

HYPERALLERGIC

"Rose B. Simpson Embeds Ancestral Histories in Clay"

By John Yau

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Rose B. Simpson, "Remind" (2022), clay, steel, grout, lava beads, 66 x 35 x 15 inches

(all images © Rose B. Simpson; courtesy the artist, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

She has taken clay and used it to recall its ancestral roots in Pueblo culture and address the present history of postcolonial recovery and ongoing trauma.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

When I first saw reproductions of Rose B. Simpson's mysterious ceramic guardians, I immediately wished I could see the actual objects. My wish was granted with her debut New York exhibition, [Rose B. Simpson: Road Less Traveled](#), at Jack Shainman Gallery, running through April 8. The subject of recent solo exhibitions, including *LIT: The Work of Rose B. Simpson*, at the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe, New Mexico (2019), and *Rose B. Simpson: Legacies* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (August 11, 2022–January 29, 2023), Simpson is an innovative sculptor who both breaks the mold and, according to the ICA press release, extends her legacy as "part of a multigenerational, matrilineal lineage of artists working with clay." She has done more with her talents than anyone has the right to expect, and that comes through in the work.

Simpson is an enrolled member and resident of Kha'p'oe Ówíngeh (Santa Clara Pueblo), which is famous for producing blackware and redware pottery. Her grandmother, Rina Swentzell, was an architect, and her mother, Roxanne Swentzell, is a highly respected ceramicist and in the 1980s co-founded the [Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute](#), a nonprofit organization that both practices and teaches sustainable living systems. Her father, Patrick Simpson, who is White, is an artist working in metal and wood.

In order to build upon this legacy, as well as come into her own, Simpson left the Santa Clara Pueblo and studied flamenco dancing, ceramics, creative writing, and automotive science, among other topics. According to the article "Rose B. Simpson Thinks in Clay" (*New York Times*, June 19, 2022), the turning point in her creative evolution was a school trip to Japan in 2010, where she learned about the Japanese aesthetic tradition, which does not separate art from craft. Although she makes no reference to it, Simpson also likely learned about *kintsugi* ("golden joinery"), the art of repairing broken pottery using a lacquer mixed with powdered gold or silver. Spiritually, *kintsugi* is about the practice of forgiveness and self-love, and accepting the ways you are broken.

While Simpson was getting her MFA in ceramics at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 2011, she studied slab building with her ceramics teacher, Linda Sormin, a Canadian Thai artist who explores migration and upheaval in her work. Whereas working on a potter's wheel emphasizes vessels and perfection, slab building is a method in which one flat shape is cut and joined to another. From there, Simpson began developing her own technique, which she calls "slap slab," melding it to traditional pottery methods she learned from her family. It is out of this cross-pollination of cultures, techniques, chance meetings, and self-determination that she has emerged as one of the foremost ceramic sculptors of her generation.

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Installation view of *Rose B. Simpson: Road Less Traveled* at Jack Shainman Gallery. Left to right: "Vital Organ: Gut" (2022), clay, twine, grout, 91 inches tall; "Reclamation IV" (2022), clay, steel, lava and bone beads, leather, grout, 88 x 15 x 13 inches; "Vital Organ: Heart" (2022), clay, twine, grout, 90 3/4 inches tall

Simpson's figures are often composed of separate pieces of clay, as if she has put a shattered head and body back together. At the same time, she resists making her figures culturally specific while telling her own story and communicating her ancestral identity. In the *New York Times* she explained:

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 [...] People have been kicked out of the tribe for making art referencing a specific spiritual belief.

How do you resist what the photographer Lewis Baltz, in another context, called "bulimic capitalism — the degrading of the landscape in favor of gated communities? How do you achieve a particular synthesis of opacity and clarity that pushes back against easy explication, distraction, and entertainment as the goal of art? Instead of moving to New York or another art world center, and living in the diaspora, Simpson set up her studio in the Santa Clara Pueblo, where her extended family has lived for generations. In order to attain and explore a domain of figures and

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language, Simpson developed her own system of signs. She shares this with First Nations and Native American authors, such as Cherie Dimaline, a member of the Métis Nation in Canada, and Stephen Graham Jones, an enrolled member of the Blackfeet tribe, who use the genres of science fiction and horror to upend stereotypes of Indigenous people. Simpson has taken clay and, through various additions, used it to recall its ancestral roots in Pueblo culture, address the present history of postcolonial recovery and ongoing trauma, and evoke a futuristic world in which these figures bespeak an unknown culture, whose beliefs remain concealed from us.

