

ART @ BAINBRIDGE

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Witness / Rose B. Simpson

July 23–September 11, 2022



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Rose B. Simpson is a mixed-media artist working in ceramic, attire, performance, and custom cars. Her practice centers on the figure—often portrayed as androgynous—to address the emotional and existential impacts of our humanity. Her work is deeply rooted in her personal history; Simpson is from Santa Clara Pueblo, famous for the ceramics produced by women since the sixth century CE. With MFA degrees in ceramics, from the Rhode Island School of Design, and in creative nonfiction, from the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, Simpson practices from her studio and carshop in northern New Mexico.

The following text is based on an interview conducted by Bryan R. Just with Rose B. Simpson.

When viewing my work, I want visitors to find parts of themselves that may not be easily accessed, to set aside their stereotypes and judgments and understand their biases, to access my work with a different emotional lens.

BRJ: Do you think the use of the human form facilitates direct emotional engagement?

Absolutely. I create installations that our bodies enter. Our physical bodies become part of the work; we become part of the installation. When entering into the installation space, you are transformed.

In my sculpture, I often leave out individual characteristics, but I always use sensory organs—the nose, the eyes, the ears, the mouth—to spark an empathic response. Through our senses the human body perceives and witnesses.

BRJ: Your sculptures might inhabit spaces you may not have imagined. At Bainbridge House, they are situated within an eighteenth-century home, a colonial space. Is this space at odds with your work, or, conversely, should we think of Bainbridge House itself as being “out of place”?

I like that idea. There have been times when I wanted only to speak to people who could understand my work. I wanted the work to be loved, seen, and cared for in the way that I intended. Yet if my sculptures are out of place, they’re actually working harder than if they’re surrounded by my context. I want my sculptures to go into difficult places; they’re intended to infiltrate.

I like words like “witness” that can flop from noun to verb. These words are powerful and transformative; they’re dynamic. Such words remind us of how much agency we have. Witnessing happens both ways. Viewers might be looking at the sculpture, but the work is also watching them.

GALLERY 1

I play with the idea of the bust as a form of portraiture, as a way to an empathic response without building the whole human form. I'm interested in the relationship between the vessel as a common ceramic form and the vessel of the human body.

I can't make an honest portrait of someone else. I have to make pieces of myself. I look at myself in different ways. We're so multifaceted. If I can find that place that's connected to all things and speaks the language of the universe, and we can each hear and understand it, then you'll know that place as well as I do, and can have an empathic response. Maybe we'll stop hurting each other because we'll know how it feels to be that tree, that rock, or that cactus, and we won't want to hurt it because we'll know what it feels like to hurt.



***Tusked 1*, 2019**

Ceramic, leather, and beads

Collection of Steve Corkin and Dan Maddalena

Tusked 1 is about how microaggressions form an exoskeleton protection. If you repeatedly experience hostile or derogatory comments, you grow hardened bones. I ask that we acknowledge the cumulative impact of microaggressions on others. The necklaces on *Tusked 1* are about maintaining self-worth and dignity.

GALLERY 2



Believer I, 2020

Ceramic, metal, and mixed media
Collection of Bridgitt and Bruce Evans



Believer II, 2020

Ceramic, metal, and mixed media
Collection of Bridgitt and Bruce Evans

The closed eyes represent subjects engaged in internal experience. They're in a state of faith. Like me at work. I developed a technique that I call slap-slab. It involves throwing clay on a flat surface until it's really thin. Working with thin slabs of clay forces me to be present in the process because I have to make swift decisions: the clay dries very fast, and it's also very weak. If it's too wet or too dry, I can't attach the next layer of clay. I can't leave it overnight and come back the next day; I have to commit to the process.

I created slap-slab because I was trying to get away from perfection. In the past, I drew what I wanted to make in a sketchbook and tried to repeat that in clay.

I became frustrated if a work didn't turn out the way I had imagined. With slap-slab, I have to accept how a work ends up instead of judging what it could have been. I have more compassion for myself. The process is a metaphor for lived experience and the ways we navigate our lives.

I don't make many slap-slab pieces with legs because it's hard. The pieces are very light, but they have metal bases. *Believer II*, with the legs, has a rod through the leg and torso to hold the head up.

BRJ: You've spoken about your presence in the works, through your fingerprints and the slap-slab process of making, as well as the momentary and fleeting nature of the creative experience. Through firing, the ceramic sculpture becomes fixed. I find an interesting tension between the ephemeral and the enduring result.

