

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.