

Linda Vallejo “Fierce Beauty” A Forty Year Retrospective

catalog essay by

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“Art that matters to us—which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the experience, or offers courage for living, however we choose to describe the experience—that work is received by us as a gift received.”

Lewis Hyde (1)

Beautiful and difficult, poetic and troubling, seductive and confronting, Linda Vallejo’s artworks function as powerful gifts. As Boston-born poet Lewis Hyde reminds us, “When we are moved by art we are grateful that the artist lived, grateful that he labored in the service of his gifts.” (2) In this essay, I weave analysis of the remarkable gifts of Vallejo’s art through a summary discussion of her life.

Vallejo’s oeuvre is remarkably diverse. Beginning her art career with training as a printmaker, she soon transgressed the traditional limits of that medium by cutting up her etchings and using them, along with hand-made paper and various found objects, to create complex relief sculptures that evoked the pre-Columbian past. She then moved off the wall, constructing totemic figures on armatures of knobby branches and other forest detritus. The sculptural figures were later attached to canvases and eventually painting became her primary medium. Vallejo’s subjects have ranged from spirit-infused landscapes to sumptuous skies to single trees burning in psychedelic color. She also has depicted the human form: sometimes herself or her husband of over thirty years; sometimes the archetypal feminine who inhabits the earth and sky; sometimes the heroes who inspire her, and us. Most recently, Vallejo has created potent installations: elaborate mandalas composed of sand and stone and other natural offerings. The earlier wood-based beings stand as silent sentinels around these prayerful mandalas. Radiant depictions of our planet surround them in brilliant painterly embrace.

The apparent diversity in Vallejo’s art is unified by three enduring characteristics: resonant conceptual underpinning, impressive strength of purpose, and a consistently high level of craft. To understand how her singular vision produced such disparate objects and images, it is necessary to survey Vallejo’s personal history.

“[T]he viewer of contemporary art must collate residual information about the maker and about her or his own experience, in order fully to comprehend the work.”

Lucy R. Lippard (3)

The daughter of two first generation Mexican Americans, Vallejo was born in 1951 in Boyle Heights. Although that area of East Los Angeles is now predominantly Chicano,

for most of the twentieth century, it was a gateway for immigrant populations from Europe and Asia as well as Latin America. Indeed, Vallejo was born in the local Chinese hospital; her mother's obstetrician was Doctor Wada. Arriving on this planet into a heterogeneous neighborhood of a Euro-American dominated city, the little girl was to spend her infancy surrounded by, and learning from, a remarkable diversity of people. That kind of cultural mix would characterize the rest of her life. And it would contribute significantly to shaping her art. In this regard, Vallejo's background recalls that of performance artist Coco Fusco.

The Cuban-born Fusco describes how the experience of being Latin American and growing up in the US led her to become an artist. "I decided that I wanted to make sense out of the clashes between cultures that cause so many of us so much trouble and pain, [and] I chose to do so within the realm of art...I say we're caught between two worlds—at least two. That's *pura bicultural* for me. We didn't theorize postcoloniality after the fact, learn about it from a workshop, or wait for multiculturalism to become foundation lingo for 'appreciating diversity'—we lived it and still struggle to make art about it." (4)

Although Linda Vallejo's art is rarely as overtly politicized as Fusco's, the two artists produce their work from similar sources and with the same passion. Vallejo's varied cultural roots are matched by her peripatetic young life and the resulting fragmentation of her educational path. When the man who was to become her father graduated from UCLA, he joined the US Air Force and was soon transferred to Germany, where Vallejo spent two of her early childhood years. The family returned to Los Angeles when she was five years old, then moved on to Sacramento, Arizona, and Texas. She attended middle school in Montgomery, Alabama, where racial hatred was an ever-present and always painful reality. In the late 1960s, the family resided in Madrid, while her father worked at Torrejón Air Base just outside the Spanish capital. Graduating from Madrid High School, Vallejo returned to California, where she studied music, theater and art at Whittier College, receiving her BA in 1973. She spent a year auditing classes at the San Francisco Art Institute. Then she traveled back to Madrid to study lithography at the university there in 1974-75. She then settled in Southern California and completed an MFA in Printmaking at California State University Long Beach in 1978.

