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Rose B. Simpson: "An Artist Asks, 'Have I Just Become Fuel for the Fire?"
By Zoë Lescaze
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Simpson's "Bosque" (2025) as a work in progress in a shop in Albuquerque. Credit: Sean Donnola

Wary of being reduced to an art world commodity, Rose B. Simpson tries to stay true to herself and her community. Here, her story in five works.

1. "BOSQUE" (2025)

The artist Rose B. Simpson circled the raw steel skeleton of the 1964 Buick Riviera in her friend's shop in Albuquerque, measuring the holes riddling the chassis. "This whole thing was Swiss cheese," she shouted above the rattles and bangs. It was early May and the lowrider had come a long way from the rust-eaten mess Simpson, 41, had begun patching months ago. Now that car — painted, upholstered and tentatively entitled "Bosque," after the improbable oases that form along rivers in the deserts of New Mexico — is part of "Rose B. Simpson: Lexicon," a yearlong installation that just opened at San Francisco's de Young museum, where it joins her first custom car, from 2014.

Simpson's art is always personal, but "Bosque" fully embodies the two places that shaped her: Santa Clara Pueblo (Kha'p'o Owingeh, as it's known by its inhabitants), the Tewa community north of Santa Fe where she was raised, and its neighbor, Española, a hardscrabble city where lovingly restored lowriders are objects of fierce local pride. It was there that Simpson — whose mother is Tewa and father is white — first learned to see classic cars as social sculptures. When she was young, she'd cruise the town's main drag; in a time before everyone had a cellphone, "that's how you found your people," she said.

Relations between the reservation and Española have always been fraught, but Simpson's cars, with their Spanish names and Pueblo paint jobs, are hybrid creatures. The patterns on the Buick — graceful black-and-terra-cotta designs floating on a white background — might appear abstract to outsiders, but they've appeared on Pueblo pots for hundreds of years. Simpson is known for her clay figures, which recall androgynous warriors, seekers and guides adorned with salvaged metal, leather and beads, but those sculptures refer less explicitly to her Tewa heritage than the cars, which she sees as "probably the most Native" work she's ever done. They also represent a risk for Simpson, who's spent her career railing against attempts to pigeonhole her as an Indigenous artist. As she told me, "I would love to be seen as an artist who just happens to be Native."

For years, Simpson got by on teaching gigs, construction jobs and local sales in Santa Fe. In the past six years, she's achieved a rare level of commercial success and international recognition. In January, she will install a bronze sculpture — a monumental mother and child — at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In March, she'll present new work in Australia for the Sydney Biennale. Being an in-demand artist often means traveling constantly between shows, residencies, fairs, galas and events around the world. But for Simpson, being rooted in Santa Clara, where she begins most mornings by talking to the earth and listening back, is essential to her practice. In Tewa, the word *nung* means both "earth" and "us." Mountains, rivers and clouds are sentient beings who observe her every decision. You carry yourself differently, she said, when you're surrounded by a world of witnesses. "Pueblo culture and belief systems are place-based," she said as we drove through the dusty brown hills with clumps of piñon and juniper surrounding the village. "So all the ceremonies and the songs and everything are about *here*." Simpson spends several weeks a year participating in Tewa ceremonies and many more sewing clothes, weaving baskets, making pots and preparing food for these events. "It's about sitting together and remembering who we are as people — laughing and joking and crying as we work — and as women," she said. The galleries representing her have learned to mark their calendars with feast days when she won't leave the pueblo or answer her phone, no matter how rare the opportunity or flattering the invitation. She sometimes chafes at these constraints but cannot imagine being free of them. "I think I might just evaporate if there were no edges," she said.

A year ago, Simpson had told me she wrestled daily with the "vampiristic" demands of the art world. Now, she said, it's more like hourly. "I really question how much it's taking," she said in the modest home she shares with her 8-year-old daughter, Cedar Rain. Soon Simpson was back to making fun of herself, lamenting the incurable love of free food that makes her say yes to art world dinners she'd rather avoid, but for a moment she was pensive. She struggles with the thought that the energy she funnels into her career might be put to better use in her community.

Underlying Simpson's concern is the long history of outsiders fetishizing Native cultures. Simpson remembers tour buses trundling into Santa Clara when she was a kid and the visitors who'd take her photo. "I have this insane trigger around white people — or tourists who happen to mostly be white people — feeling entitled to access my space, my ideas, my physical body," she said. As an artist, she faces a fundamental paradox. She has spent her career excavating the deepest parts of herself, striving to make each work more honest, raw and real than the last. Any truly authentic work she makes, however, will necessarily reveal aspects of that same vulnerable self she's fought to protect — and a larger belief system she doesn't want to compromise.

