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ROSE B. SIMPSON

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## Rose B. Simpson Thinks in Clay

“Clay was the earth that grew our food, was the house we lived in, was the pottery we ate out of and prayed with,” says the Native American sculptor and rising star.

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Rose B. Simpson outside her adobe studio in Española, New Mexico. With what a curator describes as her “‘Mad Max,’ ‘Blade Runner’ vibe,” Simpson builds on — and rough up — pottery traditions from the Santa Clara Pueblo. Minesh Bacrania for The New York Times

By Jori Finkel  
June 16, 2022

ESPAÑOLA, N.M. — The artist Rose B. Simpson was sitting in her 1985 Chevy El Camino inside her metalworking shop, trying to get the car to start. She popped the hood, turned the ignition and then lightly pumped the gas pedal. After she repeated this a few times, the car started to rumble loudly.



It wasn't her everyday car, but closer to a work of art she has made over the last 10 years, here in the self-proclaimed lowrider capital of the world. Simpson repaired large dents by learning how to shape metal at an auto body school. She replaced the engine with one she bought in a racing shop in Phoenix. And she painted the exterior with a black-on-black, gloss-and-matte geometric design and named the car Maria in homage to the celebrated Tewa potter Maria Martinez of the San Ildefonso Pueblo, who died in 1980.

"Maria is as close as I've come to making traditional pottery," said Simpson, 38, an enrolled member of the Santa Clara Pueblo (Kha'po Owingeh), based just south of Española. She belongs to a long line of ceramic artists there going back hundreds of years. But instead of making the sturdy, glossy red or black pottery her pueblo is known for, she's gaining art-world acclaim for her powerful androgynous figures of clay, often with metal adornments that look like jewelry or armor or both.



Simpson and her 1985 El Camino at her studio. Her car, Maria, is painted in the black-on-black Tewa style that Maria Martinez helped make famous. Minesh Bacrania for The New York Times

After showing off Maria ("I have to work on the idle"), Simpson crossed a patio to her ceramics studio on the property, a small adobe structure with a "clean room" for sewing and drawing in back. A dozen of her tender-fierce figures stood in front, crowded together. Some wore beaded necklaces while others were waiting to be adorned with car parts — metal gears and brake discs — like a motley band of warriors preparing for battle.

Several of these sculptures, which she calls "beings" or "ancestors," are now heading to East Coast museums: 11 recent works to the ICA Boston in August, and a new commission to the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia in October. And on June 18, a series of 12 slender cast-concrete figures will

preside over a property in Williamstown, Mass., known as the Field Farm, part of a public art program run by the preservationist group The Trustees.

Called “Counterculture,” the nine-foot-tall herm-like figures have an otherworldly presence thanks to a startling visual effect: Simpson has carved out holes for eyes that go all the way to the backs of their heads, letting the light — or life — stream through.

“When you see light come through their eyes, it will be like the sky is seeing you,” the artist added, explaining that she was thinking about the global exploitation of natural resources. “I wanted to flip this script to make those resources watch you in an intimidating way.”

Concerned that ceramics at this scale could be fragile, Simpson made her molds for “Counterculture” by carving full-size versions in wood. But even these works began with clay maquettes.



Simpson starts a new sculpture in her studio using the coil method, a traditional pottery technique for building up a vessel by hand. Minesh Bacrania for The New York Times

“I think in clay,” she said. “Clay was the earth that grew our food, was the house we lived in, was the pottery we ate out of and prayed with. So my relationship to clay is ancestral and I think it has a deep genetic memory. It’s like a family member for us.” She remembers seeing her great-grandmother, the artist Rose Naranjo, speaking to her clay, and she said her mother, Roxanne Swentzell, learned to sculpt figures as a means to communicate long before she talked.



While Swentzell makes beautifully smooth sculptures of Indigenous women engaged in everyday activities, Simpson tends to rough things up. She leaves the surfaces of her figures uneven and adds adornments in metal, leather and other materials to create, in the words of the Los Angeles curator Helen Molesworth, “a badass, ‘Mad Max,’ ‘Blade Runner’ vibe.”

Molesworth first saw Simpson’s work in 2019 at the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian while vacationing in Santa Fe. She was so struck by the “mixing of different textures, soft and hard” that she said she wondered if she wasn’t just “blissed out on holiday.” Back home, she was still fascinated and decided to feature Simpson in a group show, “Feedback,” last summer for the New York gallerist Jack Shainman. Next year Simpson will have a solo show with Shainman and another in San Francisco with her gallery of three years, Jessica Silverman. (The gallerists would not provide the range of prices for Simpson’s work.)

While Simpson works in Española on a family property, she lives with her young daughter on the Santa Clara Pueblo where she grew up. She was raised there mainly by her mother after her parents’ divorce. She said her father, a white artist, took her rock climbing and taught her how to sail on a local reservoir. “He had time to play with me, while my mom was surviving,” she said, describing the situation as “extreme poverty.” She went on to praise her mother’s resourcefulness and “deep relationship to the land.”



Simpson threaded ceramic beads to make necklaces for the herm-like figures in “Counterculture.” She has invited Indigenous people to add necklaces made with clay from their lands. Minesh Bacrania for The New York Times

“We grew most of our food. We ate our pets,” she said, mentioning turkeys, chickens and pigs. She also remembered her mother making their shoes by hand: cutting up blown-out tires salvaged from the dump with a jigsaw and then sewing leather straps onto the rubber.

Simpson was home-schooled until high school, when she went to the Santa Fe Indian School, joined the yearbook committee and filled the book with drawings of her classmates in styles inspired by her favorite comic artists, including Los Bros Hernandez of “Love and Rockets.” After college in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, she went on to the Rhode Island School of Design for a master’s degree in fine arts. There she discovered that her more polished, realistic sculptures made for “a visual language that other people weren’t speaking or understanding.”

A turning point came during a school trip in 2010 to Kashiwara, Japan. Encountering Japanese aesthetic traditions that prize acceptance of the process over perfection of the form — and don’t distinguish between art and craft — helped her think more seriously about her pueblo’s creative legacy and her own. “I was dropped in a world where I was completely incapable of communicating, which for me was not unlike the Western art world,” she said. “I realized that my artwork had to become way more specific and clear.”



Simpson, right, with her mother, Roxanne Swentzell, at the greenhouse on their property in Española.  
Minesh Bacrania for The New York Times

Her clarity came in the form of a technique she devised that she calls “slap-slab,” which she still uses today alongside traditional pottery methods. It involves throwing a slab of clay sideways on a floor or table until it’s very thin, maybe one-sixteenth of an inch. Then she tears off pieces by hand and affixes them to each other, with an effect that resembles papier-mâché. “You can see the seams, the pinches, the fingerprints, all of it,” she said.

Slap-slab embraces imperfection and intuition. “If you can get into an intuitive place, I believe you can really tickle the intuitive place in others.” It also gave her a metaphor for learning to accept oneself, lumps and all — or “building a muscle of acceptance and finding compassion for the sloppier, more complicated parts of ourselves.”



“Root A,” 2019. Simpson adorns many of her sculptures with metal pieces including car parts. Rose B. Simpson and Jessica Silverman



“Storyteller,” 2021. Some of her figures have grown rounder and carry children on their shoulders. Rose B. Simpson and Jessica Silverman

Almost six years ago, Simpson became a single mother, which has also shaped her work. As hollow clay forms, her sculptures were already vessels to some degree, but now she plays explicitly with the notion of the female body as a vessel, a vehicle for nourishment. Some of her figures have grown rounder and carry babies on their shoulders. One that appeared in “Feedback” is crawling with children — held together by a steel armature that seems equal parts cage and jungle gym. Their faces resemble that of the artist and her daughter. “You can’t tell someone else’s story. You can only tell your own,” she offered.

While she considers her work spiritual, Simpson is careful not to share specifics about the Santa Clara Pueblo’s religious practices or beliefs. “Native people have been subject to so many stereotypes that I



have to be super careful with that — we have seen through history how spiritual work just gets eaten up, spit out, exploited,” she said. “People have been kicked out of the tribe for making art referencing a specific spiritual belief.”

She has developed her own symbolic system, with “+” signs to mark the four cardinal directions, suggesting a journey, and “x” signs to represent “protection.” (From what? “Negative forces,” she said.) The signs are tattooed on her fingers and appear on her sculptures.

Then there is the bold jewelry decorating her sculptures. Miranda Belarde-Lewis, a Zuni/Tlingit scholar and curator who teaches at the University of Washington, sees it as a way for Simpson to convey both ancestral and individual identity. “The strength that she has learned from her mother, the strength to be herself as a Pueblo woman, comes across so loudly in her artworks,” she said. “You can see this confidence in the defiant expression on their faces, but also the amount of jewelry they wear, and the size of their earrings,” she said, adding, “That’s a big thing in Native communities — we love our earrings.”

The idea for “Counterculture,” which will be up for a year, is a cascade of beaded necklaces. Having made some herself, Simpson has also invited the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians, on whose ancestral land the Field Farm sits, to make beaded necklaces out of clay from their land to adorn her sculpted bodies. Her plan is to add more necklaces from Indigenous communities as the figures travel.

“Wherever they go, I’ll be connecting with the people whose ancestral homeland is there to build a sort of relationship,” she said. “Many tribes have been relocated, displaced from their own lands. So I wanted the opportunity to put their clay back in their hands.”



“The Remembering,” 2020. Ceramic, metal, cottonwood sticks and leather. Simpson envisions different ways of safeguarding the human body in her work. Rose B. Simpson and Jessica Silverman



# ROSE B. SIMPSON

BUILDING A DREAM HOUSE WHERE MANIFESTATION MEETS GROWTH.

BY KATY DONOGHUE



Rose B. Simpson’s “Dream House” is currently on view at The Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) in Philadelphia. The immersive installation is the result of an artist-in-residence program with the museum, showcasing some of the earliest examples of Simpson’s explorations into collaboration, and what she describes as her most personal show yet.

Taking over the eighth floor of the space, it opens with a vast room against which visitors cast long shadows. They are greeted with the sight and smell of a traditional adobe wall, created onsite and inspired by the Pueblo architecture of Simpson’s ancestral land of Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico. As they enter, a series of rooms follows, which can only be viewed from a window, offering a glance at Simpson’s inner world but never a full picture. Secondary spaces are hinted at with sounds and video (the artist’s first time working in the medium), making the viewer lean in deeper to get a better look.

Working with the team of artisans at FWM, Simpson imagined interior spaces representative of her inner and outer worlds, creating furniture, textiles, lighting, tabletop pieces, a quilt, a rug, and even films—many for the first time. She is known for her figurative sculptures in clay that touch upon ancestral knowledge, generational healing, and spiritual realms, and “Dream House” is a revelatory, ambitious project, one that invites viewers to self-reflect, a challenge Simpson took on in the making of it.

*Whitewall* met with Simpson in Philadelphia just before the opening of “Dream House,” and we discussed getting past the idea of needing her hand in everything, and opening up to the prospect of collaborating with others while still making super personal work. With her solo show “Legacies” on view at the ICA Boston through January 29, 2023; an upcoming exhibition at Jack Shainman in early 2023; and the public work “Countercultures” standing in Field Farm in Williamstown, Massachusetts, until April 30, 2023, Simpson’s sculptures are staring back, daring us to be present, vulnerable, and open to growth.

**WHITEWALL:** *Where did you begin with this project and the residency at The Fabric Workshop begin?*

**ROSE B. SIMPSON:** This residency started during the pandemic, so the first year almost was me and Karen Patterson [FWM’s former director of exhibitions] texting vigorously. She would ask me things like, “What are out thinking about today? What’s exciting you? What are you needing in your life and not getting?” I would send her photos of things I found beautiful in my day, podcasts, things I was thinking about. It was kind of like therapy. It was magical. It really was.

Initially, I was thinking about The Fabric Workshop to highlight my car stuff, because I really enjoy cars and working on cars. It’s been strange to find outlets for that in the world. They sent me the building restrictions and you really can’t put a car in there. So Karen was like, “What does a car mean to you? Why cars?” And we started digging.

Art is about creating your dream. It is intentionality manifest. What we’re doing and putting out there in the world is what we visualize and want to see. I live on the res in Santa Clara Pueblo, and we live in a little house my great-grandpa built for my great-grandma. Thinking about relational aesthetics and the very reason to do art, to apply arts to everything that we do, that’s where the cars come from. It’s about, how do you build an empowered experience? So Karen asked, “Where is that lacking in your life?” And I was like, “My home, my house.”

And then thinking about dreams and how the home itself is actually a metaphor for your body, your psychological states, the different rooms and places you enter within yourself. So how do you project out into your lived existence an experience of that?

**WW:** *So how were you thinking of a dream house? A phrase that can be totally on the surface and superficial.*

**RBS:** Right! Is it manifesting what you want to be in, or is it showing those internal spaces? What we surround ourselves with is a reflection of what’s going on inside. Intentionally, there was this idea that there’s access, too. It’s like, this is my body, this is my psychological state, this is my prayer, this is my past, this is my future, and who is allowed in there. And there’s this idea of voyeurism in a very deep way. That’s what art is in so many ways—this window into part of our very intimate beings. My work is very much that.



Rose B. Simpson, photo by Minesh Bacrania.

So much of my work is looking back at the viewer, and this work is very internal. Each room has a subconscious room. There’s a room from the windows, and windows from that room where you’re able to see into a subconscious space.

**WW:** *Can viewers enter there?*

**RBS:** No, you can barely see it. I kept wondering, how do you portray the deeper subconscious spaces? There’s access, there’s restriction, there’s boundaries, and then there’s welcoming. There are spaces you can’t enter but you can look in. And then there is the last space, where you are welcome to enter with respect; you can take your shoes off and you can come sit within it.

Through the show, we’re navigating these internal spaces, these dreamlike feeling spaces, and the last room is about being in the space with each other, doing that work of being aware. It’s under a very large window to be conscious of the environment, conscious of the weather, conscious of the sunlight, the moonlight.

**WW:** *You worked in new ways for this show, like with film. What was that like?*

**RBS:** This is the first time I ever worked with film. The Fabric Workshop provided me with a camera and taught me how to use it. Me and technology don’t get along very well, so I did my best. We made a quilt, we sewed a rug, we made something like 25 pillows, we sourced natural wood and made furniture and shelving. It was basically finding delicious things and pulling them in to meet that. It hearkens back to the art versus craft and utility being an aesthetic of manner. It brings us back into the aesthetics of function and how we move through the world.

**WW:** *Were there any new materials you found yourself enjoying working with? Anything about this process you want to continue with?*

**RBS:** I think the biggest part of it, the biggest lesson in my life recently, has been collaboration. That is a tool that I’ve struggled with because my work is so intimate, it’s so personal and vulnerable. I feel like my hand needs to be it—that’s it. This is mine, I’ll be responsible for that. I’m not pulling anyone else into this.

But starting with the “Counterculture” pieces that are on view at the Field Farm in Williamstown, I had to figure out how to complete this vulnerable work and rely on other people. That was the first time I’ve ever outsourced any kind of labor on my work. So I made these three wooden originals; I sculpted them with a chainsaw because it was way easier to cast wood than clay. They are nine feet tall. We shipped them out and they cast them in concrete. Then I made beads for them, so that I had my hand in them.



Rose B. Simpson, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, installation view of “Dream House,” 2022, photo by Carlos Avendaño, courtesy of the artist and The Fabric Workshop and Museum.



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**WW:** *So what is collaboration like for you, given that it's so new to your practice?*

**RBS:** I'm learning how to have faith in that process and also, to say, "Okay, Rose, you don't have to do absolutely everything." I had to think about how I could do this, to have other people's hand in it and it still feel true. To have such an incredible crew to work with at The Fabric Workshop was so wonderful. Abby Lutz is leading the project, and she's just a magical unicorn person.

**WW:** *That need to do it yourself, I wonder if it's like that, too, when you're working on cars?*

**RBS:** Yeah. And I'm working on that one, too! Because I have a buddy who is working for me now with car stuff. And I'm like, oh wait, I get to do the fun part? The part I want to do? And then to redo the fuel system, something I'm not excited about, I can outsource that and there's somebody out there that wants to do that?

When it comes to more of the aesthetic parts of it, I can come in it and, like, redo the dash the way I want to. I have a big sense of pride around that. I did it myself!

I have to pick and choose what I want to put my energy into. To trust other people with my vision is big. To collaborate, to delegate. I'm

absolutely blown away by the amount of work everybody put in to make this come together. This is all very new for me.

