

San Francisco Chronicle

"Rose B. Simpson: Where to see contemporary Native American art in San Francisco right now"

By Petala Ironcloud

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Installation view of "Rose B. Simpson: LEXICON, " at the de Young Museum.

Gary Sexton/Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

As the United States continues to celebrate its 250th anniversary, a deeper reckoning with national identity is unfolding.

"What is America?" — the question newly foregrounded by the nation's milestone — resonates across Bay Area museums and galleries as contemporary Native American art challenges old narratives. For patrons who recall these institutions displaying stolen Native artifacts as relics of a bygone civilization, the answer feels both overdue and striking.

Local museums have responded by dismantling their Native art wings that had long depicted Indigenous people through an anthropological lens, while galleries are offering solo shows to highlight today's most compelling Native artists.

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Here are four must-see exhibitions and works showing how that shift is taking shape across the region.

'Rose B Simpson: Lexicon'

Tewa sculptor Rose B. Simpson's refurbished ceramic low-rider car dyad has generated more selfies at the de Young Museum than any other artwork in the institution's history, according to Hillary Olcott, curator for Arts of the Americas at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, which also includes the Legion of Honor.

Each car has its own identity. "Maria," a 1985 Chevy El Camino, is a hot rod Simpson began transforming in 2014 and continues to refine. It features a black-on-black pottery-inspired design associated with iconic San Ildefonso Pueblo potter Maria Martinez.



Rose B Simpson working on her 1964 Buick Riviera, Bosque.

Kate Russell/Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco and Jack Shainman, New York

Meanwhile, "Bosque," a 1964 Buick Riviera, is a true lowrider equipped with hydraulics. It incorporates polychrome Tewa pottery patterns in cream, black and terracotta.

A practical descendant of matrilineal Southwestern Native potters, Simpson collaborated with Olcott, on the vehicles' installation at the de Young. They are intentionally displayed against a

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geometric, warmly colored backdrop to emulate her New Mexican homelands, from which the vehicles were driven to San Francisco.

"These are mobile vessels to bring her and her loved ones to different places and to protect them as they embody these spaces," Olcott said.

9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Through Feb 7. \$11-\$20; free for children 17 and younger. De Young Museum, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. www.famsf.org



Rose B Simpson's "Behold" at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Don Ross/San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

'Rose B Simpson: Behold'

Simpson appears again at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, this time in the shape of a sentinel-like maternal figure holding a child.

The 24-foot-tall sculpture titled "Behold," stands in the museum's upstairs courtyard, watching over the city, telegraphing a soothing calm to viewers and the at times dysfunctional surrounding streets.

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Originally designed in clay, using a millennia-old tradition passed down through matrilineal lines, the maquette was sent off to be recast in bronze, a material tenacious enough to survive the peninsula's fog.

In January, SFMOMA announced the acquisition of 85 works created by contemporary Native artists, including "Behold" and Brad Kahlhamer's metal dreamcatcher "Supercatcher" (2014). This marked a significant departure for SFMOMA, which had never featured contemporary Native art in its permanent collection or acknowledged it narratively in its exhibitions as foundational to abstraction and American modernism.



Rose B Simpson's "Behold" at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Don Ross/San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

That erasure appears especially stark when compared to other Bay Area museums quickly reconstituting their collections to include contemporary Native artists in advance of the U.S.'s 250th anniversary.

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SFMOMA declined to provide data on how many Native artists are in their permanent collection or what share of the collection they represent, citing incomplete self-reported data. But the institution announced in 2024 that it holds more than 50,000 works. With the addition of the 85 newly acquired works by contemporary Native artists, such works now account for at least 0.17% of the collection.

10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Tuesday and Friday-Sunday; noon-8 p.m. \$23-\$30; free for children under 12 years old. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third Street, S.F. www.sfmoma.org



Shoshoni Gensaw-Hostler (Yurok, b. 1982) "Holding Prayer," 2024. Dentalium shells, clamshells, mother of pearl, sinew, fabric, 10×40 in. (25.4×101.6 cm)
Randy Dodson/Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

'Rooted in Place: California Native Art'

Centering mostly living Native artists hailing from across the state of California, "Rooted in Place" features a striking work by Karuk artist Brian D. Tripp titled "Someday You Might Have to Fight for What You Believe In" (1999).

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The graphic, yellow-and-black abstract figurative portrait depicts an all-black geometric figure flanked by black and rich yellow triangles. The figures stand beneath a gray-and-black concentric moon opposite a swirling yellow sun embellished by red and black triangles. This composition embodies the spiritual and political core of both the exhibition and the de Young Museum's revamped Arts of Indigenous America wing.



Brian D. Tripp (Karuk, 1945-2022)
"Someday You Might Have to Fight for What You Believe In," 1999
Acrylic on canvas, Overall: 69×45 in. (175.26×114.3 cm)
Randy Dodson/Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

"Rooted in Place" also offers something for fashion enthusiasts: a sculptural white mantle named "Holding Prayer"(2026) by Yurok artist Shoshone Genshaw-Hostler. Constructed with dentalium shells, clam shells, mother of pearl, sinew and fabric, the work's inclusion isn't a surprise to Native viewers but intentionally challenges others' preconceived ideas about fine art.

