

Forbes

Rose B. Simpson: "Send Off Summer With An Arts Binge Across Massachusetts"

By Chadd Scott

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Installation view of Rose B. Simpson, *Counterculture* (2022), with artist, At Field Farm in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

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Over two weekends in September, the stars align for art lovers in Massachusetts and those able to get there. On September 3, the blockbuster exhibition of the official Obama presidential portraits opens at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. That weekend and the next, it overlaps at the MFA with America's most controversial art exhibition, ["Philip Guston Now,"](#) closing September 11.

As luck would have it, next door to the MFA, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's fantastical ["Drawing the Curtain: Maurice Sendak's Designs for Opera and Ballet,"](#) also bids farewell on the 11th.

More than the Obamas or the "Wild Things," however, a Pueblo ceramicist highlights the late summer arts scene across the Bay State.

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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.

While in Williamstown, don't miss [the Clark Art Institute's Rodin exhibit](#) in its final weeks.



Installation view of Rose B. Simpson, *Counterculture* (2022) At Field Farm in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

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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.

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"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.

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"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."

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Patrick Kelly



Patrick Kelly's Fall/Winter 1988-1989 advertising campaign. Photograph by Oliviero Toscani. Courtesy of the Estate of Patrick Kelly. Scan by Randy Dodson / Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.
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From paintings and drawings to ceramics and sculptures, this Massachusetts late summer arts smorgasbord serves fashion as dessert, bittersweet.

The Peabody Essex Museum in Salem celebrates the life and legacy of fashion designer Patrick Kelly (1954-1990) whose meteoric rise in the industry remains unprecedented. Rooted in expressions of love and joy—"I want my clothes to make you smile," he said—Kelly's fearless yet lighthearted designs pushed racial and cultural boundaries.

Born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, Kelly credited his grandmother for introducing him to high fashion through "Vogue" and "Harper's Bazaar." The designer quickly observed that no Black women were found among the pages and determined to design fashionable clothing for all.

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Merging Southern Black heritage—Kelly famously remarked, “At the Black Baptist church on Sunday, the ladies are just as fierce as the ladies at Yves Saint Laurent couture shows”—with his days in the New York and Paris club scenes, Kelly’s distinctive vision was realized during exuberant runway shows which opened with the designer spray-painting a heart on the back wall of the stage in the spirit of urban street art.

["Patrick Kelly: Runway of Love."](#) features footage from these groundbreaking shows along with more than 75 fully accessorized runway ensembles created between 1984 and 1989.

The era backdrops the exhibition, as it did Kelly’s work and life.

“I hope visitors will walk away with a renewed understanding of the social and cultural landscape of the 1980s through the lens of brilliantly conceived fashions,” Petra Slinkard, Peabody Essex Museum Director of Curatorial Affairs, The Nancy B. Putnam Curator of Fashion and Textiles, told Forbes.com.

Kelly embodied what was arguably the ‘80s greatest human tragedy, the AIDS pandemic, dying one day into the proceeding decade, January 1, 1990, from complications related to the disease. Six weeks before Keith Haring would similarly pass. Ten months after Robert Mapplethorpe. Less than two years before Freddie Mercury.

Gifted a one-way ticket to Paris in 1979 and hand-making his fashions with fabric bought at street markets and assembled on a borrowed sewing machine, Kelly would improbably become rich and famous on both sides of the Atlantic.



PARIS, FRANCE - CIRCA 1988: Fashion Designer Patrick Kelly in his Paris studio circa 1988 in Paris, France. (Photo by PL Gould/IMAGES/Getty Images). GETTY IMAGES

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"Each collection, colorful and livelier than the next, presented subtle and sometimes not so subtle subtext that pushed racial and cultural boundaries, asserted Black empowerment, while remaining rooted in expressions of love and joy," Slinkard said.

His legacy lives on through [The Kelly Initiative](#), founded in 2020 to "disallow Black fashion talent to go ignored, obstructed, or erased by the industry's prioritization of optics over the authentic pursuit of equity" and his radiant smile.

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