**WW:** *When you talk about working in clay, you talk about how the intention you put into the material shows up in the work. So it makes sense that you do feel the need to do it all, because it matters in the object you're creating.*

**RBS:** Right, and so I guess it's a conversation around we're all kind of in this together. And to be like, these people like doing this! They actually want to play with things I want to play with? So it's new neural pathways to start with. When we went to Williamstown and I saw the pieces at the Field Farm for the first time, I had to pull over the car and get out and stand there and feel. My body was like, "Whoa, do I have space in my consciousness and my being for this kind of validation?" It's really like, oh, I gotta grow. I gotta grow.

I stay busy to not feel the things, and when you finally just stop and it hits you, it's like, wow. I'm also scared of what it means to grow into this truth, to let this happen for me. If you build it, you have to grow into it! If you manifest it, then you have to meet it. It's a lot easier to stay simple than to bring in this relational complexity.

I think the biggest gift The Fabric Workshop gave me is community and trust and care and learning and believing in myself and the process.



Rose B. Simpson, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, installation view of "Dream House," 2022, photo by Carlos Avendaño, courtesy of the artist and The Fabric Workshop and Museum.



# DROUGH



Two views of Rose B. Simpson's sculpture *Root A*, 2019, ceramic, glaze, linen, jute string, steel, and leather, 71½ by 20½ by 16 inches, metal base 16 by 16 inches.

Opposite, *Storyteller*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, steel, leather, and epoxy, 67 by 29 by 26 inches.





# TCORE

Rose B. Simpson's ceramic and automotive sculptures honor Pueblo traditions while anticipating another apocalypse.

by Lou Cornum



The children depicted in *Storyteller* (2021) are building inside a building. Climbing a lattice of thin steel rods, they make their own structure comprising bodies on top of bodies as they ascend the metal structure that on occasion pierces them through. They are gentle and rounded; the scaffolding they unite with is angular, jutting. These little ones encircle a larger totem-like person, covering the sides and top of the head of an elder who, unlike them, has no limbs. The children are a deep orange ochre; the serene figure they climb, a sandier yellow. They are all naked, androgynous, and marked with black symbols, such as the square cross of the four directions and other arrays of thick black lines.

What they build is a world in miniature. The children are an audience, but they also appear to be part of the story itself, seeming to emerge from the body of the storyteller along with the steel rods. All together they make a story about earth, the earth they, as clay beings, come from and contact and change, as they interact with a structure made of this more industrial material – metal.

*Storyteller* is one of the more recent works on view in “Legacies,” artist Rose B. Simpson’s solo show at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Like most pieces in the show, the sculpture depicts figures that appear severe but contemplative, a contrast Simpson evokes by marrying diverse materials – most often clay, steel, and leather. The storyteller is a familiar figure in Pueblo ceramics, usually depicted as a speaker whose mouth is open in utterance, with small children gathered on the teller’s body. Simpson’s rendition, set in a harsh geometric landscape, is both familiar and alien, speaking to a deep history and an uncertain future. The storyteller looks forward, while the child on the very top looks behind. Or is it the other way around?

Simpson has produced a veritable pantheon of clay beings over the past 10 years. Bearing such hallmark signifiers as slit eyes, absent limbs, and desert tones, these figures serve as characters in a quiet but profound epic that begins in the Southwest – in northern New Mexico, to be exact – but whose relevance extends into the beyond.



Left, Simpson outside her adobe studio in Española, New Mexico, 2022.

Below, *Maria*, 2014, 1985 Chevy El Camino, with bodywork and customization by the artist.

**SIMPSON WAS BORN IN 1983 IN SANTA CLARA** Pueblo, New Mexico. Its residents are a tribal nation belonging to the larger group of Tewa-speaking peoples, who have inhabited what is now northern New Mexico for millennia. In the Tewa language they are known as the Kah'p'oo Owinge. It is said that their ancestors lived in the Puye cliff dwellings before relocating in the 16th

century closer to the ground in the nearby Río Grande Valley. Soon after descending, the tribes of the region first made contact with the Spanish conquistadores, most notorious among them Juane de Oñate, who killed, enslaved, and mutilated hundreds of Pueblo people during his tenure as governor. The memory of his cruelty was one of the bitter grounds for continued rebellion. Through the subsequent waves of settlement and the stranglehold of a capitalist national project, the Pueblo peoples have continued to fight, create, adapt, ascend.

In recent times, the conditions of struggle have unfolded in a landscape marked by climate chaos. This year alone, in the dry lands from which Simpson hails, wildfires have consumed more than 230,000 acres. For scale, the Santa Clara Pueblo covers just about 1,344 acres. The northern New Mexican lands are steadily growing drier and windier, culminating in the perfect condition for ravaging fires. Against this landscape, it is hard to avoid a point that Anishinaabe literary theorist Grace Dillon raised in 2012 – it is almost mundane now to say that, for the colonized, apocalypse has already occurred. In the 10 years since Dillon, who is credited with originating the term Indigenous Futurism, made this observation, it has become a commonplace acknowledgment for more and more people. These conditions feel baked into Simpson's ceramic works – there is a post-apocalyptic tinge to the resourceful way she alludes to this burning, which dries the land from





which she derives her clay. The exposed landscape is still visible in the works' orange color.

Some of Simpson's works, such as *Maria* (2014), feel like an Indigenous retelling of *Mad Max*. The artist detailed a 1985 Chevy El Camino like a fine piece of ceramic, sleek geometric shapes reminiscent of mesas, rivers, and the horizon rendered in deep glossy black on the black matte body of the car. When she presented the El Camino at the Denver Art Museum in 2013, the artist assembled a group of women and youths to walk with *Maria*. This fierce band of performance participants wore all black and swaggered down the road with their "droughtcore" gear: leather straps, soot-black face paint, and industrial-size goggles. They invoked a science fiction imaginary of a world scarce in oil and water; *Maria*'s crew members protected themselves from the unrelenting sun and dust of a parched place where verdant green is a rare sight.

The work is a testament to Simpson's training in automotive science at Northern New Mexico College, and she has said wryly that *Maria* is the closest she has gotten to practicing traditional Santa Clara pottery. She means that she used the Tewa black-on-black style associated with revived Pueblo pottery practices on the auto body of *Maria*. Typically, the black-on-black ceramics begin with a coil-style clay pot that has been glazed, burnished, and then painted with a particular iron-rich solution. The pot is then fired in a pit where powdered manure is poured

View of the exhibition  
"Legacies," 2022–23,  
at the Institute of  
Contemporary Art,  
Boston.

over the flames, giving the pot its distinctive black hue. The burnished sections take on a shine, and the painted sections appear matte. Starting with a readymade and very different kind of object, the El Camino, Simpson applied auto body detailing techniques in the visual style of Pueblo pottery, then situated this new creation in a suggestive narrative accompanied by a collective of warriors assembled by the artist and dressed in layers of black and metal.

The car's name is an homage to the potter Maria Martinez, who lived from 1887 to 1980 in the San Ildefonso Pueblo. A child prodigy of sorts, Martinez learned traditional pottery-making from her mother and aunt, and is credited with reviving the practice of all-black pottery. Maria developed the pit firing process with her husband, Julian; together, they conducted numerous experiments in reviving and innovating ceramic practices. That black appears not only in Simpson's *Maria*, but in the black symbols with which she adorns sculpted terra-cotta figures, for protection and direction.

*Maria* also refers to another local trade and culture: just a mile and a half north of Santa Clara Pueblo is the low-rider haven of Española. This small town is a crossroads of histories and cultural practices from the Spanish, from Mexico, from the Pueblo, and from white America. The Pueblo worlds were shattered by the inroads of Spanish conquest, and it was from literal shards of ancient pots found around their homeland that Maria





Left, *Heights I (original)*, 2022, clay, glaze, twine and silver, 54 by 12 by 10 inches.

*Brace*, 2022 (below), and *Truss*, 2021 (opposite), on view in "Legacies," 2022–23, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.

and Julian began to re-create and transform the material culture of ceramic practices. Mindful of those cycles of destructive contact between peoples, Simpson creates homages to survival, visions of transformation. Her work points to the irony of the post-apocalypse – despite the world ending, somehow it continues as well.

This lineage of influence and instruction from Pueblo artists is one of the cultural legacies referenced in the title of Simpson's current solo show. On the positive side, narratives and knowledge get transmitted, as seen in works like *Storyteller*. But there is a legacy of continuing violence as well, against a group of people Simpson sometimes refers to as the "innocents." She often represents the innocents as children, though the violence was directed against Indigenous people more broadly, and even against the landscape. In response, the artist frequently creates figures of protection, like the striking *Root A* (2019). Nearly 6 feet tall, the sculpture stands out from the rest: it is unique for the interruption of space between the leather-strapped shoulders and the head. Instead of a neck, there is absence framed by metal crescents edged with saw-like teeth. Simpson imagined this figure as a protector. In works like *Genesis Squared* (2019), a mother holding her baby stands on a metal plinth adorned with cutouts, the protection taking on the softness of a loving touch. Standing tall, this protector, Simpson has said, is meant to summon, then guard the processes of "justice, healing, and rehabilitation."

#### THOUGH THE NAME INCORPORATES "FUTURE,"

Indigenous Futurism is a mode of expression that fundamentally questions the grammar of futurist aesthetics. Indigenous Futurist works often return to the past in order to transform it, explore histories that should have been realized, or revisit traditional technologies to suit the needs of a changing reality. Paradigmatic examples include the 1999 poetry epic *Star Waka* by Robert Sullivan, in which Maori navigators



From left: Photo Addison Doby; Photo Mel Tang/Courtesy Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston





steer their traditional vessels through outer space, and *The 6th World*, the 2012 short film from Navajo director Nanobah Becker that posits ancestral corn as the key to humanity's interstellar survival. Simpson uses a similar approach, and her references to the post-apocalyptic make her a fellow traveler with the Indigenous Futurists imagining an alternative world and transformed human beings. As artist and as autobody specialist, she creates figures that emerge from a landscape scorched by fossil fuel culture, and is nonetheless still able to create beauty, to protect what has been forged. And she's ready with the tools for repair when it all breaks down.

Many of Simpson's ceramic works are made through a process she calls "slap-slab," which involves her throwing clay against the floor over and over until it becomes stretched thin. These pieces are then shaped into an image of care, as in *Genesis Squared*. While there is reference to the specificities of women's experience, Simpson often presents the human figure as androgynous, even as she evokes experiences most often of women, such as child rearing and the loss of bodily autonomy. In the lengthy artist's statement on her website, Simpson says that her work clusters thematically around "Identity, MMIW (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women) and relation vs agency in the traditional family unit." These concerns are countered by the futuristic beings who also harken to a time before the expansion of capitalism across the globe, when the work of nurturing was celebrated rather than denigrated and devalued. These figures represent a new humanity, with a strong historical lineage.

*Truss* (2021) and *Brace* (2022), alluding to architectural support structures, similarly speak of world building. In *Truss*, an armless figure stands on an automobile drum brake, three vertical tubes extending from its shoulders. In *Brace*, two ashen-gray armless figures leaning chest to chest form a triangle. Shaped from the earth, they lean, and fall, on each other. In this way, Simpson dissolves boundaries between land and figure. Likewise, *Heights I* (2022), which was created for the ICA Boston exhibition, incorporates a tower of two-handled vessels atop an armless figure's head. It resembles simultaneously a ladder and the series of grooved footholds shaped into the soft rock of the cliffs where Pueblos made their homes high above the ground. Here, rising from the figure's cranium, it suggests a reach toward the stars, toward the expanse. The figures that Simpson brings forth from the earth and adorns or builds out with industrial materials have survived recursive world-rending events and face now another post-apocalypse, the wake of a revelation. ●

**Lou Cornum** is a science fiction scholar and assistant professor at New York University. See Contributors page.

## ON THE CALENDAR

"**Rose B. Simpson: Legacies**," at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, through Jan. 29, 2023.

ARTS

## Send Off Summer With An Arts Binge Across Massachusetts



Installation view of Rose B. Simpson, *Counterculture* (2022), with artist, At Field Farm in ... [+] COPYRIGHT © 2022 STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Santa Clara Pueblo sits over 2,000 miles west from Fenway Park, but Rose B. Simpson (b. 1983) has taken up residence “back East” in 2022. At least her artwork has. Three prominent presentations of her contemporary sculpture provide a taste of [Indigenous New Mexico](#).



Simpson's first public art commission and largest project to date, *Counterculture*, features 12 hollow, concrete-clay forms supported by steel-gauge wire frames that stand approximately nine feet tall. The figures are covered with a dry concrete spray, wear necklace-like adornments consisting of thousands of clay beads and include a steel-post stanchion rooted in the ground with cement.

From the northwest corner of the state in Williamstown, the figures look west across the vast homelands from which native peoples were forcibly removed to make way for settler colonialism. Like mothers looking over their children, the all-seeing, feminine-bodied forms implore visitors to go forward with respect and honor for all that came before.

Simpson's mother, [Roxanne Swentzell](#), could rightly be considered the most influential living Pueblo potter. She was [among the first generation to transition](#) the century's old artform into a contemporary fine art direction by introducing figures.

"I was given the ceramic figure from my mom; ever since I was a kid, I was watching her make ceramic figures and so that was what I internalized clay to be," Simpson told Forbes.com. "What is traditional for me, growing up with a mom who did contemporary figures, is that contemporary figures were normal."

What was also normal for Simpson was making art to make a living. Her mother's pottery supported the family and numerous of her relatives would all be in the Native American art hall of fame if such a thing existed—"Uncle Mike," Michael Naranjo, "Aunt Susan," Susan Folwell, ["Aunt Jody," Jody Folwell](#), "Aunt Nora," [Nora Naranjo Morse](#), ["Grandma Rose," Rose Naranjo](#).

Simpson, however, hasn't simply followed in their profound footsteps, she's innovated a style all her own.

"I started out making my work smooth, making it acceptable because I come from a community of people who are working to support yourself off the tourist trade and if something's not pretty and eye catching and highly crafted then it's not acceptable," Simpson said. "Through my deconstruction of colonization and the implementation of Western values—assimilation—I wanted to challenge that and say, 'I want to talk about our humanity. I want to talk about hard issues. I want my work to get under people's skin and make them sort of uncomfortable.' To do that I had to transform my craft, transform the way that I created my work. My intention is, in a sense, to find emotional states that might be in denial. My work has to be crafted in a way that isn't necessarily 100% comfortable and that's where I break from tradition. That's my role."

*Counterculture* was installed along the horizon line of a meadow at Field Farm in Williamstown visible from nearby Sloan Road. The project was commissioned by [The Trustees](#), the nation's first preservation and conservation organization. The Trustees protect more than 100 sites of ecological, scenic, cultural and historic significance across Massachusetts and in 2016 launched its Art & the Landscape initiative to create site-specific, public art aimed at enriching visitor experiences at its properties.

Nearby to Williamstown in the bucolic Berkshires where *Counterculture* can be seen through November 30, 2022, MASS MoCA in North Adams presents "[Ceramics in the Expanded Field](#)" through January 2023. The group show brings together eight groundbreaking artists, including Simpson, who are changing the way the world thinks of clay.



"Rose B. Simpson: Legacies," exhibition installation view at ICA Boston. ICA BOSTON

Across the state, Simpson again has the spotlight to herself at Institute of Contemporary Art Boston where "[Rose B. Simpson: Legacies](#)" can also be seen through January of 2023.



Simpson's work doesn't look anything like the traditional Pueblo pottery found in New Mexico, but it does honor that tradition, in fact, she believes expanding the tradition is the best way to honor it.

"There is an incredible responsibility if you choose to pursue this direction with your life; you have to understand that there were people that came before me that made it possible for me to do what I do," Simpson explains. "When my mom was branching away from traditional pottery and doing contemporary art and figurative sculpture, that was really strange and difficult for her to do. It was looked at with disdain in lots of ways. Because of that work she did to push the boundaries of expression, I'm able to do what I'm doing. If I had done this work in the 80s, I don't think it would have been accepted. There's a responsibility to honor that work and take it further."

ART REVIEW

## Rose B. Simpson shapes stories in clay and steel

The artist from New Mexico has two new shows: 'Legacies' at the ICA, and 'Counterculture' at Field Farm in Williamstown.

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 18, 2022, 5:15 p.m.



