

LINDA VALLEJO

By *Betty Ann Brown*

In 1983, the owners of MetroSpace Art Gallery in Long Beach, California, realized they would have to close their doors within 30 days. As a celebratory finale, they asked 30 artists to do one-day installations in the soon-to-be abandoned space. One of the artists was painter-printmaker-sculptor **Linda Vallejo**. "I decided to erect a Tree of Life," Vallejo recalls. "I took this huge tree limb, installed it in a bucket and invited everyone I knew to help me decorate it. Some people sent things in the mail, while many of my friends came to MetroSpace, bringing all kinds of objects for the tree. People came in from the street; taking things from their pockets or purses. By the end of the day, more than 20 people ended up sitting on the floor around the tree. Everybody wanted to linger." Vallejo took the tree back to her studio and, weeks later, felt compelled to personalize the experience. She constructed a mask from handmade paper and placed it at the juncture of the largest branches. Then she glued feathers all over it, transforming the top twigs into an elegant headdress.

The MetroSpace Gallery installation experience inspired Vallejo to do a series of "Tree of Life" sculptures. "I see the Tree of Life cross-culturally," she explains. "There are many Meso-American examples, but it's also in many other cultures and writings, such as the Bible and the images in Balinese shadow puppetry. As I worked on the series, I began to see the tree everywhere: in photographs of the placenta, coral, lightning, river beds, roots, even in diagrams of the electrical impulses in the brain. After the event at MetroSpace, people started giving me trees," recalls Vallejo. "I had been doing assemblage for years, so I began to treat the trees like 'found objects.' Actually I tried to quit making my 'Tree People' at one point, but friends kept bringing me trees!" To this day, one corner of her downtown Los Angeles studio is piled high with trees-with sinuous limbs, gnarled bark, thick blocks of sawed trunks.

Vallejo's incorporation of trees into her art satisfies her profound ecological and spiritual commitments. "I have a strong desire to connect my art with what I believe," she explains. "As a Chicana, I see nature as a source of inspiration. I strive to incorporate the cultural concepts of the Chicano/Mexicano aesthetic in relation to nature, taking a more complete look at the earth and all its living creatures." Vallejo recognizes that being Chicana means being heir to a complex Native American heritage. She studies Native American ceremonial and traditional customs, and is a participant in sweat ceremonies. Although she honors a commitment to privacy about lodge activities, she does speak of intriguing parallels between her art and spiritual search. "The sweat ceremony is like an art-making space," explains Vallejo. "To make art, you have to be open, giving, honest with yourself. You get that same feeling in a good sweat ceremony. The feeling spreads out from your heart. You can open up and say whatever you want with total confidence and trust." Vallejo is quick to clarify that art is not her religion, yet she notes, "In indigenous traditions, if you receive a vision-one of those spectacular moments of understanding-you have to share it with others through music, dance, poetry or art in order for it to work its wonder."

Each year, Vallejo creates a series of artworks for the Days of the Dead celebrations of the Chicano community of Los Angeles. The Days of the Dead is the Mexican version of All Saints

Day and All Souls Day observed on November 1 and 2. Families remember their beloved deceased by building household altars in their honor, then visiting and adorning their graves in the cemetery. Vallejo constructs elaborate, velvet-lined boxes in which plastic skeletons dance over fields of rose thorns. In one box, the Aztec Lord of the Underworld, Mictlantecuhtli, hovers in a midnight sky over a landscape strewn with Day-Glow bones. Looking at the numerous boxes she created for the 1988 Days of the Dead, she exclaims, "I make art like some people make cookies. I'm always compulsively busy. I know that I can't quit."

Vallejo, who received a master of fine arts in printmaking from California State University, Long Beach, worked on her series of sculptures using tree fragments as armatures for ten years. During this time, she began to visualize the environments in which the wood figures would live. The environments took the shape of sculpted landscapes created on canvas, with diverse materials building up the dense surfaces on which she attached the trees. She uses gauze, gravel and glue to build up white bas-reliefs, then applies intense color over the surface. "I use a glorious pure palette to recall the Meso-American color spectrum, coupled with the dramatic lighting and image of artists such as Goya and El Greco to bring to life my Latina experience," explains Vallejo. "I strive to maintain the primal attitude of the painting medium, calling on bold and seemingly uncontrolled strokes of color. Now, I can see the entire landscape with fire, earth, water and air." She adds, "I wish to share the beauty of nature to help us remember that it is our source and inspiration."