The artist's sculpture "The Remembering" (2020). Credit: © Rose B. Simpson, courtesy of the artist, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo: John Wilson White

2. "THE REMEMBERING" (2020)

Simpson works with metal, wood, leather and cloth, but "clay is family," she said. "It's where we come from." Her maternal line has been working with it for 700 years.

Both of Simpson's parents, with whom she remains close, are artists. Her father, Patrick Simpson, makes metal sculptures she cites as an influence on her own. Her mother, Roxanne Swentzell, was among the first ceramists in Santa Clara to make figurative sculptures instead of practical vessels. The couple split up when Simpson was a baby and, while she often saw her father in Santa Fe, it was Swentzell who raised her and her older brother, Porter Swentzell, who is now the director of the Kha'p'o Community School.

The family lived on the reservation in an army tent with a garden hose for a shower and no electricity before they moved into an adobe brick house that Simpson's mother built by hand. Simpson grew up storing seeds and gathering wood. They kept bees for candles and raised turkeys for meat. Although Swentzell and her children lived off the land partly out of necessity, Simpson now recognizes her mother's decision as an act of defiance. Simpson felt deeply uncool at the time — her cousins all ate McDonald's and watched TV — but her childhood taught her self-reliance. The first thing she did when she moved into her current home, she said, was to "delete" the dryer. She remains ambivalent about having a refrigerator.

Simpson bought her first car from her mother when she was 12. (It's not unusual for children to drive in Santa Clara as soon as their feet can reach the pedals, she says.) The Jeep became a refuge. Native kids bullied her for being tall and relatively light-skinned. More threatening were the drunken men, friends of a guy her mom began dating when Simpson was about 9, whose advances she dodged by sleeping in her car. She and Porter moved into their own apartment when she was 16.

For Simpson, personal trauma and historical injustices are inextricable. "The Remembering," a work from 2020, speaks to the violence and shame she sees as her tribe's collective inheritance. Three red clay children with narrow slits for eyes stare solemnly ahead. Their jaws are set, their full lips closed. Wooden sticks jut vertically from inside smooth ceramic walls that encase their bodies. The figures' large hands dangle limply from metal chains.

Simpson made the sculpture around the same time that excavations of mass graves were revealing fresh horrors of the Indian boarding-school system that tore apart Native families across the country from the early 19th century through the 1960s. Her great-grandmother and namesake, Rose Naranjo, was among the hundreds of thousands of children who were abducted from their communities and sent to schools where they endured starvation, beatings and other forms of abuse designed to convert them into tractable servants and laborers. "What kind of sociopath, what kind of heartless … ? How do you take humans and turn them into a natural resource?" said Simpson, her voice brittle. "To break people, you break the children. That's intentional."

Simpson's performance "Transformance" (2014), staged in a popular shopping area in Santa Fe. Credit: Kate Russell

3. "TRANSFORMANCE" (2014)

Not long after she returned to New Mexico with an M.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2011, Simpson bought a 1985 Chevy El Camino, painted it satin black with glossy Pueblo patterns and equipped it with a drag race transmission and an engine that only grudgingly tolerates speeds under 110 miles per hour. She named it "Maria" (2014). " 'Maria' wants to be nuking through the world," she said. Simpson wanted something similar: to be so fast and tough no one could touch her.

For most of Simpson's life, being female felt like a liability. Indigenous women and girls are murdered at rates exceeding those of other groups in the United States. Just recently, Simpson woke up from a nightmare in which a carful of men were pursuing her and a child on her back. Finally, they caught her. "I guess this is it," she remembered thinking. "This is the moment that I disappear."

Masculinity became a survival strategy. "The less I looked like a woman, the more empowered I felt," she said. As a student at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, where she began her undergrad degree before transferring to the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, Simpson immersed herself in skateboarding and graffiti, wore a spike in her septum, stretched her earlobes around nickel-size plugs and slept with a 9-millimeter gun under her pillow. She sang lead in the Native punk band Chocolate Helicopter and the hip-hop crew Garbage Pail Kidz. She sought out romantic relationships with women, partly because they felt safer, and she dressed like the dudes who became her surrogate brothers. "I don't wear anything that impedes me from jumping a fence to get away from the cops," she recalled telling a style reporter who asked about her "fashion sense."

