

Counterculture, A Network

By Jamilee Lacy, Guest Curator

With her mixed media works, artist Rose B. Simpson translates our humanity back to us. *Counterculture*, like so much of Simpson's work, alludes to the impacts of patriarchy, racism, and more and pays tribute to the lived experiences of the "counterculture," or the many cultures whose values differ[ed] substantially from dominant cultural forces that accumulate and wield power through settler colonialism.

The sculptural figures in *Counterculture* look across what is, for Indigenous people, a post-apocalyptic vista of the vast homelands from which native peoples were forcibly removed to make way for settler colonialism. They look out across near and far landscapes imbued with the historical influences and cultural sacrifices of myriad non-Europeans—from enslaved Africans to migrants of later years—and other marginalized communities, who have all contributed to a place that exists within the realities and contexts of the past and the present day. With eyes that go through their heads, the figures represent watchful presences, perpetually observing and reminding us of what the original stewards of these lands already knew: that we are all guests in the natural world. Simpson harkens them like mothers looking over children—they are all-seeing, feminine-bodied forms imploring us to go forward with respect and honor for all that came before.

The installation of the figures comprises a long line, or string, of figures or, as the artist calls them, "spirits." From afar, and to avoid representing hierarchies of any kind, the figures look similar in height, shape, and hue, but upon closer view, subtle differences emerge. The colors, all earth tones, vary slightly, while their bodies rise with unique proportions. Simpson designed the figures to represent no one type or group of people. They instead reflect what is universal to humanity—a need for dignity, care, and protection—without flattening any story or experience.

The figures are made of dyed concrete. To create them, Simpson first sculpted two figures from wood, using a chain saw and hand tools to carve larger-than-life bodies. She then sent the two wooden forms, each slightly different from the other, to a casting and mold-making studio on the East coast. The craftspeople at the studio fabricated two silicone molds from the wood figures. Wet concrete mixed with various oxide pigments was poured into those molds to create the twelve works that make up the *Counterculture* installation. The result is twelve 10-foot figures with surfaces that, like those of our own bodies, alternate between smooth and rough,

Across much of her oeuvre, Simpson combines materials and processes, both natural and industrial. She usually builds her figurative works with clay, reinforcing them or connecting their parts with various light metals. *Counterculture*, however, is created with concrete, a new material for the artist. Used for millennia by cultures worldwide for large-scale building endeavors, concrete is a natural material comprised of crushed stone or gravel, sand, water, and air. It is also the literal foundation of industrialized societies. The industrial capacity of concrete provided Simpson with the opportunity to create an artwork that is large and able to withstand the elements, especially New England's dramatically differing four seasons. The concrete is reinforced with a steel post that runs the length of each figure. But clay is not totally left behind:

Invisible to the viewer, each figure's concrete chest is embedded with a ceramic ring. The rings, made of high-fire clay, symbolize humanity's core sense of connection to this world, to one another, and to the self—they are the visual and conceptual manifestation of that distinct yet indefinable essence we all feel within.

The necklace-like adornments worn by the figures consist of the same clay the artist used to mold the internal rings. The fireclay beads, numbering in the thousands, allude to innumerable lives that now endure in spirit within the figures and the landscape. While on the ancestral lands of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians, in present-day Williamstown, Simpson and representatives from the tribe harvested and processed more clay from nearby grounds. They will send the clay to the Stockbridge-Munsee Reservation in Wisconsin, where community youth will shape it into more beads over the coming months. Simpson will string those beads into additional sets of necklaces and layer them, with those she originally created, onto *Counterculture's* figures.

In every respect, the counterculture is a network that exists all at once in the past, present, and future. *Counterculture* exalts and expands it.

About the Artist

Rose B. Simpson's life work is a seeking out of tools with the potential to heal the damages of being human in our postmodern and postcolonial era. These tools manifest as artworks that function in psychological, emotional, social, cultural, spiritual, intellectual, and physical realms. The artist intends for these tools-cum-artworks to help build cures. In this sense, Simpson strives to imbue her artworks with poetic yet hard-working utilitarian concepts.

Rose B. Simpson (b. 1983, Santa Clara Pueblo) is a mixed-media artist from Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico. Her life's work is a seeking out of tools with the potential to heal the damages of being human in our postmodern and postcolonial era. These tools manifest as artworks that function in psychological, emotional, social, cultural, spiritual, intellectual, and physical realms. She explores a range of creative disciplines to make the artworks, including ceramics, sculpture, metals, fashion, performance, music, installation, writing, and custom-car work. She holds an MFA in Ceramics from Rhode Island School of Design, an MFA in Creative Non-Fiction from the Institute of American Indian Arts, a BFA from the University of New Mexico, and a certificate in Automotive Science from Northern New Mexico College. Her work is collected by museums across the continent and exhibited internationally. She lives and works from her home at Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico.

The Trustees of Reservations' Art & the Landscape: *Counterculture* by Rose B. Simpson runs June 18 – Spring 2023 at Field Farm, 554 Sloan Road, Williamstown, MA 01267.

See More Artwork by Rose B. Simpson

[*Ceramics in the Expanded Field*](#)

Through January 2023

MASS MoCA

[*Rose B. Simpson*](#)

August 11, 2022 – January 29, 2023

Institute of Contemporary Art Boston

Read More About Rose B. Simpson and Her Artwork

[Jori Finkel. "Rose B. Simpson Thinks in Clay" *The New York Times*. June 16, 2022.](#)

[Abatemarco, Michael. "Flying High: Rose B. Simpson." *Santa Fe New Mexican*. February 21, 2020.](#)

[Wolens, Ariella. "Rose B. Simpson Explores the Human Condition Through Her Native American Past." *Elephant Magazine*. December 16, 2019.](#)