Foreground: Rose B. Simpson, "Root A," 2019, in "Rose B. Simpson: Legacies," the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2022-2023. (Photo by Mel Taing) MEL TAING

If there can be such a thing as a post-apocalyptic vision of hope, then Rose B. Simpson's earthy, roughly gorgeous sculpture might be it. Sharp and soft, clay and steel, Simpson's figures are products of colliding worlds, material and otherwise.

The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston opened "Legacies," a single-room exhibition with 11 of her works, earlier this month; at its entrance, a resolute female figure stands guard, as if keeping the others safe. Knees locked and arms crossed, its russet-colored skin is tracked with

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impressions of Simpson's fingers, while its head rests on top of a broad circular blade embedded in its clavicles.

With that image in mind, you might be tempted to just go with "apocalyptic," a "Mad Max"-like vision primed for the Thunderdome. Like so much of Simpson's work, any implied violence is softened with solemnity, steadfastness, care. Whatever else it might evoke, the piece, "Root A," 2019, is beautiful, seductive, brimming with intimate markers: Strips of leather wound around its thighs fasten slender clay fragments in place, a string of wooden beads dangle from its belt. The round void where its neck would be invites your gaze and frames your view — looking at it means looking through it, a gateway to the ideas that lie within.

At Simpson's current installation at Field Farm, a Trustees of Reservations property in Williamstown, you can see the same idea at work. In a valley cradled by the Berkshire hills, 12 cast-concrete figures made to look like clay (outdoor works need to be weatherproof) stand like sentinels; strikingly, eyeholes carved through to the backs of their heads allow light to stream through.



Rose B. Simpson, "Counterculture," 2022. Dyed concrete, steel, clay, and cable. (Rose B. Simpson/ Jessica Silverman/ San Francisco/ Jack Shainman Gallery)  
Image Courtesy: Stephanie Zollshan STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN



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She calls the installation “Counterculture,” a tribute to untold centuries of Indigenous presence here; with its unsettling hollows, the work prompts the idea of an open-ended view, something mostly absent in a colonial framework where American history started with European arrival. Simpson, who is Santa Clara Pueblo Tewa from New Mexico, is looking back — way back, millennia or more — but, crucially, also forward. This is a story with deep roots, mostly buried, and with history scarred by conquest, genocide, disregard. But it’s still being written, a future left to unfold, and Simpson cares equally for both.

You can choose to think of Simpson as a material extremist: Clay, soft and pliable, has been a medium favored by Native American artists of the Southwest for thousands of years; industrial metalwork, cold and hard, has been around a few centuries at most, a byproduct of modernity that followed close in colonialism’s wake.

Their convergence matters in the story she tells. One of her best-known works is a 1985 El Camino — an ungainly hybrid of sedan and pickup truck that had a moment in the late ’70s and early ’80s — festooned with black pottery patterns much-reproduced for the tourist trade starting in the early 20th century. It’s a collision of commodity and culture, a motif begging to be reclaimed. She named the car “Maria,” after Maria Martinez, a Tewa artist who pioneered the tradition as a contemporary form; a print of the car’s working drawing is now on view in the permanent collection galleries at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts.

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Installation view, "Rose B. Simpson: Legacies," the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2022 - 2023. (Mel Taing) MEL TAING

At the ICA, turquoise walls bracket the low-lit space with a leading prompt — turquoise, the gemstone, is used frequently in Native American craft of the Southwest, particularly that made for the commercial souvenir trade. Curator Jeffrey De Blois told me the color (his choice) wasn't meant to evoke anything specific, but it struck a resonant parallel with Simpson's work. The artist leverages the power of old clichés long used by museums as a matter of course to frame Native American culture as primitive and a thing of the past. Despite significant progress, that element has hardly vanished, giving Simpson ample material so she can unravel false perceptions as she pleases.

Many of the pieces are marked with Xs and horizontal dashes, mysterious runes left unexplained. In "Root A," the face is ornamented with geometric patterning that prompts a conditioned response in seasoned museum-goers. My mind went searching unbidden into deep recesses of memory where countless displays of Native American ethnography, seen over years, are stored.



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# The Boston Globe

2022

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Joke's on me — there is no reference point, no explicit antecedent. Simpson's work prompts self-implication; you question not just what you're seeing, but the baggage you bring to it. Simpson can be overt, and she can be sly. One powerful piece, "The Remembering," 2020, groups three small figures, eyes shut, in pale clay jugs up to their shoulders. It's a blunt memorial to the children shunted to abusive "Indian boarding schools" by the US government in its long-term effort to brutally assimilate Native Americans by wiping out their languages and cultures.

"The Storyteller," 2021, takes a cutesy cliché about Native American culture and freights it with dread: The pale figure at its core spews harried-looking spawn that clamber up its head and shoulders and onto a steel armature. The piece is a powerful indictment of neat and tidy histories, told by its victors. The abiding sense is terror-provoked chaos, untold horrors let loose.



From left: Rose B. Simpson, "Storyteller," 2021, "Genesis Squared" (detail), 2019, and "Brace," 2022, in "Rose B. Simpson: Legacies," the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2022-2023. (Photo by Mel Taing) MEL TAING

All is far from doom and gloom here, though. At the core of the display stands "Genesis Squared," from 2019, a mother and infant with echoes of the classic "Madonna and child" images from countless European traditions. Go ahead, take the bait — that's why it's there. But Simpson's version registers as timeless, something that both predates the Christian reference and feels destined to outlast it. The mother figure wears a steel headdress and stands on a

metal box. Both are scored with patterns and symbols that could as easily be stolen from a far-flung future as an ancient past.

The piece feels like a convergence between two cultures long at odds — if not quite a gesture of reconciliation, then surely one of equivalence, universal and uniting. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, whatever you believe, what matters more than what comes next, and the generation that will carry it forward? Simpson's work roots itself in her ancient culture, but imagines a world, finally, built for all of us.

#### **ROSE B. SIMPSON: LEGACIES**

At the Institute of Contemporary Art, 25 Harbor Shore Drive. Through Jan. 29. 617-478-3100, [www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org)

#### **ROSE B. SIMPSON: COUNTERCULTURE**

At Field Farm, Trustees of Reservations, 554 Sloan Road, Williamstown. 617-542-7696, [www.thetrustees.org](http://www.thetrustees.org)



# FRIEZE

## Rose B. Simpson's Kinship in Clay

In the artist's solo show at ICA/Boston, figurative sculptures articulate the social power of family and community

C

BY CAITLIN CHAISSON IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 20 SEP 22



A darkened atmosphere pervades Rose B. Simpson's solo exhibition 'Legacies' at ICA/Boston, like a cloudy sky calling for rain. Figurative clay sculptures appear on raised platforms in the open gallery. Their resemblances disclose familial relations amongst those in the room and, as the title of the exhibition suggests, to relatives beyond. Simpson herself comes from a long line of accomplished ceramicists from Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico, including her mother, Roxanne Swentzell, her late grandmother, Rina Swentzell and her late great-grandmother, Rose Naranjo.

# FRIEZE



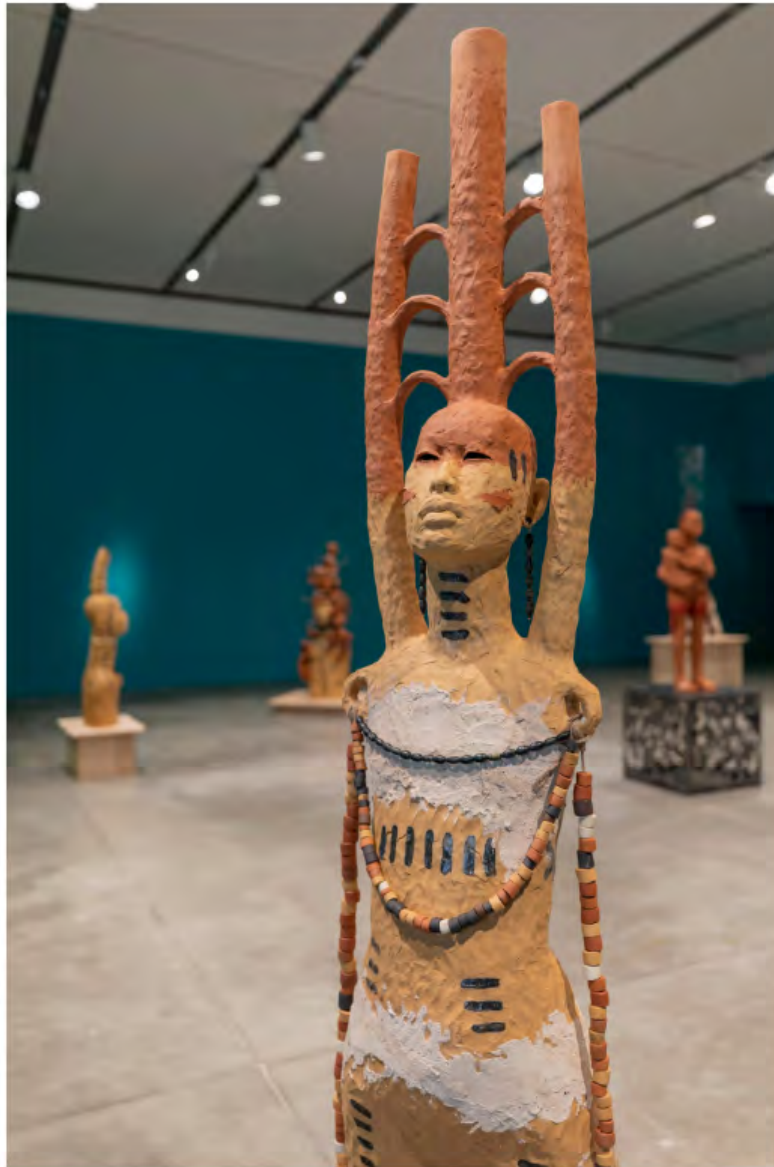
'Rose B. Simpson: Legacies', 2022, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and ICA/Boston; photograph: Mel Taing.

Although Simpson's sculptures are personal, reflective of her experience both as a parent and a Tewa woman, they are without specific autobiographical or spiritual references. The markings that run up and down the figures are intentionally inscrutable, forming part of the artist's unique symbology. Despite these guarded signifiers, Simpson's work is forthright in her critique of ongoing settler colonialism. *The Remembering* (2020) evokes the trauma inflicted at Native American boarding schools. Three sculpted children are bound with sharpened sticks at their chins. Their hands, modelled out of a smoother and lighter clay, are attached by metal links — as if to suggest their compromised agency under conditions of forced assimilation. The crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls is addressed in *Genesis Squared* (2019), where



# FRIEZE

mother and child appear together beneath the protective rays of a tablita. The laser-cut steel cube at the base of the work features silhouettes of defensive postures that are barb-like in their detail, sharply contrasted by the gentle impressions left by Simpson's hands on the ceramic elements that stand above it. The artist's various treatments of clay – a substance that can be both durable and vulnerable – convey the qualities of transformed strength.



'Rose B. Simpson: Legacies', 2022, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and ICA/Boston; photograph: Mel Taing.

# FRIEZE

The appearance of power in Simpson's work has undergone a shift in the past few years. *Directed South* (2014), the earliest figure on view in the exhibition, is distinct — clad in a heavy armour of thick leather bands and chunky unglazed beads. In more recent works, Simpson's use of sculptural artillery is less obvious, placing emphasis on structural considerations. In *Brace* (2022), two figures are pitched forward chest-to-chest. Their elongated necks tenderly touch, stabilizing one another, and their shoulders, which resemble lug handles, are tied with twine. In *Truss* (2021), a solitary figure balances on a metal brake drum while cylindrical spouts reach skyward from their head and shoulders. One of the few literal references to Simpson's training as an auto mechanic, the work also imparts her skillfulness in construction. A truss improves load-bearing through triangular assemblies of beams, but here Simpson's curvilinear design is closer to an aqueduct. Whereas the artist's earlier works were armed for protection, these newer figures carry force.

The relationships conveyed by Simpson's sculptures in 'Legacies' demonstrate the power of extended community and kin. The artist often twins her figures, a difficult task given that she works primarily with hand-coiled clay instead of moulds. Over time, some of these couples – by design or circumstance – become separated. The companion of *Root A* (2019), for instance, is missing from this installation. Absent figures like this one create a tether to beings and places beyond, and also affirm the significance of pottery as a means to articulate relations in the social world. Simpson's treatment of the hollow interiors of the figures makes space for other forms of interconnectedness. Openings in the clay are necessary during the firing process, but for the artist they also serve as thresholds for intersecting realities – perhaps most directly represented by the ascending heads in *Reincarnation II* (2021). Simpson has often described the feeling of watching her figures 'wake up' as they take shape – by extension, so too might those who find themselves in their presence.

**'Rose B. Simpson: Legacies'** is on view at ICA/Boston through 29 January.



# FRIEZE



'Rose B. Simpson: Legacies', 2022, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and ICA/Boston; photograph: Mel Taing.

## D.C.'s Hirshhorn Museum Announces Massive Acquisition Spree of 95 Works

**2** Rose B. Simpson, *Countdown I*, 2020



Photo : Courtesy Jessica Silverman Gallery

Rose B. Simpson, for example, is the first Native American woman to be represented in the collection. Her work *Countdown 1* (2020) is an armless, footless sculpture of a person made with epoxy, cement, string, leather, and metal that is inspired by the strong ceramic tradition of the Pueblo tribe she comes from.



## Solo exhibit 'Rose B. Simpson: Legacies' opens at ICA/Boston



**Celina Colby**

*Celina Colby is an arts and travel reporter with a fondness for Russian novels.* [VIEW BIO](#)



Rose B. Simpson, *Brace*, 2022. Clay, glaze, steel, and twine. 38 1/2 x 28 x 14 inches (97.8 x 71.1 x 35.6 cm). Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. PHOTO: Addison Doty. © Rose B. Simpson



Dynamic sculpture artist Rose B. Simpson opens her first solo show in Boston at the ICA, running Aug. 11 through Jan. 29. Utilizing ceramic sculpture, performance, installation, metalwork, writing and other media, Simpson reflects on the human condition, particularly under colonial rule.

“Simpson is one of the most compelling voices in contemporary sculpture who consistently asks urgent questions about where we find ourselves in the world today through inventive techniques and materials,” says Jeffrey De Blois, associate curator and publications manager and the organizer of the exhibition. “We look forward to sharing her powerful work with Boston audiences.”

“Rose B. Simpson: Legacies,” showcases 11 of the artist’s works, including some new pieces on view for the first time. The centerpieces of the exhibition are Simpson’s signature ceramic figures, part of a matrilineal clay work legacy and, appropriately, often depicting female subjects. The figures range in scale from life size to miniature and intimate, each sculpture probing consciousness and lived experience.

Simpson was born in Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico and still lives and works there, now teaching her own daughter how to use creativity to navigate the world. She holds a BFA from the Institute of American Indian Art, an MFA from Rhode Island School of Design and an MA in Creative Writing from the Institute of American Indian Art.

“My life-work is a seeking out of tools to use to heal the damages I have experienced as a human being of our postmodern and postcolonial era — objectification, stereotyping and the disempowering detachment of our creative selves through the ease of modern technology,” Simpson says in an artist statement.

In “Brace,” two figures of clay, steel, glaze and twine lean against each other, creating a triangle shape. The armless figures support each other and look out across each other’s shoulders as though scouting for threats. Here, ancestry and heritage provide a bolster for contemporary issues, with past and present holding each other up.

“Root A” stands 71 inches tall and shows a grounded figure with arms crossed and a circular shape connecting the head to the body. According to the artist, this figure stands tall “for justice, healing and rehabilitation” in the face of significant strife, perhaps even an apocalyptic landscape. In this way, and frequently in her work, Simpson illustrates how ancestral tools and practices can be used to overcome difficulty.



“These tools are sculptural pieces of art that function in the psychological, emotional, social, cultural, spiritual, intellectual and physical realms,” says Simpson. “The intention of these tools is to cure; therefore, my hope is that they become hard-working utilitarian concepts.”



