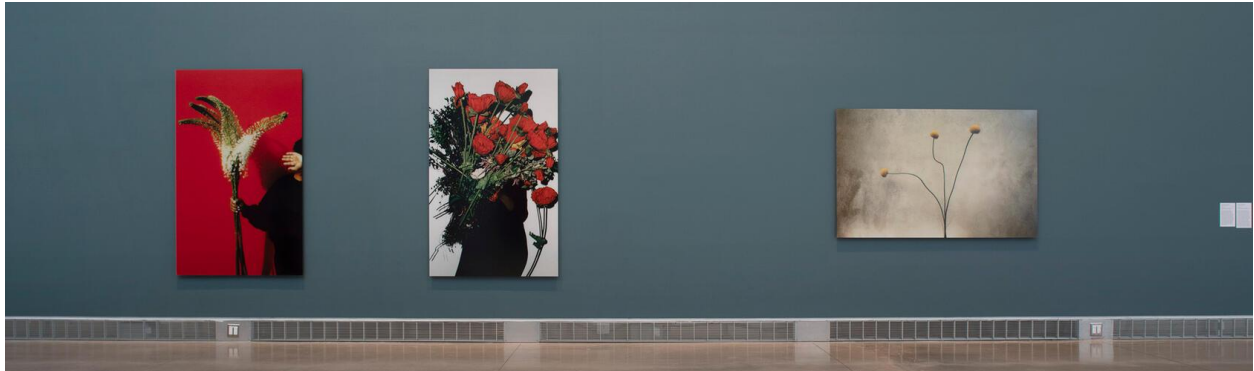


# FRIEZE



## Xaviera Simmons and Michael Rakowitz on What It Really Means to Be in Community

The two artists discuss Simmons's latest exhibition at the Queens Museum, 'Crisis Makes a Book Club' and how art can be catalyst for sustainable change

BY XAVIERA SIMMONS AND MICHAEL RAKOWITZ IN INTERVIEWS | 24 NOV 22

**Michael Rakowitz:** Tell me about the inspiration behind your new show at the Queens Museum, 'Crisis Makes a Book Club'.

**Xaviera Simmons:** During the revolution in the streets in 2020 – at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and after the deaths of many Black and Brown men and women, notably Mr. George Floyd – I witnessed many people doing enormous amounts of 'diversity' reading. During a conversation in our own organizing work, you, Michael, offhandedly joked, 'crisis makes a book club.' We were talking about a queer white feminist curator, hugely respected, who had assembled hundreds of white women to read and contemplate works by Black, Latinx and Indigenous writers. What I found – and still find – exasperating about this group was that their purpose was to gather together, with all of their various levels of wealth, power and privilege to read, but not go any further. There was no plan to organize to wield their power.

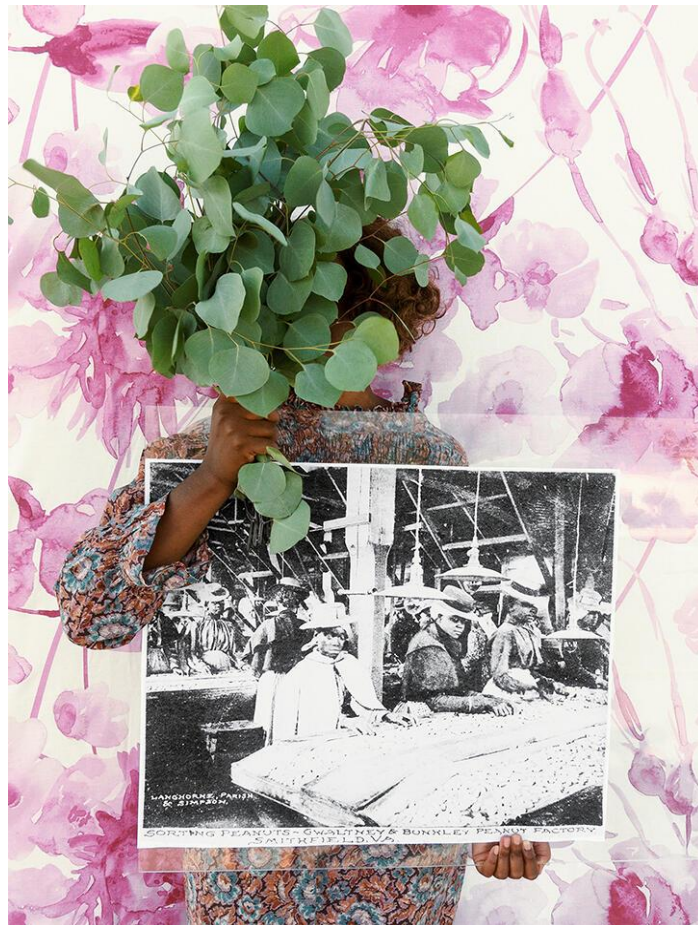


Xaviera Simmons, *Index Six, Composition One*, 2013, chromogenic colour print. Courtesy: the artist and the Deutsche Bank Collection

So, I remember the moment when you said that, and I was like, 'Michael, that's the name of my show.' But maybe you can explain, from your perspective, what you were thinking about when you said 'crisis makes a book club'.

**MR:** I think it comes from good intentions and there are, obviously, good books out there. But if people feel like they need some kind of guidebook to be able to advocate and work with Black people and people of colour, that's problematic. I don't mean to diminish the things that people have learned and put on pages, but how about showing up instead of having a segregated book club? We're all complicit in some way and it just creates this distance, this barrier as if it's something to be observed and narrated as opposed to something for us to be in as well, side by side as allies.

