

NATIONAL MUSEUM of the AMERICAN
INDIAN

FALL 2009



**STRANGE
COMFORT**

THE WEIRD BEAUTY OF
BRIAN JUNGEN

EUGENICS AND ERASURE:
WALTER PLECKER'S WAR
AGAINST VIRGINIA'S TRIBES

ONE FAMILY'S SURVIVAL

ROSE BEAN SIMPSON:
COMIC ART AND PRAYER

VAMPIRES AND INDIANS:
TWILIGHT SERIES FEEDS ON
QUILEUTE TRADITION



Smithsonian
National Museum of the American Indian

ROSE BEAN SIMPSON

PUEBLO MULTIMEDIA ARTIST CHALLENGES
THE VIEWER TO THINK DIFFERENTLY
ABOUT GENDER, ETHNICITY
AND CULTURE

BY ANYA MONTIEL

As a young girl, Rose Bean Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo) thought that everyone's mother worked with clay. Born in 1983 into a family of Pueblo clay artists, she grew up surrounded by some of the best-known potters in the southwest; her mother is Roxanne Swentzell, her aunt is Nora Naranjo-Morse and her grandmother is Rina Naranjo Swentzell. The noted potter Rose Naranjo is her great-grandmother and namesake. Yet Rose also draws inspiration from the world of hip hop, slam poetry and comic books.

Her career, as sculptor, painter, printmaker, poet, dancer and singer, reflects the two close-by but very unlike environments in which she was raised. Her father is Patrick Simpson, a non-Native wood and metal sculptor. When her parents were divorced, she divided her childhood between Santa Fe, the arts tourist capital of New Mexico, and Santa Clara Pueblo, north of Santa Fe along the Rio Grande. For a few years, she was home-schooled in a house built by her mother, surrounded by fields, gardens and animals. Later she attended the Santa Fe Indian School,

a boarding school governed and operated by the 19 northern pueblos of New Mexico.

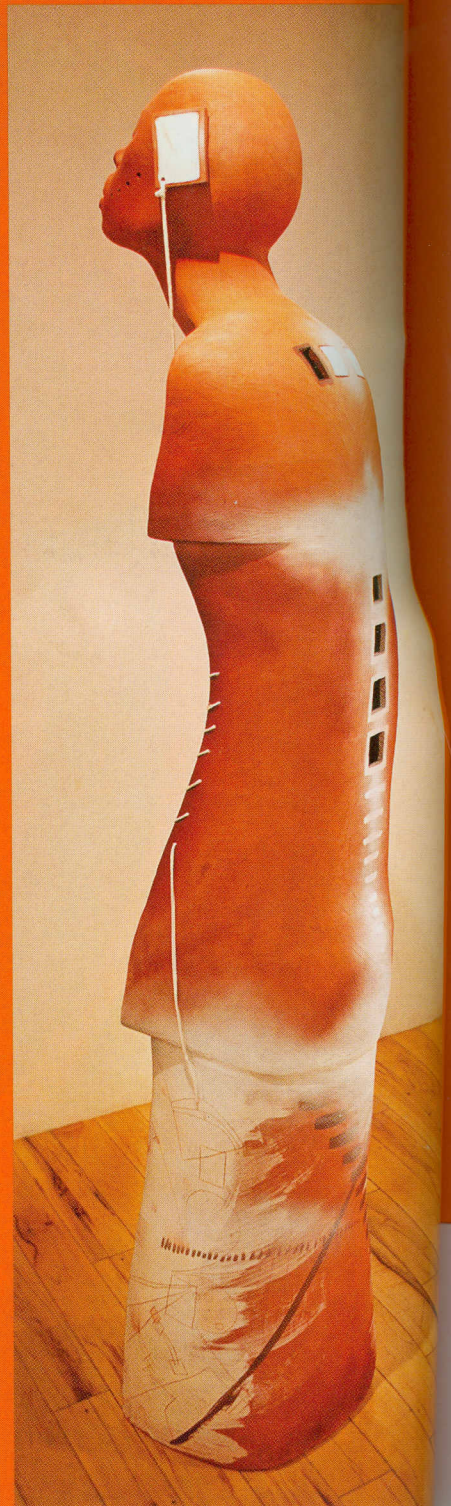
As valedictorian of her class, Simpson was accepted into an Ivy League university. But she chose the University of New Mexico (UNM) in Albuquerque instead. She remembered stories of her great-grandfather's escape from an Albuquerque boarding school. He had followed the Rio Grande back to Santa Clara Pueblo. Rose knew that home would be nearby, in case anything happened.

