

Forbes

"Rose, Rina, Roxanne and Rose B. Simpson: Four Generations of Santa Clara Ceramics at Norton Museum Of Art"

By Chadd Scott

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Rose B. Simpson with mother Roxanne Swentzell and daughter Cedar touching a sculpture. UNGELBAH DÁVILA.

Rose B. Simpson was hoping for a break. A rest from her busy schedule of exhibitions, commissions, gallery shows and installations nationwide.

As one of the most in demand contemporary artists working today, Simpson says "no" more often than "yes"—her gallerists, Jessica Silverman and Jack Shainman on her behalf, anyway—but some opportunities remain too good to pass up. Like presenting her work alongside her mother's, grandmother's and great-grandmother's at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, FL on view March 23 through September 1, 2024.

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"I don't feel fully understood until I feel like people can see my work in context, and my context is so much community and family," Simpson (b. 1983) told Forbes.com. "My work is only one of the words in a sentence that is my matrilineal heritage."

The preceding word in that sentence comes from Simpson's mother, Roxanne Swentzell. Swentzell stands as a major figure in contemporary Native American art in her own right.

She's not surprised by her daughter's success.

"Rose has always been somebody who's very naturally talented in anything she does," Swentzell told Forbes.com. "In elementary school, she was part of an opera performance that was like, 'Whoa, this girl can sing!' Then she did flamenco dancing and was asked by professionals to join them because she was that good. She was just good at whatever she put her hands to, her mind to."

When asked what she received artistically from her mother, Simpson responds with the freedom to explore the figure in her ceramics. Swentzell's groundbreaking clay work expanded on customary ways of creating Pueblo pottery by introducing the human body.

How does Swentzell believe she's most influenced her daughter?

"I nurtured in her that you're capable of more than you know and to not be afraid of learning, of learning more," Swentzell said. "I homeschooled my kids; the way I homeschooled them was to take adventures, to explore the world. Try this. Let's try that. We don't know how to do this, but let's try it out. The fear of exploring or going further was diminished because she had that 'go for it' mentality. That's what I wanted to give them—you can do it."

Do it she has.

Simpson's revolutionary sculptural works connect the modern with the ancestral addressing themes of the female body, motherhood, gender identity, and the lasting traumas of colonialism. Composed of clay, found objects, and mechanical hardware, they exist beyond the physical realm reaching into the psychological, emotional, social, cultural, spiritual, and intellectual.

Whatever she has become, and wherever her artwork may yet take her, Simpson remains grounded in northern New Mexico's Santa Clara Pueblo where she continues to live and work.

"She is who she is because of where she came from and she will affect those to come because of where she came from," Swentzell said. "A lot of the Western world don't see that perspective, there's so much focus on individualism. For Pueblo people to stand out as individuals is really uncomfortable and that makes sense to me because we are not alone in this. Because Rose is successful, that means our whole tribe is successful. It's not just her. She is doing what she is doing because of all the ancestors before her."

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Mother: Roxanne Swentzell



Rose B. Simpson with mother Roxanne Swentzell and daughter Cedar. PAMELA SOLARES.

Roxanne Swentzell's (b. 1962; Santa Clara Pueblo) ceramic figures created over the last four decades predominantly feature women, sometimes, a mother and child; they express the many emotions of womanhood, including vulnerability and protectiveness.

"I wasn't thinking I'm going to be an artist or I'm an artist, it wasn't one of those moments," Swentzell said of her creative evolution. "You're a little kid, your mom is playing with clay, that stuff looks really cool, I want to touch it, and I started playing with it, just feeling it, mushing it around, tasting it."

Swentzell's beginnings with clay had nothing to do with artistry.

"I had a severe speech impediment as a child; I wasn't able to talk and it was very frustrating for me to communicate," Swentzell explains. "I started to realize that I could make these little things out of clay that would speak for me. It was actually a language for me. I sometimes consider clay my first language because words were not there. I was able to start making these little figurines that would explain to my mother what I wanted her to know. She ended up having boxes and boxes of these clay figures that I would make just to talk to her until I was able to communicate with words."

Swentzell's words in clay would evolve into ceramic figures. A dramatic—and in some quarters unwelcome—departure from "traditional" pottery.

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"It was strange. No one had been doing this. I was breaking ground in this area of using figurative clay work," she said. "Some of the tribal people were like, 'What are you doing?' They didn't understand why I was making figures because we make pots. For me, I needed to tell a story and this is how I could do it."

The pushback, which Rose has also received for her even more radically unconventional figures, ties back to the Pueblo ethic of humility.

