

Don't Forget: Xaviera Simmons at Weatherspoon  
Art Museum, Greensboro

BY SUSAN LEE MACKEY  
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Xaviera Simmons, *Index Two, Composition Three*, 2012; Chromogenic color print, 50 x 40 inches. Edition of 3. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo, Miami. © Xaviera Simmons

n view at the Weatherspoon Art Museum is a small exhibition of photographs by Xaviera Simmons, currently the Falk Visiting Artist at UNC Greensboro.

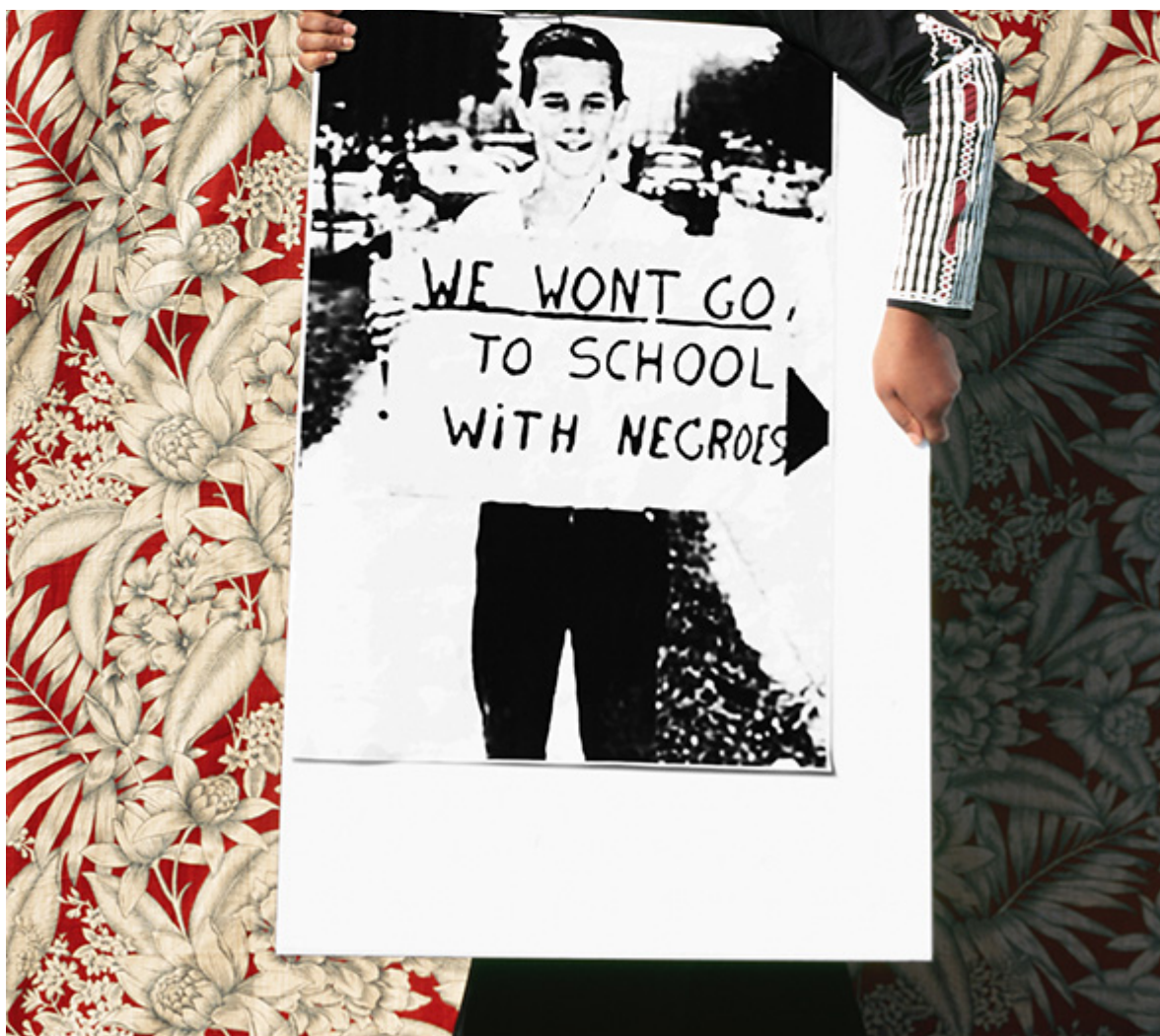


O Simmons' artistic works spans multiple genres, and she sees herself as "archivist, image maker, producer, director and sometimes actor." But her work is not delineated by genres, rather, each project is part of an ongoing exploration of ideas: abolition, reparations, undoing whiteness, and, especially in this exhibition, archival research. The photographs in this exhibition were made over the course of ten years. Included are six images from her Index series, 2 from her Sundown series, and 1 landscape self-portrait.