Rose B. Simpson, *Root A*, 2019.  
 Ceramic, glaze, linen, jute string, steel, and leather. 71 1/2 x 20 1/2 x 16 inches (181.6 x 52.1 x 40.6 cm). Rennie Collection, Vancouver. Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. PHOTO: John Wilson White. © Rose B. Simpson



Rose B. Simpson, *Legacy*, 2022.  
 Clay, glaze, grout, and found objects. Two parts: one part: 39 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 8 inches (100.3 x 24.1 x 20.3 cm); one part: 28 x 6 x 6 1/2 inches (71.1 x 15.2 x 16.5 cm). Private collection, Boston. Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. PHOTO: Addison Doty. © Rose B. Simpson

COUNTERCULTURE

# Indigenous artist Rose B. Simpson's sculptures stand watch at Field Farm

Sculptural installation will remain on view through April 2023

By Jennifer Huberdeau, The Berkshire Eagle | Jun 24, 2022



"Counterculture," a public art project of The Trustees of Reservations, is on view at Field Farm in Williamstown through spring 2023.  
JENNIFER HUBERDEAU — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

WILLIAMSTOWN — They stand, 12 silent sentinels, watching over the land.

In this field, they bear witness to the wind as it blows, to the rain as it falls, to the stars in the night sky. They watch the fireflies flit in the dark of night and stand watch over the bobolinks that nest in the tall grasses of Field Farm Reservation, 316 preserved acres overseen by The Trustees of Reservations.

It is here that sculptor and mixed media artist Rose B. Simpson's slender, androgynous cast-concrete 9-foot-tall sculptures will stand, along the horizon line of the meadow, visible from Sloan Road, through April 30, 2023. Her most ambitious work to date, "Counterculture," honors generations of marginalized people and cultures, whose voices have been too often silenced by colonization and in many cases, forcibly removed from their homelands.



"I've been playing around with this idea being a witness, of witnessing; in that we look deeply at so many subjects, everything that we experience," Simpson said, during a recent interview in the meadow, at the foot of her sculptures. "How do we look deeper and ever deeper into those subjects?"

"This piece, initially, was about looking at a sort of the post-apocalyptic landscape for indigenous people. So, they are witnesses of that really difficult history [of colonization] ... these could be put anywhere on this planet and they'd still be, in a sense, surveying that difficult history."

And this piece, she said, is about personal growth, for her, and her audience.

"So much of my work is about teaching myself how to slow down and question every moment, question the things I think I do know, that I'm certain about. I'm questioning, things that I'm told are true, those histories and the perspectives and looking deeper at any situation," Simpson said. "As I work to find that inside myself, I'm hoping the things I make in the investigation into my own personal evolution and growth become opportunities for other people to see that in themselves."

Each sculpture's eyes are purposely left vacant — holes that show the sky and land behind them.

"The eyes go through, the form, all the way through to the back of the head, to sort of wake them up. They are watching," she said. "We were out there, up on the ladder the other day to put the necklaces on and I could see the wind go through, as dust came out of the eye. It made me realize the wind is actually whistling through the eye, that there's so many layers of what's watching you. We generally forget we're being held accountable or responsible by forces that we forget have any power over us."

Simpson, who traditionally works in clay, first created three figures as clay maquettes. She then made there full-scale models from wood, pine she carved with a chainsaw. The finished pine pieces were then shipped to Sculpture House Casting in New York City, where the 12 sculptures were cast in concrete.

It's the first time, she said, she's had someone else make castings of her work. Seeing the sculptures — as a dozen concrete statues of varying colors and individual personalities — for the first time, slowly rising above the horizon line as she drove up Sloane Road, was a moment for pause, Simpson said.

"When I first saw them, as I drove up the hill — they didn't have the necklaces on yet, but they had already been stood up in the line that they're in — I pulled over. I just had to swallow. It's really, really powerful to see them," she said. "I made these originals and then I trusted them in the hands of someone else. To witness my own work, in this way, is a first-time experience for me. And I'm learning a lot from it. I'm trying to make space for the power I feel from it and the immense strength that I witness, as well this reflection in these pieces. I don't know if I'm worthy, those parts of myself that feel really small and insignificant are having to grow to accept it. It's a big growing moment."

Originally planned for the Holmes Reservation in North Plymouth, another property of The Trustees, "Counterculture," was moved to Field Farm after the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, objected to having art from another tribe on their ancestral land. Simpson, 38, an enrolled member of the Santa Clara Pueblo (Kha'p'oe Ówîngeh) in New Mexico, and The Trustees deferred to the tribal sovereignty of the Wampanoag, choosing instead to move the work to Williamstown.

In this case, Field Farm is part of the ancestral home of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians, the Muh-he-con-ne-ok (People of the waters that are never still), who now reside in Wisconsin after being forcibly relocated numerous times. The Mohican/Munsee lands extended across six states, from southwest Vermont, to portions of Pennsylvanian and New Jersey, including the entire Hudson River Valley and western Massachusetts and northwest Connecticut, up to the Connecticut River Valley.

"This project would not be possible without the Stockbridge-Munsees," said Jamilee Lacy, guest curator of The Trustees of Reservations' 2022 Art & Landscape program, during an opening celebration at Field Farm.

Changing the location of the sculptures, from a strip of land near the ocean to the woodlands and meadows of the Berkshires, wasn't as much of a challenge, as it was an adjustment for Simpson, who received her MFA in ceramics from the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence and is part of the group exhibition, "Ceramics in the Expanded Field," at Mass MoCA.

"When I first got here, this was unfamiliar turf for me. I'm always inspired by new environment and mostly because I love that sense of wonder when I don't know who these trees are, what kind of grass this is,



what these flowers are. I don't really know. I don't know what poison ivy looks like, for instance. And so I feel really naive. I feel so innocent and I'm in a state of wonder in this environment," she said.

"And so I feel like a visitor and I want to walk respectfully and I have to. I don't know who this tree is. I don't know what that plant is. I don't know how it will affect me. And so I approach it with caution but also care and respect. And when I showed up and saw these pieces here in this field, one of the most beautiful places I ever seen in my life I kept thinking what an honor to be here more than any building, any piece of architecture I could possibly imagine, that this field is the biggest honor I could imagine. And, that these pieces, get to get to last the seasons and watch this place so deeply and so long. They get to be sat on by birds. They get to watch the stars, go through the night, they get silence, they get winds, they get, you know, they get to watch the animals creep through the grass."

As part of the exhibition, Simpson will bring clay, harvested from around the stands of the sculptures, to Wisconsin, where she'll make beads with the community members, that will be added to necklaces that will be brought back and added to the sculptures.

It's a small way, she said, to connect the Stockbridge-Munsees with their ancestral homelands.

It's good to start thinking about what we can do to have reparations, to bring them home, to not just see it as a interesting thing, but as a call to action — as a call to heal, as a call to come home and feel these mountains in your soul, let the ancestors welcome you. Their ancestors are walking here still," Simpson said.

"What it would it be like to be torn from them, like that?," she asked. "I can't even imagine. I have the privilege of living in my ancestral homelands, where my history is so so, so deep there in my yard, in my backyard in my, my family that still lives all around me. I don't, I don't have that experience in the same way."

She is hopeful that work like hers will spark conversations that will help bring healing; help bring the Mohicans back to their homelands.

"I wonder how we can just start bringing awareness," she asked, saying that it's as simple as saying, "Hey you need access to your ancestral, healing waters. How can we make that happen? You need to have a place that is yours to come home to, that you can pray at, that you can commune with your ancestors.'

"That's vital, having a place to listen to go and ask for direction and hear what they have to say, instead of calling across states for answers. That distance between them, that is really hard. We can start looking at ways that we can return some land to those people and start bringing their presence back.

"I can tell the land wants that. The land is calling for its people back."



# BURNAWAY

"Rose B. Simpson at the SCAD Museum of Art"

By Daniel Fuller

July 14, 2021



View of Rose B. Simpson, *Countdown*, 2021 at SCAD Museum of Art. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. Photo courtesy of SCAD.

Defying gravity, the four 8-foot clay bodies of Rose B. Simpson's *Countdown*, her new body of works commissioned by the SCAD Museum of Art, pack a powerful presence. The figures stick their necks out, fully leaning with foreheads against the glass. It's an act of tremendous faith, an assumption that both the glass will hold, and we, the viewer, will catch them if all falls apart. The figures themselves are thin, androgynous, their bodies built from pockmarked clay surfaces. They are impressive, adorned with Native American glyphs and long hanging prayer beads. Their faces are stripped down, eroded to their essential humble cores with stoic expressions. Laid bare, the four figures feel as though they directly gaze at us in compassionate confrontation, a sincere attempt at reasoning. The viewer is left to answer their provocation with a broad tapestry of potential meanings: deeper understandings of nature and death, power and politics, capitalism and strength, art, and beauty. Standing under these sculptures is an emotional journey of mind and body.



View of Rose B. Simpson, *Countdown*, 2021 at SCAD Museum of Art. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. Photo courtesy of SCAD.

The exhibition is so captivating, but I can never fully take my mind off the SCAD Museum of Art as a building. The museum is situated in a renovated antebellum railroad complex. The distinctive Savannah Gray Bricks that make up the railway structure and the surrounding freight warehouses date back to 1853. When Henry McAlpin, the owner of the Hermitage Plantation, realized his land was situated on a rare-grey colored clay that was not suitable for crops, he redirected the labor of enslaved people from farming to hand-forming bricks—the resulting materials made the foundation for this art museum in a historically preserved building. The museum building itself conjures irreconcilable issues of monumentality, of memory, life, the hereafter.

In opposite corners on the glass and the walls behind the sculptures sit flattened sundials with their corresponding vinyl design. Alluding back to the exhibition's title this is the *Countdown*, the rare and elusive moment where the world is aligned. The magic hour as the sun rises and falls, where communication and connection happen in the form of perfect synchronicity. I stand, unsettled, waiting beneath these timeless sculptures with the suspense of the sun.



Rose B. Simpson "Artists Explore New Ways of Sculpting the Land"

By Susan Delson

July 23, 2021



A photograph by Gianfranco Gorgoni of 'Seven Magic Mountains' by Ugo Rondinone, a 2016 land art work near Las Vegas.

Photo: Estate of Gianfranco Gorgoni; artwork Ugo Rondinone

In 1969, a young artist named Michael Heizer headed into the Nevada desert 80 miles northeast of Las Vegas and cut a pair of trenches into a mesa, running 50 feet deep, 30 feet wide and a combined 1,500 feet long. Monumental enough to be seen in satellite photographs, "Double Negative" quickly became an icon in the emerging field of land art—art that uses land itself as its material, by marking, sculpting or otherwise intervening in the landscape.

Half a century on, land art is changing. For one thing, it's no longer the exclusive domain of male artists from New York, "talking tough and driving bulldozers" to make "geometric, minimalist gestures in the desert," said William Fox, director of the Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno. Contemporary artists tend to favor less intrusive approaches, Mr. Fox said, often addressing what he called "real-world, real-time concerns." And they're more likely to be women and people of color, including indigenous artists.

This summer, the Nevada Museum of Art is presenting five exhibitions exploring diverse aspects of land art, from iconic beginnings to new interpretations. The state has been home to 15 or more important works of land art, some of them now gone. "We're acknowledging these major earthworks in our backyard," said the museum's senior curator and deputy director Ann M. Wolfe. "But at the same time we're asking: Who are the artists who've been left out of the land art narrative, and who are the artists shaping the future of the field?"

As a starting point, "Gianfranco Gorgoni: Land Art Photographs" presents images by one of the first land art photographers, who was "on the ground when those pieces were being created in the 1960s and '70s," Ms. Wolfe noted. In 2015-16, Mr. Gorgoni returned to Nevada as the official photographer for "Seven Magic Mountains" (2016), a work by Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone that was commissioned by the museum and the New York-based Art Production Fund. Located 10 miles south of Las Vegas, "Seven Magic Mountains" is visited by about a thousand people a day, said Ms. Wolfe, drawn by its syncopated shapes and Vegas-inspired neon colors.

A model of "Seven Magic Mountains" is among the first works on view in "Land Art: Expanding the Atlas." Grouped under broad themes like Ground, Water, Space and Ruin, some 80 works by close to 50 artists trace an alternate history of the field, proposing different definitions of what land art might be.



*Justin Favela's 'Family Fiesta: Double Negative' (2015) staged a pop-up party at the site of a 1969 land art work by Michael Heizer. Photo: Courtesy of the artists Justin Favela. Photo credit: Mikayla Whitmore*



Northern California artists Daniel McCormick and Mary O'Brien, for instance, specialize in watershed restoration and erosion control, working with woven basket forms that become part of the environment. Aboriginal Australian artist Reko Rennie uses an early land art technique—inscribing the terrain with tire-track circles—for a different purpose, reclaiming traditional territory on behalf of his people. And in the video "Family Fiesta: Double Negative" (2015), Justin Favela wryly critiques Mr. Heizer's pioneering earthwork by staging a pop-up party at the site, filling its minimalist void with color, camaraderie and Mexican *banda* music. "Great acoustics," he later noted.

For artist Rose B. Simpson of Santa Clara Pueblo, N.M., land art was an important context for the quartet of outsize female clay figures, called "Groundbeings," that anchor the exhibition "Rose B. Simpson: The Four." "It's as if they're emerging from or descending into the earth," said contemporary art curator JoAnne Northrup. A fourth exhibition spotlights High Desert Test Sites, an arts organization co-founded by artist Andrea Zittel in 2002 that stages events in desert locations, ranging from "experimental music to ephemeral structures to performances and happenings," Ms. Wolfe said.

All four shows are currently on view. On Aug. 28 they will be joined by "Judy Chicago: Dry Ice, Smoke, and Fireworks Archive," which focuses on a less-known aspect of the celebrated artist's work: a series of performances, called "Atmospheres," that Ms. Chicago initiated in 1968 in response to the monumental land art of that era.

Staged in the deserts where those massive interventions were taking place, the Atmospheres used ephemeral materials like smoke, fireworks and dry ice to "feminize the landscape," as Ms. Chicago put it. The exhibition includes large-scale photographs, videos and documentation of these performances, which the artist continues to create—including one in New Mexico last weekend, just before her 82nd birthday. Releasing colored smoke into the air, she has observed, "softened everything."

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# SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

## Rose B. Simpson: "Flying high: Rose B. Simpson"

Written by Michael Abatemarco

February 21, 2020



Rose B. Simpson makes her signature sculptures in her studio in Española, photo by Luke E. Montavon/ *The New Mexican*

It's a mild winter day in late January, and Rose B. Simpson, dressed in a dark sweatshirt and jeans, is busy at her potter's wheel, just starting on a new piece. Under her practiced hands, the rectangular clay slab quickly takes on cylindrical form. "I have a running joke with a friend of mine where I say, 'I have to go dig clay,' " says Simpson, who purchases 50-pound bags of it from a company in Albuquerque — unlike some of her Santa Clara Pueblo relatives, who gather clay by hand. "So I go to the store and get out my cornmeal and throw it, and say my prayers," she jokes, tossing up her hand as though making an offering. "What I'm asking my clay to do requires it to be really high-fired. I need it to be really dense and strong because I ask a lot of it."

It's early in the day and Simpson, 36, a recipient of the Women's Caucus for Art's 2020 President's Art & Activism Award, isn't wasting any time. At her Española studio, she's trying to get a head start on a project she plans to complete for the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Colorado for a two-week residency in early March. The work she's doing now is for an exhibition slated to open in May at The School, an old schoolhouse in Kinderhook, New York, that's managed by the Jack Shainman Gallery.

The studio is attached to her mother Roxanne Swentzell's Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute, at Santa Clara Pueblo. It's a cramped space, no larger than a one-car garage, stacked with bags of pale, flesh-colored clay, and the air is perfumed with its earthy aroma. Bottles and tubes of glue and acrylic paint crowd the shelves next to Simpson's framed master's degree from the vaunted Rhode Island School of Design. ("Conferred with honors," it reads in a stately script.) The cement floor is gouged with deep scars that Simpson explains are from the time when her uncle, sculptor Michael



Naranjo, used the studio. "He was using an angle grinder on his stonework in here," she says. "And he's blind."

In one corner rests an old squat kiln, about waist high, with room enough for clay pieces no larger than 26 inches. That's pretty astounding, considering that much of Simpson's work is life-sized or larger. "You made everything with this kiln?" asked an incredulous Helen Molesworth, the curator of the New York show, when she saw it. Molesworth, who also served as curator-in-residence at the Anderson Ranch in 2019, convinced Simpson to apply for the residency to take advantage of the art center's large, walk-in kilns.

### **The Wheelwright retrospective and beyond**

Simpson, who's been represented by Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art in Santa Fe for most of her professional life, had her first mid-career retrospective at the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in November 2018. Were it not for the birth of her daughter, Nugget, the exhibit would have opened a few years earlier, cementing Simpson's place as the youngest artist to ever have a solo show at the museum. "I lost my youngest position to T.C. Cannon," she says about the influential Kiowa art star whose life was cut short by a tragic car accident at the age of 31.