The current exhibition consists of related gatherings of figurative sculptures in each of the gallery's distinct areas, starting with an open room off the hallway leading to the two main galleries. I see the arrangement as an interrelated installation focused on journey and transformation, as implied by the exhibition's use of a line from Robert Frost's well-known poem, "The Road Not Taken." In the first space are two sculptures, "Conjure II" and "Conjure III" (both 2022). "Conjure II" is a yellow ocher clay head painted with white circles, resting on a block of weathered wood. Rising from the forehead is a tangle of curving, intersecting, and looping white ceramic tubes. As the word "conjure" suggests, viewers are about to enter a dream, an alternative reality whose relationship to our everyday world is not spelled out, which is true of all of Simpson's work.



Rose B. Simpson, "Road Less Traveled" (2022), clay, steel, reed, twine, lava beads, grout, 63 x 14 x 14 inches

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It is telling that Simpson calls attention to the support on which the head rests, which is labeled as "indigenous New Mexico pine from new studio build." From the clay to automotive parts to hand-rolled beads to recycled wood from her new studio, Simpson seems to have gotten some of her aesthetic cues from her mother's commitment to sustainable living systems. Her rejection of capitalist consumption in art making — which stands in contrast to many of our most celebrated sculptors — should cause us to reconsider the concepts of monuments and permanence, and to acknowledge change as part of sustainability.

In the next large space are four sculptures, three facing the entrance and the other facing those sculptures. Three have cylindrical bodies, with a vessel affixed atop their heads. Their genderless bodies are the color of red earth, and the shallow indentations on their surface are records of the hands and fingers that touched, shaped, and smoothed them. Each face bears a distinct set of markings. A four-handled vessel with a sturdy tapering neck rests on the head of "Vital Organ: Heart" while an open, diagonally aligned rectangle sits on "Vital Organ: Gut" (both 2022). The third figure, "Reclamation IV" (2022) has an ochre face and an earth-red vessel atop its head. Three plus signs are vertically aligned on one side of its torso, while a winding trail of dashes leads up to and passes the X on the vessel.

While Simpson has expressed that the "plus" sign means the cardinal directions and the X represents protection, we are left to surmise the meanings of the other abstract markings on her work, which may prompt us to look longer, think harder, and reflect further upon what we are seeing. Isn't that the hope of art? What might we make of the two vertical dark lines descending down the face and over the open eyes in "Vital Organ: Gut"? Or the large, open rectangle isolating the mouth and part of the neck from the rest of "Vital Organ: Heart"?

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Installation view of *Rose B. Simpson: Road Less Traveled* at Jack Shainman Gallery. Left to right: "Release" (2022), clay, steel, twine, grout, 84 x 20 x 18 inches; "Remind" (2022), clay, steel, grout, lava beads, 66 x 35 x 15 inches; "Guides" (2022), clay, steel, grout, 65 x 19 x 9 inches

The genderless, hairless ceramic figure of "Road Less Traveled" (2022), which faces the other three works, stands on a low pedestal. Not part of a group, like the other works in this exhibition, I see this piece as a surrogate for the artist and for anyone who has decided to see living as a spiritual journey. As Simpson's work indicates, we are members of a community and ultimately the authors of our own journey. The journey may not be heroic, but it is necessary. As the three figures it looks toward make clear, ideally we are helped every step of the way.

The figure's arms press against its chest, each hand clasping a shoulder, elbows pressed together; vulnerability and strength, self-protection and determination are rolled it one not-so-simple pose. The abstract markings that extend the length of the figure — black on one side and white on the other — remind us that we live inside language, and it is not comprehended by everyone. There is nothing "universal" about what Simpson or any other artist is up to. What do the black wires encircling the figure's waist signify? Or the rows of beads encircling the neck? What can we make of the four protuberances extending from the back of the head? Is this figure a machine or deity or both? What might we say about the genderless nature of the exhibition's figures?

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Simpson's work gave me much to consider and reflect upon, all while filling me with a deep pleasure and respect for the sensuousness and urgency of the work. Her art inhabits a line in Wallace Stevens's poem "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction": "be/In the difficulty of what it is to be."

[Rose B. Simpson: Road Less Traveled](#) continues at Jack Shainman Gallery (513 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 8. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.

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