

A Question of Balance

Artists and Writers on Motherhood

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Papier-Mache Press, 1995

Watsonville, CA

Cover art, "Family Portrait" by Ann Trask

Cover design by Cynthia Heier

Photo by Sarah Putnam

Interior design by Leslie Austin

Linda Vallejo, thirty-eight, is a dynamic sculptor and painter who uses the bold palette of her Mexican heritage to create images of women. Inspired by her belief that "woman is the symbol of the earth," much of her work is an "effort to touch the heart of all people to remind them that the earth is our home and we should befriend it," the artist explains.

Vallejo has a BA in painting and drawing from Whittier College and an MFA in printmaking from California State University at Long Beach, where she has been a visiting lecturer. She also did graduate work in lithography at the University of Madrid, Spain, and studied theatre in London, England. The recipient of a Latinas Making History Award and a Brody Arts Fellowship, Vallejo has been recognized by a number of organizations, including the National Association of Chicano Studies, the Institute for Hispanic Cultural Studies, and the City of Los Angeles. Her work has been exhibited throughout the Southwest, as well as in New York, Madrid and Mexico.

At the time of this interview, Vallejo was also working part time as a grants writer for the Long Beach Civic Light Opera and the Long Beach Ballet; she has subsequently opened Galeria Las Americas, a Los Angeles gallery representing contemporary Chicano and Latino American artists. Vallejo lives in Long Beach, California, with her husband of seventeen years, Ron Dillaway, and their two children, four-year-old Robin and three-year-old Paul.

"Being a mother and having children empowers my life," says Linda Vallejo. "That's really the key to the whole idea of being an artists and a mother. Being a mother surrounds me with the kind of love and support that I need to live a complete life as a human being, as a woman, and then as an artist and a worker in the community."

She believes that as an artist she has a responsibility to use her gifts. Vallejo says, "When I was much younger and studying art, I decided that I wanted to have three basic elements in my life. Once was to be an artists forever and never let that go. The second was to be a wife and a mother. And the third was to have a spiritual core in my life. And at this point, I have all three, so I really believe that I am living a full life, where no major aspect is lacking."

Vallejo's vision of how she wants to live contrasts sharply with the stereotype of the angst-ridden artist. Her reaction to a retrospective of works by Jackson Pollock (a leader of the abstract expressionist school of painting who died in 1956) exemplifies this contrast: "I have a love-hate relationship with Pollock and his kind. On the one hand, you really have to applaud this human being for breaking all the rules. And when it comes to art, I love to break the rules.

"But on the other hand, I really hate him because he was an alcoholic and he had a terrible personal life. He was emotionally disturbed and somehow or other he's become an artistic demigod. I really resent that, because I think that a lot of the role models artists have today are drug-ridden, alcoholic, emotionally disturbed - socially, spiritually, and physically fragmented people who don't have families, who are ostracized by society and become rich and famous."

Although she flirted with the image of the angst-ridden artist in her early twenties, Vallejo found that being depressed and miserable drained her; she had no energy left to create. Then she fell in love with her husband, Ron Dillaway, and, "the work just started flowing out like so much water." Vallejo determined to live her life another way "I'm going to have good friendships and people who care about me; I'm going to have strong spiritual support systems, and I'm going to kick ass in art."

In addition to her husband and the woman who cares for her children, Vallejo has a spiritual support system of men and women involved in the Native American religion she practices. She also volunteers in a prison, conducting indigenous ceremonies for Native American women. Her vision of the unity of her roles as wife, mother, artist, and community worker, allows her to pursue her goals apparently unencumbered by the guilt that holds back so many other women.

While Vallejo does not see children as hindering her, she admits that one can travel faster on a career path without them. "If your priority is to become an internationally renowned, famous, and wealthy artist, you can accomplish it much more quickly without children. You can go to all the openings - you're available for travel, for exhibition dates, and for the last-minute production without any glitches.

"But that, to me, is not necessarily the only way to accomplish it. Anyone who has children realizes that things move a little bit more slowly with kids. I struggled a great deal to have my children. It took me seven years to have two kids. I had to go through major surgery, and I had two miscarriages before I had my two boys. So they're really like miracle babies.

In a very human sense, my children taught me that I can accomplish anything. I had to be very consistent about my efforts; I had to watch my health very closely. And because of my desire for children and my initial inability to fulfill that dream, I have developed a very strong spiritual sense. So you see, my children have brought wholeness to my life."

Vallejo slowed down her production and changed her mode of working while pregnant. "One of the things you have to accept as a mother is that things are going to change. You have to hold on to the thread of inspiration. You have to hold on to the thread of dedication. You have to hold onto the thread of discipline. It's kind of like a spider's thread - it's very strong and it will only break if you purposely cut it. But if you hold on to the thread and continue to work, you can learn

much about your personal ability to work in the face of difficulty, negative energy levels, and discomfort,” the artist says.

During that time, Vallejo continued to go to her studio one or two days a week, regardless of how she felt. “When I was pregnant the first three months, I puked all day, and how do you make artwork when you’re puking all day? Well, doggone it, you can make it happen. What became important to me was not the quantity, but the thread of the work itself and staying in line with my desires as an artist.

“I found that I could speed up my production. I worked out a process that allowed me to be a mother and artist at the same time. So I’m not developing a process where it takes me 150 hours to complete one painting and I must have twenty-four hours in a row to be able to complete this painting. Instead I started to become highly flexible and create work that could happen beginning to end in a day.”