The Wheelwright show was the beginning of a new phase for Simpson that led to greater national interest in her work. "It's changed my life," she says. "I'm now represented by a gallery in San Francisco, the Jessica Silverman Gallery. It's just nuts who I've been talking to and connecting with."

If not for the Wheelwright show, it isn't likely that she would have been selected for the exhibition at The School — or for the Anderson Ranch residency, for that matter. But Molesworth saw the show on a visit to Santa Fe with her wife, Susan Dackerman of Stanford University's Cantor Arts Center, and took notice. "She was like, 'We thought we were in dreamy Santa Fe and your work was just good in context, but let's let the Santa Fe wash off and then we'll revisit the photos we took.' When they sat down and looked at the photos, they were like, 'No, it wasn't just Santa Fe. She's good.'"

Simpson's ceramics often betray the hand of the artist, whether she's creating busts, full-sized figures of Native warriors, dolls, installations, or works in her *Ancestor Masks* series. She doesn't try to disguise the fact that the pieces are clay; they're usually dimpled with the impressions of the busy fingers that molded them. Her warrior figures, some of which were shown at the Wheelwright in her 2018–2019 solo exhibition *LIT*, are free from specific tribal associations, offering imaginative interpretations of what a warrior could be. Some of them are based, she says, on her idea of what tribes living in a post-apocalyptic future might look like. They're mixed media works, painted with tribal designs of her own invention, and adorned with beads and jewelry made from metal and stone.

Many of her clay figures are female, but even so, the faces are anonymous, although they often bear a slight resemblance to her own rounded features, with tranquil, knowing eyes.

### **Dreams of speed and flight**

With the award from the Women's Caucus and a flurry of other exhibitions in the pipeline (including an upcoming fall show at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno), it's hard to imagine that Simpson ever wanted to be something other than an artist. She was born into one of the most prominent families

of Native artists in the country. In addition to her mother and her uncle Michael, other members of the family include ceramic artists Jody Folwell and Nora Naranjo Morse.

But when she was in high school, Simpson had other ambitions. "I really wanted to go into the Air Force. I used to make those plastic models of bomber planes and hang them from my ceiling. I wanted to fly so bad."

She took the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test (ASVAB) and got high scores. Soon after, various branches of the armed services started calling. "My mom kept hanging up on them. She sat me down and was like, 'You want to kill people?' and I was like, 'I just want to fly their airplanes, man.'"

Simpson hasn't yet satiated that desire. She talks — sheepishly at first, then animatedly — of possibly taking advantage of a Whirly-Girls International flight training scholarship to learn how to pilot a helicopter. "You can do search and rescue and there's a lot of side jobs you could do." She even considered building one of her own, and having the tribe sponsor the project. "I could give the governor rides up the canyon," she says, laughing. "I don't know."

If you know Simpson, you wouldn't have any doubt that she could pull it off. In a room adjoining her studio is a photo of artist Jeff Brock's souped-up 1952 Buick Super Riviera, Bombshell Betty, which broke several land-speed records at Utah's Bonneville Speedway. Simpson practically seethes, recalling her obsession with Brock and how she wanted to break his record and become "the world's fastest Indian." Adjacent to her studio is the auto body shop where she works on her own custom cars. But Maria, her signature 1985 Chevrolet El Camino, isn't there. The car, which she named after Native American potter Maria Martinez, sports black-on-black Pueblo designs in the style of San Ildefonso's sought-after pottery. It's currently on national tour, part of a traveling show called *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*.

### **Art as an act of healing the past**

Simpson approaches the designs for her custom cars as she does all her art, with reverence and respect for her ancestry and empathy for the larger indigenous community. In part, that attitude is why she was selected for recognition by the Women's Caucus for Art.

"I've known about Rose for some time but had never really seen her work in quantity," says WCA president Margo Hobbs, who was impressed by what she saw at the Wheelwright. "It just blew me away. After, I was thinking that I should give her the President's Award because everything she's doing is right in line with what the Women's Caucus, as an organization, supports."

The award is specifically for a mid-career artist who embodies the organization's mission, which, Hobbs says, is to create community through art, art education, and social activism. "It's not just Rose's work, which is so profoundly expressive, but the work she does with her community, with at-risk youth, and the various environmental organizations she's involved with."

For her May exhibition at The School, Simpson saw an opportunity to make a positive statement about a dark period in American history. The sculpture she's working on depicts three youthful figures, standing back to back. At this early stage, they're androgynous figures, and may remain so.

They are meant to represent the souls of children from a bygone era, when Native youth were separated from their families, sent to boarding schools, and forced to assimilate into Western society.

The School was an abandoned schoolhouse that gallerist Shainman transformed into an art space. "Helen [Molesworth] was saying that when she first walked into the building, she could still hear the children's voices in the walls," Simpson says. "When I see it, I can't help seeing a boarding school. Assimilation was a policy of genocide of indigenous people. It was a way to kill us. As a mother, I'm still struggling with it."

Simpson speaks of how the abuse the children learned in boarding schools, particularly in the 19th century, contributed to persistent generational trauma and cycles of abuse. "This is what I've inherited and I'm trying to undo it," she says, fighting back tears. "I'm 36 years old, I have a 3-year-old and I'm still dealing with what happened to my people in the 1800s. And it's only one aspect of post-colonial stress disorder."

But the clay figures aren't really about the abuse. They're about the bonds that children formed with each other in order to survive, and the communities they built together. "It's the survival instinct," she says.

Simpson's work seems to come from a deeper place than ego can reach. She taps into a wellspring of the universal, to the core experiences of being human. It's what makes her work accessible and relatable. "I'm dedicated to being aware all the time. What we do and why. What we ingest, through our eyes even, is what we become. How does different art affect us? What is the intention behind it? It's pretty cool to have a space to build that conversation," she says of the upcoming show. "I see it as an opportunity, an access point, for the art world to share consciousness."



# HYPERALLERGIC

**Rose B. Simpson: "Meet the Art Community of the US Southwest: Rose B. Simpson Believes Culture Is for "Conscious Nurturing"**

Written by Ellie Duke

March 9, 2020



Rose B. Simpson in her studio (courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery)

Rose B. Simpson is a mixed-media artist from Santa Clara Pueblo, NM. Her work engages ceramic sculpture, metals, fashion, performance, music, installation, writing, and custom cars. She received an MFA in Ceramics from Rhode Island School of Design in 2011, an MFA in Creative Non-Fiction from the Institute of American Indian Arts in 2018, is collected in museums across the continent, and has exhibited internationally. She lives and works from her home at Santa Clara Pueblo, and hopes to teach her young daughter how to creatively engage the world.

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**How long have you been in Santa Clara Pueblo/New Mexico?**

My ancestry dates back thousands of years to the area. I was raised at the Pueblo and after my first graduate degree, returned to live and raise my daughter. As my spirituality is heuristic, I have to be in place to practice.

**What is the first strong memory you have of art?**

My mother supported her family with her ceramic sculpture. So I remember watching her work from when I was still crawling. She was always telling me not to touch her work. I wanted to “help her” so bad. I don’t think I was aware that there was any difference between “art” and “life.”

**What are you questioning through your practice right now?**

I’m always tossing around the idea that for an art practice, we take resources from the earth, and my hope is that the works that are made make systemic change to benefit the planet. Right now I’m working on building awareness around the energy of colonization, around indigenous culture, bodies, and place.



(Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery)

**What challenges do you face as an artist in the Southwest, New Mexico, or Santa Clara Pueblo?**

Recently, I’ve had opportunities to show my work more extensively beyond Santa Fe and the Indian Art Market sphere. Juxtaposing those experiences, I can see how patronizing and disrespectful a small market like the one in the Southwest can be.

**What is the most impactful or memorable art experience you've had in the last year?**

In June of 2019 I got to participate in a group show at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco. It was the beginning of my representation by JSG, and a really amazing friendship with both Jessica Silverman and her partner, Sarah Thornton. I was given a solo show in the Fall of 2019, a show that pushed my creative process in some of the most vulnerable and exploratory ways. I fell back in love with my studio process.

**When you are working a project do you have a specific audience in mind?**

My work is intended to translate our humanity back to ourselves. I hope that I can educate some people on issues of unconsciousness around race, gender, and history, and I hope to honor lived experiences of those who have suffered Post Colonial Stress Disorder.

**What questions do you feel aren't being asked of or by creative people in your community?**

I think that we lack the capacity for healthy critical dialogue. Art is a powerful medium, and because of the economic importance of it for so many, I've found it difficult to critique or have challenging conversations around our creative intentionality.

**How do you engage with and consume culture?**

I don't think culture is for our consumption. I believe culture is for conscious nurturing. As someone who was initially equipped with a cultural identity, it is frustrating to see people use cultures that are not their own (especially Indigenous culture and lifeways) for their own benefit.

**What are you currently working on?**

I am at Anderson Ranch for an arts residency to finish work for a show at Jack Schainman's School at Kinderhook, curated by Helen Molesworth. Because the exhibition is going to be located at an abandoned and re-appropriated schoolhouse, I've been delving into the history of Western Education and Indigenous Boarding Schools as a genocidal tool in the war against indigenous culture. As someone who attended Indian Boarding School myself, this subject is very sensitive and I am very dedicated to this work.



**Who in your community of artists, curators, archivists, organizers, directors, etc. is inspiring you right now?**

I have wonderful conversations with some of my peers, artists that I respect immensely, including Dyani White-Hawk and Razelle Benally. Working with Jessica Silverman has been one of the most inspiring new forces in my life. Helen Molesworth and Susan Dackerman are people that I admire immensely, it is so good to have queer leaders making space in our global conversations. Tony Pandola is writing a book and our conversations seem to radicalize every energetic and philosophical apocalypse. Jamie Okuma, Cannupa Hanska Luger, Vanessa German, Nep Sidhu are some artists I look to for inspiration and energy.

**Where are the centers for creative community in your region?**

I am most connected to two very important creative machines: the Institute of American Indian Arts and the New Mexico School for the Arts. I believe that centers for critical creativity are the lifeblood of a very tenuous environmental and political future.

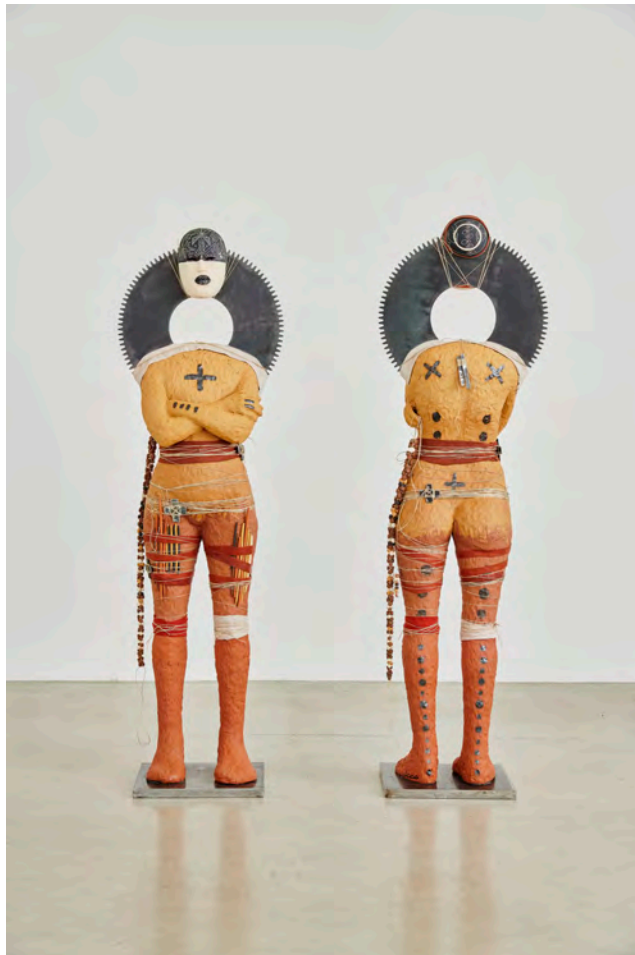
# ELEPHANT

## Rose B. Simpson Explores the Human Condition Through Her Native American Past

By Ariella Wolens

December 16, 2019

A sense of place and spirituality go hand in hand in Simpson's intriguing ceramic sculptures, as seen in her current exhibition, *Duo*, which is on show at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco. She speaks to Ariella Wolens about her fascination with automobiles, and reflects on the place she calls home.

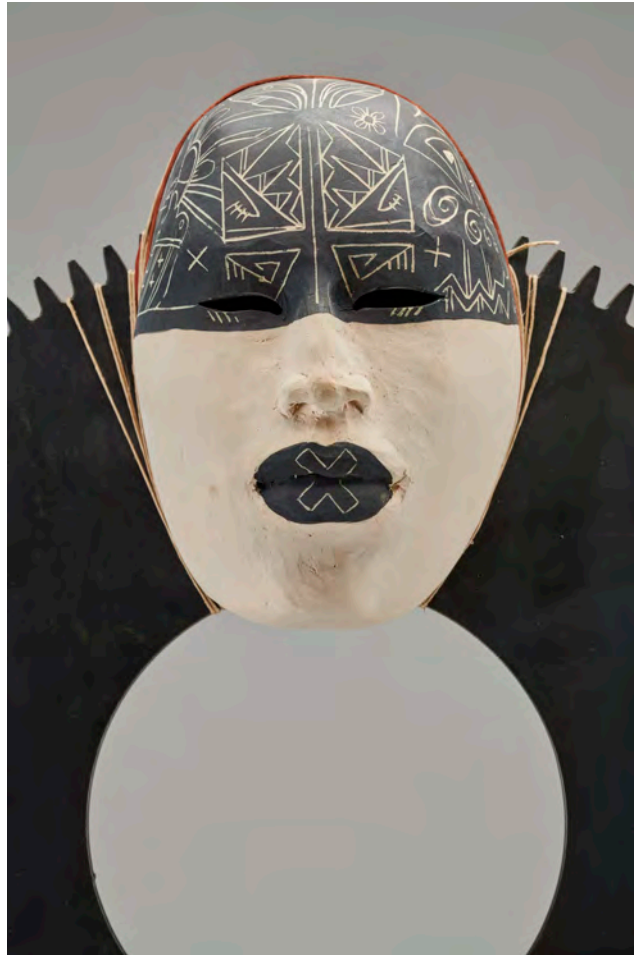


Rose B. Simpson, *Duo* Installation View, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.  
Photo by John Wilson White.

Rose B. Simpson speaks to me from her immutable home within the sun burnished landscape of her tribe's terra firma, otherwise known as the Santa Clara Pueblo. This historic area of the Pueblo people has existed for thousands of years; sustained by the waters of the Rio Grande and now abutted by the New Mexico capital of Santa Fe on one side, and the notorious city of Española—known as the Lowrider car capital of the world—on the other. As we're talking, Simpson's three-

year-old daughter can be heard playing in the background, adding her own charming narrative to our conversation as we discuss Simpson's recent successes.

One of these notable accomplishments is her current exhibition *Duo*, currently on view at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco. When I ask Simpson about the impetus behind the show, she describes the importance of site specificity to her work: "I was thinking about audience and space. I wanted to see an arrangement of bodies facing each other in a line, as a way to formally display relationships and activate the space between," she explains.



Rose B. Simpson, Detail of *Root A*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.  
Photo by John Wilson White.

*"The sculptural couplets elicit both the tension and fecundity of co-existence; the ability for beings to work together or against one another"*

Eleven sets of genderless corporal sculptures, some evoking totemic forms, others akin to funerary masks, can be seen in the exhibition. The colours and processes hearken back to Simpson's own Pueblo culture and her tribe's venerated practice of creating ceramics and pottery. Simpson, along with her mother, Roxanne Swentzell, is among several Santa Clara sculptors whose work has received global recognition.

While each set of bodies in *Duo* consist of a double, they are not parts of a whole, but rather mutual individuals—equals with a common identity, twins navigating the world simultaneously but alone. The



sculptural couplets elicit both the tension and fecundity of co-existence; the ability for beings to work together or against one another. Simpson informs me that, though she created each work as doubles, they are sent into the world as single pieces.



Rose B. Simpson, Duo Installation View, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.  
Photo by John Wilson White.