**XS:** And that's the thing, going back to 'Crisis Makes a Book Club', there is going to be a huge book distribution for the show. I'm of the Fred Hampton school: you can give people lots of things, but they need the political education to understand them, because we live in a political climate. So, I'm for you doing the book club, podcast or retreat. But what happens next? How can we see the tangible results of all the book clubbing? And this is a question that I've asked artists, curators, and museum directors, as well as my friends in organizing and myself. Really, the second title of my show could've been 'Let the Monies Flow' – diverting funds towards the LANDBACK movement, reparations and undoing whiteness.



Xaviera Simmons, *Sundown (Number Five)*, 2019, chromogenic colour print. Courtesy: the artist and David Castillo Gallery

And all those books actually do say that. So, at what point do we get to see you not curating a show, but out on the streets advocating for real material repairs? At what point do people see you creating tension and taking risks

because of your learning? I am living in the contradiction. My show is very expensive to produce because I'm paying people well and because it's costly to work large scale. So, how do I make the kind of art that I want to make, but also push the institutions, funders, and audiences further than they might have gone had they not experienced my show? So, there is a book club component because I'm like, 'Let's read, and then do something about what we just read.' I want to see that tangible action.

**MR:** What I think is very important about your work Xaviera is that you create these spaces of possibility. There's a really important militancy and rigour in your work, but there's also a lot of generosity. I think also about the text-based paintings that you do, such as your installation at Socrates Sculpture Park, titled *The structure the labor the foundation the escape the pause* (2020), which we might look at as a kind of constructivist agitprop on the theme of reparations as a form of redress. I think that when you create sites of possibility, exchange and political education then things really do change. It's not just a form of critique, it's also something that's propositional.



Xaviera Simmons, 'Crisis Makes a Book Club', 2022, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and David Castillo Gallery; photograph: Queens Museum

**XS:** I'm a visual artist, so I've got to reconcile all that stuff while constantly implicating myself. My show is expensive, as I said. Art making is expensive, and when you ask for people and yourself to be paid properly it becomes more expensive. That means sometimes having a difficult relationship with the institution. If the staff or other artists are not in a good place, then what are we going to do about it? Are we just going to put up our show and move through, or are we going to try to form an alliance with those people who need more and should have more? There's a lot on the table inside of my work. It's being in community. I think what organizing and being a community does is that you actually get to practice being in the discomfort and moving through it. There are moments of tension, there are moments of breakdown. But if you continue to hold space it's an act of solidarity. That is critical. You have to continue to show up, as you would in the studio, producing the work.

**MR:** So, tell me more about the show. What should we expect to see?

**XS:** So, the centrepiece of the exhibition is this large-scale structure or text sculpture – I think of it as a sculpture, the building – made out of hundreds of planks of wood (*Align*, 2022). Each plank is painted with a phrase or sentence that holds some the language that I am looking for from whiteness, from wealth and from those who desire to shift themselves in order to shift the culture. The text is a meditation and an embodiment, really. Inside the sculpture is a room that's very sensual, I mean, that's just simply about having a sensual experience. The colours inside of the installation have a sensual quality. There are moments of pause and moments of rigorous contemplation in each of the seven spaces that my work occupies inside of the museum.



Xaviera Simmons, *Align*, 2022, freestanding structure: wood, paint, and seven-channel video with sound. Courtesy: the artist and David Castillo Gallery; photograph: Queens Museum

There is also a video installation that documents the work behind the museum's Cultural Food Pantry, a program initiated at the height of COVID-19 to support community members of Corona, Queens. Surrounding this sculpture is a series of large photographs of floral arrangements. Overall the works are meant to feel sensual and liberatory, at the same time that they are rigorously crafted and large scale. And then there are huge, monumental sculptures made from papier mâché, clay and plaster (*Gallery 6 Figures, No. 1, No. 2, No. 3*, 2022). There are three that I have made that have been fabricated with the guidance of Greg Corbino, who is a stunning sculptor who helped me to make concrete my vision for these figures. I constantly go back and forth, in my work, between a rigour of mind and politics, and a feeling of sensuality, of being a person who touches and sees and feels. I want audiences to feel this tension in my work. And I feel fucked up sometimes, but then I also know that visual art can push us to new places, to some degree. At the time of this conversation, I am in Oaxaca Mexico, and it seems that everyone's an artist here, everyone makes things. I'm sure there are issues, but just from observing, everyone, little kids, everyone is making something. That's what our cultural spaces are meant to do. Our impulse is to create and live with those creations.



Xaviera Simmons, 'Crisis Makes a Book Club', 2022, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and David Castillo Gallery; photograph: Queens Museum

**MR:** I think that what has been really valuable, Xaviera, doing the work we do together, is that there's also a lot of joy in imagining new things and getting excited about the words that come out of each other's mouths. And seeing what each of us are doing because all of these things, I want them to track back to our work. I want our work to be the proposition so that when somebody sees it they can probably have the same kind of chemical reaction we all had when we saw something that made us decide that this is what we wanted to do. *Xaviera Simmons's 'Crisis Makes a Book Club' is on view at the Queens Museum, New York, until 3 March 2023.*

*Main image: Xaviera Simmons, 'Crisis Makes a Book Club', 2022, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and David Castillo Gallery; photograph: Queens Museum*