When she is unable to go into the studio, Vallejo uses a technique that she calls “filling the well” to accumulate ideas and inspiration for future work. She explains, “You can’t create work - really sensitive, meaningful work - without a reservoir of imagery and beliefs. And you can’t create a reservoir of imagery and beliefs and concepts in a vacuum.” Vallejo fills her well by going to the country. “It’s very easy to find a girlfriend who will drive you someplace. You might take a small sketchbook and keep a log, write down ideas and begin filling the well.”

While pregnant, Vallejo filled her well in other ways, too, such as buying books that she had always wanted to read and attending religious services more frequently. “I began to round out my life in the time that I had when I wasn’t forced to be an artist. I could develop those aspects of myself that I’d never had time for before. I really took the opportunity to grow on all kinds of levels so that I could become a full human being and make a full artistic statement because of it,” Vallejo says.

“And women know that once you become pregnant and have a child, you have the opportunity to become closer to your mother than ever before, closer to your sister and your aunts, closer to elderly neighbors who have had children.”

An elderly neighbor took care of Vallejo’s first son for a year and a half while she went into her studio one day a week. “I found out I didn’t need nine hours in the studio. If I was really centered, I could go in four hours and accomplish a great deal. So you feed the baby, you leave the bottle, you go to the studio.

“Now I have a woman who comes to my home. She’s in her late fifties. She’s a Mexicano woman, so she speaks Spanish, which I’m very pleased with. She has a lot of knowledge about old ways of taking care of children. She’s a masseuse; she’s amazing. She’s a very good teacher to me, and she’s become a member of my family. I helped her get her papers, I got her a dentist and a doctor, I got her some eyeglasses,” the artist says.

“She comes to my house five days a week. My children are in Montessori school two days a week. She basically cleans my house, takes care of my children, and does all the wash. She’s taken on a lot of the physical aspects of being a mother and really became a second mother to

my kids. And I take on the emotional responsibilities and specific teaching responsibilities with my kids because I have the energy to do it.”

Vallejo has developed a system that works for her and is eager to advise others on how to schedule their time. “I tell other women, ‘If you only have one day in your studio, make it a day; pack yourself a lunch and go to your studio, even if it’s only a quarter of a studio you’re sharing with somebody else. Spend all day, even if you don’t feel like going, even if you don’t know what you’re going to do when you get there. Go anyway and get this rhythm going. After a while, your creative clock will get in sync with you.’

“You have to set up a real schedule. One of the things I tell people is, ‘You cannot fragment your days. You don’t want to have an appointment for your art career, a layout job, a meeting at your kids’ school, and people coming over for dinner on the same day. Don’t divide your day into minuscule pieces. If four hours a week is all you can get, that’s your creative time, you stick with that. If you’re doing eighteen things in one day, you won’t make art.”

Rather than trying to do a little of everything every day, Vallejo has evolved a schedule that keeps her energy concentrated. She works two days a week as a grant writer for the Long Beach Civic Light Opera and the Long Beach Ballet, and spends the other three weekdays in her studio; weekends are reserved for her family. The only exception to this strict division is that Vallejo accepts business phone calls at home.

“When I come to the studio, I usually don’t leave. I come and deal, deal as hard as I can. By the time I get to the studio, I’m so excited and happy to be here that the energy flows very quickly.”

Does she ever pick up a paintbrush at home? “Never! I don’t expect my children to wait on the sidelines while I’m doing my artwork. They won’t anyway, anybody knows that. So when I’m at home, I’m at home. I’m cooking, I’m cleaning, I’m teaching alphabets, I’m driving the kids to a special event. I’m a woman, I’m a wife, I’m a lover, I’m a friend, I’m a mother at home. In my studio, I’m a ragtag, mad-dog artist.”

The days she works as a grant writer are also full days. “I don’t do any other business at the job - I don’t accept any private phone calls; I just do the job. I turn the switch, I’m at the job. I go home at night and cook dinner and massage my husband’s back. So I’m not fragmented in a million ways.”

How does being a mother influence the content of her work? “I’m really playful with it, that’s one thing. Being a mother just balances me out as a human being so that I can do my work. I have done some motherhood images, but I don’t tend to do that that much. It’s more or less on an emotional level. The happiness that my children, my husband, my family gives me comes through in my work.

“I think the work influences me to be an artist because this place is so separate. My children aren’t here. I bring them to see my work as often as I can, but this is really my place. This is my place for me.”

Having a studio outside the house has always been important to Vallejo, but after becoming a mother, the studio has become essential. When her first child was born, her studio was three minutes away from home. "I was very fortunate to have a very inexpensive studio in a very beautiful place. I've never lost a studio. I've even sold jewelry to keep my studio; I've done everything possible.

"Because of my children, I've become highly prolific. I tend to accomplish a lot in a short period of time because I have other responsibilities. And I'm still more prolific than many of the women I know without kids because their time isn't as precious to them. Since I have such a big support system to fall back on, I tend to take bigger risks with my work.

"People say, 'My art is my children.' I don't believe that for nothing. If you have a kid, you know doggone well you art is not your children. You can stack your paintings and walk away. You can't stack your kids and get up and go. My art is my work. It's something I've done all my life. I can't help it. At one point last year I thought I might quit. It was a ridiculous idea. I held it for like thirty minutes and came back three days later and busted out three new paintings."

Does she ever feel guilty about going into the studio? "Why should I? I believe that if you're given a gift, you must use it. If you have the gift of writing and poetry and beauty in any form - sculpture, painting, dance, music, literature, cooking, sewing, any of the traditional arts - you have a responsibility to the symbolic and physical whole to live it out. Because beauty really does counteract ugly."