

# Art in America

"Rose B. Simpson's Droughtcore Sculptures"

By Lou Cornum

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Rose B. Simpson: *Genesis Squared*, 2019, on view in "Legacies," 2022–23, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.

PHOTO: MEL TAING/COURTESY INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, BOSTON

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.

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Rose B. Simpson: *Storyteller*, 2021, ceramic, glaze, steel, leather, and epoxy, 67 by 29 by 26 inches.  
PHOTO: MEL TAING/COURTESY INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, BOSTON

*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.

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**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.



Rose B. Simpson: *Brace*, 2022, on view in "Legacies," 2022–23, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.  
PHOTO: MEL TAING/COURTESY INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, BOSTON

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

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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.



Rose B. Simpson: *Maria*, 2014, 1985 Chevy El Camino, with bodywork and customization by the artist. PHOTO: KATE RUSSELL

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 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

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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.



PHOTO: JOHN WILSON WHITE/COURTESY JESSICA SILVERMAN, SAN FRANCISCO.

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 and Julian began to re-create and

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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.



Rose B. Simpson *Heights I (original)*, 2022, clay, glaze, twine and silver, 54 by 12 by 10 inches. PHOTO: ADDISON DOTY

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

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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 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.

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