"It's our life of living within a community, that we're stepping out of line in ways that might be to some people offensive, but it's coming from a good place," Swentzell said. "Luckily, I'm able to keep doing the work that I do, and Rose is taking the next leap of that journey, and who knows where it goes for other people."



Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo, born 1983), 'Genesis,' 2017. Ceramic and mixed media 32 in. (81.3 cm) © Rose B. Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art Gallery, Santa Fe. ADDISON DOTY.

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Grandmother: Rina Swentzell

Simpson grew up close with her grandmother Rina Swentzell (1939–2015; Santa Clara Pueblo).

Rina Swentzell was tough. A battler. Strong. Audacious for her time. An educator who earned a doctorate and an activist on behalf of her community.

"She wasn't scared to argue with old white men," Simpson said, laughing. "She was incredibly brave and courageous in a world where that wasn't ok. She would question things and say what she thought. I was always impressed, and she was so smart."

Listening to Simpson talk about her grandmother, it's clear how connected her art making's interrogation of entrenched systems—patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism—and the difficult conversations she raises is to Rina Swentzell.

"She had experienced some really intense hardships with postcolonial stress disorder," Simpson explains. "She asked questions. Why are things the way they are? She investigated. She challenged those narratives, the common narratives, and she built conversations around why things are the way they are in a really deep and holistic way."

Great-Grandmother: Rose "Gia" Naranjo

Rina Swentzell and her mother Rose "Gia" Naranjo's (1917–2004; Santa Clara Pueblo) small, ceramic vases on view at the Norton showcase the traditional Pueblo style of pottery.

Simpson was fortunate to spend much time with her great-grandmother as well. She remembers the two singing together, songs Rose Naranjo taught her.

"She was a survivor. More than a searcher, she was a survivor," Simpson said. "She was a beautiful person, a very strong woman, and she was an incredible potter. She taught her children how to support themselves and how to have relationship with the clay, to see it as the animate being that the Earth and the clay is and how to relate to it in that way."

Naranjo had 10 children. She is the matriarch of a mindboggling artistic dynasty that not only includes great-granddaughter Rose B. Simpson and granddaughter Roxanne Swentzell, but also grandchildren Susan Folwell and Jody Naranjo, children Michael Naranjo, Nora Naranjo-Morse, and Jody Folwell, each one a highly esteemed, awarded and collected ceramicist. And Rina, just to name a few.

The 70-generation legacy in clay won't end with Simpson. She has a 7-year-old daughter.

"I have no doubt she will," Roxanne Swentzell said when asked if she expects Rose's daughter to carry on the family tradition.

Rose B. Simpson Across America

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Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo, born 1983), *Open*, 2022. Ceramic, twine, pearls, and steel 20 ½ x 6 ¼ x 6 ¼ in. (52.1 x 15.9 x 15.9 cm) © Rose B. Simpson. Courtesy of the artist, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. ADDISON DOTY.

In addition to her exhibition at the Norton, Rose B. Simpson had other opportunities come her way this year too good to pass up.

She is creating nine large-scale bronze and steel sculptures for public display in New York. In Madison Square Park, seven 18-foot-high androgynous sentinel figures will convene around a central sculpture of a young female figure emerging from the earth, standing guard as her ancestral protectors. Further uptown, Simpson will install two life-size bronze sentinels in Inwood Hill Park, the site where Dutch colonial governor Peter Minuit “purchased” Manhattan Island from the Lenape in 1626.

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The sculptures will be on view from April 11 through September 22, 2024.

Also in New York, she's been included in the Whitney Biennial, the most prestigious presentation of contemporary American art.

For the Cleveland Museum of Art, she's producing a pair of 25-foot-tall figural sculptures for display in the museum's atrium. Constructed from her signature clay in addition to metalwork, porous concrete, and cast bronze, the figures' layers mimic rock eroded through geologic time and the structural materiality of man-made architecture. Intricate welded metal structures mounted to the heads of each figure, intended to cast shadows, mimic the structures of the mind in relationship to time and space.

These will be on view from July 14, 2024, through April 13, 2025.

She has another solo exhibition coming later this year in San Francisco.

What does the artist think of all this attention?

"I just put one foot in front the next, take out my garbage and scrub the floor on my hands and knees and dig ditches and move things with tractors and participate in my community because that's what matters," Simpson said. "I'll keep doing what I do and as long as it is meeting a need for people and people feel moved and feel like it's helping them heal and grow something inside themselves; I will keep doing what I'm doing if it's needed."

It's needed. On the Pueblo and around the world.

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