



# Found

BEING BORN INTO A FAMILY OF ARTISTS SET A COURSE FOR  
BUT SHE HAD TO TRAVEL



"This feeling  
of clay in my  
hands. Inherited  
from forever."

# (ation)

ROSE B. SIMPSON.  
FAR TO FIND HER WAY HOME. BY ROSE B. SIMPSON

Photographs by MINESH BACRANIA

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For the last few months of senior year at the Santa Fe Indian School, my scholarship-acceptance letter to Dartmouth College burned a hole through my backpack. The submission deadline was looming when I made my way across an empty basketball court at the old campus, toward the mail room where Little Joe chilled behind the counter, his monster truck growling out back. I asked him if he could postmark the letter yesterday so it wouldn't seem as late—a favor for a fellow Santa Clara Pueblo person. He shook his head and said “Noooo ... but I'll get it out as fast as I can.” He tapped the long edge of the envelope on the counter, as if revving it up, and tossed it in with the outgoing mail.

Perhaps I delivered that letter too late because of my great-grandfather Michael Naranjo. In the 1920s, he was sent away to the Albuquerque Indian School. On weekends he would run the seventy-some miles back home to Santa Clara Pueblo, following the Río Grande north and sleeping in a cave somewhere along the way if needed. The journey was long, but I believe it helped him feel connected to home—the landscape our ancestors dedicated their entire lifeways to for thousands of years.

Growing up in the eighties and nineties with an indigenous artist mother who practiced permaculture, I realized at a young age that if we continued using our natural resources the way we had been, the world as we knew it may end abruptly. It seemed to me that my great-grandfather had run home to catch a break from the boarding school's Colonial-Indigenous Apocalypse, and I had a sinking feeling that if I was on the other side of the country when the world started to fall apart, it would take me a very, very long time to find my way home on foot.

In 2001, instead of Dartmouth, I went to Albuquerque to attend the University of New Mexico. That



“Walking the badlands by my studio in Santa Clara/Española, an eroded surface exposes what is underneath. It is so empathically raw.”

**The frantic nature of all my dedications left me shattered. Without the grounding of place, I was spinning without a center.**

That stretch has always reminded me that I am blessed with a strong foundation for the work I do to create a healthier world for my daughter. It is with a deep ancestral love that I sculpt, weld, sew, paint, sing, write, work on cars, climb, run, mother—always doing my best to be conscious of the choices and mannerisms that create who I am and how I exist: I am fluent in many worlds. I am always rooted in one.

made sense. I had a car, but if there was no more gas, no more fossil fuels—I could walk home like my great-grandpa did. Just follow our river upstream from the hot city streets to Santa Clara Pueblo, where the air smells right and the sticks and cottonwood leaves crackle under my feet the way they should.

I was 17 when I drove my Jeep south on I-25 to move into the dorms at UNM. It was the first time I felt the stretch of the rubber band connecting the center of my chest to the center of my pueblo, the first of so many life episodes clearly revealing where I belong.

**A**s with most people coming of age, leaving home offered so many identities I could build myself into. Was I to be a printmaker? Singer? Professional student? Flamenco dancer? Poet? Sculptor? I fell in love with aspects of these worlds, convinced that if I dedicated myself fully to one, it would save me from feeling lost.

The frantic nature of all my dedications left me shattered. I wanted to eat it all up as fast as I could. But without the grounding of place, I was spinning without a center.

In the spring semester of 2002, I dragged my new Acoma roommate to a Dead Prez concert at the Sunshine, and afterward, as is tradition, we followed the midnight horde to the Frontier for a breakfast burrito. There we met Mike360, a long-haired cholo who walked up to our booth in shell-toe shoes, a flute hanging from a Peruvian-style holster across his chest.

“Heeey ... nice turquoise earrings, sister,” he said to me. “What tribe are you?” “Santa Clara,” I answered, feeling so flashy rocking my Feast Day gear, my Pueblo bling.

“Isn't that up by Española? The Lowrider Capital of the World?” I nodded and smiled.