These can be purchased individually or together, therefore bestowing a weighted decision on the collector: "If someone buys one of them, they're responsible for the splitting of the work. To me, that adds to the conversation," she asserts. The twinness of the works is key; they are birthed together, but through circumstance have to navigate the world as solitary beings.

Simpson's bodily forms are evocatively tactile, with the trace of the artist's touch remaining strikingly visible on the ceramic surface. This is due largely to Simpson's idiosyncratic process of

furiously reworking the clay's density. With a method she calls "slap slab," she repeatedly throws clay onto a diagonal surface until the material is paper thin. From here, she applies an additive process to build up the body of the works in wafer-like strips, which come together to create the solid somatic form.



It could be said that Simpson's work is ultimately about the human condition. Her identity as a Native female may be in danger of becoming fetishized, but for the artist, her work exists within a far less prescriptive state. Simpson is forced to grapple with cultural insensitivity, but ultimately she sees the fight against the racial determination of her work as a privileged engagement: "I've had a lot of access because of these cultural fixations, which I've had to navigate in strange ways because the work that I do within the Native art sphere is considered weird and unheard of. Also, because I'm sensitive not to overshare or capitalize on my identity, I'm able to have a deeper conversation about humanity. Some of the decisions I've made are intentional to deconstructing the stereotypes around culture and gender."

Our discussion of gender inevitably leads to a discussion on Simpson's predilection for automobiles, and her active involvement in car culture. This obsession goes so far that she even formally studied Automotive Science at the Northern New Mexico College (she graduated in 2015), subsequent to receiving her formal art training at the Rhode Island School of Design and the University of New Mexico. With its built-in velocity and utilitarian economy, Simpson treats cars as a vessel in much the same way as she does her ceramic sculptures.



Rose B. Simpson, Moon 1, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.  
Photo by John Wilson White.

*"Where Simpson comes from, cars are emphatically celebrated as symbols of pride, and as a means of survival"*

Earlier this year Simpson installed Maria, her custom built 1984 Chevrolet El Camino, within the Minneapolis Institute of Art, as her contribution to the group exhibition Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists. The car's moniker pays homage to Maria Martinez, a Native potter of the San Ildefonso Pueblo, who painted using a distinct black-on-black technique. It is a process that continues to be implemented by Simpson's tribe, whereby alternating matte and polished



treatments are used to create geometric and figurative imagery. Simpson applied this technique to the body of her *El Camino*, painting swift geometric lines of glossy paint across the car's paneling.

For Simpson, this use of automobiles within her art is a way to speak to her identity through means that eschew stereotypical mores. Rose explains how the car culture of Española suffused her upbringing (the artist bought her first car at the age twelve.) Where Simpson comes from, cars are emphatically celebrated as symbols of pride, and as a means of survival.



Rose B. *River Girl 1*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.  
Photo by John Wilson White.

When I ask Simpson why she chose to continue to remain on her tribe's reservation while pursuing a career as an artist, she explains the nature of her Native spirituality, deeply rooted in a sense of place: "You can't go somewhere else and practice our indigenous religious belief system. I was raised very strongly in my traditional beliefs at the Pueblo, and because of that, to leave is to make a choice that is too hard." This fidelity speaks to Simpson's uncompromising nature. Simpson communicates her identity with reverence, and with a sanctity for its secrets.

# Art in America

## Native Women Artists

June/July, 2019



Rebecca Belmore, *Fringe*, 2007, Transparency in light box, 96 1/4 x 32 3/4 x 6 1/2 inches

"Hearts of Our People" showcases the artistic achievements of Native American women from the past one thousand years. Organized by Minneapolis Institute of Art associate curator Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Native independent curator Teri Greeves, the exhibition brings together more than 115 artists. The works, ranging from pottery and textiles to photographs and a painted Chevy El Camino, are drawn from the museum's permanent collection and the holdings of over thirty institutions and private individuals. Accompanying pro-grams include a symposium by artists and scholars, screenings of movies by and about Native women, and artist talks. Following its Minneapolis debut, the show will travel to the Frist Art Museum in Nashville, the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa.

## **A Spectacular Exhibit Of Indigenous Women Artists Counters 500 Years Of Exploitation And Ignorance**

By Jonathon Keats

June 10, 2019



Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo), *Maria*, 2014. 1985 Chevy El Camino. Collection of the Artist. © 2014 Rose B. Simpson. Image: © Kate Russell

At the beginning of the 20th century, a Native American potter named Maria Martinez received an unusual request from an archaeologist excavating a site near her home at the San Ildefonso Pueblo in northern New Mexico. He showed her a potsherd unlike anything made in her village – a remnant of an antiquated style in which patterns were rendered in black on black – and asked if she could replicate it for historical research.

Not only did she recapitulate her ancestors' technique. She also revived it, developing new permutations that were admired by her people and outsiders alike. Her descendants still make it today.

Martinez's distinctive blackware is featured in *Hearts of Our People*, a vital survey of art by Native American women that opened at the Minneapolis Institute of Art last week. Curated with input from a geographically diverse panel of Native artists and Native and non-Native scholars, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue provide an engaging perspective on the artistic practices of Indigenous women representing tribes ranging from Yup'ik to Osage over the past millennium.

Although Martinez was an exceptional artist by any standard, her dynamic balance of tradition and innovation is strikingly pervasive, recurrent throughout the exhibit. Artists past and present have meaningfully addressed their communal heritage through modes of expression uniquely their own. Their

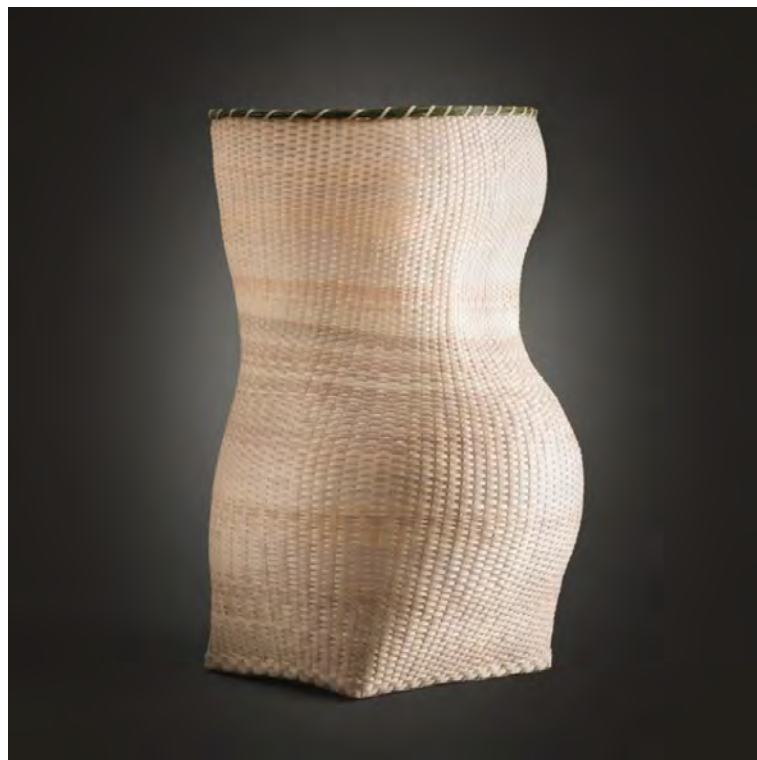


work simultaneously maintains continuity and adds to their culture. In many cases, it also provides a cross-cultural portal for non-Native viewers.

A work by a contemporary Santa Clara Pueblo artist named Rose B. Simpson, created in tribute to Martinez, provides a good basis for appreciating these complex dynamics. Several years ago, while loading crops into the bed of a Chevy El Camino, Simpson realized that the car was a lot like a pot. "In the same way our bodies are vessels, the things we eat out of are vessels—it's a utilitarian object," she explains in the exhibition catalogue. To make the association explicit, she painted the Chevy black on black, using a design evocative of San Ildefonso blackware, and dubbed her artwork *Maria*. The strong visual impact reflects Simpson's motivation to make what she dubs an "empowered vessel". The El Camino becomes a vehicle for affirming her personal strength, and relating it to the power that women hold in her culture as makers of life-sustaining pottery.

As *Hearts of Our People* shows, the interplay of tradition and innovation is not only manifest in ceramics, but can equally be found in long-established media ranging from textiles to beading to carving to painting, as well as newer media such as digital photography and video. Basketry is especially well represented, and serves to illustrate the tensions that Native artists have faced in post-colonial America and how they've confronted existential threats ranging from genocide to assimilation.

Like ceramics, baskets have a long history as utilitarian objects and cultural artifacts, serving day-to-day functions while also holding communities together through practices of gathering and making. Within and beyond tribal boundaries, the most refined examples have been admired as artworks and treated as commodities. In *Hearts of Our People*, early 20th century baskets by Washoe artist Louisa Keyser and Yurok/Hupa/Karuk artist Elizabeth Hickox show the aesthetic splendor of basketry, equal to Maria Martinez's pottery, while their personal stories reveal the ugly circumstances in which they were compelled to work.



Cherish Parrish (Odawa/Pottawatami), Gun Lake Band of Pottawatami, *The Next Generation—Carriers of Culture*, 2018, Black ash and Sweet Grass.

For instance, although Keyser invented a new form of Washoe basket called a *degikup*, the non-Native shop that sold her work instead advertised her 'authenticity', appealing to non-Native buyers' desire for primitivism. She was even given a make-believe name, Dat So La Lee, to tout her exoticism. The marketing paid off in the sense that her large baskets sold for more than \$1,000, a hundred times the price of basketry by nameless female contemporaries. As commodities, these baskets sustained Keyser and her community, much as Maria Martinez and her painter husband Julian helped bring their Pueblo from the brink of starvation to relative affluence. But this imprint of primitivism has remained for nearly a century, at least for non-Native viewers, denigrating the creators by ignoring their inventiveness, imagination and humanity. For that reason, *Hearts of our People* is an essential corrective.

The exhibition is also an important corrective in a second way. At least since the 18th century, when Immanuel Kant wrote his *Critique of Judgment*, the Western elite has viewed utility as antithetical to art. Craft is belittled, with the result that Native art has often not been taken seriously, a problem exacerbated by non-Native ignorance of the multiple valences of utility in Indigenous societies. Although it would be unwise to generalize, given the vast diversity of these cultures, many dimensions of utility are revealed through this exhibit. One of the most significant is the role of craft as a communal activity, weaving collaborations on a daily basis and intergenerationally.

The philosophical implications are profound – as profound as the meaning of any artwork Kant would have appreciated – and they're extremely relevant for all peoples today, as society becomes more fractured and shortsighted amidst xenophobia and environmental destruction. The Native practice of thinking in terms of the next seven generations – and acting accordingly – is one that we all need to adopt, and it can be imbued through encounters with Indigenous art.

No single artwork can possibly contain all of these values, though one contemporary basket comes astonishingly close. The Ottawa/Ojibwe/Pottawatomi artist Cherish Parrish has woven a black ash basket in a shape reminiscent of a pregnant woman, a form she describes as "a universal idea for something beautiful and appreciated, something only women can do". Her vessel, titled *The Next Generation—The Carriers of Culture*, embodies the unity of utility and beauty by relating basket and belly, while simultaneously suggesting that the future of a people is borne through heritage as much as biology.

More than just an illustration of grandiose principles, Parrish's basket is a product of these processes, unifying object and meaning. *The Next Generation* really is a carrier of culture – the living descendant of ancient tribal traditions that may eventually birth meaningful art of its own.



## **The Often-Overlooked Aspect of Native American Art: Women**

By Shyam Patel

June 6, 2019



Christi Belcourt; Métis, born 1966; *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014; Acrylic on canvas; Unframed: 171 × 282 cm (67 5/16 × 111 in.); Art Gallery of Ontario; Purchased with funds donated by Greg Latremaille, 2014; 2014/6

Although most outsiders don't realize it, Native American art is largely the product of women's work. "This material culture stems from a Native female understanding of the world, her own identity, who her people are, and how this knowledge can be passed on," says Kiowa beadwork artist Teri Greeves. To illustrate this often-overlooked aspect of Native art, Greeves and the Minneapolis Institute of Art's Jill Ahlberg Yohe organized an exhibition of some-120 works conceived over the span of a millennium by female artists from indigenous nations that, collectively, represent all regions of Native North America.

Titled *Hearts of Our People: Native American Women Artists*, the show, which opened at MIA on June 2, includes contemporary works such as Santa Clara Pueblo artist Rose B. Simpson's *Maria*, a customized 1984 Chevrolet El Camino; Romanesque 19th-century sculpture by Edmonia Lewis; and ancient pottery by the Hohokam and Mimbres tribes. "No one other than the individual who comes from the community that's created these works can speak to it," says Greeves, citing the importance of the Native Exhibition Advisory Board (a panel of 21 Native and non-Native female artists and scholars) in selecting the works on view. The final assemblage was organized into three overarching themes that connect each object: relationships, power, and legacy.

"When you see a dress made for a young woman, you're seeing four deer taken by her uncle, tanned by her aunt, and beaded by her mother," Greeves continues. "She wore it understanding her relationship to the deer sacrificed for her, the trade routes that brought her the beads, and the love of her family." While the show reaches across time, media, and Native communities, it's by no means a definitive study of Native American women's art. "It's the first step toward a conversation around Native art we hope will continue in art institutes," Greeves says. "This is barely the tip of the iceberg."



## **'It's long overdue': the first exhibition for Native American female artists**

By Nadja Sayej

June 13, 2019



Christi Belcourt (Métis) - The Wisdom of the Universe, 2014. Photograph: Art Gallery of Ontario

Walk into most museums and there might be something missing on the wall labels beside Native American artworks – an Apache dress from the 19th century might just read: “Title, year, materials.” What’s missing? The artist’s name. Though many of the artists’ names were not recorded, and will forever be anonymous, many that have been recorded are now being recognized as never before.

Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists is the first ever museum retrospective of Native American and Canadian female artists. It opened at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and until 18 August, over 115 artists from 50 Native communities are being given the credit they deserve. “This is the first, believe it or not, show devoted to Native women artists,” said Jill Ahlberg Yohe, who co-curated the exhibit with Teri Greeves. “It’s the first to honor Native women from ancient times to the contemporary moment.” Then why did it take so long?

Most 19th-century art collectors were “men with a Victorian sensibility,” Yohe said. For the most part, these men weren’t interested “in identifying women, or individualizing Native people”. She added: “90% of Native art is made by women. Native artists know this. It’s just non-Native people who haven’t recognized that.” Yohe has been working on this exhibition since 2015. “It dawned on me after scouring the collections that all the work is made by women,” she said. Putting together the show meant more than just plucking out items from renowned collections. Rather than repeating the same old narratives, the co-curators wanted to incorporate fresh voices. That led them to working with 21 women, both Native and non-Native scholars and artists, to curate this show as part of their “exhibition advisory board”. “That’s what made it special,” said Yohe. “We have the voices, expertise and knowledge from all these women.”



Rose Simpson's 1985 Chevy pays homage to Maria Martinez. Photograph: Collection of the artist.

Upon entering the exhibition, there's a parked 1985 Chevy El Camino by Rose Simpson, a work which pays homage to the 20th-century potter Maria Martinez, "the first self-identified non-anonymous Native artist," said Yohe. That sets the tone for the entire show, which is divided into three sections: legacy, relationships and power. The exhibition includes the work of 12 Canadian artists to trace tribes and communities that were established long before borders between the two countries. "The borders between the US and Canada weren't created by indigenous people, but by outside influences," said Yohe. "All this work is connected to our history, whether it was made in 1500 or 2019. It's all a part of the American and Canadian story." Métis artist Christi Belcourt shows *The Wisdom of the Universe*, a painting from 2014 that features animals on the endangered species list in Canada, alongside Haida fashion designer Dorothy Grant, who sketches Haida artwork on to clothing, is showing her wool Hummingbird Dress from 1989, the same year she debuted her first collection. Though craft and fashion play a role in this exhibit, it's not where it ends. "It's the gendered aspect of women's work," said Yohe. "These categories don't work; they just don't work in Native communities."