Vallejo as "New Mestiza"

Vallejo's extensive travels and her scattered school experiences reinforced what Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa would call the *mestizaje* nature of the artist's identity. (5) Anzaldúa used the term *mestizaje* to analyze the sense of self that transcends dominant cultural concepts of binary existence, that is, the either/or polarity that tells people they are either a member of the dominant culture or an outsider, that they are either "white" or a person of color, etc. According to Anzaldúa, the new *mestiza* is a woman who exists "between" multiple cultures and develops the capacity to absorb and negotiate all of them. She felt that the new *mestiza*, being aware of her conflicting and meshing identities, could employ her unique perspective to challenge the limiting (i.e., stereotyped) thinking of Western culture. Anzaldúa, who died in 2004, never met Vallejo, but her words describe aspects of the artist's life and work with uncanny accuracy. (6)

By creating a new mythos--that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave--la mestiza creates a new consciousness. The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the

subject/object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts.

Gloria Anzaldúa (7)

When Vallejo speaks of her artistic identity, she uses language that might have come from an Anzaldúa text.

I am a Postmodern American, a woman of color whose ancestors are from another country [Mexico], who grew up in Europe, and yet is imbued with American ideology. All of these influences are like the bubbling water in a fish tank, constantly mixing with each other. In order to be able to integrate my life, I have to discover who I am and create images out of it. I like the bubbling affects of multiple sources, with everything cross-fertilized. The myriad influences, coming from all the people and places of my life pierce the Postmodern reality and emerge as my art. (8)

Pre-Columbian Art & Self Help Graphics

One of the enduring influences on Vallejo's work is the pre-Columbian art of Mexico. She became deeply involved with the pre-Columbian past while working at Self Help Graphics (SHG) in 1976. SHG is a community arts organization that was founded in the early 1970s by a group of East Los Angeles artists. When Vallejo taught art classes at SHG, she was encouraged to use Mesoamerican history in the curricula. Intrigued, she and her new husband began to travel to Mexico, to pre-Columbian sites like Palenque, Teotihuacan and Chichen Itza. In Europe, she had been drawn to the art she saw in museums and cathedrals. In Mexico, she "fell deeply in love" with pre-Columbian art.

Vallejo collected "tons" of books on the history of Mexican art, covered them in plastic, and shared them with her SHG students. She began to study the pre-Columbian world in earnest, reading Maya texts like the Popol Vuh and pouring over reproductions of everything from tiny jewels to immense pyramids. "Mexico was like this goddess waiting for me to find her." (9) Once the artist discovered the most ancient aspect of her cultural roots, it became the foundation for new waves of imagery.

In 1980, she created *Food for the Gods*, a circular construction framed by braided rings of roots. (Viewers familiar with Picasso's early collage *Still Life with Chair Caning* [1912] will remember he framed that work with a ring of actual rope.) In the center, Vallejo placed rows of hand-made paper discs folded to resemble tiny tortillas, cast-paper corncocks, and two scrolls made from earlier etchings. The tray-like configuration recalls Aztec offerings to pre-Columbian deities, perhaps the war god Huitzilopochtli or his mother, the fierce earth goddess Coatlicue. Some works in this series incorporate snake imagery evoking the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl. Others are based on pyramidal forms that allude to the immense stone structures serving as platforms for pre-Columbian temples.

Dances & Ceremonies

The pre-Columbian world also inspired Vallejo's ritual practice, a practice that initially was born of dance. One day at Self Help Graphics, Vallejo saw a group of Mexican *Danzantes* (dancers) and they changed her life.

I'd always wanted to go to the Congo and see aboriginal dancers before that tradition was gone. Then I saw the *Danzantes* and I thought: there's a traditional culture that belongs to me! I jumped off the cliff and took a dive into the next aspect of my identity. I became a *Danzante*. (10)

Further change came when her dance group, the Flores de Aztlan, was invited by Lakota Elders to participate in Native American ceremony. Vallejo and some of the other members of the Flores de Aztlan joined the Lakota to participate in indigenous rituals throughout California.

I became deeply involved with that community. We traveled all over the state, presenting in universities and all kinds of cultural celebrations. I dedicated thirty years of my life to Native American, Mexican and Chicano ceremony. (11)

Some of the most important aspects of Native American rituals have to do with observing and aligning oneself to the cycles of nature. The ceremonies often take place in remote locations and a major focus is the contemplation of nature's "persona" as it appears to humans. Participants look to the rising and setting of the sun, the rising and setting of the moon, to calculate the time passed and the time before them. You find yourself staring at the sky and earth and the line between them. You look to the horizon for the time of day, the height of the sun, the phases of the moon. The horizon appears again and again in my work. (12)

The decades involved in ceremony have clearly influenced the artist's oeuvre. Vallejo knows that authentic art always come out of the artist's life experiences; the issues and ideas an artist focuses on will automatically appear in her work.

