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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## Beyond the Book Club, An Artist's To-Do List

In a Queens Museum show that is by turns serious and bitingly funny, Xaviera Simmons challenges individuals and museums to show their commitment to justice.

Detail from "Align" (2022), the centerpiece of Xaviera Simmons's exhibition. The text is written from the point of view of the white subject, signifying the kind of thinking and action that the fight for social justice requires. Credit: Jasmine Clarke for The New York Times

**By Aruna D'Souza**  
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Remember all those book clubs that popped up in 2020, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, when a lot of people wanted to deepen their understanding of racial violence? (There was one reading group comprising several hundred white women in the arts that met regularly on Zoom.) And the chorus of urgent “we-must-do-more” statements put out by museums to show support for the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted around the country?

Xaviera Simmons remembers. In her exhibition at the Queens Museum, the Brooklyn-based artist looks back on that moment and asks: What exactly did all those book clubs, podcasts, listening sessions and declarations of solidarity do to improve peoples’ lives? That interest has given her an almost endless range of topics to draw on, she said in interviews, including “the viewing of Inca architecture, today’s front page of The Financial Times, images of the copper mining operations in the Congo ...”

At the Queens Museum, the artist introduces the exhibition's animating question even before viewers set foot in the door. A billboard mounted on the museum's west facade lists a series of words, including Amend, Abolish, Redress, Repair, Unionize — actions that activists say need to be done to address racial disparities. Below them is the solution that many liberal allies alighted upon: Crisis Makes a Book Club — the title of the exhibition (on view through March 5, 2023, in Flushing Meadows Corona Park).

The disparity between the to-do list and the solution is laugh-out-loud funny. A pair of photographs of a classical Greek sculpture depicting a lion attacking a horse accompanies the text, emphasizing that consequential change requires fierceness, not the decorum that well-intentioned responses to crisis often prescribe.



Xaviera Simmons's "Crisis Makes a Book Club" installation on the Queens Museum facade. Simmons slyly challenges the viewer by playing up the contrast between the difficult work that fighting inequality demands with the polite responses of many liberals. Credit: Hai Zhang





The centerpiece of the exhibition, “Align” (2022), is a black-walled structure covered with hand-painted white lettering. Credit: Xaviera Simmons and David Castillo Gallery; Photo by Hai Zhang

The artist (her first name is pronounced Zai-VEER-ee-ah) is inviting those who might have been trying — and perhaps failing — to find their political footing in the era of Black Lives Matter to step up. Simmons provides the resources to do so, in part by modeling what an engaged form of social justice might look like. The centerpiece of the exhibition, “Align” (2022), is a free-standing, black-walled structure covered with hand-painted white lettering that essentially functions as a gallery within a gallery. The unpunctuated text is Simmons’s ardent wish for how allies should act and think:

*In order to unravel our own power here  
we present our guide to undoing ourselves  
undoing our whiteness and patriarchy with  
a focus on land back in action material  
reparations and other strategies to make repairs.*

The breathless urgency of the structure’s exterior stands in stark contrast to the soft mustard walls of the interior. Here visitors can sit and watch videos composed of still and moving images of landscapes — ocean bluffs, pine forests, desert vistas — as well as a charmingly D.I.Y. video clip that Simmons took at the Vatican Museum of the horse and lion sculpture shown on the facade. The close-up of a tooth-and-claw fight to the death we saw on the front of the building is tamer now that we see the marble animals safely roped off in the museum, transformed into an opportunity for aesthetic contemplation. The ongoing struggle for justice must make way for moments of respite,

intimacy and beauty, Simmons reminds us.



Detail view, "Align," (2022). In contrast to the blunt message on the structure's exterior, the interior is a place for visitors to watch videos and images of landscapes and an opportunity for respite and contemplation. Credit: Jasmine Clarke for The New York Times





Simmons's "Index Three, Composition Four" (2012), is a color print that explores the idea of the self as a collaged accumulation of resonant objects and historical images.  
Credit: Xaviera Simmons, via The Studio Museum in Harlem



"Sundown (Number Five)" (2019) is part of a series of works in which the artist poses with archival photographs and landscape elements — a photograph of Black women sorting peanuts in a factory in Smithfield, Va., a live plant, a floral printed backdrop. They combine with Simmons's veiled presence to make a portrait that unveils place and history.  
Credit: Xaviera Simmons, via David Castillo Gallery

That dialectic — between fighting relentlessly to change the world and pausing to take pleasure in it where we can — runs through the exhibition, including in a series of photographs of flowers that ring the museum's skylit atrium gallery. By enlarging the original Polaroids the surfaces gain a gauzy tactility that recalls historical still life painting.

Elsewhere, a darkened gallery holds two images mounted back-to-back on a plinth. In this quiet, chapel-like space the viewer can contemplate ocean waves or earthenware vessels, a yin and yang of boundlessness and containment. A series of wonderful and playful sculptures ("Gallery 6 Figures, No. 1, No. 2, No. 3," from 2022) in another gallery reimagines tiny prehistoric European clay artifacts like the Venus of Willendorf in monumental form, metamorphosing the original Venus's exaggerated hips and breasts into a lush, ungendered body fashioned out of papier-mâché.

While much of the show addresses the individual's response to the battle for social justice, Simmons hasn't forgotten all of those promises that museums made in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, either. Even the Queens Museum, which has long taken a proactive stance in issues facing its racially, ethnically and economically diverse community, is subject to the artist's exacting and probing questioning.

One example of the Queens Museum's approach to community engagement is its Cultural Food Pantry, created in partnership with the nonprofit La Jornada to support residents of Corona, Queens, who were especially hard hit by the Covid-19 crisis.

In a corner of the building where people come on Wednesdays to pick up bare necessities, there is a set of slides chosen by the food pantry staff to show the work they do. Above these plays a video of Simmons's queries, translated into Mandarin and Spanish, to those who use the space. "What kind of freedoms do you imagine for you and your family?" one asks. "Did your home country have food pantries?" another says. "What is your definition of capitalism?" a third poses. Peoples' answers will be added to the projection over the course of the exhibition. By asking the viewer to think about the conditions that make food pantries necessary, Simmons provokes a growing unease as to whether they are an effective response to the crisis or a Band-Aid solution that leaves the underlying disease untreated.



"Gallery 6 Figures, No. 1, No. 2, No. 3," from 2022, a series of playful sculptures reimagines tiny prehistoric European clay artifacts like the Venus of Willendorf in monumental form. Credit: Xaviera Simmons and David Castillo Gallery; Photo by Hai Zhang

Simmons's approach is less to condemn than to plant the seeds of political awareness among museum visitors. To this end, she will distribute 4,000 copies of books including "The End of Policing" by Alex Vitale, the Spanish-language edition of Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States," and titles by Angela Davis, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Audre Lorde.

In a short note appended to the exhibition's introductory wall text, Simmons insists that her presence should not be seen as a substitute for "the vital life-changing work that museums, trustees, and both individual and governmental entities have to do to radically shift philanthropic, labor, and civic systems." She is aware of the fine line she treads in asking visitors to demand more of our art institutions while having an exhibition in one.

For many museums, the idea of advancing social justice and combating inequality takes the form of diversifying programming: bringing more people into the fold, first and foremost by displaying more work by Black artists. Surely that's a net good for audiences, who have been treated to an array of excellent shows over the past few years as a result. The problem arises when that's all museums think is required of them. Simmons's intervention makes clear that you can't curate your way out of racism — or read your way out of it, for that matter.