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Rose B. Simpson: "Leaving Fingerprints Behind"

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A scene featuring Rose B. Simpson in her beloved El Camino, "Maria," from an upcoming episode of the docu-series, Art in the Twenty-First Century. Simpson named the car after artist Maria Martinez. (Courtesy of Art21 and PBS)

Artist Rose B. Simpson enters her vulnerability era with bi-coastal shows and upcoming PBS doc appearance

Within a sea of notable Native and New Mexican creators, Santa Clara Pueblo multimedia artist Rose B. Simpson has made a name for herself through a combination of gorgeous, empowering pieces, a family-born knack for clay and ceramics and an outspoken attitude that accentuates a growing need to let her guard down.

As time has gone by, Simpson says, her opinions on openness and sensitivity have evolved, leading her into a new period of vulnerability that not only challenges her as an artist, but as a person navigating the arts world as a New Mexican, a Native person and a parent.

Now, with a new show dubbed *Road Less Traveled* at New York City's Jack Shainman Gallery, Simpson will also appear in an episode of the documentary series, *Art in the Twenty-First Century* on April 7 via PBS. With her growing notoriety, plus representation in New York City, San Francisco, Santa Fe and beyond, it seemed like a great time to catch up with Simpson and gain a little insight into the working mind of one of the more prolific and universally respected artists going today.

Oh, and did I mention she loves lowriders?

From Simpson's Road Less Traveled, currently up at New York City's Shainman Gallery. (Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.)

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

SFR: I wanted to start with legacy, because in your segment in Art in the Twenty-First Century, you talk about connection to ancestors; seeing their fingerprints on buildings and ruins, then making it a point of including your own fingerprints in your work. Is this concept of legacy an important one to you?

Rose B. Simpson: I think more of fingerprints representing the present. So, when we see fingerprints on the walls at an ancestral site, for example, that's evidence of a very lived presence. I don't see history. I see vibrance, I see life, I see a living experience. That's basically why I'm invested in leaving the process visible in my work. I do it intentionally to make people aware of the process and the present experience.

I think in a time where we're about fast products everywhere, we've built a world where we don't want that human touch—we want this sterile, artificial, disconnected thing. OK, that's not true for everyone, but it feels like we do need some of that really raw and rough humanity to have a little bit of compassion and empathic response to being human.

You're a parent, too. Have legacy and ancestry taken on different meanings because of that?

I think that I'm more invested in a future than I used to be. I used to be kind of like, 'Let it all burn!' And now I'm like, 'Woah, wait a minute!' I'm fully aware of this feeling of love that…on a really enlightened day, I'm like, 'There is no death!' It's all connected, and I don't fear death, or transformation. But I also love this body, this life; I love this feeling of love and I think, 'How cool would it be to survive in this form?' I'm finding there's a lot of power and strength in softness and staying vulnerable.

You talk about inherited historical trauma in the documentary, and then about how your work has showcased concepts of empowerment. Are feelings of empowerment still on your mind as you continue your practice or as you think about your place in the world being a parent? Is there ever a moment when you can dust off your hands and say, 'I now feel empowered?'

I feel like if I ever have an answer to that, I've finished with life. As long as we keep questioning what we think is true, we keep living. If we get super solid, and it's, 'This is the truth! This is the answer!' there's no point anymore. But I hope I keep changing my mind. If I stop questioning myself, stop challenging myself, if I get too comfortable, it's time to take to me out to the hills.

What I'm learning currently is…my default setting has been self-righteousness and figuring out the best mode of self-righteousness, but the challenging thing to do now is to stay in the space of, 'I don't know.' In that space, I'm finding wonder, and I'm watching instead of dictating this reality. That space has been scary, because it's vulnerable and I'm not in control—and it's fun to be in control—but it's probably the hardest thing I've done. When I do make it there, it's absolute bliss.

In a recent interview with Vogue, you talk about how you come from 70 generations of clay artists. That's a seriously long time. How do you quantify that, and how do you carve out your own space within so many generations? Do you even feel a need to do that?

I used to think it was a big deal until I went and studied [ceramics] in Japan, and their clay history goes back to 1300 BC; so we're actually a very young clay community. I think that really helped. Yes, mostly I think about the matrilineal line in that the mother actually makes the daughter's eggs as she makes the daughter. I'll make my grandchildren through my daughter; I was an egg inside my mom's mom—my mother's mother made me. It's fascinating when you think about [my family's] clay line because it's similar to that direct line to ancestry, and it doesn't go through the father's side, whereas in Japan, that's more of a...men mostly did the clay, historically. So there's a reason I do clay, because my mom and her mom and her mom and her mom and her mom did it.

Right, and your mother, the legendary Roxanne Swentzell, appears in the documentary segment, and you both talk about collaboration, or 'leapfrogging' as your mom puts it. So maybe it's less about your own specific thing and more about being part of something?

I think so, and sometimes I wonder who really is in charge, y'know? I thought that was cool on Art in the Twenty-First Century, that it was so family focused, because it really is. They followed me around for a long time, all over. They got to see all of my life, and I think a lot of it does revolve around family, and maybe I don't realize that's a thing until I have these other eyes on it and people saying, 'This is fascinating.' But it's just my normal, and I'm so family oriented—not, like, nuclear family, but community. I wouldn't ever want to leave Santa Clara. It's got its good and bad, but I'd never want to leave here. My managers on each coast are like, 'Would you want to move somewhere more convenient for your career?' And I say if I'm moving, I'm moving farther up the mountain here.

