

Rose B. Simpson: "Four New Mexico artists selected for Whitney Biennial"

By Alex De Vore

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(Courtesy jessicasilvermangallery.com)

Rose B. Simpson, Cannupa Hanska Luger, Harmony Hammond and Maja Ruznic among this year's participants

As the next iteration of the Whitney Museum of American Art's much-lauded Biennial barrels toward a March 20 opening in New York City, four New Mexico artists are preparing works that will be included: Santa Clara Pueblo's Rose B. Simpson, Santa Fe's Cannupa Hanska Luger (Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold; Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara and Lakota), Galisteo's Harmony Hammond; and Placitas-based artist Maja Ruznic.

Together they'll join 69 artists and two collectives from across the country for the forthcoming show, the museum's first since 2022 and certainly its first major showing following COVID-19 lockdowns.

Curated by the Whitney's Chrissie Iles and Meg Onli, *Even Better Than the Real Thing* represents a return to form for the Biennial. In the lead-up to 2022, curators and artists were forced to organize

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by video, but for the 2024 version, Iles and Onli spent much of 2023 conducting hundreds of site visits at artists' studios around the country.

"After finalizing the list of artists last summer, we have built a thematic Biennial that focuses on the ideas of 'the real,'" Iles and Onli write in a statement on the Whitney website that announced the lineup Jan. 25. "Society is at an inflection point around this notion, in part brought on by artificial intelligence challenging what we consider to be real, as well as critical discussions about identity. Many of the artists presenting works—including via robust performance and film programs—explore the fluidity of identity and form, historical and current land stewardship, and concepts of embodiment, among other urgent throughlines."

In other words, it's a nationwide time of flux, and artists, who are often expected to filter the human experience through their work and who already toil in uncertain fields, have a lot of feelings stored up—those spurred by a post-pandemic landscape; the rise of plagiarizing robots; the terror of climate change; and the general vulnerability that goes into creating art in the first place.

The opportunity nearly slipped through Simpson's fingers, she tells SFR by phone from her Santa Clara studio, noting with a laugh that she took Iles and Onli to dinner at New Mexican restaurant The Sopapilla Factory when they came to visit her studio.

"These biennials are a little difficult because they let you know last-minute, but because I was already working on a solo show when they asked me...I already had a concept in my head," she explains. "I'd made this group of pieces for a solo show, *Skeena*, at my San Francisco gallery, Jessica Silverman, and they were sort of creating and anthropomorphizing the concepts of those people who are in my corner. Two of them represented sort of soul portraits of my bros, my buddies; I call them 'daughters,' and I said I would like to see four daughters together, so that's what I proposed."

Iles and Onli obliged, and Simpson got to work creating more of the ceramic sculptures.

"It's more about how we are there for each other," she tells SFR. "How we behold each other, how we change our modus operandi from competition to support. If you think about how we see our post-colonial situation, how do we transform that? How do we become aware of the issues we deal with? How do we say a prayer for some sort of change for the better?"

Luger's work contains a similar if more pointed ethos. In an interview with *The New York Times*, he explained that his plan to install a full-sized, upside-down tipi is meant as "a signal that the way we are going as a species is inverted."

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A&C (REECE MARTINEZ)

Luger was born on the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota but calls Santa Fe home. His inclusion in the Whitney is very on-trend, too, given his prolific output and consistently socially conscious work across a variety of media over the years. Take his recent *Future Ancestral Technologies* project, from which his Whitney piece is derived. Across those works, including clothing and billboards, Luger “enacts and prototypes experiences that engage Indigenous cultures to thrive into the future,” according to an artist’s statement from his website. He likens the work to that of science fiction, which has always, of course, been meant to advance ideas of caution—but also hope.

“The curators landed on the [tipi] piece; I’m always excited to try new things, to *make*, and when they first started talking to me about it, it was kind of before all the information and news we have presently, but over time I think that piece has become stronger as a statement,” Luger tells SFR. “My interest in sci-fi literally came from...I’m a fan, and I started developing all this work because of a lack of seeing myself or my culture represented in any sort of context within science fiction. So rather than waiting for it, I can actively participate in dreaming it.”

Luger further says his project and, by extension, its inclusion in the upcoming Whitney Biennial, might tackle long-accepted but potentially tiresome aspects of sci-fi.

“It’s either utopian or dystopian, but the world just isn’t like that,” he says. “We’re constantly adapting and changing, and that’s an important aspect of Indigenous life ways. How do we embed

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that so future generations and present generations aren't looking into a dark future? It's...giving us something to imagine in the future. If nothing else, a path, a guide. Options."

Painter Hammond, meanwhile, is often cited as a trailblazer, both as a progenitor of the feminist art movement in New York City in the 1970s and as a co-founder of A.I.R., widely recognized as the first woman-run cooperative gallery in NYC. Hammond was also a driving *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics* in 1976. *Even Better Than the Real Thing* marks her first time participating in a Whitney Biennial, though the institution has shown her work before. Hammond is perhaps best-known for a sort of post-minimalist and monochromatic body of work with textures that practically leap off the canvas or dance across it with an almost ambulatory grace. She moved to New Mexico in the '80s and has lived here ever since.

As for Placitas' Ruznic, the Bosnian-born painter has presented numerous solo exhibitions in recent years in New Mexico, New York and California, just to name a few. With a dash of personal detail and a penchant for mythology and esotericism, her paintings engage in strange symmetry and an almost mirrored-image quality through imperfect geometry and a color palette that straddles the fence between bold and muted.

Finally, and just as exciting—at least for Santa Feans in the know—formerly local multi-disciplinary artist and performer Pippa Garner snagged a spot at the Biennial as well. And though SFR was unable to reach her, viewers can expect an evocative if not provocative work. Some notoriety for Garner, who now lives in Long Beach, California, is long overdue, especially in an exhibition that will feature so much brilliance.

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