Alta

Rose B. Simpson: "At the Wheel and Over the Hood"

By Jessica Zack

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Rose B. Simpson's mixed-media sculptures offer an exuberant blending of ancestral and contemporary culture.

Clay and cars. Cars and clay. It's an understatement to say that artist Rose B. Simpson's connection to both runs deep.

These dissimilar obsessions have made Simpson one of the most in-demand contemporary artists working today. The mixed-media sculptor is renowned for both her sentinel-like ceramic figures and her radically inventive art cars.

Simpson began garnering gallery and museum attention when she was fresh out of art school for her monumental clay sculptures exploring Native identity. In 2014, just three years after she received her master of fine arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design, while living in her native Santa Clara Pueblo (Kha'po Owingeh), in northern New Mexico, Simpson wowed the art world with her now-iconic first art car, *Maria*. She had refurbished the 1985 Chevy El Camino and intricately painted it entirely matte black except for its glossy black geometric designs, which visually pop against the flat finish—an homage to the acclaimed Tewa potter Maria Martinez (1887–1980), who pioneered the famous black-on-black style.

For the past six years, Simpson has been working on her second art car: a decrepit 1964 Buick Riviera, which she's calling *Bosque*, that she's been meticulously restoring from the inside out. I had the opportunity to visit Simpson this summer in her auto mechanic friend's Albuquerque garage. There, on a rather hot morning, she was working feverishly to finish the new car in time for her exhibition at San Francisco's de Young Museum, *Rose B. Simpson: LEXICON*. (The show opened August 30 and will run until August 2, 2026.)

Both *Maria* and *Bosque* will be installed in the museum's expansive Wilsey Court, surrounded by a massive mural—33 feet tall by 53 feet wide—that Simpson will create on-site. She planned to paint the new car in the traditional Tewa polychrome palette of cream, cayenne, and black. "It's a New Mexico term for the forested area along the river, which is kind of cool because she's a Riviera," she says of the artwork's title. "I'm trying to get the custom plate. I submitted it to the DMV."

As I watch, Simpson, hunched over in her face shield, spot-welds patches on *Bosque*'s massive metal hood. Later, we discuss her life story and artistic journey to this point in her career, tracing back the ancient roots of her creative fixations. These disparate interests—clay and cars—and their powerful hold on her imagination start to make perfect sense.

Clay, after all, runs through Simpson's bloodline; her relationship to it is ancestral.

Cars, on the other hand, are like a first love. And every new car comes into her life with the rush of a new affair.

Kate Russell | Rose B. Simpson in her New Mexico studio.

POTTERY SHARDS

Growing up in the Santa Clara Pueblo, with a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother who were all Tewa ceramists, Simpson was aware that she descended from a mind-boggling matrilineal ancestry of clay artists. Approximately 70 generations of female potters had come before her, dating back to the sixth century.

As a girl, Simpson knew the feel of mineral-rich soil under her fingernails. I can imagine her squeezing and thumb-rolling tiny knobs of red clay that had been discarded by her sculptor mother, the celebrated Pueblo artist Roxanne Swentzell, while she was creating her signature mother-and-child figures.

Swentzell and her daughter would take walks around nearby ruins and occasionally discover pot shards with faded Tewa designs.

"This might've been my great-great-great-great-grandmother who made this pot, and it had a whole story, a whole life that happened," Swentzell said during a 2024 talk with her daughter at the Norton Museum of Art, in West Palm Beach, Florida. Four generations of their family's work were on view together in the exhibition *Rose, Rina, Roxanne and Rose B. Simpson*. "Her grandkid probably went down to get water and broke it on the way home."

What with the clay from the soil her family farmed, the adobe home her mother had built by hand, the pots they'd cook their meals in, and an aesthetic tradition that had been passed down through millennia, creating and imagining in wet earth became a kind of first language for Simpson. It's a sense of familiarity that predates personal memory.

"Where I come from, the entire context is clay," she tells me, adding that her eight-year-old daughter, Cedar Rain, seems to have inherited the family gift of artistic talent. "I pulled out some old drawings of mine, and they're not as good as hers at her age. Boy, can she draw."

"It feels weird to even call clay a material because it's more like family," Simpson says.

"It wasn't just for fun, though," she continues. "Clay wasn't a toy. My mom supported us off clay, so it was always a part of our life, but as kids, we weren't allowed to touch it because if she gave us her clay, that was our income. So if you got any, it was a tiny little piece, and you respected it."

Simpson's bond with cars might not be ancestral, but growing up just south of Española, the so-called lowrider capital of the world, she was always drawn to them.

Flashy muscle cars are a ubiquitous symbol of strength and freedom, and Simpson dreamed of having her own someday. "I love the power. I love the speed. I love to be carried," she says.

At various points in her life, cars have been a refuge, a flex, a symbol of enveloping safety, and, always, a source of pride. "I grew up in a youth culture that valued cars," says Simpson. "The cruise line was *so* important in my town as a teenager."

