

ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Xaviera Simmons Is Embarrassed for America

For the interdisciplinary artist, watching the cycle of responses to white supremacist violence — outrage turning into apathy — is an anguish as familiar as heartbreak.



The artist Xaviera Simmons at the Queens Museum, where her exhibition “Crisis Makes a Book Club” is currently on view. Credit... Zachery K. Ali

By Lovia Gyarkye
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Xaviera Simmons is ready to move on. When we met at the Queens Museum two weeks before the opening of her new show, “Crisis Makes a Book Club,” the New York-based interdisciplinary artist, who is known for her landscape photography and staged self-portraits, ruminated on the vexing cycle of social eruption and passivity that defines American attitudes toward white supremacist violence. Surrounded by the buzz of assistants installing her exhibition, Simmons recalled how the social upheaval of 2020 fell into a familiar pattern: The antiracism uprisings and the suffering laid bare by the pandemic led to frenzied institutional acknowledgments of racial inequity followed by total stasis. She compared the feelings these events and their aftermath inspired in her to the overwhelming agony of heartbreak, and she has experienced enough of that to understand that one can’t write new chapters without breaking away from old patterns. Simmons, 48, grew up in New York, between Harlem and her grandmother’s house in Queens. She was raised by an intergenerational community of women — her mother, aunts and cousins — who modeled care and mutual aid long before they became buzzwords. Her childhood was also defined by a duality between the cacophony of 125th Street (back then, that stretch of Harlem still resembled a sprawling Pan-African open market) and the quiet of her grandmother’s bountiful garden, teeming with flowers and produce. Threads of those formative years appear in Simmons’s work, which often shifts between the clamorous and the calm.



Simmons spent the past year creating and photographing floral arrangements. Fourteen of the roughly 300 large-scale Polaroid prints that she made are included in the exhibition. Credit...Zachery K. Ali

Simmons's path to becoming an artist was likewise marked by shifts and digressions. She enrolled in Bard College after high school, but withdrew after two semesters because of financial constraints. She spent the next few years trying to support herself materially and transform herself spiritually. In 1996, she got a job as an assistant to the fashion photographer Walter Chin; in 1998, she embarked on a pilgrimage that retraced some of the trans-Atlantic slave trade routes through the U.S., the Caribbean and the African continent. The journey helped her heal from a breakup and inspired thoughts about the real and fictive history of the United States' physical landscapes and how they contribute to the country's national identity — real and imagined.



"For this particular show, I have a fabricator, printers, someone who works with me to do my animations and the text works," Simmons said. "The question is not 'How many assistants do I have?' — it's 'How many people do I work with to see something through?'" Credit...Zachery K. Ali



Simmons has previously made large-scale sculptural works with wood and textile, but for this exhibition, she wanted to experiment with different materials, from papier-mâché and plaster to clay and paint. Credit...Zachery K. Ali

In 2000, Simmons returned to Bard with a different, more confident perspective. She studied photography, honing her technique under the guidance of Larry Fink, An-My Lê and Stephen Shore and found herself in conversation with her instructors, posing questions about what was left out of their art. "I love Stephen's work, but there's a real whiteness to it," she said. "What's missing is history. What's under this landscape that you're attracted to?" That question has inspired several of Simmons's works, including

the photographs “High Season Brown” (2004), “Untitled (Cape)” (2010), “Canyons” (2011) and “A Country Built on Free Labor” (2018), in which the artist poses defiantly in quintessential American environments, from a field of dried corn stalks to coastal dunes, her presence disrupting and inviting viewers to interrogate the overwhelming whiteness of the locations.



"I think of the text work as photographs I can't physically make," the artist said of the imposing wall of language at the center of "Crisis Makes a Book Club." Credit... Zachery K. Ali

These images also express Simmons's interest in performance. After graduating from Bard in 2004, she completed a two-year acting conservatory with the New York-based Maggie Flanigan Studio while participating in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program in studio art. Through the Flanigan studio training, she gained a greater understanding of how to use her body to conjure different emotions in her audience. Nowhere is Simmons's application of those skills clearer than in "Sundown" (2018-present), the artist's ongoing series of 60-by-45-inch photographic prints exploring the ways in which racist violence has suppressed large parts of American history. The title comes from the phrase "sundown towns," which referred to

Jim Crow-era locales where segregationism was violently enforced at night. In these images, Simmons poses dramatically — her body positioned away from the camera, her face hidden with behind props — in front of floral wallpaper, costumed in vibrantly patterned clothes and sporting various hairstyles, holding archival images of Black people. Her body becomes a tool, a means of making previously concealed histories visible and demonstrating their purposeful obfuscation.

Over the years, Simmons has expanded her practice, moving from landscape photography to sculpture. The images in her “Index” series (2007-present), like her imposing text-based works and site-specific commissions, gesture toward an expansive formal consideration: How can she get one medium to do the work of another? Is it possible to make text as dramatic as cinema, to make photographs large enough that they feel like sculptures? She is most interested in language, which figures heavily in the Queens Museum exhibition’s central work, “Align” (2022), an imposing wooden sculpture onto which Simmons has painted her thoughts about race as well as those of James Baldwin from his 1984 essay, “On Being White ... and Other Lies.” “I can order language around; it’s more bendable for me,” she said.



