

FRIEZE

"Rose B. Simpson on Indigenous Education"

By Rose B. Simpson and Natalie Diaz

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The Santa Clara Pueblo artist speaks with poet Natalie Diaz about learning outside institutions, exploring how clay, steel and cars become teachers in her work



Natalie Diaz I first knew you as a writer, when you were doing the MFA programme in creative non-fiction at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe [IAIA]. I thought we could begin there and talk about education: what it means to you to have these different experiences of learning, both from elders and family – intergenerational knowledge – and through Native and Western institutions. How has that shaped some of the ways you move in the world as an artist, as well as a Native artist?



Rose B. Simpson, 2022. Courtesy: the artist, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman, New York; photograph: Minesh Bacrania

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Rose B. Simpson It's fascinating, because my mom, who is also an artist, chose to raise me and my brother in the Santa Clara Pueblo [in New Mexico], and she wanted to return to ancestral ways of learning and being in relationship to place, land and community. So she pulled us out of tribal day school to be homeschooled. Her approach to education was very much like chopping wood to learn your fractions.

My brother was really into history, specifically military history, and we would go to the library and borrow all these books on the subject. While my mom worked in her studio, he would read his books out loud, and that was part of our lesson plan. We'd find what we were interested in and then teach her what we were learning.

Western education almost feels like sugar: it doesn't really feed you, but it's fun. – Rose B. Simpson

In my community you learn by watching, by paying attention. If anyone has to tell you bluntly what's going on, that's a shameful moment. You should already know, just from observing. You look around and see what needs to be done, what other people are doing, and then mimic their behaviours. It's on you to learn. My mom's approach to homeschooling was also very much relational and applied. I'm saying this because when she made it an option for us to go to school, it was very desirable to us. We both desperately wanted structure, especially my brother. He went to military school and I went to the Santa Fe Indian School.

I had a 100 percent attendance rate, because I saw school as a buffet of information: a place where people just tell you things and you get to learn, and they help you figure it out. That was miraculous to me. But I struggled with some of the simple rules, things like asking to use the bathroom, because it wasn't a neural pathway I had built.



Rose B. Simpson, *Full Turn* (detail), 2020, ceramic, twine, metal, concrete and leather, 189 × 34 × 36 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco

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ND What were some of the biggest shifts you experienced in moving from learning at home to a place like the IAIA or the Rhode Island School of Design [RISD], where you earned a master's in ceramics? Could you reflect on that part of your artistic education?

RBS My frustration with RISD was that many of the artists were conjuring up subject matter, and it was very conceptual. On the other hand, IAIA was a unique environment where it wasn't about fishing for content, but more about how you tactfully convey your ideas. I saw Western education as a kind of shortcut to knowledge and expertise, because it's not necessarily applied. It's very heady, right? It's disconnected from the body, in the sense that it's quite different from learning on your own, hands-on. The privilege of growing up in a postcolonial, Indigenous thinking environment – and seeing Western systems of living and working as an option, but not as scripture – is that it encourages you to think about other ways the world might function, both spiritually and adaptively. Ideas of sustainable agriculture and the preservation of cultural systems that are based in an ancestral relationship to place become even more intriguing. Western education almost feels like sugar: it doesn't really feed you, but it's fun.



Rose B. Simpson, *Bosque*, 2025, installation view. Courtesy: Fine Arts Museums San Francisco, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco and Jack Shainman, New York; photograph: Kate Russell

ND I teach on a writing MFA at Arizona State University, and that's always the difficult part for students: when they sit down and think, 'Well, what do I write about? I have to write about something.' They're looking for something profound – which, in a way, means you're looking in the wrong place. You're doing too much with this disconnected 'I', this ocularcentric 'I', rather than an awareness of the other ways your body sees. It's being obsessed with making a mark versus giving yourself the curiosity to understand how you've been marked, and how you therefore mark others as you move alongside each other in the world.

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When people talk about Indigeneity, they often invoke the word 'relationality', but it's not just reciprocity. It's about responsibility – to your tribal nation, community, parent, sibling, child. I wonder if you reflect on this word 'responsibility'. How do you think about your role, your gift, your responsibility as a maker?

RBS You said a couple of things that I think are key. One of those is the word 'awareness', which I think means listening or silencing oneself in order to receive instruction. I feel like self-awareness is an overused phrase right now, because of how the New Age spiritual movements have been a little too self-indulgent. I've found that the passion that I feel to create work, to return to the studio, is actually that of service and responsibility. It's not lost on me that there are so many ancestors who are watching me sculpt clay. I'm being supported and guided by them – not on how to use the medium, but how to honour this skill that I was given in order to heal. It's for something larger than myself.



Rose B. Simpson, *Bosque*, 2025, production documentation. Courtesy: Fine Arts Museums San Francisco, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco and Jack Shainman, New York; photograph: Kate Russell

ND We've had conversations about the importance of materials – especially when we strip away the word's association with commodity or exchange. Etymologically, 'material' simply means the substance, the body, from which something is made. Could you speak about your relationship to materials – how you think about them, how you hold and carry them, not as resources you purchase and transform but as something you're in relationship with?

