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"With 'Road Less Traveled,' Rose B. Simpson diaries the tension between ancestry and modern culture"

By Monet Wolfe

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Installation view, Rose B. Simpson, 'Road Less Traveled,' 2023. Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W 20th Street, New York, NY © Rose B. Simpson. Courtesy of the artist, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

The artist's New York debut is on view at Jack Shainman Gallery, rendering tangible her relationship with Native identity and cycles of personal struggle

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In the numbered streets of the Chelsea district, buried amongst other galleries, one exhibition sticks out from the rest. The condensed layout of the space at [Jack Shainman](#) offers an extra layer of closeness to the already intimate works of Rose B. Simpson's solo debut in New York City, named *Road Less Traveled*.

The title of the exhibition refers to the mental process of creating the curated works. The tension between a culture that centers ancestral memory and a modern society that looks to build over it manifests in Simpson's patterned clay sculptures. The show opens with a piece dubbed *Conjure II*. A large head tilts back on a slab of pine, looking up at a cluster of large white clay rings—a rendering of the hopes and dreams born from challenges overcome in the artist's lifetime. A few of the figures' faces are vague, as well as their bodies, fostering relatability for viewers.

The exhibition's titular piece takes on a more feminine form; it's a full-bodied vessel, resting its hands on its shoulders, arms uncrossed. Its body language appears weighted—by inner turmoil or mere exhaustion. The figure is Simpson, depicted in a moment of frustration, as she finds herself pulled between her own beliefs, and those of the people she's surrounded by. A subtle white brush stroke from the sternum down is a reminder: In order to adhere to her spirit, she must pave a path for *herself*.

As viewers follow the course of the show, more figures emerge. Each is distinct in style and shape, reinstating the idea that they are vessels for Simpson's metaphysical desires. Some of them stand at over six feet tall, conveying a sense of empowerment. In a closed-off room, the walkthrough concludes with two figures—*Star Being A* and *Star Being B*—facing towards each other, in conversation.

Simpson's subjects are complex; she uses them to grapple with identity, culture, and cycles of struggle, on both a personal and global scale. Not every sculpture is explained, yet the narratives behind them emerge abstractly, as she meticulously weaves intersectional themes together with the codes of contemporary art. Amid the impersonal tendencies brought on by technology today, Simpson uses the tangible to express emotions we so readily shove away.

Born and raised in Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico, Simpson hails from a long line of artists and ceramicists, including her mother, the sculptor Roxanne Swentzell, who similarly uses clay as catharsis. This heritage wasn't simply handed down to Simpson, rather acting as a resource in her multidimensional work.

Simpson joined Document ahead of *Road Less Traveled's* opening to explore motifs of hope and the inspirations that continue to steer her, as she speaks from the driver's seat of her car under the New Mexican sun.

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Left: *Vital Organ: Heart*, 2022 clay, twine, grout. 90 3/4 inches. Right: *Conjure II*, 2022 clay, grout, indigenous New Mexico pine from new studio build. 28 x 12 x 14 inches.

**Monet Wolfe:** I know this is not your first solo exhibition, but it's your first in New York. What has that experience been like?

**Rose B. Simpson:** It was good. I got sick, and then I was trying to get over it, but I wasn't getting over it. I was on DayQuil, so it was a trudge—but it feels like a big deal and I know it's a big deal. I actually think that being sick was a blessing in disguise. You're just trying to get through the day. You just show up and do it.

**Monet:** Artistry is present in your family's lineage. Did you feel pressure to become an artist?

**Rose:** I wanted to fly bomber planes [and] join the Air Force, so I took the ASVAB in high school and got good scores. The Air Force called and my mom hung up on them. Boy, I got an earful. My mom was like, 'You just want to play with their toys, but you're going to have to kill people and you're not that person.' So I was like, *What do I do if I don't do that?*

I just started looking for other forms of adrenaline. I started painting trains, [with] spray paint. I was at UNM in Albuquerque. That's where I was knucklehead-ing out, and I decided to take a ceramics course, because I grew up using clay. I took the class, and realized I could make my graffiti characters in clay. That was an *aha* moment. The only pressure, maybe, was that that's what my family does, so I kind of wanted to *not*. I wanted to be different and do something else.

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Also, within the Native art world, there's a limited amount of support. A lot of people in the pueblo are selling work to the same galleries and the same dealers and the same collectors. So, there's a little bit of competition. If there's pressure, it's because we're all trying to make money off the same people, and that makes it weird. And there's a little bit of competition in the family—we don't talk about art with each other.

**Monet:** At the end of the day, it's work, right?

**Rose:** Yeah, it's work. At this point, I'm not in the same circles as a lot of other people in my tribe, so that's nice. But my mom is always doing art stuff, my brother has his PhD in Pueblo Indian Studies and he's a tribal council member. We don't tell each other [when we are doing openings and lectures], because we don't want to make each other go. Why would you force people in your family to go to the thing they all do for a living?