Simpson estimates she currently has 14 cars, 15 if you count *Bosque*. "Yeah, I have a car problem," she says with a knowing smile, shaking her head. "My relationship with cars is long, and it's got some codependency."

She swears she recalls being one or two years old and riding in her parents' truck (before they divorced and she grew up primarily with her mother)—specifically, a 1950s dump truck that her father, sculptor Patrick Simpson, had dismantled and shortened while he was a student at the Kansas City Art Institute. "When he put it all back together, it was two inches shorter, and he replaced all the washers with cutout stars and put fake flowers in the [cab's] ceiling," says Simpson.

"I remember sitting on the floor, and the heater element looked like a rabbit," she recalls, "and I'd stick my fingers through the floor and see the road go past."

Kate Russell | One of Simpson's 25-foot-tall sculptures from *Strata* (2024), on display at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Simpson was valedictorian at the Santa Fe Indian School and received a scholarship to Dartmouth College her senior year. The acceptance letter "burned a hole through my backpack" for several months, she recalls.

In what she calls "the first of so many life episodes clearly revealing where I belong," she made the decision to stay close to home and study at the University of New Mexico, in Albuquerque, and then the Institute of American Indian Arts, in Santa Fe.

"I remember thinking that if the world ended, I couldn't walk home from Dartmouth.... I needed to know that I still had that connection to home and that if anything happened, I could follow the river north and end up in my pueblo, where my family is and my context and what's most important to me," Simpson says.

By 2009, however, the then-25-year-old had decided to attend RISD. "I wanted to know what it felt like to be anonymous," she says, even though she recalls being asked by a visiting artist there why someone with her cultural pedigree (70 generations?!) would bother going to grad school for ceramics.

The answer was that Simpson was on the cusp of discovering her own distinct artistic style, something perhaps more easily realized in new surroundings. Using her innate familiarity with clay, she devised a technique she calls "slap-slab," which she uses with traditional coil building to create powerfully enigmatic, often androgynous human figures.

Simpson's figures are more experimental and rough-textured than her mother's work, the seams and fingerprints left visible. They can be larger-than-life and have hollow, watchful eyes. She adorns them in metalwork, cottonwood branches, beads, and leather. Personally symbolic markings ("+" and "x," which Simpson has tattooed on her fingers) appear often, connecting Simpson's Native red-clay tradition to a modern aesthetic. At once serene and fierce, her figures can exude a postapocalyptic, *Mad Max* toughness as well as a grounded, quiet power.

For her 2024–25 exhibition *Rose B. Simpson: Strata* at the Cleveland Museum of Art, she created two 25-foot-tall figures, which stood watch in the museum's atrium. Built of clay, concrete, and bronze, the monumental figures, decked in beads, intricate headgear, and chains, were installed face-to-face as if "witnessing" each other, and the museum's visitors.

"Rose's practice is always centered around the figure as a proxy to address emotional and existential impacts of global humanity," such as the lasting trauma of colonialism or gender roles, says Jessica Silverman, who has been Simpson's San Francisco gallerist since 2019. Silverman has seen interest in Simpson's work from private collectors and museums skyrocket. "We have a waiting list for her ceramics, in particular," she says. "She's someone who is on a lot of people's checklist of desires" around the globe.

In the past year alone, in addition to the West Palm Beach and Cleveland exhibitions, Simpson's work was shown at the 2024 Whitney Biennial, and she installed two site-specific works, *Seed*, in New York City—18-foot-high figures placed around a central female figure in Midtown's Madison Square Park and two life-size bronzes in Upper Manhattan's Inwood Hill Park, also called Shorakapok Preserve (after the word meaning "the sitting place" in the Munsee language of the Wecquaesgeek). Simpson's sculptures pay tribute to the island's history as Manahatta, the ancestral land of the Lenape people.

Kate Russell | After buying the Buick for *Bosque*, Simpson discovered there were no aftermarket parts available for the vehicle, adding to the project's epic demands.

ART CARS

As we talk inside her friend's garage, where *Bosque*, tires and fenders removed, is up on blocks and a drawing tacked to the wall shows Simpson's initial designs for the car's polychrome exterior, Simpson keeps circling back to her RISD experience. She describes a study-abroad trip she took to Kashihara, Japan, in 2010 and a course that same year called Aesthetics of the Everyday, taught by RISD philosophy professor Yuriko Saito, as revelatory in helping her see clay, and cars, in a new light.

"That seminar was life-changing," she recalls. Simpson hadn't yet discovered the language, or the conceptual framework, to describe her personal ethos, but she found it in Saito's description of "relational aesthetics" and in the Japanese tradition of embedding aesthetic moments in the familiar. It opened her eyes to a way of living creatively in the world without distinguishing between art and craft—or, more meaningfully, she says, between art and life.

"Rose was an exceptional student, and that particular seminar was one of the most memorable teaching experiences I had in my career," recalls Saito, now a professor emerita. "I remember talking with her class about the tea ceremony, which is an established art form but at the same time an example of how a really mundane activity can have a deep aesthetic significance in life, [how] we don't need to make artificial boundaries between art and life. Rose was majoring in ceramics, which can be utilitarian and also fine art. I think she realized that these everyday objects and everyday activities are worthy subjects of aesthetic inquiry."