Art that is authentic and true to the individual will mirror that person's life and experience. After thirty years, my work is naturally imbued with ceremonial significance. The imagery comes up, floats to the top. It's almost like watching a dream. I can look at the work and see what was happening in my interior work when I produced it. (13)

Tree People

Although it can be said that Vallejo's ritual work informed all of her art practice, its impact is most obvious in her Tree People series from 1980-1990 and in her Prayer for the Earth installations (discussed below.) Vallejo conceived of the Tree People as metaphoric representations of how humanity would appear "if we were to acknowledge our fundamental relationship to nature." (14)

Constructed of hand-made paper on armatures of bent branches, the Tree People range from singular heads with a profile recalling the Maya Indians of Southern Mexico, or a

ghostly deer skull with spiny twig antlers, or a haunting face with tangled roots for a beard.

The Tree People can be considered totems, that is, emblems for the mythic beings that watch over or protect groups of humans. The word “totem” comes from Ojibwa, one of the languages spoken by Native Americans from the Great Lakes area. *Ototeman* means “he is of my clan” and refers to the creature believed to be a tribe’s ancestor or guardian. (15)

Vallejo’s Tree People resemble totemic depictions of the Native Americans who live on the Northwest Pacific Coast of Alaska, Washington and Oregon. Northwest Coast totem poles are tall cedar posts carved with stacked symbolic images that are erected outside ceremonial long houses. One Northwest Coast group, the Haida, has a pole known as The Weeping Totem. The central image is a man who cries streams of tears that pour down the pole and splash on the heads of two toads. (16) The pole depicts the Haida tale of a chief who mourns the actions of his children who have tortured toads and thereby abused their agreement to respect all of the Great Spirit’s creatures. (17) Like the Haida’s Weeping Totem, Vallejo’s Tree People remind us of the ruptured relationship between humankind and nature.

Work at the Woman’s Building

During the years she was working at Self Help Graphics, Vallejo also became involved with the Los Angeles Woman’s Building. Founded in 1973 by feminist artist Judy Chicago, designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, and art historian Arlene Raven, the Woman’s Building was an important center of feminist art and culture until it closed in 1991. The Building provided studio space for artists and offered classes in feminist art education. It also housed both an art gallery and a full service design studio known as the Woman’s Graphic Center that had typesetting and printing facilities.

Vallejo came to the Woman’s Building in 1979 to run the Madre Tierra Press, a project whose goal was to produce a series of handmade books employing depictions of the Chicano community and women’s relation to it. Vallejo invited thirteen Chicanas from the Los Angeles area to join the project. She oversaw the entire process: facilitating the genesis of the designs, incorporation of photographic images, use of letterpress, and printing of the final plates. She did a ritually infused performance at the Madre Tierra Press publication party. (18)

The Woman’s Building invited Vallejo to lecture about her work and about Chicana art in general. These were her first public talks; after her successes there, Vallejo went on to become an exceptionally gifted spokesperson for her work and for the value of art in general. It was also at the Woman’s Building that Vallejo had the first major exhibition of her art. She remembers it fondly: “The women there understood and supported my art better than anyone.” (19)

Many of the women who worked at the Woman’s Building sought to overturn the traditional dualist thinking that separated art from life, disconnected personal issues from political ones, and severed the ties between nature and culture. They were some of the artists discussed by U.S. critic Lucy Lippard, artists who “work from inside, arriving at primal images from their own needs, overlaying personal on historical and perhaps even

biological memory. Among these artists are many feminists, trying to overcome the imposed polarization between 'the personal and the political,' nature and culture." (20) One of the artists Lippard focused on was Ana Mendieta, an important antecedent and inspiration for Vallejo.