But she embraced the youth culture at UNM. At the age of sixteen, she had recorded back-up vocals for the Navajo rapper Natay. At UNM, she was in the hip hop group Garbage Pail Kidz. She also became involved in slam poetry. "I have always loved poetry," she says, "its simplicity, honesty and structure... where every word has its place... and the space between having deeper and deeper meanings." She calls herself a "3-D Poet."

At the university, Rose double-majored in studio art and creative writing, with a minor in flamenco dancing. In 2005, she returned to Santa Fe to complete her BFA degree



PHOTO BY KARL DUNCAN



at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA). There she joined the rock band Chocolate Helicopter. Today she is a member of the band The Wake Singers, composed of three original members of Chocolate Helicopter.

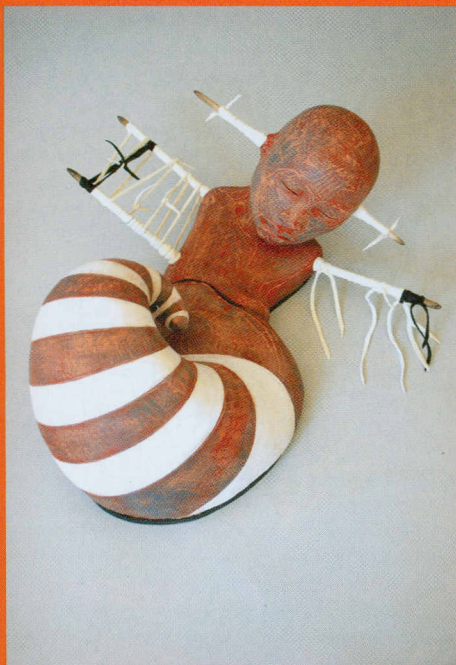
Since she had already taken her ceramics requirements, she enrolled in a small metals class at IAIA taught by Mark Herndon. She says she was “introduced to a whole new world of expression.” Her graduation exhibition included

a number of etched metal works hanging from the ceiling.

Simpson’s work now combines the three-dimensional plastic tradition of pottery with two-dimensional influences such as comic art. She was one of the artists featured in the *Comic Art Indigene* exhibition curated by the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe and recently on view at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

Like her mother’s artworks, Rose’s pieces are figurative. Yet these figures have cutouts exposing inner chambers. They are missing limbs or have bodily protrusions. They speak to her experience as a woman and a multicultural Native, objectified and judged by others. Her art challenges those stereotypes.

This aim underlies her long-time interest in comic art. She credits her stepfather Diego Romero (Cochiti Pueblo) with introducing



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

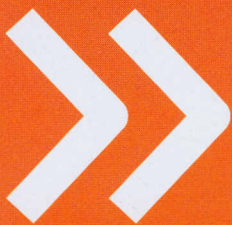
The Spirit of Will, 76" x 13.5" x 12", ceramic, leather, 2008.

Protection, 32" x 13" x 8", ceramic, bronze screen, bolts, pinion pine cone, 2009.

Messenger, 76" x 16" x 17", ceramic, leather, 2008.

What's Missing, 24" x 13" x 11", ceramic, wood, leather, 2009.

Think vs. Feel #3, 33" x 17" x 5", ceramic, wood, clock motors, 2007.



her to the genre through the *Love and Rockets* graphic novels. She acknowledges its dominance by males – both as its creators and consumers. Most of the human characters in graphic novels depict scantily-clad and buxom women, and men with absurdly muscular bodies. The images are often sexual and violent and can numb reactions to reality. She says, “we objectify, judge and stereotype pretty much everything after a while... [and] it begins to inhibit our abilities to



communicate and have much of a relationship with the real world.”