“Órale ...” he said. “Heeey ... well maybe you can help me out ... I have an idea to build a lowrider that runs on biodiesel ...”

Through Mike360 I found another family and, with it, passion and direction through community—vivid names on the sides of trains and on billboards, water towers, cinderblock walls, on everything between Taos and Silver City. I'd conjure the face or the sound of the voice behind the spray paint, slap tag, or fat marker and smile, feeling like this was my people's turf. *I'm here. I'm here. I'm here*, chanted emblazoned names like Chale. Fueeds. Shine. Husle. Muerte. Ceaso. Weso. Ruein. Kwiot. Avol. Grab. Afue. Gaen. WM7. And Rude, may he rest in peace. These souls are *puro* New Mexico.

Even though I built a connection with a greater span of the state, reminders of my northern New Mexico roots sprouted in strange places. Like when my flamenco teacher at UNM told me from the driver's seat of his lowrider that we were *gente*. “Your accent, Rosa! I can tell you're from Spaña by the way you talk! I'm from Dixé! Río Arriba!” He grinned as wide as the steering wheel and dropped his car into gear, and it grumbled away. I imagined him cruising north along the Río toward the orchards of Dixon. Looking at my friends, I asked, “I have an accent?” They nodded and giggled.

**I**n 2009, two years after graduating from the Institute of American Indian Arts, I left Santa Fe and a blossoming arts career to attend the Rhode Island School of Design—not only for a master's degree in ceramics, but also because I wanted to know what it felt like to be anonymous. The East Coast was a place where people had real accents, said things like *kwofee* and *woaddah*. I rode my bike through damp, through changing leaves, past intricately carved architectural accents left over from what was once the flowering of Providence. I'd hitch the top bar of my bike frame on my shoulder and carry it up the echoing stairwell to my RISD ceramics studio, roll up my sleeves, and pick up wherever I'd left off in my investigations of the potential of ceramic and concept.

I loved Rhode Island. I loved being away. I loved the freedom to build myself from what felt like scratch. I loved my classes and the pull and stretch of thoughts and creativity. I loved the time to consider—subject, process, material, culture.

“Rose comes from a family of potters,” my professor once told a visiting artist. The woman looked up from her ceramic work and her not-very-dirty hands and studied me. I sat up quick on my stool like a kid in grade school.

“How long has pottery been in your family?” she asked.



"The process I take to understand myself sometimes begins when I create raw reflections in clay."

home—the place where I noticed usable clay in the dirt sides of roadcuts, where I lived in a mud house and dug my hands into the earth to plant, to clear the fields, to cook pots, and to roast food. Where I come from, the entire context *is* clay.

But RISD offered a study-abroad course, "Clay in Japan," and I took it as an opportunity to stretch that rubber band even further. In Kashihara, I lived with other students and worked behind a printmaking factory in a traditional ceramic studio with an anagama kiln. I wandered with my Japanese-speaking RISD buddies, intentionally getting lost and strengthening our aesthetic-appreciation muscles. We took in Osaka's continuously moving fluorescent walls that reflected in the wet streets; the *clunk-clunk* of a can of hot coffee falling through a rural bus-stop vending machine; monkey tracks in 4 a.m. snow, heading for the dark of the mountain brush. I began to see that it was the quality of attention itself that kept my rubber band from feeling stretched too unbearably far. Still, I yearned to return to my center place with new eyes, to find these aesthetic moments in the density of my familiar.

After graduation, some of my friends chose to move to New York City, thinking that was what one does with an MFA: go to the city and get famous. I knew I had to go home to northern New Mexico, to my bare feet on unpaved earth that has witnessed centuries of cultural prayer and practice, colonization, oppression, and preservation, to a hard-won seat around a Feast Day table—red chile-soaked oven bread the sweetest reward after dancing or cooking. To the place where my people have been broken, struggled through addiction, and found survival through creative

expression and cultural preservation—the familiar, tensile pull of feeling so lost in the place we belong. I knew I had to be refilled, refueled, recharged, redirected. I moved back to Española in 2011, bejeweled with a new set of eyes.