The exhibition title, “Crisis Makes a Book Club,” is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the proliferation of reading groups that emerged after the 2020 uprisings. Credit...Zachery K. Ali

“Crisis Makes a Book Club” asks viewers to think about how we might use language to make change. “We have all the language we need to reconcile all of the issues,” Simmons said. “Why aren’t we using it?” The exhibition’s title is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the proliferation of reading groups in the past two years, which Simmons believes should be just the beginning, not the end (as they often are) of commitments to dismantling the system. In addition to the text works, the show includes new large-scale

photographs of floral arrangements (a recurrent motif, Simmons says, during the 2020 protests) and giant gray clay and papier-mâché sculptures inspired by early European figurative works. The exhibition, Simmons explained as we walked through the galleries, models its own thesis by engaging with the broader Queens community through a suggested reading list, a book distribution program, a lecture series and a partnership with the museum's food pantry (although the artist maintains that institutions should work to make such services obsolete). Just before she sat down to answer T's Artist Questionnaire, Simmons expressed her mixed emotions regarding the show: She was excited, of course, but she was also sad that we are still wrestling with the same issues — endlessly retreading familiar ground.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep and what's your schedule?

I've always been an early riser. I generally wake up around 6 a.m., light my candles and have my espresso before spending time with family, loved ones and animals. And then, [as it does for] every artist, studio starts: Half the job of having a studio at this juncture is emailing people, looking at images, talking to fabricators and my printers — who are amazing. I'm pretty much done by 7 p.m.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

My whole day is creative work.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

There's no worst studio, because you're just thankful to have space.



Days before the exhibition opened, Simmons and her team were rushing around the Queens Museum, finalizing and arranging pieces. Credit...Zachery K. Ali

What was the first work you ever sold and for how much?

Maybe “High Season Brown” (2004) and probably in the low thousands.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What’s your first step?

Reading. My first step is to go get books.

How do you know when you’re done with a piece?

Because I work in so many different mediums, it depends. I know because other people tell me. Done is a financial decision, it’s a time decision, it’s other people who have to move on. So, to be real, it depends on which objects, the type of work and the budget.



For these large sculptural works, Simmons drew inspiration from John Baldessari's 2010 resin-and-steel "Giacometti Variations." Credit... Zachery K. Ali

How many assistants do you have?

It’s not how many assistants I have — it’s how many people I work with to see something through. For this show, there were at least 10 people. I have a fabricator, I have printers, I have someone who works with me to do my animations. I have an assistant on the text work, I have an assistant to help me produce the floral works. But on a regular basis I probably employ two people.

What music do you play when you’re making art?

I used to be a D.J., so I don't do a lot of listening when working. But for fun I listen to D'Angelo, Anita Baker, Sade, the Internet and the music of silence. I also love reggae covers of R&B and hip-hop songs. That's the best music ever. Sometimes I'll call up my friend Belinda [Becker], who's a D.J., and ask her who I should listen to.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you were a professional artist?

You just slip into that.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat while working?

Home cooking when I'm working.

Are you bingeing any shows right now?

I've been catching up on "Housewives" and "RuPaul." There's also a show I really like called "Born This Way." It's about young folks with autism and I love it.

What is the weirdest object in your studio?

Probably me. [*Laughs.*] No, I have animal skulls and bones. I make a series called "Index," and those pieces require all kinds of different objects to make them happen.

How often do you talk to other artists?

Daily.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I don't procrastinate. I take my time, but I don't really procrastinate.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

Almost this conversation. But before that, yesterday, when I realized how many Black people have been working inside these institutions and not being listened to. They get so burned out and leave the field. I asked the curators at the Queens Museum what we could take away from this show so that I could give money to some artists who I know are burned out from trying to tell institutions to do something.

Image

What do you usually wear when you work?

I like everything to be streamlined and simple, so usually just a painter's dress or smock, my painting sneakers and my head wraps. For this show, I've been wearing a knee-length black dress and a pair of basketball sneakers. I've had these shoes for a long time now and they're very expensive. So when they started to break, I began taping them and I actually want them to become their own look. A lot of times, especially with a show this heavy, I will wrap my hair in some kind of way.

If you have windows in your studio, what do they look out onto?

I travel a lot, so fortunately for me, I have many different windows.

What do you pay for rent?

I've paid a lifetime for rent.



Some of the artist's materials and notes for "Crisis Makes a Book Club." Credit...Zachery K. Ali

What's your worst habit?

Probably asking my partner to drive me across the country two, three or four times a year. That's a bad habit.

What embarrasses you?

I'm embarrassed that we are still having these conversations [about white supremacist violence in America]. I'm embarrassed for all of us. We're still talking about this stuff in a way that we know — there are documentaries, books, movies, television shows and lectures. It's weird; it's embarrassing and it's strange.

Do you exercise?

Sometimes.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

Right now, I'm really digging on — I don't know who it's by — this sculpture of two lions eating horses from the Vatican's collection. It's an image that keeps sticking in my mind, the way it's crafted. I don't know the provenance of the work, but I think it's absolutely stunning.

This interview has been edited and condensed.