The *Comic Art* exhibition displayed her “Objectification Series,” four black-and-white figures cut from Masonite. The images address stereotypes based on physical appearances – a woman in a bra and short skirt, a Pueblo woman in a traditional manta, a graffiti artist in baggy pants and a hooded sweatshirt, and a lesbian couple with a motorcycle helmet. Simpson removed the black border that surrounds most comic strips and had each figure stand alone, away from the wall.

Many of her sculptures are personal, introspective pieces, but carry the universality of the human experience. Her inspiration arises from a “need to heal.” By exposing the pain or “wound,” healing can begin. This healing process is not for her alone; it is for everyone. As she reasons, “in understanding what is unhealthy within [me], then creating an art-prayer for growth and putting it out there for others to see, I am reflecting that same part of themselves, and in my healing they can grow as well.”

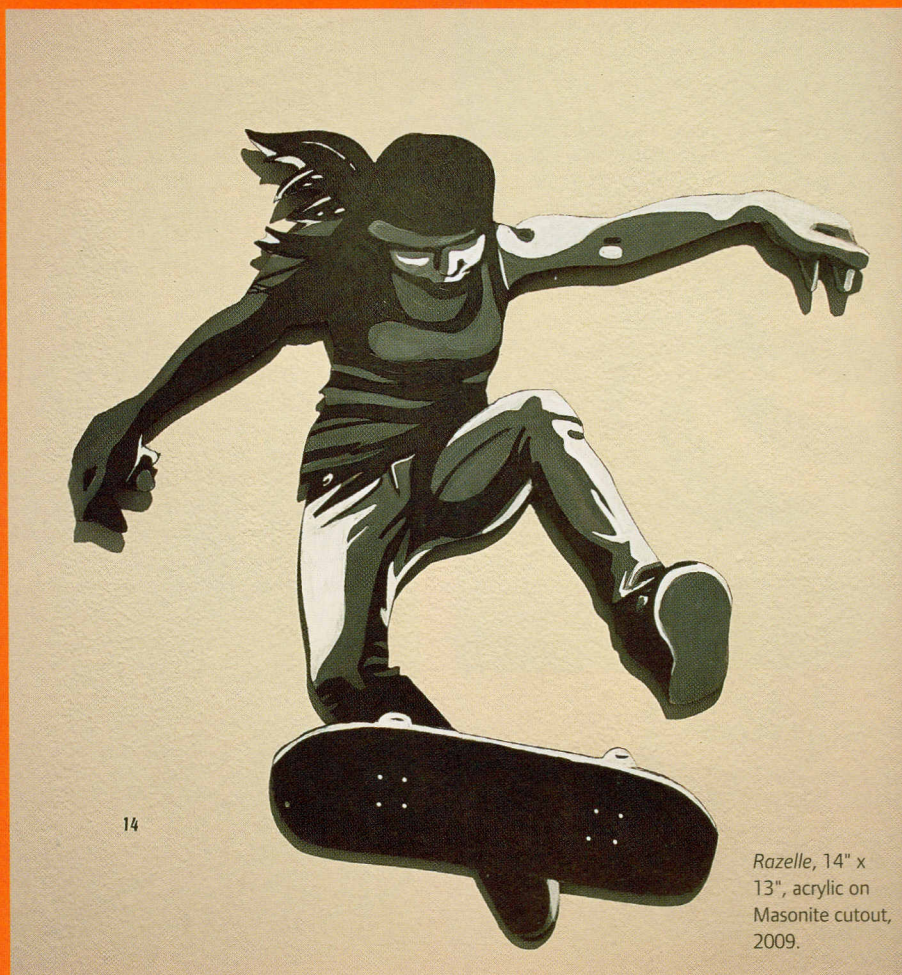
She explains, “I send prayers out to the world through my art, both figuratively and literally. It’s hard for me to let go of a piece, because it contains my love and hope. In fact, I put a message in every piece I make.”