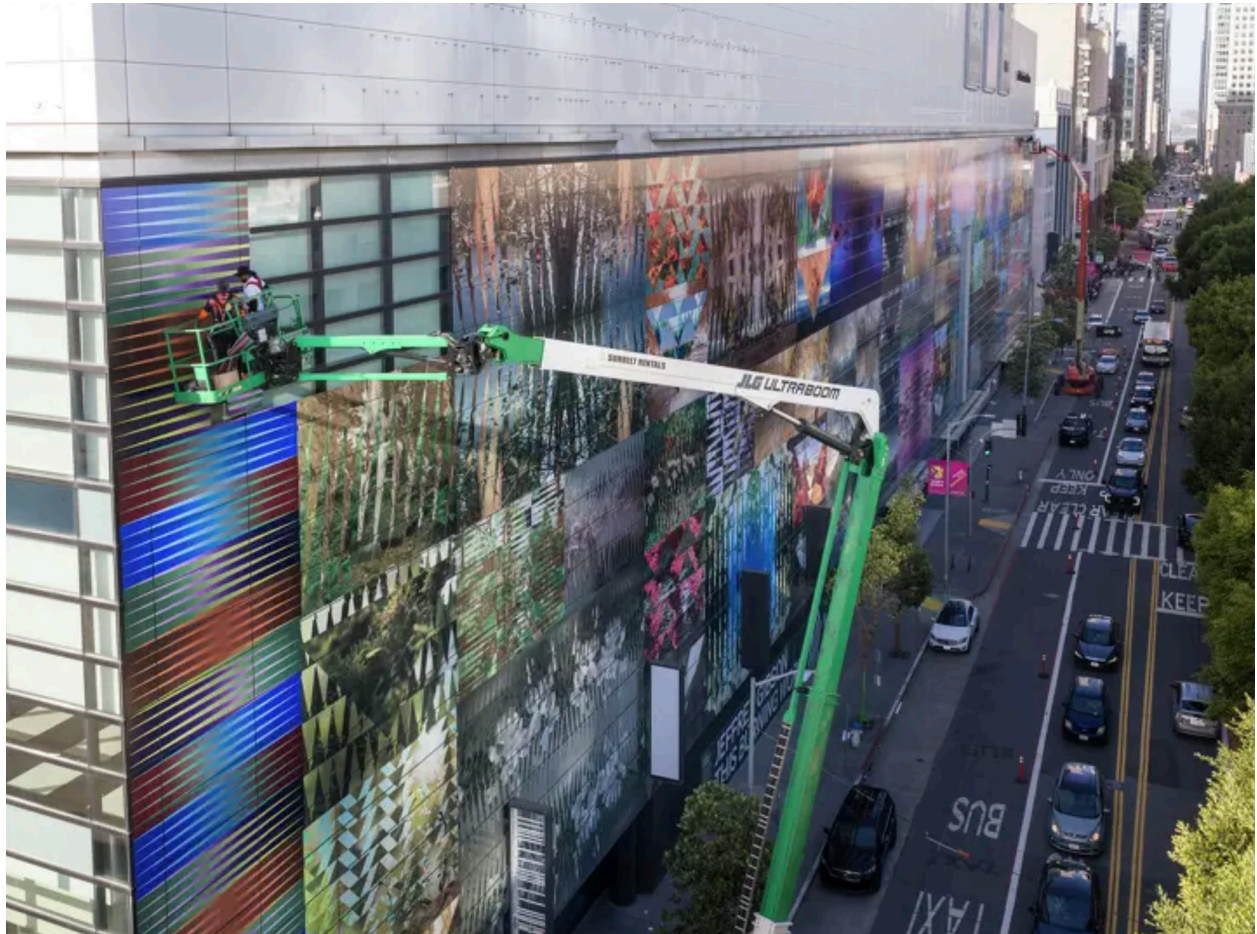
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In the adjacent Arts of Indigenous Americas gallery, Rumsen Ohlone basketweaver Linda Yamane's "Ohlone Feathered Basket" (2025) serves as a land acknowledgement. The vibrant basket incorporates fire-colored feathers, reinforcing a theme seen across the Bay Area and increasingly embedded into Californians' consciousness.

9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Through Dec. 6. \$11-\$20; free for children 17 and younger. De Young Museum, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. www.famsf.org

'This Burning World'



"This Burning World" (2026), vinyl facade on the Mission Street side of the former Bloomingdale's building at the San Francisco Centre.
Henrik Lam/ICA SF

Along Market Street in San Francisco, the economic dead zone is revived by Mississippi Choctaw-Cherokee painter Jeffrey Gibson's digital landscape, "This Burning World," commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco and projected onto the former Bloomingdale's edifice.

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The 60-foot-wide work features images from upstate New York and the Bay Area in woven, kaleidoscopic and geometric panels. It also borrows imagery from a 2022 video installation by the same name.

Gibson's landscape points to Native mastery of abstraction and landscape, and subtly critiques how Indigenous peoples were depicted as belonging to bygone cultures by celebrated 19th-century photographers, while Native creatives were relegated to "craft." Each photograph is layered or superimposed with another color-filtered photograph, creating geometrically interlaced images stacked like film strips and juxtaposed in a slate of half- and full-sized columns to produce a woven photographic landscape.

Gibson's layered and superimposed images produce a woven photo landscape, or textile, evoking the Lakota phrase *mitákuye oyásin*, meaning "we are all related," and #NoDAPL (No Dakota Access Pipeline) underscoring inseparable human-land kinship.

Orange-brown, navy, crimson, teal and gray triangles abound, reference Native design and Gibson's gay identity. Vertical oblong triangles evoke Plains Native parfleche designs, while smaller vertical strips of triangles suggest mountains, rays of sun or feathers. Horizontal forms seem to signify mountains, direction and movement, or symbolize protection from harmful and uninvited spirits. Elsewhere, a large central inverted triangle may allude to the AIDS awareness emblem.

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