Once I fire something, it becomes eternal, a relic. I am making future potshards. I walk into the hills and see the fingerprints of my ancestors and then go make more. I have a very engaged relationship with history and lineage.

GALLERY 3

When I'm starting with the head, I think about the spaces that we inhabit psychologically or intellectually, our thoughts and aspirations.

Dragonfly is about insomnia. I've been trying to embrace insomnia. If you fight it, it persists. If you accept it, it becomes easier to navigate. At its core, it's about a very active mind.

We have to be innovative to survive. As a kid, I used to shop at the dump. I found great stuff to reconfigure, appropriate for something else. It's hard to throw things away if they can be fixed or reused. When you don't have much, you learn to use what you have.



***Dragonfly*, 2019**

Ceramic, glaze, jute string, and steel
Collection of Margot and George Greig

I work with clay vessels, our bodies are vessels, and cars are vessels. I see the pieces of cars as body parts. I often use car parts in my work based on what they're intended for in the car. I use brakes for the feet of my sculptures. *Dragonfly* uses a drum brake, an older type of brake. I play on the words in the sculpture with the idea of taking a break, pausing to notice. I love to use brakes for that reason.



Femme, 2020

Ceramic, metal, and mixed media
Collection of Emily and Mike Cavanagh

With *Femme*, I navigate gender and expectations of being female. I was a model in high school. I hated it. That level of objectification and even sexualization of my body was very unhealthy. It didn't feel safe. I felt incredibly vulnerable. I reacted by getting rid of tropes of feminine stereotypes, by favoring my masculine side. I felt invincible, like I could do the things I wanted to do in my life without being assaulted.

With *Femme*, I explore how I might reclaim that feminine energy without perpetuating gender stereotypes. I don't necessarily feel like I figured it out, but it's the beginning.



Protector I, 2020

Ceramic, metal, and mixed media

Collection of Steve Corkin and Dan Maddalena

Through my creative process, I try to understand what “warrior,” “strong,” “protected,” or “protector” looks like; to strip away weapons and external ideas about masculinity and strength in order to rewrite those gender characteristics, as I have with *Femme*. “Sensitive” and “tender” can also be qualities of strength. Where do we find strength?

GALLERY 4

These sculptures are part of a single artwork. They have ceramic bases with metal frames inside to hold up the heads. As with many of my works, *Old Masters* involves a lot of engineering. I have to predict how the work will survive. I’m always dealing with the fragility of the slap-slab clay, but often that fragility is part of the message. I try to convey a sense of fragility without the piece breaking.

BRJ: Given that your ancestors—including both parents—are also artists, are they your “old masters”?

These pieces were created as parents, as a mother and a father figure. They deconstruct the idea in Western art of “old master” artists and question who has the right to knowledge. For example, I take earth-colored clay and paint it with traditional pottery designs from my region.

The knowledge of my ancestry flips the script about who holds knowledge and who is the master.

The child in my sculpture carries knowledge in the form of the patterns on its surface. I refer to the nature versus nurture debate: What do you inherit genetically, and how does your environment feed your belief systems and your values? I’m connected to my mom, which must shape my practice more than history.

Much of my work is not about what it is, but how I do it. I’m sensitive to cultural exploitation. I don’t speak for all Native people. I don’t even speak for my tribe. Because I grew up very much a part of my community, I understand its nuances. I also come from a very private community. If you share too much cultural knowledge, you can get kicked out. I have something incredibly important to me—my background, heritage, and its strong foundation—that I could lose. Thus, I consider basing my conversation around my heritage as problematic. I’m trying to build a conversation with other communities that speak an entirely different cultural language. My life has been about trying to find a common way of communicating, a connection that’s beyond cultural background. I try to find a raw place inside people that can be accessed emotionally. The more vulnerable I can be in my expression, the rawer my truth is.

This piece is rare because I use so much cultural information. I want to use my own vulnerability, processes, and stories to demonstrate how we can all be vulnerable and committed to holding many perspectives without judgments about identity and self. This is why I often expose my building style, my hands, my fingerprints in the clay; the process is my own making, my own becoming.



Old Masters, 2021

Ceramic, glaze, grout, steel, leather, wire, scrim, string, twine, concrete, and epoxy
Private collection. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

All works are by Rose B. Simpson (Tewa Pueblo, born 1983, Santa Clara Pueblo, NM; active Santa Clara Pueblo) and are © Rose B. Simpson / Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. Photographs on pp. 4–9 are by John Wilson White.

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