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"Rose B. Simpson Thinks in Clay"

By Jori Finkel

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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.
Credit: Minesh Bacrania for The New York Times

"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.

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.

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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. Credit: 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.

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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.



Clockwise from left: "Take a Seat," 2022; "Encounter," 2021, a maquette for the "Counterculture" installation; "Legacy," 2022; and "Delegate," a work in progress, left, in Simpson's studio. "You can see the seams, the pinches, the fingerprints," she said.

Credit: Minesh Bacrania for The New York Times

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"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."



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

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

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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.)

Molesworth compares Simpson to the artists Simone Leigh, Wangechi Mutu and Karon Davis, who have injected new life into the tradition of Western figurative sculpture, with its heavy emphasis on memorials and monuments. "Most figurative sculpture offers a body that is impermeable, strong, powerful," she said. "But for these women the body also has some quality of either intimacy or vulnerability. I think that's unusual to see." In Simpson's case, she added, the clay plays a big role: "There's a frailty and vulnerability in the material."



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. Credit: Minesh Bacrania for The New York Times

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."

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"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 Kashihara, 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.
Credit: Minesh Bacrania for The New York Times

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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."

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."



"Root A," 2019. Simpson adorns many of her sculptures with metal pieces including car parts. "Storyteller," 2021. Some of her figures have grown rounder and carry children on their shoulders. Credit: Rose B. Simpson and Jessica Silverman

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

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."

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