Jamie Okuma's *Adaption II* from 2012.  
Photograph: Charles Walbridge/Minneapolis Institute of Arts

One of the most fun pieces in the exhibit is a pair of heels by the Luiseño/Shoshone-Bannock artist Jamie Okuma, who is showing her Adaption II shoes from 2012. The artist has taken a pair of Christian Louboutin heels and covered them in what Yohe calls "Native couture" – including the likes of glass beads, porcupine quills and buckskin. The work counteracts the stereotype that Native art lives in the past and lacks sophistication. The Creek-Cherokee artist Joan Hill is showing her 1990 painting Women's Voices at the Council, which shows the head of a tribe, a woman she refers to as the "Beloved Woman", meeting with other women as part of the decision-making for their tribe. Haida artist Freda Diesing shows Mask, Old Woman with Labret from 1974, which depicts a woman with a labret, a body modification known as "lip plugs", which were recognized as status symbols for women on the north-west coast. (Diesing was one of the few female carvers of her generation and her Haida name Skil Kew Wat means "magical little woman").

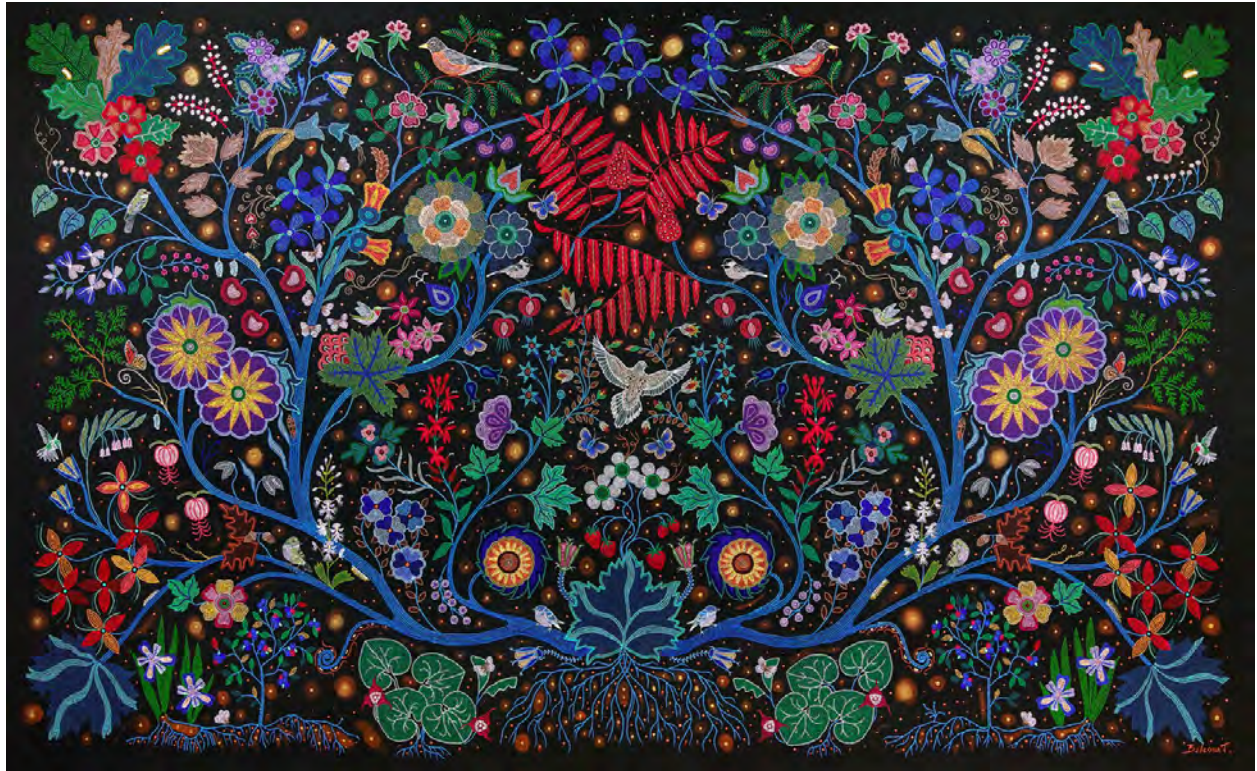
The artworks here are more than just decorative or folk-art masterpieces. They offer an overlooked, often silenced narrative. "Their work tells the story of Native people, the idea of resilience, despite all measures of annihilation of federal policy, settlers and acts of genocide," said Yohe. The Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore shows Fringe, a sculpture from 2007, which draws attention to the violence against First Nations women with a gaping back scar the artist believes will never disappear. But this exhibition is, in part, about healing. For one, it aims to be a counter-narrative. They're calling it "corrective art history" to the dusty old textbooks that ignored them for decades. "It's long overdue," said Yohe. "Native women's art history is American history."



## In “Hearts of Our People,” Indigenous Women Reclaim Space Through Art

By Christian Allaire

June 3, 2019



Christi Belcourt, *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014

Photo: Greg Latremaille / Courtesy of The Art Gallery of Ontario

Art has served as an outlet for indigenous women to carry on their traditional crafts and stories for centuries. They've continued to create even while contending with legacies of unimaginable oppression, like the residential and boarding schools many were forced into throughout the 19th century in the United States, in which colonizers attempted to wipe out their culture and assimilate them into a white, Christian way of life.

Today, their works are heavily referenced in mainstream fashion and design, and often without acknowledgment; indigenous women artists are frequently victims of cultural appropriation. It seems undoubtedly related to this erasure that there has yet to be a major retrospective in a major museum devoted to exploring these women—until now.

Through August 18, the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA) is presenting “Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists,” the first major showcase to provide visibility to the indigenous women, both from Canada and the United States, who have repeatedly been ignored in the mainstream art world. Curated by Teri Greeves and Jill Ahlberg Yohe, it features 117 different objects, all made by native

women, that span more than 1,000 years, including paintings, sculptures, garments, and more. The artists themselves also range in tribe and location.

The project has been a long time coming for curators Yohe and Greeves. The pair have been working on this project for more than four years, and during the acquisition process, the duo worked with an advisory board of 21 different native artists and scholars to ensure that the final selection represented the right mix of region, medium, and tribe. “Neither one of us could speak with authority on all these other nations,” said Greeves, while Yohe added, “To tell a story that’s as rich as this, we can’t tell that story. The board helped us make sure that we were comprehensive in scope.” To accomplish their goal, the curators split the exhibit into three themes: legacy, relationship, and power.

Inside, the works manage to do these big ideas justice. Power, for example, comes roaring at you at high speed: A totally customized El Camino, made by the mixed-media artist Rose B. Simpson, a Santa Clara Pueblo, opens the show. With her work, *Maria*, she presents herself as a petrolhead—something viewed as a very masculine hobby—then gives it a native woman’s twist, outfitting the car with decals inspired by the lines found in Pueblo ceramics, which are often made and mastered by women.

In another room, a large-scale painting, titled *The Wisdom of the Universe*, by Métis artist Christi Belcourt—painted in a dotted style, to give her canvas the appearance of being beaded—explores the relationship between indigenous people and nature. Animals, plants, and water hold a sacred place in indigenous life, and Belcourt specifically refers to 21st-century climate change, only painting species that are on Canada’s endangered list. It’s an extremely beautiful piece with an ugly message at its core.



Rose B. Simpson, *Maria*, 2014. Photo: Kate Russell

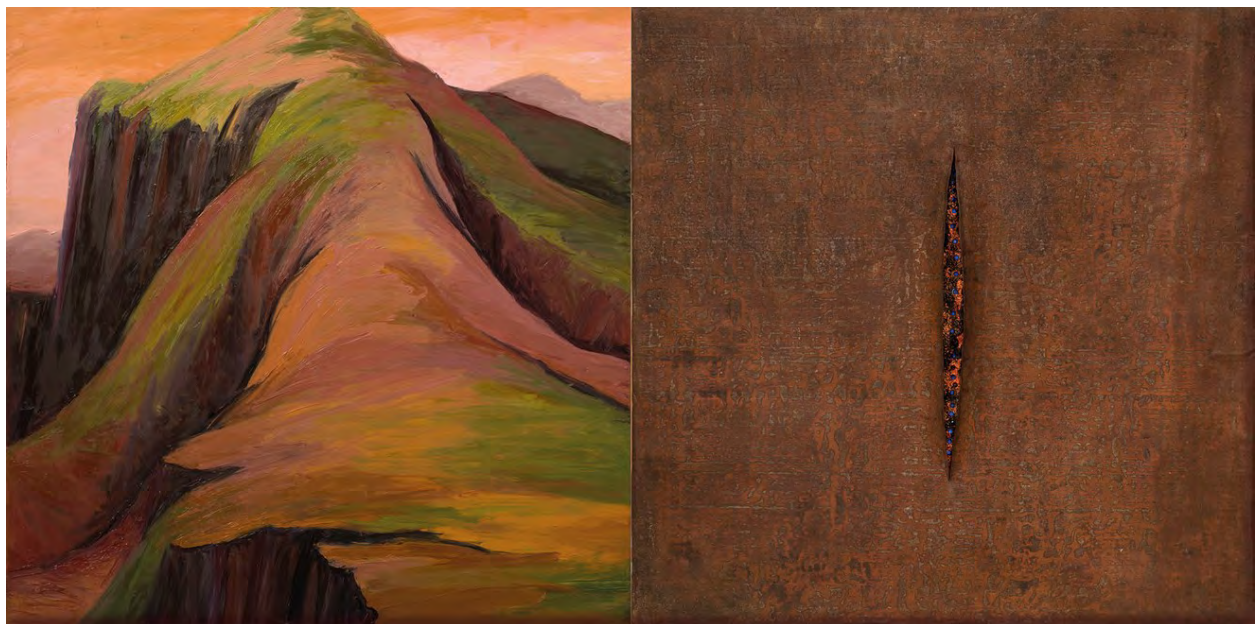


Meanwhile, Legacy is a theme that runs through just about every piece in the show. A standout sample is the collaboration jewelry, titled *Adornment: Iconic Perceptions*, by Kiowa jeweler Keri Ataumbi and Shoshone-Bannock and Luiseño artist Jamie Okuma, both profiled for *Vogue* here. On a glimmering cocktail ring and necklace, Okuma beaded portraits of Pocahontas, based on historical illustrations of her in the 17th and 18th century; Ataumbi then set Okuma's beading with precious metal, pearls, and stones. They are fabulous pieces of fashion that reimagine a historical figure who has long been misunderstood and stereotyped.

In general, the fashion pieces show just how much indigenous art has evolved, and they cut through any myth of its homogeneity. An Anishinaabe jingle dress and beaded headband from the 1900s evokes the flapper-style silhouettes that dominated the time period, showing that a traditional garment can even reflect the current trends of the day. Another piece by Okuma, a hand-beaded pair of Christian Louboutin platforms, combines traditional craft with an ultramodern flourish.

One can't help but notice the timing of a show like "Hearts of Our People." Women's rights are increasingly under attack in America; controversial, draconian laws, for example, threaten to overture *Roe v. Wade*. Revisiting traumas specific to indigenous women and connecting to their struggles through solidarity—that's something Greeves believes this show can provide.

"This exhibit was supposed to open in 2016, when Hillary [Clinton] was supposed to be president. Then the election happened," Greeves said. "I realized, everything happens for a reason. This kind of showing of native women's effect on American art, making that declaration now and making a stand on women's power, is actually healing medicine for this moment. This is happening when it's supposed to be happening."



Kay WalkingStick, *Venere Alpina*, 1997  
Photo: Kay WalkingStick / Minneapolis Institute of Art



# DATEBOOK

## **4 Gallery Exhibitions to Share This Holiday Season**

Written by Charles Desmarais

November 20, 2019

There's no shortage of opportunities to enjoy — and perhaps share with visitors — thoughtful art exhibitions at Bay Area museums this holiday season.

They run the gamut from art in the age of Black Power (at the de Young Museum through March 15) to the colorful, unpolished art of Burning Man (Oakland Museum through Feb. 16); from James Tissot's flowery depictions of 19th century high society in England and France (Legion of Honor through Feb. 9) to conceptually formidable contemporary works (two good shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art into February and beyond).

Don't let such bounty blind you, however, to the wealth of smart private gallery exhibitions, all without an admission charge.

### **Photography celebrates an anniversary**

Of particular interest to many in this photography-obsessed region will be Fraenkel Gallery's 40th anniversary exhibition, "Long Story Short" (through Jan. 18). Jeffrey Fraenkel and Frish Brandt have built their business into one of the best of its kind worldwide. They did that by focusing first on great images and letting the commerce develop organically.

A case in point is the entertaining current show. It includes works by masters like Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Romare Bearden, Sophie Calle and Alfred Stieglitz but pays equal attention to a large number of irresistibly confounding pictures labeled, simply, "photographer unknown."

### **Edifice complex**

The Mexico City artist Damián Ortega is known for an eclectic body of sculptural work. Often, elemental concepts of construction or its crafted opposite — controlled erosion and meticulous disassembly — are at the center of his method. His use of unconventional materials and surprising images calls a different kind of attention to the idea of building. A 1998 work in the collection of New York's Guggenheim Museum, for example, might be a Constructivist sculpture dating to the early 20th century, were it not pieced together of interlocking discs of hardened tortillas.

That sense of whimsy is an Ortega trademark. For his show at Adrian Rosenfeld, "Estridentópolis," in collaboration with the prominent Mexican gallery Kurimanzutto, seven hybrid buildings sprout animal heads and appendages. Each stands about 8 feet high or taller and references an architecturally distinguished high-rise in a major city — the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings in New York, Chicago's Marina Towers, and so forth. All are lovingly formed of discarded paper bags that once held cement. These are put to use as papier-mâché (in Spanish, *papel maché*) and as pasted sheets, carefully matched so that the colorful typography becomes a decorative element.

A cement-bag "Working Class Shirt," overalls and work gloves in the show hint at the unlikely parity of humble human labor and utopian aspiration that formed our modern, Modernist cities.

## Restructuring perception

Miriam Böhm's exhibition "While, Weil," at Ratio 3 through Dec. 20, is a bracing mind game with a refreshing visual payoff. The best word for how one feels after spending 45 minutes carefully unraveling Böhm's photographic puzzles? Restored.

The Berlin artist takes three basic approaches. Least engaging at the surface level, yet challenging on closer inspection, are photographs of what appear to be cut scraps of cardboard and other photos, which are pieced together into abstract designs. Their interest derives from minute clues to their construction, provided by shifts of focus and light across the picture plane, and barely discernible imperfections of cutting and matching.

More baffling are large rectangular scrims, subtly painted to suggest that rectangular apertures have been cut from their centers. Another layer of illusion is added by hanging each scrim in front of photographic wallpaper that depicts, yep, a rectangular aperture.

The best works by far, however, are rephotographed landscape images that have been folded, cut, repositioned, subtly lighted and otherwise altered to disorienting effect. These works pose once again what had seemed a long-solved conundrum, calling on us to enter the psychosocial fray that sets picture against the thing pictured, and then against the world.



"Tusked 1" is a 2019 work by Rose B. Simpson. Photo: John Wilson White, Jessica Silverman Gallery

## Native talent

If Rose B. Simpson had her way, viewers of her somber clay figures would know the history of Native American bravery in the face of colonialism and genocide. They would respect the complexities of her Tewa tribal culture of the American Southwest, and the distinction between her own Pueblo of Santa Clara and that of San Ildefonso. But there's a great deal they would never learn, because there is much that is meant to be private, even sacred. To be shared among Tewa alone.



Rose B. Simpson's 4½-foot-tall "Frère 1" is on view at Jessica Silverman Gallery through Dec.21.Photo: John Wilson White, Jessica Silverman Gallery

I found this out over the course of a delightful conversation I had with Simpson at a small party in her honor. I was pleased, not least because it justified the approach I always take to unfamiliar art. I don't generally talk to artists or curators before I write a review. I assume I can never know all the references and life experiences that may be relevant to the work. That frees me to take it in on equal human terms. Of course, as in any social interaction, the more we learn about an artist's language and approach, the deeper our appreciation. But that comes best after engagement with the art, not before.



Rose B. Simpson's "River Girl A" is among the works in the Jessica Silverman Gallery show.Photo: John Wilson White, Jessica Silverman Gallery



There is, in any case, a regal solemnity about the figures in Simpson's exhibition "Duo," at Jessica Silverman Gallery through Dec. 21, that seems outside of culture. Or, more precisely, that supersedes any single society.

The title of the exhibition is reflected by the works throughout. Siblings, lovers and alter egos; pairing, coupling and mirroring. A pair of Janus-like figures look to the past and to the future, symbolizing at once both beginning and end.

