

Beyond labels: Renowned Artist Xaviera Simmons invites Dayton to experience joy, sensuality through art

New 'Figure Eleven' exhibition redefines how we see art - and ourselves.



Xaviera Simmons, Figure Eleven, 2025, bronze. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo/CONTRIBUTED

By Hannah Kasper

Updated Dec 5, 2025

“This is what I won’t be talking about — race, capitalism, Black folks, white folks...,” said artist Xaviera Simmons from The Tank, a theater-in-the-round located under the Dayton Arcade.

So began the conversation between Simmons, a Los Angeles-based interdisciplinary artist, and Dr. Judith Huacuja, Professor Emeritus of Art History, University of Dayton. The occasion was the opening of the solo exhibition, “Xaviera Simmons: Figure Eleven”, at The Contemporary Dayton.

It was an intriguing opener from an artist who spent two years on a walking pilgrimage retracing the Transatlantic slave trade with Buddhist monks. She has spoken at length on the relationship between her work and issues including white supremacist violence and misogyny and oppression against women.

She elaborated on the shift.

“People are used to having that language be a part of every conversation that I have. As an artist, I don’t feel comfortable carrying that whole weight every time I walk into a room. It’s important for me to be in joy and grace.”

“‘Figure Eleven’ is a much more sensual and forgiving space,” she continued.

“I’m interested in beauty right now.”

The art historical body

Simmons’ lengthy resume includes visiting lecturer at Harvard and participation in the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program. Her work has been shown in the ICA Boston, SFMOMA and the Barnes Foundation, and is held in the collections of several prestigious institutions. She is represented by David Castillo Gallery in Miami.

At The Contemporary Dayton, the exhibit includes recent photographs, paintings, videos, and a new body of bronze sculptures, the latter of which the non-profit art center helped facilitate through the generosity of a donor.

Simmons’ conceptual underpinnings have been at times tongue-in-cheek, like commentary on virtue signaling trends. Her 2022 Queens Museum exhibit, “Crisis Makes a Book Club”, referred to the plentiful yet short-lived book clubs that popped up after the murder of George Floyd.

Her work is also a loving tribute to art history, with references that span antiquity to Flemish painting, the Hudson River School to contemporary media.

“Her work unfolds through a cinematic sensibility where narrative, movement, and stillness intersect,” said Heather Jones, curator and director of programs and engagement at The Contemporary.



(L-R) Executive Director Eva Buttacavoli, artist Xaviera Simmons, Curator and Director of Programs and Engagement Heather Jones, with Simmons' artwork at The Contemporary Dayton. Simmons encouraged local artists to get to know the non-profit art center's staff and even its Board of Directors.

Jones cited the artist's photographic series and monumental text paintings as examples.

“Performance, choreography, and the sensual are integral to Simmons' artistic language. In this recent sculptural work, these elements coalesce into forms that feel both classical and contemporary,” said Jones.

The clear reference for the bronzes is the voluptuous figure of the Venus of Willendorf, a prehistoric fertility symbol.

“For me,” said Dr. Huacuja, “the way I enter her work is through this hard-hitting sense of the body. The physicality, the emotions, the intellect that we carry in our body.”

The sculptures are also meant to celebrate relatable bodies.

Simmons said, “I was thinking contemporarily (about) what poses and fertility look like now. What does sensuality and a freedom of figure look like now?”

“I’m thinking about the roundness and suppleness of things. That’s also the art historical body. As a student of sculpture, it’s important for me to start at the beginning. It’s tied to African fertility symbols but also European sculptural symbols.”

How to look at art

The shift in Simmons’ discourse is the artist’s desire to live in the pleasure of artmaking. Art school veterans might view this as an indulgence. We were taught that the message is as important as the medium.

By her own admission, Simmons “slashed” the language in the press release. Her wish was to not have any wall text or labels, but she acquiesced.

While she encourages people to do their own research into her work, the big question when approaching this show might be — does someone get a feel for it with limited information?

An art historian might doubt it.

“It seems fair to the audience, these days, to offer some kind of in,” said Huacuja.



One of Xaveria Simmons' bronze figures and a photograph in the background. The artist works in a diverse range of media and is interested in the art historical figure.

So let's offer up some "ins".

You can start with whether you have any feelings of personal connection to the work. This could be found in how the sculptures make you feel about body image, whether your own, or in the value placed on different body types through mass media.

Your knowledge of art history can certainly play a role in how you approach art work, as can an interest in the practical mechanics of various materials. Given the wide range of media, do you feel the artist mastered the materials?

Simmons works with a team on any given project, and she was not present for the brass fabrication, an intense process featuring molten casting. How does that make you feel regarding the artistic ownership of the work? Does it belong to the assistant as much as it does the visionary?

If you enjoy film, does the work conjure in you a “cinematic sensibility”? This effect may be observed through the photographs that meld figure and landscape, or with the animated video in the back gallery.

Do you think it is possible to make text art that feels like cinema, or photographs that feel like sculptures? Why would an artist want to play with those relationships?

On organizing in the arts

“The most important thing to me about being an artist is labor. We understand that art is esoteric, mystical, religious, spiritual, creative, formal, historical. But art is also a form of labor. It needs to be respected and fought for,” said Simmons.

She is an advocate for artists and art workers organizing and unionizing.

“The stronger we fortify collective engagement, the better quality of life we will have. That really informs a lot of my work.”

Simmons encouraged local artists to get to know The Contemporary Dayton’s curator, Eva Buttacavoli, and even the non-profit’s board of directors.

“Contemporary art spaces are going through a lot. It’s critical that we find those resources to not only support (them) financially but to engage artistically. The institutions are only as good as the communities that engage with them,” said Simmons.

Intervals

Here is my personal ‘in’ to “Figure Eleven”.

Looking at the sculptures, and listening to Simmons' thoughts on unionizing, I couldn't help but think of another kind of labor. Labor, by definition, is work, and there's little work as challenging as childbirth.

I thought about Simmons giving herself permission to steer the conversation around her work toward a politic of joy. I thought about an artist's work, the outcome of their labor, as a force that needs nurturing before its debut. I thought about those zaftig bronze figures and how they recall the Venus — the symbol of fertility, the mother goddess, love.

I thought about the anesthesia bill I received from the hospital after the emergency c-section from my first birthing experience, and how even with health insurance, the cost was prohibitive.

I thought about how both artists and mothers benefit greatly through organizing support systems, and how so often, in America, both types of creators are deemed as not worthy priorities for networks of support, whether that be physically, mentally, or financially.

I wondered how that might ever change, and I looked to Simmons' work to probe those questions.

There's no wrong way to look at art.