Earth, Body & Mendieta

Like Vallejo, Mendieta's art was deeply affected by the challenges of negotiating Latin American and US cultures. Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta came to the United States at age 12, without her parents, and entered foster care in Iowa. In the early 1970s, she began creating hybrids of Performance Art or Body Art (art in which the artist's own body becomes the "medium" through which she expresses herself) and Earth Art (art made on the surface of the planet, rather than on canvas or other man-made materials.) Many of Mendieta's pieces involved constructing ephemeral female shapes from flowers or rocks or reeds, then documenting them with photographs. From 1973 through 1980, she took annual trips to Mexico, where she initiated her *Siluetas*, "eerily symbolic works in which she cut, burnt, drew or otherwise shaped a human silhouette (usually her own) into an array of outdoor sites." (21)

As her work matured, Mendieta stated: "I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my silhouette). I believe this to be a direct result of my having been torn away from my homeland during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that tie me to the universe." (22)

Like Mendieta, Vallejo has created work rooted in the connection between nature and the female body. And like Mendieta, Vallejo has turned to the ancient world for precedents. Both artists seem to sense that ancient cultures were more in tune with the power of nature than our contemporary world. (23) For Mendieta, ancient cultures possessed "an inner knowledge, a closeness with natural resources" that endowed them with a certain "authenticity." (24) But whereas Mendieta's female silhouettes recall Neolithic goddesses from Egypt and Europe, Vallejo's female images are recognizably Mexican in origin. They often have eyes drawn from Mixtec manuscripts and poses echoing Aztec stone sculpture or Zapotec ceramic urns.

Another artist who depicted the female body in nature and did so using the pre-Columbian visual language was Mexican painter Diego Rivera. In the late 1920s, he did a series of murals for the Chapel at the National School of Agriculture in Chapingo. Combining revolutionary Marxist ideology with allegorical figures of fertilization and growth, he depicted the abundant earth as a voluptuous female nude. In one depiction, Rivera's allegorical woman reclines and lifts her hand in a mudra-like gesture. In another, she soars through the soil to inseminate corn and other crops. Vallejo's female figures are, like Rivera's, sensual, powerful and boldly drawn.

Women in Nature

Women can, and do, identify the forms of our own bodies with the undulations of the earth—the hills and sacred mountains which were the first gardens and the first temples.

Lucy Lippard (25)

Inspired by pre-Columbian precedents and Rivera's exemplar, Vallejo began painting images of women in nature in 1990. Her series entitled *Women of Love and Integrity* includes dozens of works on both canvas and paper, all of them based on the fusion of the female with nature. One depicts a woman emerging from the rough-hewn texture of a tree trunk. Another depicts a woman with immense leaves for hair; yet another has the blue waters of a rushing river cascading down her shoulders. Some of the women have butterfly faces. Some have heads replaced by shining sunflowers, the petals becoming spiky yellow tresses. *At One with the Earth* (from 1992) depicts a woman reclining against a gentle hillside, her pose a canny quotation of female nudes from the Renaissance (think of Titian's *Venus of Urbino*) and early modern eras (of course Manet's *Olympia* comes to mind.) *Garden of the Spirits* (1994) is a gouache on paper depicting two women and a male companion standing in a verdant field of green, flanked by gigantic flowers. All three figures are delineated with a glowing white line, so they appear to phosphoresce in their magical botanical realm.

Vallejo's later series, *Spirits of Nature* (2000-2005), similarly explores the union of woman and the natural world. As art historian Chrissie Iles reminds us, "The fusion of the woman with a tree, a sacred container of the spirit, is one of the most ancient images of primitive natural magic." (26) The *Spirits of Nature* paintings continue Vallejo's exploration of this relationship in contemporary terms.

These paintings are distinguished from their earlier relatives by the intense sensuality of the more fully realized female nudes. In *Eternal Seed* (2000), a monumental woman stands, holding a small globe. Her sumptuous body shimmers inside floral folds of red and gold. The evocative shapes enfolding her resemble both velvety petals and liquid labia. They bring to mind Georgia O'Keeffe, whose flower paintings are similarly seductive. It is well known that O'Keeffe was distressed when viewers—especially critics—read her floral forms as sexual. (27) In contrast, Vallejo acknowledges, indeed embraces, the erotic content of her work.

California Land & Sky

"There is a way that nature speaks, that land speaks. Most of the time we are simply not patient enough, quiet enough, to pay attention to the story."

Linda Hogan (28)

In 1996, Linda Vallejo, her husband Ron Dillaway, and their two sons began building their dream house in Topanga Canyon. Their magnificent home sits on the steep side of a canyon, framed by ancient oaks. It seems alone in paradise: no other dwellings are visible from the many large windows. Vallejo's art studio is nestled in her house now. As she paints, she can watch birds soar and coyotes run through the ever-changing sun and shadow.

The formerly urban-identified artist experienced profound changes when she found herself surrounded by the spectacle of boundless sky and endless earth. Daily, she woke to the sun and bathed in the unceasing California light. At night, she was sheltered under the vast canopy of stars. She became, as Chickasaw poet and environmentalist Linda Hogan would put it, "patient enough, quiet enough" to hear the way "that nature speaks, that land speaks."