**Monet:** Your sculptures are very intimate. Do you see them as sort of journal entries?

Rose: Totally. It's *super* personal and that's so strange. I studied art for a long time and I understand the value of intense critique. The one good thing about art school is when you sit and stare at something that you wouldn't have normally stared at for that long. Being forced to look at it longer than you would have otherwise, you build the capacity to see things more deeply, consider further, and witness deeper.

A really good skill to have is a really deep sense of consideration. When I was studying art, I was thinking about my own reactions to art: what works for me, what doesn't. I had a lot of respect for high craft, for instance, photorealistic painting. You have respect for it, and value it for what it is—but it's hard to access. It's hard to find an empathic response because it's so specific. Things like Donald Judd, where it's super abstract and you need an entire art history degree to understand what's going on, that's *incredibly* inaccessible.

I'm affected by when work is *othered*: objectification and stereotyping and exotification as another sense of exclusivity. With my work, I explore ways to make it as inclusive as possible. It's not [so] abstract, and it's not super culturally specific. *How can you make something that can actually reach people—no matter where they come from?* I'm not saying that I succeed all the time, but looking at myself and trying to erase the boxes that I put myself in helps me recreate something that is still incredibly vulnerable, truthful, and inclusive.

**Monet:** Do you have any specific contemporary artists you look up to?

**Rose:** I'm a big art fan. When I first discovered Wangechi Mutu's work, I was just like, *Aghhh! I'm so glad that you're doing this. You're doing this so I don't have to.* It was this incredible relief. She can be brave in ways that I can't. I love to see her work, or hear her processes, because it's absolutely enthralling to me.

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I'm a big fan of my contemporary Dyani White Hawk. Her paintings are so different from mine—the process is careful and meditative. It feels really comforting, because I'm always navigating complicated emotional processes and spaces. Her work is brilliant. It's still contemporary and also abstract, but because of the way that she does it, it roots back into craft and mannerisms. For me, it's not *what* you do, it's *how* you do it and how you approach it. The nature of her approach becomes medicinal.

**Monet:** Do you try to emulate it?

**Rose:** Not necessarily. I think that it's something that helps me. I'm all, *You do that, so that I can make the mess that I make.* [White Hawk's work] is so clean and organized, and mine is all messy and emotional—and that's good. We both do our thing, but her work makes me feel good. I would not live in a house full of my work. No way. I already live in my head. I already live in my heart. I already live in my body. I don't need more of it around. I learn, from my work, about myself, and then I surround myself with work that feels meditative and medicinal and soothing and calming. But I look to certain things to heal me, like landscape. I love landscapes. I would live with landscapes all day, or I could wander off into the hills, and that would do the trick. No humans, no people.



Left: *Release*, 2022 clay, steel, twine, grout. 84 x 20 x 18 inches. Right: *Road Less Traveled*, 2022. 63 x 14 x 14 inches.

**Monet:** It's funny that you say that, because so much of your work is figurines that look like people.

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**Rose:** Well, that's the challenge, right? I'm diving into the challenge, but I can't be there all the time. I would die. I would drain. I would empty out all the way. I would have to go to places [to gain] respite and peace. Hence, the landscape painting, or simple geometrics.

**Monet:** Do you see only yourself in your work, or do you think of the figures as characters you inhabit?

**Rose:** I suppose they're all pieces of myself, you know? They're all aspects of the multifaceted being that I am. They're all the ways that I see myself. I don't feel like I have the right to tell anyone else's story.

**Monet:** There's an interview where you say that your work is part of your hopes and dreams, and I wanted to ask about what those are. Is there any one dream that is recurring in your work?

**Rose:** I was talking to my cousin about this this morning—about the doom and gloom of the world: intense weather and climate change and ailments of toxic shit. I look forward to approaching the challenges that are to come with our journeys as humans on earth—where I watch without judgment and stay in my faith. I stay believing that everything happens for a reason, and if I am able to witness deep enough I will find out what that is. But if I'm filling space with my thoughts or fears about something, I'm missing out on the opportunity to learn what it has to teach me. I look forward to not what I [will] have, but to changing how I exist in the world.

I could talk about all the things that have hurt me, and all the horrible things that have happened and will happen. I'm getting tired of it. I want something else. I want to walk through the world differently, because I'm almost 40 and I've spent a lot of my life complaining. It's exhausting. I've missed out on so much wonder, because I've spent my life in self-righteous victimry and entitlement. My hope would be that I can change that mannerism for myself, and emulate that for my daughter.

**Monet:** Do you think you'll have these conversations with your daughter, too?

**Rose:** We already do! It's fun, because she's six. She'll be like, 'That looks gross!' Maybe if I say, 'That might be delicious, I should try it,' it's going to change her attitude—instead of assuming everything is going to be crap, right?

We were headed to the airport. I was like, 'I need you to get all your stuff together, because tomorrow there's going to be traveling and it's going to be a hard morning.' And she was like, 'Well, if you say that, it's going to be true.' I was like, *Thanks for the reminder*, because it was true, you know? It's cool to see it, and that kind of helps me. Like, how do you explain that to yourself as if you were a six-year-old?

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