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Rose B. Simpson: "A Museum Gone to Pot"

By Emily Wilson

May 25, 2026



Featured image: Installation view of Rose B. Simpson: *LEXICON*, de Young Museum, San Francisco, 2025, Photograph by Gary Sexton. Image has been cropped.

IT'S RARE TO BE genuinely surprised in an arts space, but that's what Rose B. Simpson has managed with *LEXICON* (2025–27), creating a genuinely startling experience at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. Walking into Wilsey Court, the viewer finds a 1964 Buick Riviera and a 1985 Chevrolet El Camino. What's more, these classic cars are painted with Pueblo pottery motifs. The Chevy, *Maria* (2014), is matte black with glossy black geometric designs in a style pioneered by Tewa potter Maria Martinez. The Riviera, *Bosque* (2024), has a cream exterior painted in a different Tewa style, with a design that includes turkey feathers and flower motifs.

Simpson is best known for her life-size (or larger than life-size) figurative clay sculptures, often incorporating or adorned with metal, beads, leather, concrete, and wood. The sometimes monumental figures seem at once ancient and modern, presenting an interplay between materials and between the human form and the abstract markings of their mesmerizing surfaces. At the Whitney Museum in 2023–24, she exhibited a suite of clay figures, limbless and flat, standing in a row. Titled *Counterculture* (2022), the body of work concerned communities outside the mainstream—their beliefs, modes of expression, and sense of place, themes that echo across *LEXICON*.

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Simpson's interest in cars comes from growing up in Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico (where she still lives), right next to Española, considered by some to be "the Low Rider Capital of the World." The customized cars, modified to sit close to the ground and frequently fitted with hydraulic systems to raise and lower the car's body, are often elaborately painted. Santa Clara Pueblo is itself renowned for its pottery, which typically incorporates a high-gloss surface with matte designs. Simpson's mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother all worked with clay, a lineage that goes back centuries, and the material feels almost like a family member, she says: it's what her house is made of, and it's how she makes her livelihood. In *LEXICON*, Simpson is telling a story about clay and cars, design and function, craft and community, decoration and signification. She says that she got the idea to paint *María* with Pueblo designs during harvest on her and her mother's small farms, when she used the Chevy's flatbed to transport some crops. It struck her that the car was a vessel, like a pot.

With their meticulous craft and detailing, Pueblo pottery and lowriders alike are highly aestheticized *functional* objects. But the effect produced by *María* and *Bosque* depends as much on context and staging: facing away from each other in the vast public court of the museum. The incongruity of cars covered in Tewa designs is compounded by their dislocation. They are cars and they are pots and they are sculptures. Their presentation plays on two different modes of display—exhibiting works of art in a museum and exhibiting rides at a lowrider meetup or car show.

Simpson has surrounded the cars with a huge mural, 33 feet tall by 53 feet wide, encircling the hall with a vast evocation of a Southwestern landscape and Pueblo pottery motifs. In earth colors, creams, brown, rust, and red, the mural grounds the cars in a symbolic context of rain clouds, corn, mountains, feathers, and flowers. It emphasizes the importance of place—for Simpson, for lowrider culture, and for the living tradition of Tewa pottery—while also highlighting the site of the museum and turning the space into an enormous pot. If, as Simpson said, a car is a vessel, so is a museum: all cultural artifacts are pots in which we store meanings, memories, ideas, and narratives.

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