

Forbes

Rose B. Simpson: "The Best Of Contemporary Indigenous Art Makes Visit To North Carolina"

By Chadd Scott

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Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo), *Maria*, 2014, 1985 Chevy El Camino, H. 54 × W. 72 × D. 202 in.
Courtesy of the artist. PHOTO: KATE RUSSELL

For Nancy Strickland Fields (Lumbee) it was like something out of a dream. Returning from taking one of her University of North Carolina Pembroke Museum Studies classes to visit the Town Creek Indian Mound State Historic Park, they had time to kill and stopped at the Rankin Museum of American Heritage in Ellerbe, population 1,000.

"Very small, couple of thousand square foot museum, that sort of typical thing you find on the back roads of anywhere in the country," Fields told Forbes.com. "The guy that started the museum was a doctor and he started buying Native art in the 40s and the early 50s."

The Institute of American Indian Arts Museum Studies graduate, former employee of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., and director/curator of the Museum of the Southeast American Indian at UNC Pembroke's expectations were low. She could never have imagined what was waiting for her inside.

"I about lost it," Fields remembers as if it happened yesterday. "There is a Maria Martinez and Julian (Martinez) pot sitting on the floor in this atmospheric natural history environment of desert sand

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and the tufts of gasses and I was like, 'what the hell!' Then I looked around and it just multiplied over and over again."

Maria Martinez (1887–1980; San Ildefonso Pueblo) may be the most famous Indigenous artist ever for her iconic black-on-black pottery produced in conjunction with her husband, Julian (1879–1943; San Ildefonso Pueblo). Having met four presidents—or four presidents having met her—gives some indication of her stature. Finding a Maria Martinez pot in a DIY museum on a country road in North Carolina strains believability.

The story gets better.

"I walked over to this u-shaped case and there was a collection of archaeological pottery—early stuff—and this pot absolutely grasped my soul. It was absolute perfection," Fields said. "It was well balanced. It was huge! (It had) this beautiful beaded rim, super thin composition, the clay itself was perfection—no cracks, no bubbles, no hairline fractures, nothing."

The piece was pre-contact and from the area that is now North Carolina. Everything about it was exceptional and rare.

"All of a sudden I found myself in conversation with the maker," Fields recalls.

What was that conversation?

"'Who were you?' 'Who taught you this?' 'How many times did you make a pot like this,'" Fields repeats. "I started envisioning a woman, digging clay, cleaning the clay, running it through a sieve. I can see her hand. You are absolutely magnificent."

A flood of emotions nearly overwhelmed her.

"As Native peoples, when we make objects, there is an intent when you give that object shape, you're bringing all of the elements together, you're putting yourself into it—and I saw her there—you're putting that knowledge into practice," Fields explains. "As an artist, you're remembering the lessons that you learned and what you saw. Then the intent with the meaning. What does it mean to make this pot? What is its purpose? What life is it going to have? And of course, our objects are alive, so how did this artist put that intent and that spirit in that piece of pottery?"

She'll never forget it.

"As I sat there, it just came to me: this is the show," Fields said.

What show?

Glad you asked.

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'To Take Shape And Meaning'



Jamie Okuma (Luiseño/Shoshone-Bannock/Wailaki/Okinawan), *Adaptation II*, 2012, shoes designed by Christian Louboutin, leather, glass beads, porcupine quills, sterling silver cones, brass sequins, and chicken feathers, each H. 8 5/8 x W. 3 1/4 x D. 9 3/16 in., Minneapolis Institute of Art, Bequest of Virginia Doneghy, by exchange. PHOTO: MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ART.

The North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh's history dates back to 1924. This will be the most ambitious exhibition of Native American art it has ever produced and its first of any kind since 1989.

NCMA leadership asked Fields to change that. To make history by curating an exhibition of Native American art there.

Fields' initial idea was too high concept for a museum just learning about Native American art. Something else was required. Something she couldn't pin down until that day in Ellerbe.

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The Rankin Museum pot and its once-known maker cleared the logjam in her mind.

"The show, 'To Take Shape and Meaning: Form and Design in Contemporary American Indian Art' reflects that heritage. It reflects that cultural continuum that is still carried forward," Fields said.

Presenting exclusively 3-D works, "To Take Shape and Meaning" brings together 75 Native American contemporary artists, most of them living artists, representing over 50 tribes across the U.S. and Canada. It is rooted in reverence for tradition while pushing the boundaries of contemporary interpretation.

