

Chronogram

"Rose B. Simpson's Monumental Sculpture Seed Takes Root at Vassar"

By Brian K. Mahoney

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Rose B. Simpson's *Seed* (2024) rises 18 feet high on the northwest edge of Vassar's campus—seven weathered steel sentinels encircling a bronze female figure that appears to emerge from the earth, embodying reflection, protection, and ancestral presence.

On the northwest edge of the Vassar College campus, between the stately arboretum and the slow drift of city streets, seven towering figures stand watch. Formed from weathered steel, they ring a bronze woman who seems to be rising from the earth itself—an emergence, a remembering. *Seed* (2024), by Santa Clara Pueblo artist Rose B. Simpson, is the newest addition to the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center's collection of public art, and the first major outdoor work by an Indigenous artist to make a permanent home on the campus.

At 18 feet high, the installation commands attention, but it's not spectacle Simpson is after. Her sentinels, cut from massive sheets of steel and punctured with geometric patterns drawn unconsciously from Pueblo visual language, stand as watchful protectors. The larger bronze faces look outward, guardians for the living; the smaller faces gaze inward toward the central female figure, a gesture of introspection and renewal. Together, the figures form a circle of protection—an invitation to reflection, and a quiet critique of what humanity too easily takes for granted.

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Bart Thurber, the Loeb's Anne Hendricks Bass Director, notes that *Seed* was deliberately sited at the campus's perimeter. "Its location symbolizes a community with its figurative elements looking both inward and outward," he says. "We wanted it to be visible from the neighborhoods as well as from campus—to signal welcome, reflection, and connection." The work bridges thresholds—between past and future, art and land, college and community.

That sense of continuity extends to the ground itself. Around the sculpture, a ring of native plants—common milkweed, wild strawberry, and other medicinal species—grow in consultation with Misty Cook, an herbalist from the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians. Their presence roots the piece in the valley's first stories, where the Munsee-Lenape once gathered plants for food, medicine, and ceremony. In this living ecology, Simpson's work becomes less monument than ecosystem.



A detail from Rose B. Simpson's Seed reveals one of the smaller bronze faces that gaze inward toward the central figure—an intimate expression of reflection and renewal within the circle of steel sentinels.

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Deputy Director and Curator Mary-Kay Lombino calls the sculpture "powerful and thought-provoking," praising Simpson's fusion of traditional craft and modern material. "Her expressive design draws heavily on her ancestral Kha'p'oe Ówíngéh tribe's traditions," Lombino says, "while also integrating innovative techniques that connect the past with contemporary experience."

Nearby, inside the Loeb, a complementary exhibition—"For Maria: Rose B. Simpson and Pueblo Pottery"—traces the lineage of her practice through drawings, lithographs, and early Pueblo ceramics and is on display through February 15. It's a reminder that *Seed* did not simply appear; it germinated from centuries of women shaping clay and story into form.

Standing before *Seed*, you can feel that inheritance in the steel and soil alike—a circle of ancestors, a call to consciousness, and an insistence that art, like the land, never stops teaching.

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