"When that light bulb went off, I realized I come from a town where relational aesthetics are everything!" says Simpson. "Lowriders *are* art pieces. It's art and it's aesthetics that's applied and intentional and used."

Simpson explains that there are more custom cars per capita in Española than in Las Vegas or Orange County. "I learned to drive when I was 11 and bought my first car when I was 12," she says. She paid her mother the outstanding $500 on the Jeep Cherokee she would eventually drive to Rhode Island.

"That Jeep became my identity," said Simpson, who speaks with a poet's cadence, delivering the de Young's annual Bransten Lecture in April. "After a really hard day at school, I would go sit in my car, and it would be really hot, and I'd close the windows and sweat, and it made me feel OK. Those four corners of that car were the corners of my soul, were the corners of my being."

When she packed up the car, which had illegally tinted dark windows and a spring-lifted rear, to make the 2,200-mile road trip to art school, "the funny thing is I realized as we were leaving Santa Fe, I could either take my mattress or my subwoofers. I was like, Eh, who needs a mattress?" she recalls, laughing. "So I drove across the country with my subwoofers, and [the car] was covered in stickers, and I drove around playing my music all loud, with my bright yellow [New Mexico "Land of Enchantment"] license plate. Everybody was like, Who is *that*? And I realized nobody has custom cars in Providence."

Simpson shares this story on a break from welding, and she pauses before putting her face shield on to get back to work. "Relational aesthetics, man."

Visitors to the de Young, stopping to admire the beauty and novelty of the two art cars Simpson has painted like pottery, will likely have no inkling of the thousands of hours she spent on them—compounding, patching, sanding, grinding, metal-shaping—long before applying any decorative paint.

Kate Russell | Simpson's first custom car piece, *Maria*, a 1985 Chevy El Camino, caught the art world's attention just three years after the artist earned her MFA.

We should have run screaming when we realized that all the fuses were rusted," says Simpson, who found out after buying *Bosque* that, unlike for *Maria*, a Chevy, there are no aftermarket parts for old Buicks.
"You'll never see the millions of hours underneath that paint," she says.

Surveying the wreck that's still a far cry from a work of art, she adds, "Someone must have rally-raced this. I swear to God, the only good thing about this car was the roof."

People also aren't likely to know that when Simpson returned home from RISD in 2011, she enrolled at a local school, Northern New Mexico College, in automotive science to learn collision repair and classic-car customization. During that period, she met artist Jeff Brock, who was building the art car *Bombshell Betty*, a raw-steel 1952 Buick Super Riviera that has set seven world speed records at the Bonneville Salt Flats, in Utah.

"Jeff was incredibly influential," says Simpson. "I wasn't studying collision repair so I could build something to go in a museum. That was not the intention. I was there to build cars so that I could cruise. But Jeff said, 'Why don't you build [an art] car?'"

"Rose is one of my favorite human beings I've ever met," says Brock, who lives in the tiny town of Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. "I'm honored to have been there and been part of [creating *Maria*], but at the time, I thought, Oh, you crazy woman. You're taking on way more than you can handle. The car she started with was a wreck. It was so sad how much damage was hiding under the paint, and the more she dug into it, the more I felt bad for her. It was so hard to even get it to the point of being a blank canvas."

Brock was one of the first people to see *Maria* after her black-on-black treatment. "We were sitting on chairs in the yard right after I brought her home after I had painted her," recalls Simpson. "She had been a side-of-the-road junker that had been totaled, and now she was absolutely beautiful. We had a cigarette and were looking at the car. And there was this moment when Jeff said, 'Wow. Look what you did.' And I realized right then I'd built a relationship with this car. The car called me, and I brought her home. I became sort of a tool in her toolbox of becoming."

Simpson describes ushering her cars into a new existence—rather than wresting them from nothingness—in the same way she does her clay figures. "I don't feel like I'm making them; I feel like I'm meeting them," she tells me.

Hillary Olcott, the de Young's curator of arts of the Americas, recalls meeting Simpson on a tour of the museum with Silverman back in 2019. "We were chatting and walking through the museum, sort of imagining what opportunities there might be to work together on a project. I told her how much I love *Maria* and would love to have her here in Wilsey Court, in the center of our building. Rose said, 'I've actually just bought this 1964 Buick Riviera that I really want to redo and customize as well. Maybe they could both be here together.' I said, 'Heck yeah, let's do it.'"

Olcott and Simpson are planning for *Maria* and *Bosque* to be parked nose-to-nose inside the museum's spacious interior courtyard.

"I can't wait to see them facing each other, almost like they're facing off for a fight," says Silverman. "But, knowing Rose, I don't think it's going to feel that way. Knowing how much truth and honesty and awareness and deep sensitivity that is embodied in her, and the vulnerability and intelligence in the work, I think it's going to feel like a conversation more than a battle."