

# HYPERALLERGIC

"Rose B. Simpson's Antidote to 'Postcolonial Stress Disorder'"

By Erin Joyce

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Rose B. Simpson in her studio in 2022 (photo by Kate Russell; courtesy Jessica Silverman Gallery)

**"The pieces feel like they used all of us to create themselves," she told *Hyperallergic*.**

"I didn't want to be an artist," Rose B. Simpson told me over the phone from her studio at Santa Clara Pueblo, an Indigenous community just outside of Española, New Mexico. "I wanted to fly airplanes and helicopters. I only did art as a kind of default." The artist, who works across large-scale ceramic sculpture, custom cars, fashion, and performance, as well as music, has been featured in some of the nation's most prestigious institutions, including the Denver Art Museum, Minneapolis Institute of Art, and SITE Santa Fe. She had a recent solo show at San Francisco's Jessica Silverman Gallery, and is one of several Indigenous artists exhibiting in this year's Whitney Biennial alongside Demian DinéYazhi', Cannupa Hanska Luger, and Kite. For an artist who was reluctant to start, Simpson's career is on a powerful path.

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After graduating from high school, Simpson moved from Española, a small town north of Santa Fe known for lowrider cars and high crime rates, to Albuquerque, where she attended the University of New Mexico and studied studio art, creative writing, and dance. She later went on to earn an MFA from Rhode Island School of Design in Ceramics, and an MFA in Creative Non-Fiction from the Institute of American Indian Arts. However, it was outside the context of the academy that Simpson found profound ways of channeling her voice through artistic expression, creating work that speaks to her culture while living with what she describes as "postcolonial stress disorder."



Installation view of Rose B. Simpson, "Counterculture" (2022) (photo by Stephanie Zollshan; courtesy the artist; Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

The artist got into graffitiing and painting train cars, and joined the underground Hip Hop scene in the city. "School was like a byproduct," Simpson shared. "My real life was the social scene and culture that I was part of in Albuquerque. That was what really influenced me and helped create who I am. It was more of an education than the formal education." Several street artists in Albuquerque took Simpson under their wing, notably Mike 360. "He was an incredible figure in Albuquerque for a long time," she told me. "An incredible influence on young people who showed us ways of empowerment and different ways of seeing the world and even engaging in political activism. He made it cool." This environment of support and care was foundational to Simpson and shaped, in part, who she is today as an individual and as an artist. "We were co-creating this little belief system — I felt empowered, I felt strong, I felt beautiful, I felt all the things that I wasn't feeling in our patriarchal capitalistic world."

Co-creating and collaboration remain integral tenets of Simpson's practice. When working outward from an idea toward the realization of a piece many contribute their labor and energy, whether visible and not. "I don't do anything solo," she says. "When I am doing something, I have this whole history behind me, I have all the unseen beings in the world that are moving around me." The artist absorbs physical, psychic, emotional, and spiritual influences from ancestral knowledge systems, contemporary lived realities, and the environment, and casts these into her sculpture

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and performance. In Simpson's work, references to Pueblo culture, underground music, the North American landscape, and lowriders all swirl around in confluence.

Simpson's 2023 sculptural installation, "Counterculture," originally shown at the Field Farm in Williamstown, Massachusetts, foregrounds the displacement and dispossession of Indigenous people by settler colonialism. The 12 female humanoid forms tower above the viewer, gazing out towards the landscape. At the Whitney Museum's iteration, they were installed on the terrace, looking out towards the city, a territory stolen from the Lenape by Dutch colonists in the 17th century. These 10-foot-tall cast-concrete statues nod to the artist's Santa Clara identity and cultural heritage, but also her immediate family: Her mother is famed ceramist Roxanne Swentzell, who is known for her bronze and clay feminine figures.



Rose B. Simpson, "Maria" (2014) (photo by Kate Russell; courtesy the artist)

Simpson's 2014 work "Maria" is another example of her building off her environment, personal passions, and a legacy of women artists who have come before her. The sculpture, a 1985 Chevrolet El Camino restored and redesigned by Simpson, is black-on-black, paying homage to the black-on-black pottery of the celebrated late San Ildefonso Pueblo artist Maria Martinez and the lowrider culture of Española. The matte body of the El Camino is ornamented with shiny geometric patterns, playing with motifs of Tewa pottery.

But the work is an act of empowerment deeply personal to the artist, too. "I felt really disempowered and insecure and lonely and scared as a small child," Simpson said. "I felt vulnerable, and I looked towards cars as protection, as beauty, as a relationship that you can build, to express how you see yourself. It's another form of collaboration." The car is an entity that literally and metaphorically holds within it people, objects, and ideas and transports them to another location.

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The work acts as a container: Like the pottery specific to Santa Clara Pueblo, this El Camino holds within it that visual and cultural vocabulary of beauty and utility.

Simpson views her work not only as a form of agency for herself and her community — an antidote to postcolonial stress disorder, perhaps — but also as bodies that themselves have agency. "The pieces feel like they used all of us to create themselves," she told me, "and we're just the tools."



Rose B. Simpson (photo by Minesh Bacrania, courtesy Jessica Silverman Gallery)

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Installation view of Rose B. Simpson, "Daughters: Reverence" (2024)  
(photograph by Audrey Wang, courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art)



Installation view of Rose B. Simpson, "Counterculture" (2022)  
(photo by Stephanie Zollshan; courtesy the artist; Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

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