Speaking of, you say in the documentary that you're 'of here,' but describe not always being comfortable in New Mexico. How does tension like that play into your practice?

If I'd figured out how to be at peace, if I'd found inner-peace, I don't think I'd have made art. One time I considered moving to Hawaii because I had some good friends out there. I even sold my bed and was sleeping on the floor, ready to split. I thought about those ideas of Hawaii—and my friends are Indigenous Hawaiians who face challenges and historical trauma, I'm not saying it's just been easy for them; but it's so beautiful there, and I was thinking about what do you make when life's just good? Where does your art practice go when you have a sense of comfort and ease? I didn't move because I realized I'd only become part of the problem, even though I wanted to help...My physical presence in their homelands would...it wasn't my battle, and I knew I had to start at home and clean my own backyard.

Let me tell you a story: I had a conversation with my daughter about icky feelings. She's 6, and she was feeling like I don't want to play with her, I don't want to do the things she wants to do. So I asked her, 'How does that make you feel?' Eventually I was telling her how every morning, when I drop her off at school I feel fear—because we live in America and I don't want my daughter to get

shot. So instead of going to the story in my head, I've been like, 'Time out, brain!' I'm so great at building these horrible storylines about what could happen, but I ask myself, where is this in my body? Where is the physical experience of a feeling? If I go there and stay with it and watch it run its course, I almost can't wait to see what these icky feelings are doing in my body and how they transform. I've spent my life trying to avoid those feelings, and it's interesting to find intrigue or just be fascinated by that, to go searching for them and that becoming a habit, almost like a fun thing to do; to find where your feelings are in your body. Sometimes I'll by lying in bed—I have insomnia—and I'll be thinking about my day, all the thoughts and feelings, and I'll find a really yummy awful one. And I say, 'Let's go there; I felt like shit; that's delicious; let's see what's there.' Because there's gotta be something cool to find. Maybe that makes me masochistic, but I feel true change from that process.

When you can channel that into the work, does it come with a sense of release?

When we talk about the practice itself, I feel like I'm more in a state of listening. I wait for it to come, it comes so fast, with so much. It's almost like the difference between writing with a pen versus typing. When you're thinking really fast, it's easier to type, you get it out faster; but sometimes my art process is that I have some thing that needs to come through, but I'm stuck here with a pencil. And it slows down, you have time to think about it. I was laughing because I spent like nine months, 10 months working on this solo show I opened in New York last week, but then by December, I was kind of over that idea. I have a different idea, other projects—God forbid a project lasts over a year. It's funny, if I do a proposal, by the time it goes through, that idea is old news.

You talk about challenging yourself, not taking the easy route. With that in mind, can you describe your current process and body of work? How much of it is an organic evolution versus a considered plan you're attempting to execute?

I don't know what you mean by plan in the big sense of things. I have a sketchbook, and because of the nature of my [clay] work, I have to engineer a bit. It takes forethought, I don't want them to break. I have to think, is it gonna work, is it gonna be user friendly? They're installing a piece of mine in Philadelphia today, for example, but I'm confident it's going to be an easy install because I've thought this through. I spend a lot of time thinking about the engineering of something, especially the ceramics, because there are things I have to do to make sure they're stable.

But plastics, acrylic paints, things like that feel icky to me, so I spend a lot of time experimenting with materials. For instance, I'm building a studio, and we ended up using concrete. It's so interesting to me how concrete can be an art material for sculptural things.

Or I did a residency at the [Fabric Workshop and Museum] in Philadelphia, where you basically go and they say, 'What do you want to try you've never tried before?' They have this whole group of people who help you with everything, and they have these bins that...every artist who goes through a residency there, they follow them around and pick up the things you try that didn't

work, and they put it in this bin—and artists can look at any of those things. You can open the box and see the process. That opportunity, when you get stuck in a rut, it helps you to play and to see.

Let's talk lowriders and muscle cars, because you're famously into the artistry of such machines. How's the car going? Is part of what draws you to cars that it's an ongoing project?

I am working on a new car—me and my buddy, who I hire part time—a '64 Buick Riviera with hydraulics. It's funny, though, we hit the switches and the glass fell into the door, so I guess we're at that stage where we need window regulators.

It's so funny when people [present a car] as an art piece, and they're like 'Finished in 2014,' because it's always a work in progress, and it's a lot of fun. I have a story about when I drove 'Maria,' my El Camino, to Tucson for a show. So, on the way back, I blew the engine right near San Felipe on the way out of Albuquerque, and I couldn't get a tow because the engine was blown and the drive shaft wouldn't spin. I had two buddies in the car, but we also couldn't move it, and there were no rocks to throw behind the wheels to stabilize it, only pebbles. So I crawled underneath and disconnected the drive shaft and used it behind the wheel, but the fun part was sitting on my phone getting excited about the next engine to put in. We took the engine apart and that engine has been in all kinds of art pieces.

I dunno, I think I like cars because they're a process, never done, never fully finished. I think I find solace in engineering. I think because my emotional state and my mind is so wild most of the time, the simplistic dependability, the way an engine works, is very satisfying to me. And I like to know how things wore. For example, I have a hybrid Jeep Wrangler, and I have no idea how that thing works. At one point there was some recall for something, and I took it to the dealership, but they couldn't deal with it, so I got my buddy to hook up that machine, you know, where it does the car computer and tells you what's wrong—and there was a Chrysler paywall to do it. I was like, 'No bro, this is not my zombie apocalypse vehicle. It's a nice dependable mom car.' But I need to have my backup.