When she finished "Maria" in 2014, Simpson began thinking about women in the car world, who tended to be bikini-clad models perched on the hoods of hot rods at expos and races. She asked herself what a more empowering alternative might be. Later that year, she shut down Canyon Road, a touristy strip of historic adobe buildings in Santa Fe, for an unsanctioned performance. Flanked by Indigenous women and queer friends dressed in custom black leather like a postapocalyptic battalion, Simpson drove "Maria" slowly past the boutiques and art galleries hawking paintings of stoic Indians wearing buckskin and feathers. A heartbeat thudded from the subwoofers as the group marched past stunned onlookers. She called the piece "Transformance."

"Two Selves" (2023), a work inspired by Simpson's becoming a parent. Credit: © Rose B. Simpson, courtesy of the artist, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

4. "TWO SELVES" (2023)

Simpson's daughter was born at home two years later, in 2016. Cedar Rain's father, an old friend of Simpson's, does not currently share parenting duties with Simpson. "I realized that my masculine energy wasn't going to help me in this really difficult scenario where I have this colicky baby who's crying all night long," Simpson said. "You have to pull from a source that's so deep and so old to keep this child alive and keep yourself sane, right? And in that, I found a source of power that I didn't really know was there before." She hoped that by facing her own fears and self-loathing she could prevent her daughter from experiencing them too.

One work that resulted from that process is "Two Selves," a dual-bodied, six-foot-high ceramic self-portrait from 2023. The taller figure's face is careworn — sorrowful, even. Her chin, however, is lifted and her lips are parted, as though she has just glimpsed something hopeful on the horizon. An androgynous child bound to her chest strains forward, arms outstretched. That being "is the little me," said Simpson. "It's like the heart, the vulnerable part that I haven't let speak, that I don't often allow to guide me. And that's the one that's saying, 'This way.'"

When it came time to sculpt the larger figure's face, Simpson had to confront her own. She returned to an exercise she hadn't performed since grad school. Studying her own face — its strong jaw, high forehead and fine creases — she concentrated on the features she hated. Simpson's goal wasn't to convince herself she was beautiful. It was to simply accept what she saw, to hold her own gaze and think, "This is me. This is who I am."

"Daughters: Reverence" (2024), a sculptural installation for last year's Whitney Biennial. Credit: Ron Amstutz

5. "DAUGHTERS: REVERENCE" (2024)

Simpson sees her sculptures as "Trojan horses of consciousness," slipping into spaces where they might encourage others to examine their own bruises and blind spots. Still, she often worries she's deluding herself, especially when she's confronted with evidence that, for some collectors, her sculptures are little more than trophies. "When I hear people go, 'Do you have a Rose? *I* have a Rose,' I'm like, 'What the [expletive] is that?'" she said. " 'Have I just become fuel for the fire?'" She recently had a dream in which she was gingerly trying to extract herself from a nest of snakes — an almost too-perfect "metaphor for the art world," she said.

Ever since the Black Lives Matter movement emerged a decade ago, commercial galleries and public museums have been attempting to correct biases, including the dearth of Indigenous work in American institutions. In 2020, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., acquired its first major work by a Native artist, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, who died earlier this year, and who was the first Native American honored with a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2023. Just last year, Jeffrey Gibson became the first Indigenous artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. Simpson is wary of the scramble to include Native perspectives that can sometimes result in graceless groupings of artists. When curators propose events to accompany her exhibitions, the standard pitch goes: " 'Let's find all the Indians in the area and have a powwow or somehow honor the Indians,'" she said. "And I'm always like, 'When you had an Asian artist, did you do that?'"

Her response to tokenism is to create figures that exist unto themselves. For last year's Whitney Biennial, she installed "Daughters: Reverence" (2024), a group of four regal figures — in ocher, black, red and gray — adorned in cascades of handmade beads. Simpson made no attempt to smooth or polish their skin, leaving it dappled with hundreds of her fingerprints. The towering figures stood facing one another, seemingly unconcerned with the spectators around them. "They're not doing something for the audience," she said. "They're actually doing work with each other."

Simpson is slowly trying to do the same, to blot out distractions and external expectations. It's partly why she's learning to fly helicopters. "In every single moment, there's like 1,000 things that could kill you," she said — the danger forces her to be present. She dreams of someday building one, a winged sister to "Bosque" and "Maria" painted with similar Pueblo patterns. It would be a work of art, but also something of real use. With a helicopter, her tribe wouldn't have to depend on outsiders to reach remote parts of the reservation. It would be only for them, she said — "not for anybody else."