The works demonstrate the continuity and evolution of Native and Indigenous arts in contemporary culture, including baskets made out of blown glass, cars transformed into works of art, and cutting-edge fashion ensembles embellished with goose feathers and turkey quills, all revealing transitions of place, experiments in materiality, and meanings blended from present-day and traditional beliefs.

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The Best Of The Best



Virgil Ortiz (Cochiti Pueblo), Convergence, Defenders Descend from Portal to Pueblo, 2023, Cochiti red clay, white clay slip, red clay slip, and black pigment (wild spinach plant), H. 28 1/2 x W. 19 x D. 18 in., Gift of Alan and Benjamin King, Jeffrey Childers and Onay Cruz Gutierrez, Joyce Fitzpatrick and Jay Stewart, Valerie Hillings and B. J. Scheessele, Marjorie Hodges and Carlton Midyette, Stefanie and Douglas Kahn, Bonnie and John Medinger, Mindy and Guy Solie, Cathy and Jim Stuart, Libby and Lee Buck, Liza and Lee Roberts. COURTESY NCMA

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"To Take Shape and Meaning" features the 21st century's most iconic Indigenous makers and their most iconic objects. Fields has assembled the contemporary Native Art equivalent of "The Avengers."

The checklist is astonishing.

Marie Watt Blanket Story. Yep.

Preston Singletary glasswork. Yep.

Virgil Ortiz Indigenous futurism ceramic. Yep.

Jamie Okuma beaded stilettos. Yep.

Jeffrey Gibson punching bag, the kind of which led him to being selected as the first Native American artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale in a solo exhibition. Yep.

Raven Halfmoon monumental figure. Yep.

"The show itself, as we were putting together the catalog, was taking on its own shape and meaning," Fields said. "What all of these pieces are saying collectively, and how they're operating together, and that energy they're bringing, this chorus of voices of artists from around the country, talking about their genealogy, talking about their rootedness, their place of being."

The piece de resistance, the cherry on top, the icing on the cake, Rose B. Simpson's one-of-a-kind *Maria*, her iconic interpretation of a Maria Martinez black-on-black pot applied to a 1985 El Camino.

"This is badass," Fields remembers thinking when Maria arrived at NCMA. "I was like I need to lay down, I'm gonna' faint."

Simpson's *Maria* marks the second time the great matriarch of modern Pueblo pottery has intersected with "To Take Shape and Meaning." The third time, unquestionably, proves how her spirit is watching over the show and again strains believability.

The North Carolina Museum of Art had only four pieces of Native American art in its collection prior to 2010, one of them, a black-on-black Maria Martinez pot. It will be on view next to *Maria*.

The Museum now has a growing collection of Indigenous artworks acquired in the last decade from Watt, Singletary, Simpson and others.

The historic pot from the Rankin Museum which sparked Fields' imagination in putting this show together will not be included. Her research revealed it to be a funerary urn and NCMA's policy, thankfully, prohibits the display of Native American funerary objects.

"I don't want (visitors) just to lean into the aesthetic ... and I don't want people to lean into the surprise," Fields said. "They need to understand the why. Why are they creating, and what did they

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go through to do this, to create this, and the time that that's put into it, and the cultural knowledge."

Native North Carolina



Kathleen Wall (Jemez Pueblo), Holding Her Culture, (2023). Jemez Clay, slip, underglaze; 28" X 10" X 11" © 2023 KITTY LEAKEN

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For a state with the largest number of citizens identifying as Native American east of the Mississippi River, finding Native American art on view in North Carolina is exceedingly rare.

"It's not easy to do at all and that is another reason this exhibition is so important," Fields said. "That shows a value system, so if a region is highlighting and sharing Native culture it's saying, to a degree, we value this culture, we value these people. They're an important part of who we are."

The region has not historically valued Indigenous people.

"We're in the South. We are still living out these legacies of colonialism, but furthering that is Jim Crow, and Jim Crow was not that long ago," Fields said. "When you look at the effects of Jim Crow, that pushed this ideology that Indians are worthless, don't have any value with the exception of labor, and so that makes it really hard to take pride and express cultural identity and art."

As far back as the early 1700s, North Carolina passed a law forbidding Indigenous people from having any kinds of cultural expression, a policy the United States would enact in the following century.

"A cultural Indian (in North Carolina) was a dead Indian in the early 1700s, and as families move forward to just exist—that core human agency to survive—there was a lot of things that were let go," Fields explained.

Eight North Carolina artists are featured in the exhibit.

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