Xaviera Simmons

'Coded'

The Kitchen
512 West 19th Street
Chelsea
Through July 30

Xaviera Simmons started as a photographer, but her work in recent years has gained breadth and momentum, incorporating performance, painting, poetry and sound. All of these are included in her evocative and timely exhibition "Coded," at the Kitchen.

As if orienting herself before moving forward, Ms. Simmons has included one of her early photographs, "Landscape (Two Women)" (2007), which features a surrealistic conjoined figure created by two women leaning toward each other and pulling their clothes over their heads. After establishing the idea of bodies as landscapes, Ms. Simmons shifts to maps. A new series of photographs uses repeated images from the internet — one of an African woman striding through water with an infant and another of a male bodybuilder — and turns them into grids shaped like unfolded maps and held out before an obscured viewer.

Paintings made with white lettering on a black background, reminiscent of Glenn Ligon's paintings, sample text from actual maps and describe "ocean swell patterns" and "turbulent waters." What is left out, of course, are the humans (and their cargo) navigating these waters.

Other references to the history and struggles of the African diaspora include a sound piece with a man repeating his love for a woman in Africa in three languages and video snippets of dancehall music. Rather than tie these with blunt didacticism to current conflicts (or ones in the past, since Ms. Simmons once spent time with Buddhist monks retracing slave trade routes), Ms. Simmons has created a show that surges with energy, but also has cryptic ambiguity. Saying black bodies are contested terrain would be obvious. Perhaps this is why Ms. Simmons titled the exhibition "Coded."

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY

Xaviera Simmons's "Red (Number One)." Her show at the Kitchen includes paintings, poetry and sound.