

**Linda Vallejo**

ArtScene Magazine

Vol. 11, No. 2

October, 1991

By Dr. Edith A. Tonelli

(The author, Dr. Edith Tonelli, is the former director of UCLA's Wight Art Gallery. As director, Tonelli organized last year's CARA – "Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985" – exhibition. Vallejo was among the artists that were included in that exhibition – Ed.)

(Galería Nueva, Downtown) The title of Linda Vallejo's exhibition of new paintings and drawings is "Simbolo y Fuerza," translated to English literally as "Symbol and Power." It did not take me long to realize that although this is an artist whose ties are on a very different heritage and community than mine, she is addressing very common human problems. I was soon to realize that the artist sees her work this way as well, informed by her Native American heritage and experiences, but with hope that it reverberates for anyone who has suffered in life and persevered. My own English title for this show would differ slightly from hers: "Icons of Strength."

The primary element that distinguishes her work is the intertwining (sometimes literally, as in *Mujer con Hojas*) of natural and human forms. Vallejo believes that this kind of human strength is the result of a connection with nature and an internalizing of natural power. Her experience with indigenous people and her understanding of a personal relationship to the land and natural forms has healed her time and again, and has the potential, she believes, to be a teacher to anybody.

I suggest that she succeeds in communication that strength when she is least literal – when the elements are all there, but not explained. When her images are truly icons. That may partially be the formalist art historian in me, but never before have I been so convinced that literal imagery is as damaging to the symbolist artist as verbosity is to the haiku poet.

For example, when I see the suggestion of a female form in the landscape, it maintains a mystery and a vibrancy that the literal demarcation of breasts and nipples does not. But when the sinewy vegetative elements slither along a young girl's thighs, I wonder about the metamorphosis of her torso and the effect on her innocence.

Vallejo remarked to me that the present series emerged out of her attempt to imagine and environment for earlier sculptures, particularly her "tree people," done in the early 1980's from real branches and small trees, and experimented with light and times of day. She started small then moved to larger canvases, with *Original Woman* and *Understanding Each Other*, which smoothly integrate the natural and the human, while still illuminating the process of taking from nature and experiencing the metamorphosis.

Another series with some gem-like images is "Broken Body, Strong Spirit," watercolors in which she presents the wound of loss and suffering as parallel to physical mutilation. "Human beings in the urban landscape are like human shards," she has declared, and yet artists can be those

who show us the strength and hope in the human spirit. *Human Shard, Cloaked in Faith* and *Spirit Cloaked in Faith* do combine the wound and the spirit, and recreate the Classical torsos after which they are modeled. They float in an almost theatrical space, and yet through color and masterful modelling they become more than just disembodied body parts – they have a presence.

Perhaps the most exquisite yet disturbing piece here is an untitled water-color of a female torso in a green forest-like setting. The flesh is recreated through water-based paint to give it translucence – almost a life and breath of its own. The lower part of the landscape also vibrates and creates an appropriate environment for this “shard.” It is the upper two-thirds of the “environment” that still seems to be “in process,” not quite resolved in color or form, and thus disturbing and uncomfortable for this goddess. It is, in the end, the process that keeps me intrigued and searching. There is an on-going struggle, a “working through” that has always been of more interest to me than the finished, completed and sometimes static “masterpiece.” These are graphic symbols of the process of integration, often organic and uneven, rarely smooth or mechanical.