

The Boston Globe

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

By Murray Whyte

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

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

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

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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.

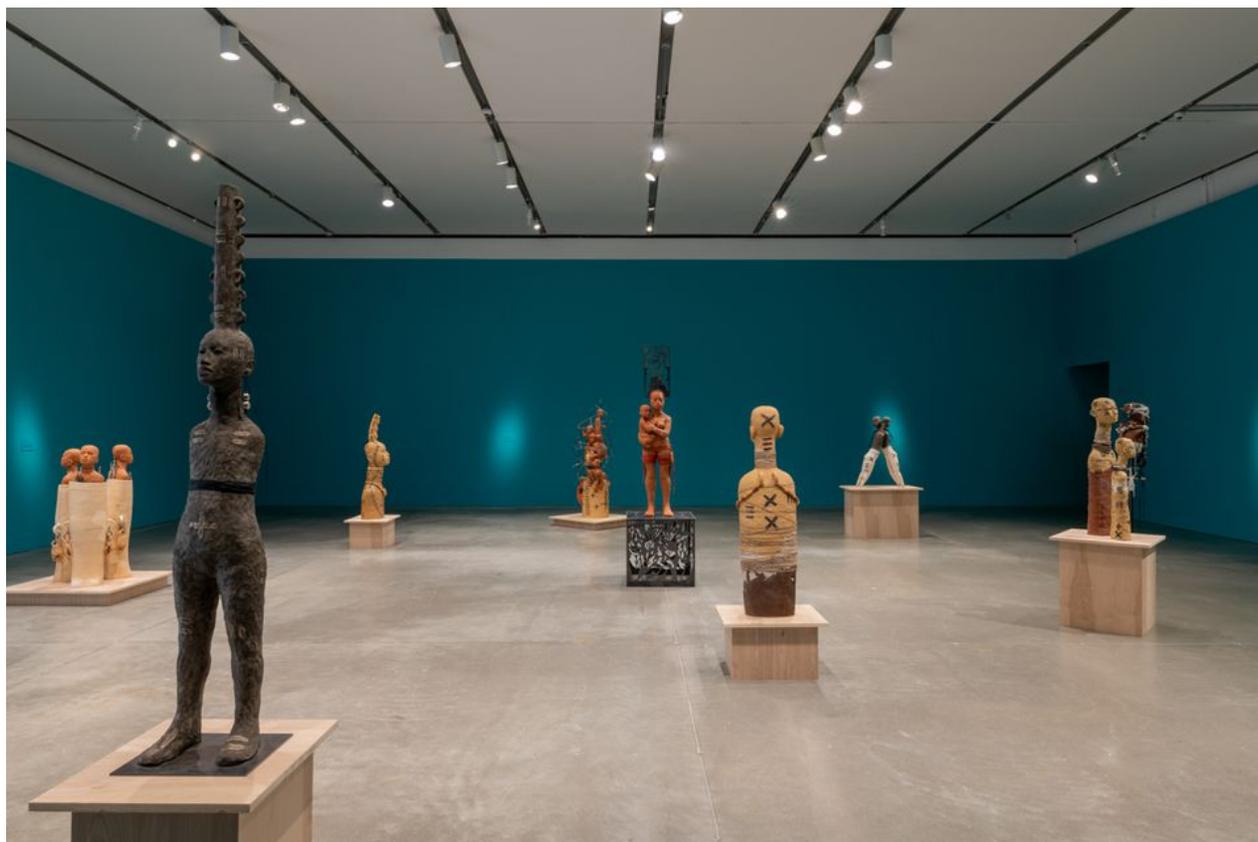
She calls the installation "Counterculture," a tribute to untold centuries of Indigenous presence here; with its unsettling hollows, the work prompts the idea of an open-ended view, something mostly absent in a colonial framework where American history started with European arrival. Simpson, who is [Santa 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.

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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.



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

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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.

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)

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

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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.

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