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RBS What I've noticed is that creating these 'art beings', as I call my sculptures – transforming them from their previous state into what they've been called to be, through my physical being – is very taxing. It takes a lot. I've just had a realization: maybe I make anthropomorphic forms because I need them to hold in their bodies what I can't. I ask of them to carry this part of me. This idea that we use clay, we use steel or wood, is not how I think. I ask of the metal, I ask of the wood, I ask of the earth to change form with me to do this work, to be in service. I'm asking for the material's collaboration. To respect the material is to work in a state of consent, and in order to get consent from something that is deemed inanimate, you have to be able to learn to communicate with it. I talk to my materials all the time.

ND I find your language of collaboration with materials so striking. You describe clay, steel and wood not just as resources but as co-labourers, bodies in their own right. It recalls older understandings of making – when writing, for instance, required ink drawn from animals or bone, reminding us that creation has always been embodied.

With that in mind, I'd like to turn to your exhibition 'Lexicon' at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. Could you talk about your two customized cars, *Maria* [2014] and *Bosque* [2024], which figure prominently in this project? I'm also interested in how the sensuality of working with clay translates to cars – how your making self exists alongside them. And, finally, the car as both object and disruption: what it allows in terms of movement and freedom, especially in cruising culture in New Mexico, where the roads themselves become part of the work.



Rose B. Simpson, *Seed*, 2024, installation view, Madison Square Park, New York. Courtesy: the artist, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman, New York; photograph: Elisabeth Bernstein

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RBS Both *Maria* and *Bosque* were with me before they became what they are now. I already had a relationship with these cars before I painted them. They are beings. They are vessels. They hold energy and intention. They are very much someone. Anyone who has ever had a relationship with a car can understand that. Cars have character – you can see it, you can feel it – and the responsibility I feel for them is intense. I have to love and nurture them. I feel like the energy that we recently put into *Bosque*, to transform her from what she was to what she is now, was immense. She was my driving car.

Cruising is a meditative act that can make you more present in the moment– Rose B. Simpson

I recently gave a lecture on art and ecology as part of the show's programming. The cars' designs reflect that idea. A 'bosque' is a riverbank woodland where water sustains life – where deer, elk, fish and eagles gather – and my 1964 Buick Riviera carries that name. I remember finishing *Maria*, bringing her home and thinking, there's no way I made this car. She felt more beautiful than I could claim. Then I realized I was in service to her creation – she called me to realize her dream, and I had to grow to accept that truth.

I was at a meeting recently with a group of lowriders, and someone from out of town was like, 'We'll have a spot where people can sell their cars.' One of the guys said, 'Are you serious? Every single one of my cars is in my will to my daughters.' The love and intention behind that is a lifelong investment in relationship, something carried across generations. It's about cultivating an aesthetic practice and a way of living, rooted in family and community. It's not about economic development or producing objects for sale.



Rose B. Simpson, *Counterculture*, 2022, twelve dyed-concrete and steel sculptures with clay and cable adornments, 325 × 61 × 28 cm (each), installation view, Field Farm, Williamstown, MA. Courtesy: the artist, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; photograph: Stephanie Zollshan

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ND That, to me, is an important disruption of what we call 'art'. Your cars demand more of art: they're functional, intimate and rooted in lived experience. What I love is that you can cruise them down the road – with your child, with a friend, on a date – or simply park and sit in the back. There's a sensuality in that, tied to the lowrider and other car cultures you come from. Can you talk about how these works embody art as something utilitarian, a necessity for being, rather than a luxury?

RBS Lowriding and cruising has a specific aesthetic – whether you're going really fast or low and slow – that is about taking care of each other. There's this bond you have with a car, and it feeds into an aesthetic – a relational aesthetic. Performance is a moment that has two edges, similar to a museum or gallery wall, or a frame. A performance is saying, this is where it begins and this is where it ends, and what's in the middle is special. What I was trying to define, in the context of Indigenous aesthetics, was the idea of performance as something that transforms a moment.

It's not lost on me that there are so many ancestors who are watching me sculpt clay- Rose B. Simpson

After studying relational aesthetics and performance art at RISD, I enrolled in an automotive science programme, because I found that cruising is a meditative act that can make you more present in the moment. When you're sitting in a really beautiful car and driving through Española, New Mexico, on Good Friday, and everybody else is in their really nice car, and we're all so excited to see each other and so proud of what we have to show, it's a transformative moment of relational presence. For communities that have been subjected to postcolonial violence, to disparities of all kinds, these moments are vital to survival.



Preparatory sketch of *Behold*, an upcoming site-specific commission at SFMOMA. Courtesy: the artist, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman, New York

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ND Let's talk about *Behold*, your monumental sculpture to be unveiled in January 2026 at SFMOMA, and what it means to create a work of this scale.

RBS That work has been a long time coming. It's a monumental bronze of a mother figure with a child coming from her hip. The mother is looking out over the city, and the child is watching how she's perceiving the world. It's been a long process – and it should be. Not in a dogmatic way, but in terms of a deeper witnessing, holistically allowing in information from all our senses. To do that, we need to listen to all sides of the story. And in a world where information is being constantly pushed into our eyeballs, we're going to have to begin to exercise our intuitive muscles in order to make informed decisions. That's a lot to hold, but that complexity is fucking beautiful.

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Rose B. Simpson's 'LEXICON' is on view at the Fine Arts Museums, San Francisco, until 2 August 2026

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