Upon my return, I saw the magic in what I had always taken for granted. What I once saw as eyesores became poetry—the crooked and decrepit mobile homes, the Virgen de Guadalupe still standing on the side of a burned-out adobe house. I began to read local history in the dragging chain of a barking dog, broken glass and barbed-wire fences, moccasin soles on hot sand, ducks flapping upstream on the Río Grande, the ancestor cottonwoods.

Fresh in my home studio, I had a new respect for the clay, building my figurative work with a new approach. Setting my focus strictly on the process (*how* I made something, rather than an idea of what it *should* look like or be), I deconstructed my preconceived ideas of attractive, acceptable, and beautiful. I was taking a step back to see the raw creative process reveal itself. This allowed me to love the realness of people and history in the world of northern New Mexico. And, in a way, loving my home for what it was helped me begin to love the worn history and legacy of myself.

As a child, I watched the custom cars of Española from the truckbed of Mama's 1952 Willys and vowed that when I grew up, I, too, would have a lowrider. When

I came home from grad school, I signed up for automotive science at Northern New Mexico Community College (now Northern New Mexico College). At lunch, we students would smack the body filler dust out of our baggy pants and take our classics to the road—welding studs still sticking out of bare metal like whiskers, half-sanded chunks of primer, proud and in-process. We'd roll fleet-style to El Parasol, sit outside with a big tray of beef and chicken tacos. Albuquerque, Rhode Island, Japan—all the places I'd been faded away as I joked in my comfortable accent with my cholo bros. I had a new ability to kick back and roll the flavor of the moment around in my mouth, to smile and watch because what used to be mundane was now spectacularly *home*.

**I knew I had to go home to northern New Mexico, to my bare feet on unpaved earth that has witnessed centuries of cultural prayer and practice, colonization, oppression, and preservation.**

It is a pleasant Sunday evening in Española. Not too hot or cold, not too bright or dark. The sun is getting low over the Jémez Mountains, painting long stripes across the packed-dust driveway. Maria, the 1985 black-on-black custom El Camino street rod I started at lowrider school, is now completed and parked next to my adobe home. I run my hand down the chrome trim that frames the swooping bed, blow any dust off the satin-black and gloss-clear geometric pottery designs that run her length. When I crouch down to her low level I can see the painted sky in the reflective mountain shapes and water spirals.

I unbuckle the car seat from my lifted Tacoma truck and firmly latch it into the passenger seat of Maria. I catch Cedar (aka "Nugget"), my two-year-old daughter, scrambling to get behind the wheel, the keys in her hand. I smile and shake my head. *Figures*. Swooping her up, I knock the dust off her feet and scold her for rubbing her dirty shoes on the black leather upholstery. She doesn't care. Nugget just wants to go for a ride. As I plop her into the seat and buckle her in she's clapping her hands, "Yay!"

I turn the key halfway and watch the oil pressure needle rise and settle from its gauge on the aircraft-aluminum dash that I machined together from old highway signs when Nugget was still kicking around in my belly. I smile. Every square inch of the car conjures those kinds of memories. So many stories.

I press the gas and twist the key all the way until Maria rumbles up and then settles into her loping idle. The engine is so loud, I can't hear my daughter's excited squeals anymore.

I turn to her little gleaming face and ask, "So. You wanna cruise to Sonic?" **NM**

Rose B. Simpson is featured in "Storytellers," p. 8.



"Nugget, a two-year-old toddler, Maria, a 1985 El Camino street rod. My babies."

## NEXT-GEN ART

**Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art**, in Santa Fe, carries mixed-media artwork by Rose B. Simpson (558 Canyon Road, 505-992-0711, chiaroscurosantafe.com).

On November 4, the **Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian**, also in Santa Fe, opens the first major solo exhibition of her art. *LIT: The Work of Rose B. Simpson* features new and retrospective pieces, including life-size clay and mixed-media sculptures, including welded steel and leather, that she interprets as masks, self-portraits, and monumental, warrior-like figures. The exhibit is up through October 6, 2019 (704 Camino Lejo, on Museum Hill, 505-982-4636, wheelwright.org).