

**REAL  
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Don't Trust Anyone Over 30" competition in 2003, which requested proposals from emerging artists age thirty and younger, living in New York or New England. Under 30 was juried by Jennifer Gross, Curator of Contemporary Art, Yale University Art Gallery, Barbara Hunt, Executive Director, Artists Space, New York, and Barbara Krakow, President, Barbara Krakow Gallery.

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REAL ART WAYS, founded in 1975, is a nationally recognized, alternative multi-disciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work, and creatively engages and informs audiences and communities. Real Art Ways is an active presenter of different art forms, including music, performance, spoken word, film, video and visual arts. Real Art Ways has a particular commitment to supporting the work of emerging artists.

# Xaviera Simmons



Jaamburr, 2003, color photograph, 20 x 30"

## Xaviera Simmons

By Luc Sante

Xaviera Simmons is a lexicographer, her photographs functioning as nouns, verbs, and the occasional adjective—words organically created by the African-American population over the past four centuries finding themselves expressed in tableaux that may be staged as fictions but wind up as nonfictions. Simmons is a director and choreographer, deploying her subjects—including herself—as players, as examples, as narrators, as inventions, as dancers, as case histories, while at the same time they are playing themselves in a ritual theater piece called the portrait. Simmons is a historian who knows that things are as much and as little now as they have ever been, and that the proper approach to the past begins within the present moment, as much as the present can be found lurking in the shadows of the past. Simmons is a designer, a visual musician who throws pattern and color relentlessly at the eye in wave upon wave and then draws back to allow a cool field of pure tone to glide across the stage. Simmons is a sensualist for whom any argument, any thesis can be construed as an excuse to let oneself go into the sheer pleasure of vision. Simmons is a humorist who knows that laughter is both a release and a

Xaviera Simmons was born in New York. She graduated from Bard College in 2004 with a B.A in photography. In 2005 she completed a 2 year actor training program with Maggie Flanigan as well as a year long studio residency studying with Ron Clark at The Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. She is the 2005–2006 workspace artist at Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning as well as the 2005 VKP Artist Educator at The New Museum. She is the cofounder of Tuffness Crew, a dj collective.

On the cover: International Nigger, 2003, color photograph, 20 x 30" (detail)

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choke, and that all jokes are dead serious. Simmons is a lover who has been there and can tell you all about it. And Simmons is a photographer, one who redefines herself constantly, makes up new ways of seeing, burns down styles in order to reinvent them, muddies the waters of conventional categories, and can tell the most outrageous stories that always turn out to be the truth.

*Luc Sante* is a book critic for *New York magazine*, a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, and a senior contributor to the *Internet magazine Slate*. He has written about books, films, art, photography, and miscellaneous cultural phenomena for many other periodicals. He lives in New York City and is writing a book about the picture postcard and prewar America.

## Read All Over

By Laurie Dahlberg

"Let photography be literary." This was Clement Greenberg's advice in 1946, when he feared that art photographers were neglecting the true nature of their medium in following

*International Nigger*, 2003, color photograph, 20 x 30"



*International Nigger*, 2003, color photograph, 20 x 30"

modern painters into the domain of pure abstraction. Xaviera Simmons' recent color photographs take on this hoary old prescription as a challenge to be met with joy. Not surprisingly, Simmons, a history junkie, also acknowledges a debt to one of the great figures of photography, Walker Evans (who also happened to be Greenberg's model for a "literary" photography.) Like Evans, she recognizes and cherishes the creative spirit in the vernacular—decorated storefronts and intimately embellished interiors, where the viewer is seduced by the photographer's careful attention to structure, surface, and detail (occasionally you may even catch Simmons playfully quoting some element of Evans' famous works.) But the comparison only goes so far, perhaps because mining the past is not the point for Simmons; it's simply one of the many strategies that she holds in reserve as she considers what feels right for each concept and composition. Moreover, Simmons' color images are as warm as Evans' black-and-whites are cool, which reminds us that

Evans, a white, upper-class male, was an outsider looking in on the exotic customs of various American "others," while Simmons photographs the people and places of her own life.

Although the pictures' juicy color and vivid camera detail are intensely descriptive (and therefore literal), there is a greater sense in which they evoke language. These are highly condensed images that read epigrammatically; they don't tell stories as much as they suggest mottos, aphorisms, puns, and declarations. Working mainly with portraits and

figures in the landscape, Simmons creates pictographs of love, pride, fear, isolation, and desire, that carry along related themes of race, culture, and nature. She arrives at these emblematic expressions through a combination of the artificial and the natural, punctuated by an intense palette of primary colors. While the settings are harvested from everyday life, Simmons' handling of people and pose is deliberate and rhetorical. In *Arie at the Wall*, a woman, draped in a fluid gown, stands on a city sidewalk in profile against a blood red wall, holding a pose that recalls the elegantly stylized figures on ancient Greek pottery—a winged victory figure for the city in the new millennium. Other images are similarly iconic; an interracial biker couple locked in a blazing kiss against the backdrop of a fallow field, a young boy holding a frustrated girl at arm's length in a backyard, a teenaged swimmer standing with outstretched limbs beneath the flowing water of an outdoor shower. Without an extensive narrative context, gestures and expressions take on a distilled potency.

Simmons' titles, often based on the historical lexicon of African-American slang also clue us in to her intense interest in language and the way it has determined both black experience and white experience of blacks in America—hence her giddy parodies of racial stereotype in *African Grape*, n. (1970s–1990s) and *International Nigger/Robert Beck*, n. (1950s–1960s). In *Jaamburr*, an eighteenth-century African-American coinage meaning "free black," Simmons evokes literacy itself. This unassuming portrait of a man quietly writing in his room, seated against a wall covered with sensational newspaper stories—stories in which African-Americans likely appear only as sports figures, criminals, or victims—provokes a question: when was the last time you saw a depiction of a black man engaged in the life of the mind?

Most of all, Simmons seems determined to make pictures on her own terms. Sometimes freighted with history, sometimes buoyed by an animated spirit that is purely idiosyncratic, Simmons' work may not be black and white, but it does ask to be read all over.

*Laurie Dahlberg* is an Associate Professor of Art History and Photography at Bard College.

*Arie at the Wall*, 2003, color photograph, 20 x 30" (Private Collection)

