

# The New York Times

## Words and Actions: Queens Museum Shows About Seeking Racial Justice

Two exhibitions at the Queens Museum address efforts to create a more equitable society.



"Align" (2022) by Xaviera Simmons is the 16-foot-high and 15-foot-deep centerpiece of her exhibition at the Queens Museum. Credit: Jasmine Clarke for The New York Times

**By Alina Tugend**

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This article is part of our Fine Arts & Exhibits special section on how museums, galleries and auction houses are embracing new artists, new concepts and new traditions.

Thousands of handwritten capital letters march neatly on the walls of the 40-foot-long wooden shedlike structure with phrases gradually coming into focus: “unlearning and undoing,” “white-structured disasters,” “commitment to transformation.”

The structure — titled “Align” (2022) and stands 16 feet high and 15 feet deep — is the centerpiece of the exhibition “Crisis Makes a Book Club” at the Queens Museum until March 5.

The artist, Xaviera Simmons, calls it a text sculpture or an architectural intervention; it begins with the sentence “crisis makes a book club,” which is repeated sporadically throughout the writings. For Ms. Simmons — who has had group and solo shows in numerous museums nationally and internationally and has been lauded as “one of the most talented artists of her generation” — it is both humorous and wholly serious.

The written text was prompted by her familiarity with “a group of very wealthy, very influential and very seasoned white women in the arts, philanthropy and academia” who started a book club during the pandemic and amid the protests against the murder of George Floyd and other police brutality against Black people, Ms. Simmons said.

She spoke to a portion of the book group when they were meeting with a variety of artists and academics, and women in the group who she knew “would share the reading lists and tell me what they were talking about,” Ms. Simmons said.

“They never said or announced the depth of language that needed to be said as they engaged in their readings and communing. So, I painted the language for them and for all white women, including white queer, white feminists, who proclaim to desire for substantial change and find themselves starting or joining book clubs and listening sessions when state violence is enacted upon Black people, Indigenous people, trans people and brown communities who do not have the substantial power and resources to push against that power.”



Xaviera Simmons at the Queens Museum. Credit: Jasmine Clarke for The New York Times

Ms. Simmons certainly doesn’t want people to stop reading; as part of the exhibition, the museum is distributing contemporary and historical books on, among other topics, a history of Indigenous people in the United States. The aim is to give away 4,000 books over the five-month show.



But it's not enough. "Everybody loves a Toni Morrison, an Audre Lorde, a James Baldwin," she added. "Books are fabulous, but you can't stay in a book club or a reading circle or a listening stance and expect things to miraculously change."

In addition to Ms. Simmons' own words, she has also written out most of the James Baldwin essay "On Being White ... and Other Lies," published in *Essence* magazine in 1984.

In the back of the structure is an entry that welcomes visitors inside, with a bench and videos of landscapes and weather, a contrast to the gut-punching narrative.

"This is more of a pause inside of my work," she said, "I want to make sure, especially with this amount of content, there's a space to contemplate, to reflect."

The text sculpture is just one part of the exhibition; less noticeable at first are the large framed photos on the walls surrounding the structure, close-ups of a variety of carefully arranged flowers, the bright reds popping, the simple yellow, white and pink flowers more subdued.



"Gallery 6 Figures, No. 1, No. 2, No. 3" (2022) by Xaviera Simmons. Credit: David Castillo Gallery

In another space stand dark gray giant papier-mâché and clay figures on pedestals, influenced by European prehistoric figures. They are faceless and genderless, but the bangles they wear on their arms and legs, their casual stances (one with arms folded behind its head), along with round heads and voluptuous buttocks, give them both a friendly and luscious feel.

The floral and other photographs in the exhibition, as well as figure sculptures, Ms. Simmons, 48, said, add “a sensual element to it all.”

“I am founded in an art historical context,” said Ms. Simmons, who has taught at Harvard and Columbia. “I have been looking at paintings and sculptures and figurative works and gold plating and collage my whole life.”

The Queens Museum, which stopped charging visitors during the pandemic and has remained free, hopes the shows will draw the highly diverse community of the borough. But Ms. Simmons notes at the conclusion of the wall text that her exhibition is not “a surrogate for the vital life changing work that museums, trustees and both individual and government entities have to do to radically shift philanthropic, labor and civic systems.”

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