The Sundown series is named after "sundown towns," areas in which Black folks and other people of color faced heightened violence after dark. In each Sundown image, Simmons photographs herself holding an archival image for her viewer to confront while she looks elsewhere. In Sundown (Number Seventeen) (2018), Simmons is shown using both arms to wield an oversized image: a black-and-white photograph of a segregation-era boy holding a plainly written sign: "WE WONT GO TO SCHOOL WITH NEGROES."

Our messenger is on the move: chin up, sunglasses donned, she carries her message elsewhere. She reminds me of the protester at the 2017 Women's March, Angela Peoples, who was photographed holding a similarly plain indictment: "Don't forget: White Women Voted for TRUMP." In 2019 Simmons told MoMA, "America doesn't know people as daughters of sharecroppers or as descendants of American slavery, I mean we know but we don't really know.... like if there are descendants of slavery then there are descendants of planters and plantation owners. As a collective, the people of the United States don't understand their own narrative. Our collective narrative doesn't really account for the white people, their children, and so on across the country who oppressed negros for centuries, like till right now." In this series, the archive is a source of damning evidence. Hanging the works in front of the gallery entrance, Simmons forces white visitors to acknowledge their own whiteness.





Xaviera Simmons, *Sundown (Number Seventeen)*, 2018; Chromogenic color print, 60 x 45 inches. Edition of 3. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo, Miami. © Xaviera Simmons

The other photographs in the exhibition, from the Index series, mobilize the archive differently. In contrast to the straightforward messaging of the Sundown pictures, these images are overlaid with archival materials, a mess of information. Simmons has said these are meant to be sculptures within photographs; she has collected images and objects from an archive of Black cultural diaspora and fastened them to someone, maybe herself, and photographed them. The person is barely recognizable under the heap of things—only the legs, outfitted in colorful stockings, give it away—their identity absorbed by that of this new figure.

I'd like to think that what appears like a random accumulation is actually the result of precision and care. Each individual is highly specific, their components carefully chosen. In *Index Two, Composition Three* (2012): a black and white photograph of Grace Jones, a palm frond, a terracotta vessel, a pictorial guide to hairstyles, a postcard featuring the Sufi saint and Senegalese icon Amadou

Bamba Mbacke, an aluminum can, all affixed with clothespins. Simmons assembles these disparate materials and reconfigures them into a new narrative, one that's not linear but collage-like, and legible only to those familiar with Simmons vocabulary of visual references.

In some of the Index photographs there is the occasional blur that indicates movement, indicates that there is a person within all this sculptural material, but the camera flattens the figure and turns the body into shapes, colors, and icons. The very nature of photographing a sculpture means that its 3-dimensionality is lost and our view is incomplete. The archive of Black diaspora is similarly frustrating—incomplete and sometimes incoherent.

The photographs appear less like discrete art objects and more like documentation of a research process, or a performance. Simmons told *FLATT* Magazine, “I started to think abstractly through words, through reading and through language, through research. Research is like choosing your own adventure or letting the work have its way with you. I need that play.” Having been raised by a Buddhist mother, Simmons has retained some of those spiritual rituals. Viewed through this lens, interacting with the archive becomes a form of movement meditation. There is a gentle pleasure in archival research, one that Simmons clearly enjoys. It requires order and intuition in equal measure. Careful handling, detailed annotation. There is sometimes the thrill of an unexpected discovery, and the letdown of missing objects and indecipherable notes.

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[Xaviera Simmons is on view at the Weatherspoon Museum of Art, Greensboro thru May 29, 2021.](#)

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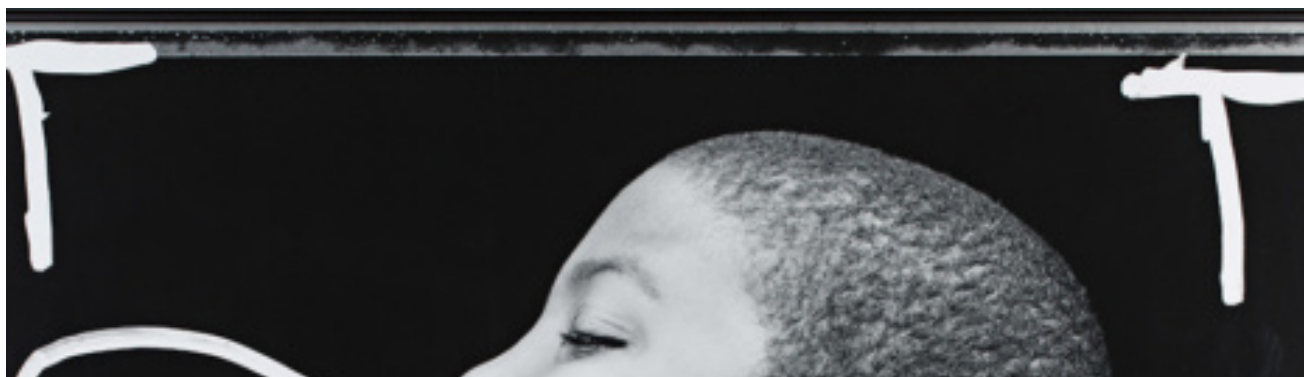




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