**"Long Story Short":** 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. Through Jan. 18. Free. Fraenkel Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. 415-981-2661. <https://fraenkelgallery.com>

**Damián Ortega: "Estridentópolis":** 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. Through Jan. 25. Free. Adrian Rosenfeld, 1150 25th St., S.F. 415-285-2841. [adrianrosenfeld.com](http://adrianrosenfeld.com)

**Miriam Böhm: "While, Weil":** 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through Dec. 20. Free. Ratio 3, 2831-A Mission St., S.F. 415-821-3371. <https://ratio3.org>

**Rose B. Simpson: "Duo":** 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through Dec. 21. Free. Jessica Silverman Gallery, 488 Ellis St., S.F. 415-255-9508. <https://jessicasilvermangallery.com>

# KQED Arts

## A groundbreaking exhibition finally tells the stories of Native women artists

Written by Jeffrey Brown and Kira Wakeam

October 18, 2019

"Hearts of Our People" is the country's first ever exhibition devoted solely to the works of Native American women. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts assembled the retrospective, which is currently at Nashville's Frist Art Museum and will visit Tulsa and Washington, D.C. in 2020. Jeffrey Brown reports on how the show brings attention to a realm previously "not at all addressed in the art world."

### Read the Full Transcript

- **Judy Woodruff:**

And now a look at an art show that is both making history and teaching it. Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists is the country's first ever exhibition devoted solely to the works of Native American women. Jeffrey Brown traveled to Minnesota and New Mexico to meet with some of the team behind the retrospective. It's part of our ongoing arts and culture series, Canvas.

- **Jeffrey Brown:**

How many artists have a master's in fine arts and studied auto mechanics? Meet Rose Simpson, whose day of making art includes hours coiling clay in her studio, soldering metal pieces for sculptures in her garage, and spending time under the hood of a 64 Buick Riviera she's fixing up. Simpson lives and works on the Santa Clara Pueblo just outside Espanola, New Mexico. Her mother, Roxanne Swentzell, is a ceramicist, as was her mother, a tradition through time.

- **Rose Simpson:**

I come from a long, long line of artists and creative people. And long line, I mean, like, as far as you can go back.

- **Jeffrey Brown:**

You're not talking about 10 or 20 years. You're talking about hundreds.

- **Rose Simpson:**

Yes, I'm talking about hundreds, possibly thousands.

- **Jeffrey Brown:**

Continuity and seeing art as part of daily life.

Simpson's work is a contemporary take on the traditions of her Santa Clara Tewa ancestors. And now she's part of a groundbreaking exhibition, the first of its kind dedicated to more than 1,000 years of artistic achievements by Native American women.

Put together by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, where we saw it, the exhibition is called Hearts of Our People.

- **Jill Ahlberg Yohe:**

Seeing these works of art together.

- **Jeffrey Brown:**  
Co-curator Jill Ahlberg Yohe:

- **Jill Ahlberg Yohe:**

This exhibition was really necessary in a non-Native context, because it had never been explored before. And that was stunning, because something that is so clear in Native communities wasn't at all addressed in the art world.

- **Jeffrey Brown:**

On display, some 117 works of art from more than 50 Native American communities across the U.S. and Canada. There are traditional pieces, like this Anishinaabe jingle dress created in 1900 and worn for dancing at powwows, and a Hohokam bowl dating back to 1,000 A.D. There's also contemporary photography, video and installation pieces, like *Fringe*, a 2007 piece by Rebecca Belmore tackling the issue of violence against Native people, particularly women. Whenever possible, the creators of these works are named. Rather than generic craftspeople, the exhibition wants us to see creative individuals making art.

- **Jill Ahlberg Yohe:**

I think that the way — that the development of collecting Native American art and the stories that had previously been told are ones that position Native women as non-artists.

- **Jeffrey Brown:**

Contemporary artists are shown alongside those of their ancestors, highlighting the way Native women's art has adapted, while remaining connected to generations past. One example? This towering stack of blankets by Seneca artist Marie Watt entitled *Blanket Stories*, displayed next to a traditional Navajo chief's blanket from the 1880s. And then there's Rose Simpson's piece, a restored 1985 Chevrolet El Camino she named *Maria*. Sitting at the show's entrance, it's paired with a large vase by the car's namesake, Maria Martinez, the celebrated pioneer of the black-on-black Pueblo pottery style emulated in the car's paint job. But a car as art? Rose Simpson made *Maria* herself, to use, to drive. Plus, she realized it holds things, just like some of her other creations.

- **Rose Simpson:**

It hit me like, pew, it's a pot. It is a super contemporary vessel. This is why there is no disconnect between life and art.

- **Jeffrey Brown:**

No disconnect?

- **Rose Simpson:**

No. And this is — what does art have to do with cars? I'm like, what does art have to do with life? What does life have to do with art? The point is that we have ripped art away from our lives. And so the more I could apply the creative process to every part of my life, then the stronger I felt as a person.

- **Jeffrey Brown:**

Given the show's size and scope, Jill Ahlberg Yohe and co-curator Teri Greeves knew they could not put it together alone. They assembled an advisory board of scholars, historians and artists, 21 women in total, Native and non-Native.

- **Dyani White Hawk:**



The work is indigenous, truly indigenous art form.

- **Jeffrey Brown:**  
Among the advisers, Dyani White Hawk of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, a painter and mixed media artist based in Minneapolis.
- **Dyani White Hawk:**  
This exhibit covers 1,000 years.
- **Jeffrey Brown:**  
Yes.
- **Dyani White Hawk:**  
Still, it was so hard to pick the pieces that were going to go in the show, because there's so many that could be.
- **Jeffrey Brown:**  
White Hawk's work mixes modern techniques with traditional Lakota artforms like bead and quill work. She says the recognition of Native women artists is long overdue.
- **Dyani White Hawk:**  
The vast majority of Native arts has been supported by women over generations, but it's an aside. It's a side note in the way that we understand and look at American art history. And it's not a truthful and honest way to understand the history and artistic history of this land.
- **Jeffrey Brown:**  
Rose Simpson also served on the museum's advisory board. For her, being in the show is an opportunity to open doors for other Native American artists.
- **Rose Simpson:**  
It's absolutely about changing a mind-set. The first step is to infiltrate and then get respect, and then pull it back the other way. I was handed this — the baton, right? And I have to go further and really respect it and be responsible with it.
- **Jeffrey Brown:**  
And she's choosing to remain in her rural home, where she's passing on an ancient artistic tradition to her own daughter. For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jeffrey Brown on the Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico.

# HYPERALLERGIC

## The Undersung Art of Native American Women, Front and Center

Written by Erica Cardwell

August 15, 2019



Christi Belcourt, "The Wisdom of the Universe," 2014, acrylic on canvas 71 x 114 x ½ x 3 ¾ inches (courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario)

MINNEAPOLIS — Upon first arrival to *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, the feature exhibition at Minneapolis Institute of Art, visitors are greeted by a 1985 Chevy El Camino parked in the center of the gallery. "Maria" (2014), was conceptualized by Rose B. Simpson, alongside the exhibition advisory board. Simpson describes "Maria" as an "empowered vessel," similar to a pot or basket, with its rounded corners and "black on black" interior and exterior. While bold, the decision to place "Maria" at center stage, was both a measured pronouncement of the exhibition terms and an impracticality. However, Jill Ahlberg Yohe, the institute's Associate Curator of Native American Art, insists that it was easy to get the car into the building. On my first visit, I circled the car with Ahlberg Yohe, pausing from time to time to eavesdrop on people, particularly men, who were admiring its interior and new engine. On my second visit to the exhibition, I found myself subconsciously disinterested, being that I am not much of a car person, skipping the installation altogether, in order to move onto the "art."



Rose B. Simpson, Santa Clara Pueblo "Maria" (2014) 1985 Chevy El Camino 117 x 74 x 56] (courtesy Collection of Rose Simpson)

The car, as an object, is initially framed in distracting codes of machismo messaging and a ploy for engagement. According to Simpson, the car as art object represents the legacy of agency and power endowed by the Santa Clara Pueblo female experience. As a challenge to Western perception, "Maria" introduces a new dimension to the role of Native women's art in the cultural and institutional landscape. The car, and its charged position, is both a tool for unlearning and expanding interpretations.

In a 2013 conversation between Ahlberg Yohe and independent curator and beadmaker, Teri Greeves of the Kiowa Nation, the pair considered, why hadn't there been an exhibition dedicated to Native women artists? *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* sought to answer this question. To make it happen, Ahlberg Yohe, Greeves, and research assistant Dakota Hoska collaborated with an advisory board comprised of 21 Native women artists, as well as scholars, curators, and historians on Native North America. As the board convened, one central and more specific question was posed, "Why do Native women artists create?"





Kiowa artist, "Cradleboard" (1890) Wood, leather, venetian glass beadwork 43 ½ x 11 ½ x 10 ½ inches (courtesy Denver Museum of Nature and Science)

After three years of extensive meetings, phone calls, and emails with the advisory board, Greeves and Ahlberg Yohe narrowed down the exhibition into three themes, including several sub-themes: Legacy, or the continuum of resilience as it relates to children and ancestors; Relationship, or further, the Indigenous concept of interconnectivity and relationships called Kincentricity as well as Collaboration; and Power, which encompasses Honor/Diplomacy (certainly as it relates to land sovereignty) along with Dignity, Grace, and Balance. These themes uphold the confluence of spirituality and practice within Indigenous organizing structures, producing an exhibition that includes 115 diverse works spanning 1,000 years, with an impressive 70% of the ancestral art identified by name. This model is a crucial guide for dismantling more general ideas around diversity and inclusion in traditional curatorial

practice. Both curators were dedicated to presenting the show through an immersive collaboration process that centered Indigenous values, rather than the translation of these values into palatable white supremacist standards.



Ancient Pueblo artist, "Pot (Olla)" (c. 1000–1300) Clay, pigments (courtesy Minneapolis Institute of Art, The Putnam Dana McMillan Fund)

The predominance of Native art is attributed to pottery, beadwork, and textiles. Ahlberg Yohe has observed that Native women contribute roughly 90% of the art found within Native and Indigenous collections. Much of this work is craft, an artistic practice that is ingrained from birth. Given that these practices are usually intended for domestic use, Native art is typically perceived as "primitive novelties" or souvenirs. These creative methods, however, need not be relegated to oversimplified defining concepts such as "creative outlets" and "functional craft," especially as they relate to the history of colonization and subsequent Western trade and market production. As Ahlberg Yohe puts it, "it is important for experience and artistry to be on equal terms."

Given this duality, along with the breadth of the exhibition, *Hearts of Our People* will probably require a second look for most visitors. It is a massive undertaking with a substantial collection of art from Native North America. Containing sculpture, textiles, paintings, photographs, collage, video, audio, and music, the depth of the exhibition gives the viewer the sense of a retrospective survey, breathing new life into these works of art.



Louisa Keyser ("Dat so la lee"), Washoe, "Beacon Lights basket" (July 1, 1904–September 6, 1905) Willow, dyed bracken fern root, western redbud (courtesy Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York, Gift of Eugene Victor Thaw Art Foundation, Thaw Collection of American Indian Art)

The impressive 343-page exhibition catalogue further contextualizes the exhibition. It includes scholarly articles and personal essays from members of their advisory board and artists with work in the exhibition. In their essay, "Encircles Everything: A Transformative History of Native Women Arts," Janet Catherine Berlo, Professor of Art History at the University of Rochester and Ruth B. Phillips, Professor of Art History at Carleton University in Ottawa, recall Abe and Amy Cohn as major players in the colonization of Washoe baskets. Their intent was to collaborate, but instead the Cohns exploited the basket weaving artist Louisa Keyser by giving her the name "Dat-so-la Lee", making her fame a distraction from the broader community of basket weavers. Keyser's "Beacon Lights Basket" (1904) is representative of the artist's signature *degikup* style – the rounded curve of the baskets is formed through a meticulous style of taut weaving, resembling rows of corn. Washoe baskets were known for their shape and the ability to hold water. According to Berlo and Phillips, "[the Cohns'] propagandistic misinformation has until recently obscured the



artists' greatest achievements in providing a critical economic and artistic resource for their communities at a time of cultural upheaval so great that it threatened their very survival."

Lea S. McChesney, curator of ethnology at the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology and director of the Alfonso Ortiz Center for Intercultural Studies at the University of New Mexico, uses the term "soft power," in her essay "Carrying On: Gender and Innovation in Historic Pueblo Pottery, to further elaborate on the significance of women's pottery and makers. McChesney believes that through aesthetics, women's pottery can influence and transform space and relationships.



Arroh-a-och, Laguna Pueblo, "Storage Jar" (1870-1880) Clay, natural pigments, 12.5 x 15 inches (image courtesy the School for Advanced Research, photograph by Addison Doty, © School for Advanced Research)

While clay and pottery have unquestionable links to women within Indigenous cultural practice, the expansiveness of gender is more clearly recognized within these communities. The Native concept of gender is configured much differently than biologically focused structures found in the West. Often, in the framing of artistic production of pre- and post-colonial work that is not rooted in the West, artists with gender identities that do not fit within a binary or linear framework are either lumped into the category of "woman" without distinction, or disregarded.

The artist Arroh-a-och is described as *k'u kweemu*, or “like a woman and sister/brother” by Laguna community member Max Early and utilized she/her/hers pronouns and Laguna female gender words. Though little is known about the artist, Arroh-a-och, her “Storage Jar” is widely recognized as a signature piece of Pueblo pottery.

The debut of *Hearts of Our People* occurs at a particular watershed moment in the art world, when several shows centered around women artists have opened or are forthcoming, thus producing a further examination of the concept of endangerment. Many of these shows had been in the works for years prior to the lead up to the 2016 election, a fact highlighted by the foolhardy name of a recent *New York Times* article, “Female Artists Are (Finally) Getting Their Turn.” This recent surge of art shows dedicated to women artists offers the retrospective sense of preservation, at a time when our physical bodies are at stake, a critical shift in power at an uneasy juncture in history.



Cherish Parrish, Grand Traverse Bay Anishinaabe, “The Next Generation – Carriers of Culture” (2018) Black ash and sweet grass 23 x 12 x 14” (courtesy Gun Lake band of Pottawatomi)

Edmonia Lewis, the neoclassical sculptor, is another example of an under-recognized woman artist in this show. Lewis was of Haitian, Mississauga and African American heritage and trained

and lived in Rome, Italy. One of her most famous sculptures, "The Old Arrow Maker," is on view in the exhibition; it depicts Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "The Song of Hiawatha." Widely known for her sculpture "Forever Free," which represents two freed slaves, Lewis was known for creating narratives of Black and Indigenous people as a dogged means of inclusion. However, in spite of her efforts and mastery of Western sculpture, Lewis is rarely included in contemporary discussions of neoclassical art, even when these discussions are centered on women artists.



Edmonia Lewis, Mississauga and African American, "The Old Arrow Maker" (modeled 1866, carved c. 1872) Marble, 20 x 14 x 14 inches, (courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art Bentonville, Arkansas; photo: Sotheby's)

*Hearts of our People* addresses this categorical denial in a signature painting from the exhibition, "The Wisdom of the Universe" (2014), by Christi Belcourt of the Michif tribe. The painting displays an ornate midnight covered in coiling, rooted vines. Birds, flowers, and golden stars are nestled into the foreground, and upon an even closer look, round-faced clover, berries, hanging spiders and fresh herbs can be seen. The pastoral impression of the work seems familiar on first look; it is in the presence of such vibrance and lushness that one could experience both possibility and



prosperity, somewhat disguising the sinister absence coursing its way throughout the piece. Unless you read the wall text, it would be hard to discern that every element of animal or plant life in the painting is either nearing extinction or endangered. The viewer, now privy to Belcourt's knowledge, can more adequately perceive the intuition of the painting, and experience the connection between life and art, with measurable injustice in between. The future, while ominous, is also ongoing within this context.

From the advisory council who gathered for long-term curatorial visioning, to the engagement with ancestral artistic inheritance, *Hearts of Our People* has developed new traditions within the institutional complexity of the fine art world. *Hearts*, a prescient title, is an appropriate front-facing sentiment as both a mode and a context for looking.

*Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* is now on view at the Minneapolis Institute of Art through August 18. The exhibition was curated by Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves, with the Native Exhibition Advisory Board, a panel of 21 Native artists and Native and non-Native scholars from across North America, [fully credited here](#). The exhibition will travel to the Frist Museum in Nashville September 27, 2019–January 12, 2020, to the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. February 21, 2020–May 17, 2020, and to Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa June 28, 2020–September 20, 2020.