

Xaviera Simmons Enlightens at the Queens Museum

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Xaviera Simmons working on the imposing wall of language, *Crisis Makes a Book Club*, Queens Museum, New York, NY, USA. Photo by Zachery K. Ali via The New York Times. Detail.

Xaviera Simmons: Crisis Makes a Book Club at the Queens Museum in New York (open until March 5, 2023) is an expansive solo exhibition of recent work by this Brooklyn artist. Simmons has developed a multidisciplinary practice around the investigation of imperialistic systems that affirm superior constructions of whiteness. This museum-wide undertaking illuminates

entrenched notions of power through the use of text, installation, sculpture, and photography.



Xaviera Simmons at the Queens Museum. Photo by Jasmine Clarke for *the New York Times*.

Crisis Makes a Book Club

Xaviera Simmons (b. 1974) has taken over the Queens Museum, located in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park and in an outer borough of New York City, cherished for its rich and diverse network of immigrant neighborhoods.

The building housing this museum was originally constructed for the 1939 World's Fair, then used as the temporary headquarters for the United Nations

General Assembly (1946 to 1950), and later served as an attraction during the 1964 World's Fair with the installation of the Panorama of New York City, which remains on permanent view in this building that was inaugurated as the Queens Museum in 1972. This historic building is located opposite the iconic Unisphere fountain, also from 1964, and alongside the Grand Central Parkway, one of this city's busiest expressways. Taking full advantage of this location's high visibility, Simmons has mounted a monumental billboard with the following words in bold text across the museum's facade overlooking the highway.

UNDO UNRAVEL ADMIT AMEND
ABOLISH REDRESS ORGANIZE
REPAIR RETURN RESTORE
MOBILIZE UNIONIZE RECONCILE
RECENTER UNIVERSALIZE
CRISIS MAKES A BOOK CLUB



Xaviera Simmons, *Crisis Makes a Book Club*, 2022, printed self-adhesive vinyl, Queens Museum, New York, NY, USA. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery.

Alongside these words are a pair of images depicting stone sculptures of a lion devouring its prey behind a rope suggesting that these are objects of a museum to be viewed from a distance. Furthermore, the image/word interplay of this billboard conjures ideas of bondage, incarceration, and the forced

relocation of human beings as well as the unjust seizure of sacred and cultural objects.

Simmons' billboard is an announcement, one directed at the ongoing struggles, mental and physical, between cultural erasure and cultural preservation. Ultimately, this billboard facing Grand Central Parkway demands change across multiple sectors, including the call for western institutions to repatriate stolen artifacts to their places of origin.



Installation view: Xaviera Simmons, *Questions for the La Jornada and Queens Museum Cultural Food Pantry*, 2022, video projection of questions on painted wall, to be updated with responses periodically, Queens Museum, New York, NY, USA. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery. Photo by Hai Zhang.

Within the museum, Simmons goes behind the scenes to shine a spotlight on the food pantry hosted by the Queens Museum in collaboration with two local

community groups and in response to the growing number of families in the area experiencing food insecurity. This food pantry is one of many that have recently popped up around Queens as a consequence of the pandemic and unprecedented economic hardships that affected those who were the most vulnerable in the first place.

Through the projection of questions in multiple languages, the artist is soliciting responses from the workers, volunteers, and patrons of this food pantry to be incorporated throughout the run of this show. Although the Queens Museum has made a concerted effort to maintain sincere collaborations with its surrounding community, Simmons has utilized the billboard and projections to focus on the systems that make it impossible for some to break away from the cycle of generational poverty.

Alignment

About 20 years ago, Simmons spent two years on a walking pilgrimage retracing the transatlantic slave trade with Buddhist monks. This process physically connected the artist's body to a history that many in this nation are fighting to be removed from school curricula, uncomfortable histories that some would prefer were swept under the rug and not acknowledged as the cause for contemporary racial inequities.

For this exhibition, Simmons installed a large, freestanding wooden structure painted black in the center of the museum's spacious atrium. Through a painstaking process, the artist covered the exterior of this structure in white text. As the artist endured to trace the footsteps of history many years ago, she continues on this path of endurance through the inscription of text pertaining to this nation's construction of whiteness. The text does not flow easily and is visibly demanding. Mindful of the demands for viewing the

exterior of this structure, Simmons created a calm interior with multiple screens of video and still images of soothing landscapes intended as a moment of respite.



Installation view: Xaviera Simmons, *Align*, 2022, freestanding structure: wood, paint, and seven-channel video with sound, Queens Museum, New York, NY, USA. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery. Photo by Hai Zhang.

The coexistence of mentally demanding content and calming imagery is also at play in a series of photographs installed around the perimeter of the atrium that depicts vibrant floral arrangements over black silhouettes. Pleasing to the eye, these moments of visual nourishment run counter to unsettling ideas embedded within, as in this case referencing the use of floral images by abolitionist movements as a counterpoint to the violence of mass incarceration.

An adjacent gallery is dominated by three monumental figures made of paper mache and plaster. These regal and robust figures emanate a maternal sensation of warmth and nourishment, that through alterations of scale and materials, counters Western pre-historic forms of art history such as the Venus of Willendorf as well as massive sculptures of iron or steel by contemporary artists. These works demonstrate the artist's masterful process of alchemizing uncomfortable truths into various forms of output that comfort without compromise.



Installation view: Xaviera Simmons, *Gallery 6 Figures, No.1, No.2, No.3*, 2022, paper mache with paper mache clay, plaster, and paint, fabricated by Gregory Corbino, Queens Museum, New York, NY, USA. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery. Photo by Hai Zhang.

This delicate balancing act is felt throughout, beginning with its title, *Crisis Makes a Book Club*, and its reference to the proliferation of book clubs, formed by sympathetic bystanders to horrific events, many of who had not fully processed their own privilege or whiteness.

This exhibition questions the effectiveness of such book clubs and seeks to make tangible the actions required to shift the mindset and bring about change. Not discounting the importance of reading, the artist is distributing thousands of books throughout the run of this exhibition chosen for their emphasis on systems of domination, those that were founded upon anti-Blackness and anti-Indigenous sentiments and enforced through white terror. Simmons' exhibition at the Queens Museum moves around the physical and mental space of the Queens Museum in unexpected ways, enlightening through a dignified system of thought developed by the artist over the past two decades.

You can see Xaviera Simmons' show *Crisis Makes a Book Club* at Queens Museum, New York, until March 3, 2023.