

Through the Lens: Confronting History and Memory in Xaviera Simmons's *Sundown*

Personal Reaction to the Artifact

As I approach Xaviera Simmons's work in the *Sundown* series, I feel an unexpected pull, almost as though the piece demands my attention rather than passively inviting it, like the others do. The vibrant red coat she wears against the stark geometric backdrop immediately seizes my attention and evokes a sense of urgency and unease. The colors feel deliberate, as if shouting for recognition amidst the broader narratives of the exhibit. The binoculars that Simmons holds intrigue me. They seem to serve as a metaphorical bridge between the past and the present, a tool for magnifying the truths hidden within history while also reflecting my own role as a viewer. What strikes me most is the faint, almost imperceptible reflection in the binocular lenses. I lean in closer, curious to make sense of it, and realize there was a partially obscured, fragmented landscape. It feels like a puzzle piece of memory that is inviting interpretation but denying clarity. I cannot decide if the reflection represents a scene from history, distorted by time, or a contemporary reality that refuses to be seen. The ambiguity lingers with me, as though Simmons is asking, "What are you choosing to see, and what are you complicit in ignoring?"

The placard Simmons holds in her hands delivers its message bluntly: "Black farmers are being forced off their land by longstanding government discrimination." Reading those words, I feel discomfort, not because I am unfamiliar with the history, but because the simplicity of the statement underscores how some things have not changed. It is an indictment, not just of historical injustice, but of a present that allows these patterns to persist. When I come back to look a second time, the binoculars feel accusatory, as if Simmons is looking at me, asking what I intend to do with this knowledge. They are instruments of scrutiny that hold me accountable for how I process and respond to this reality. The longer I stare, the more I wonder

if Simmons is searching for action or for reckoning.

There is a tension in the artwork, a balance between its undeniable beauty and the profound sorrow embedded within its layers. The piece seems to vibrate with questions: Who gets to own the land? Who gets to own the narrative? By narrative, Simmons highlights the power of storytelling and historical framing of who has the authority to document history and whose voices are amplified. What happens when both are taken away? These are not questions meant to be answered easily or quickly. They are meant to linger, to follow me after I leave the exhibit, and they do.

Broader Context of the Artifact

Simmons's *Sundown* series emerges as a profound response to the historical and ongoing dynamics of land, labor, and identity in the United States. As Simmons explained in the *Widening the Lens* podcast, her work is deeply tied to a reparative framework, aiming to confront the systemic injustices that have shaped American history while fostering dialogue about the intersections of race, labor, and ownership.

Simmons's artistic philosophy is rooted in the acknowledgment that the United States "has the receipts."

By incorporating archival images and public domain photographs, she underscores how the past is not merely a collection of distant events but a living force shaping the present. Her use of placards bridges historical injustices with ongoing struggles, refusing to let viewers distance themselves from these realities. The binoculars she holds in the image further this idea of scrutiny, inviting viewers to confront what they might otherwise overlook. As Simmons describes, her work challenges the historical apparatus of photography, which has often been used to claim and dominate land, by reappropriating it to expose labor's exploitative history.

The podcast broadened my understanding of the complexities that Simmons navigates

in her art. Her insights into the connection between land and the black body, and how both have been commodified and exploited through the lens of chattel slavery, enhanced my appreciation for the layered critique present in her work. As Simmons states, “The Black body was constructed in service to doing things to the land for the benefit of, you know, white Europeans,” emphasizing how these histories of labor and dispossession remain embedded in the American landscape. Simmons addresses the dual nature of land as both a source of sustenance and destruction, a tension that resonates deeply in her art. The geometric backdrop and reflective binocular lenses in her piece create a fragmented, incomplete image, symbolizing how historical narratives are often skewed by those in power. This aligns with Simmons’s belief that addressing these distortions necessitates a courageous confrontation with the past.

Placing the Object within the Broader Context of Politics, Culture, Memory, and History

Simmons’s focus on labor as a key theme connects her work to larger narratives of displacement and extraction. Her art goes beyond simply illustrating these struggles; it compels viewers to consider their deeper meanings. For instance, her insights on the lack of communication between the descendants of chattel slavery and indigenous communities bring to light a shared history of trauma and the possibility for solidarity. This thread of connection, both suggested in her artwork and discussed in the podcast, enriches her message. It is not only about uncovering overlooked histories but also about imagining ways for collective healing.

Through the *Sundown* series, Simmons repurposes photography—once a tool of domination and erasure—into a medium for visibility and resistance. Her work insists that we grapple with the legacies embedded in the land, recognizing its histories of violence while imagining futures rooted in justice and equity. The binoculars in her image now symbolize more than observation; they are an invitation to look deeply and critically, to question not only what we see but how and why we see it.

Xaviera Simmons's *Sundown* series bridges memory, power, and resistance, addressing the silencing of the past and the erasure of black labor from mainstream historical narratives. The placard reintroduces these histories into contemporary conversations, challenging collective amnesia. This act of remembrance actively resists historical erasure by confronting viewers with the weight of forgotten or ignored labor. Simmons forces a reckoning with the ways history is recorded, archived, and told.

The series examines the materiality of power and the making of archives, as Simmons repurposes historical photographs to expose systemic violence. As discussed in the *Widening the Lens*, photography historically served as a tool of colonial dominance, capturing and justifying conquest. Simmons subverts this by turning the medium into an instrument of resistance. The binoculars in her piece, reflecting fragmented landscapes, symbolize how archives can reveal or obscure truth depending on who controls them.

Simmons's work also critiques the gap between acknowledging historical injustices and achieving reparative action. Her body becomes a living archive, connecting past oppression to present struggles for justice. This echoes the podcast's discussion of "ecological reparation," where healing the land and its histories requires acknowledgment and partnership. Simmons expands this concept to cultural memory, demanding ethical reckoning through recognition, dialogue, and action.

By inserting herself into reconstructed images, Simmons highlights art's role in questioning dominant narratives. Her vibrant clothing contrasts with archival photographs, symbolizing the tension between past and present, visibility and erasure. Simmons challenges us to engage critically with inherited narratives and to take responsibility for building a more just future.