the pedestal would do that. And then it became about the minute details, like how to affix flat works and sculptural works, and how did I want that to be seen? For the paintings, I got really interested in a specific kind of cord. There are the paintings themselves, which I really love, because they hold the space front and center. Behind the paintings, there are these really soft, beautiful cords that remind me of ships' sails. I like the idea of working with different heights in *Posture* to bring all the different parts of my practice into one frontal, straightforward intervention inside this very ornate, historically fraught space on that corner across from Central Park. I want to say that I produced that work for myself, yes of course, but really for the audience, and the students that were coming in and the security guard. I thought a lot about the security guard who had to look at that work every day. He was on my mind, part of my audience. How do you keep this person's attention with a series of works? How do you keep turning the imagination with a variety of objects and insertions?

Xaviera Simmons, Capture, 2019, Two-channel video (video still). Courtesy the artist and David Castillo.

Rail: In *Posture*, you use the white geometric pedestals associated with the white cube gallery, but there's a nod to Brâncuşi as a precedent. Ever since at least 1989, when Scott Burton organized a Brâncuşi show at MoMA, we've been alert not only to the sculptural qualities of the bases designed by Brâncuşi but to the suggestion of a near-equivalence between sculpture and base, as if the two could exchange places. In *CHORD*, you presented your photographs on modular structures made of African mahogany. Now, in *Posture*, one of those modular bases is itself placed upon a white base.

Simmons: I'm happy that you brought that up. Originally the curators asked me to show *CHORD* in the Great Hall. I really don't

enjoy reshowing the same thing, especially after just a year. I didn't put that wooden piece in *Posture* until the very last minute, but I took that as, "okay, how can I go into the next phase beyond *CHORD*?" I produced the wooden pedestals with the photographs attached to them because I wanted those to feel like furniture or design objects, things that you would just own, things that engage with images in a home. With *Posture*, in that narrow space, I was thinking I can control how the photographs are seen, and I can think about how the videos are shown, what height and form the pedestals are going to take. And I can play with the photographs not being on a wall, and how the paintings continue to be their upright selves in a different way—how to make the paintings sing in their posture, if that makes sense. All the elements came together, but they really are an extension of *CHORD*. My studio tends to work that way. I keep thinking, the conversations keep going, and I try to let one work or series inform the other, as if friends were engaging in some form of dialogue or disagreement.

Rail: How did you arrive at the title *Posture* for the installation?

Xaviera Simmons, Number 17, 2017, Performance Still. Court

Simmons: I had been reading a number of early writings by Richard Serra, thinking about how his close romantic, creative, and physical relationship with Joan Jonas influenced his work in terms of the relationship between the body and the object. I love the works of Martin Puryear—always one of my favorite artists—and I've been thinking about Louise Bourgeois and Louise Nevelson, how they talked about bodies moving around their works and how that inspired their processes. I also think about engaging with repetition inside the

studio, and so many moments of movement, dance, and performance in my own non-performative works. I have been obsessed with simple gestures since I started out as a photographer, and now I love working both on and off the wall. So, how are bodies engaging with the works in *Posture* besides looking at them frontally? You can kind of squeeze your way in. The guard doesn't let you, but I have photos of people—I won't name them—who have gone through, and I'm happy they did because they got to see the backs of works from the floor level and also from above, as the works are situated underneath a grand staircase which is very dramatic. I think about all of those interactions.

Rail: In some earlier interviews, you've noted that you do a great deal of planning in sketchbooks, and that the sketchbooks generally contain a lot of text—your design thoughts, journalistic writing, other notations—and drawings that take the form of stick figures. Did the sketchbook stick figures serve as the basis for the animation in *Posture*?

Simmons: Totally.

Rail: Is this the first animation you've done? And if so, what prompted you to get those stick figures moving?

Simmons: This is the first. A lot of the time when I work, even with text works, I can't make "images" of these things. I wanted to show labor, and these animations show a lot of labor that never accomplishes anything, futile labor. At the end—I don't know, should I give it away? [*Laughs*]

Rail: Let's just say that there are moments which are very Sisyphean.

Simmons: Exactly. The animations are tied to image-making. I wanted you to see the labor, but that's physical labor that I can't produce with actual physical bodies because they would just die, right? The characters in the animations are extinguished. And I wanted the labor to be almost . . . I think the word I want to use is "uncanny." How does it rest on you to see these figures experiencing this much fruitless labor? You can tell that they're non-White characters by their physical shapes, hairstyles, etc. All of their labor is monotonous, fruitless,

mind-numbing. And for me—I'll be honest—I sometimes feel that there's a repetition within art world practices, a repetition of labor from all types of groups, and we within those groups reproduce domination and suffering, this repetition of ideas and this fruitless, monotonous continuation of narratives. I'm interested in shifting the narrative, but I am also excited to see the fruitlessness of the labor as well. It's a little overwhelming even for me to try to get myself out of it.

Rail: There's a significant contrast between the labor in the animation and the action in certain stretches of the second video in *Posture*. Different characters are seen arranging flowers and leaves, working very deliberately, very calmly at a table. I saw a parallel between those arrangements and your art-making procedures involving assemblage, making grids of found photographs, and, in the largest sense, creating the installations themselves. Do you see these as related? Is there something darker in the second video, too?

Simmons: No, that part for me is definitely about pleasure. Like I said earlier, when you really start to do research into contemporary abolitionist thought, it is not all about the hardness of it. It is also about joy and pleasure and forming the self, the community, and the "government," and how bodies organize themselves or not in new ways. I think it's really important to consider new ways of seeing and new ways of living, new ways that can become politically tangible, should we act as a group with compassion and creativity. If you look at those two videos together, if in one there are characters who are under complete duress at all times, where are the characters in complete contemplation and joy, constructing and presenting a new reality, a new beauty, a more refined era?

Rail: To continue with thoughts of joy and beauty, I'd like to ask about gender and bodies in your work. When you staged *Coded* at the Kitchen in 2015, you incorporated found photographs of male go-go dancers and videos of daggering, the Jamaican dancehall moves that simulate sex. For your contribution in 2014 to *Pier 54*—a show of women artists responding to *Pier 18*, a legendary 1971 exhibition with male artists—you studied homoerotic moves and queer codes and then choreographed an hour or so of five women performing those

movements and gestures. Found imagery aside, there seems to be a scarcity or even an absence of male bodies in your photographs and performances. Have I just missed them?

Simmons: I am actually obsessing over male bodies now. But I think with *Pier 54* and *Coded*, in particular, I was really interested in how to process the enjoyment of looking at men loving each other, especially right before the AIDS crisis, processing those figures and thinking about how to respond to that pleasure of looking at others giving and receiving pleasure. In *Coded*, there actually is a male performer who narrates the hour-long performance, and it's really about a love affair between a man and his lover. So yes, I'm interested in male figures. I've had male figures in some of my photographic works, and I'm also really excited about the female as male and all of it. It's more that I can't keep up with what I want to produce, and I'm still producing ideas and things from sketches produced a bit ago. I'm really excited about the male figure now, because I haven't explored it enough in terms of how I've presented my work. So the male figure is coming—the male figure as sensual, as tender, and as complex as I can imagine the "MALE" to be.

Contributor

Marcia E. Vetrocq

MARCIA E. VETROCQ is a writer, editor, and visiting associate professor in the fine arts department at Pratt Institute