A reporter from *The Arizona Republic* observed that Simpson’s artworks are “no longer defensively Indian; they are the insides of all of us made visible.” Simpson felt that that statement had lifted a barrier. “How can we abuse someone else if we see ourselves in their eyes?” she asks. “How do we begin to deconstruct our stereotypes if we don’t break the surface?”

Although Simpson addresses wider, collective issues, she never lets Santa Clara Pueblo stay far from her point of reference. It has shaped her and provided a foundation. “Santa Clara is the center of my world, and that is where this stone came from that is dropping into the pool of water, the ripples are going out further and further,” she says. Rose Simpson is an artist who creates “prayers” through art, offering strength to heal ourselves and, one hopes, everything around us.

More of her work can be viewed at www.rosebsimpson.com. ✱

Anya Montiel (Tohono O’odham) works in the Cultural Arts Office at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.



Razelle, 14" x 13", acrylic on Masonite cutout, 2009.

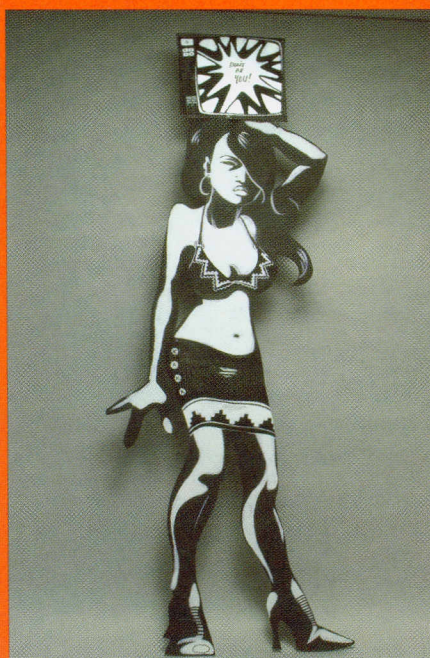
OBJECTIFICATION SERIES: BELOW (L-R)

Objectification portrays distinctive elements of contemporary Pueblo Indian life in bold graphic terms. The allures and pressures of assimilation, tradition, creativity and companionship are portrayed with a human face reminding us that in our lives, within and beyond boundaries, we find ourselves.

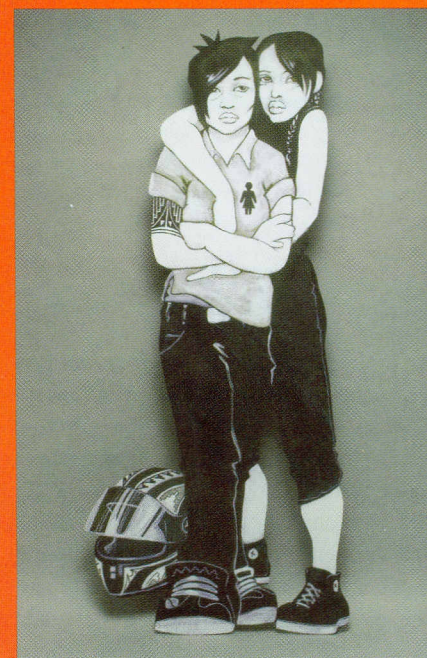
Seductive Woman With TV, mixed media on Masonite, 2008.

Lesbian Couple, mixed media on Masonite, 2008.

Graffiti Artist, mixed media on Masonite, 2008.



PHOTOS BY TONY CHAVARRIA



“ I SEND PRAYERS OUT TO THE WORLD THROUGH MY ART, BOTH FIGURATIVELY AND LITERALLY. IT'S HARD FOR ME TO LET GO OF A PIECE, BECAUSE IT CONTAINS MY LOVE AND HOPE. IN FACT, I PUT A MESSAGE IN EVERY PIECE I MAKE. ”



Julez, 17" x 12", acrylic on Masonite cutout, 2009.



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