The perpetual communion with the elements altered Vallejo's art: she began painting the sky in all its moods, then the land in its constant sculptural fluctuations, and finally oak trees as noble guardians of time. Again, her work recalls O'Keeffe's. Although O'Keeffe created remarkable paintings while living with Alfred Stieglitz in New York, she truly flourished when she resided in the mountains and deserts of New Mexico. Similarly, Vallejo's work exploded with new vitality in Topanga Canyon. She turned from depictions of women in the earth to direct portraits of the sky (the *Los Cielos* series) and the land (the *California Horizons* series.)

Thunder, Lightning and Rain (2006) is a truly astonishing painting. It rises from dark, storm-tossed clouds at the bottom—from deep blue clouds cut by sharp lines of lightning—then ascends to more and more sun-infused color until, at the top, it glows with ineffable warmth. *Fire and Earth* (2006) is a horizontal strip of sunset. Flaming lines rush across the sky, burning the clouds into molten gold. If *Fire and Earth* is hot, then its tandem *Air and Water* (2006) is cold. Pale and ethereal, it depicts the cool sweep of fog across an icy sea.

Some of the skies in Vallejo's California Horizon series are more stylized. They recall O'Keeffe landscape abstractions such as *Red, Yellow and Black Streak* (1924), a stack of layered colors that only distantly alludes to desert, mountain, and sunset sky. In Vallejo's *Skyline* (2002), the atmosphere is more like swirled frosting more than thin air, the surface below more like folds of pastry than piles of stone. And yet the painting works: we "read" earth and sky even as we recognize the skillful translation into expressive art.

Vallejo's expressive interpretation of earth and sky recalls the late paintings of Vincent van Gogh. The Dutch artist performed a similar abstraction for his iconic *Starry Night* from 1889. Van Gogh did not see the spiraling currents of blue and yellow in the night sky. He did not see the cypress tree undulate heavenward. But he *felt* them. And his expressive abstraction of the natural forms allows us to feel the sky in a way that a photographically realistic depiction never would.

Postmodern Altars

The sublime beauty of many of Vallejo's landscapes stands in marked distinction to the troubling postmodernism of her sculpted altars (2008). Framed by wooden structures that recall Gothic cathedral shrines, Vallejo's altars incorporate reproductions of her paintings in the same way that her early pre-Columbian offering pieces incorporated previous prints. They also incorporate many culturally devalued materials, such as Styrofoam, Mylar, Plexiglass, AstroTurf, plastic beads, and polyester yarn. Vallejo's altars force us to interrogate the nature of beauty in this Postmodern world. Many viewers might, in fact, consider them kitsch.

Chicana artist and scholar Amalia Mesa-Bains urges us to reconsider the apparently kitschy content of much postmodern avant-garde art. Noting that "[v]ernacular, vulgar, inferior, tasteless, and insensible are all terms associated with kitsch," (and, she might have added, the synthetic materials in Vallejo's altars), Mesa-Bains recuperates kitsch as a component of what she calls "Chicana *rascuache*" aesthetics. (29) Chicana *rascuache* is, according to Mesa-Bains, most often articulated in household altars. She argues that such altars are the most important way for Chicanas to embellish their domestic space and establish "a counterpoint to male-dominated rituals within

Catholicism.” (30) She adds that such altars are “characterized by accumulation, display, and abundance,” and that they commingle “history, faith, and the personal.” (31)

Vallejo’s *Earth’s Altar Gold* (2008), however kitschy its materials, emerges as a jewel-like assemblage of female and earth images. Evocative of religious imagery yet shamelessly hedonistic, it celebrates beauty where we find it—even if that is in simulacra: plastic materials, digital reproductions, and mock marble.

The central image of *Earth’s Altar Gold* is a nude female, standing on a faux stone pedestal. Behind her is the darkened silhouette of a single tree, encircled by a fiery sunset. The lone tree and intensely pigmented sky look forward to Vallejo’s most recent series of paintings.

The Electrics

Vallejo’s beloved subjects—people and nature—come together in *The Electrics*, the recent paintings that are expressively energized by vivid color and vibrating form. In this series, the artist has returned to the cosmic vision search initiated in her ceremonially imbued art from the 1980s. The paintings depict the altered state of the sacred that Vallejo experienced in Native American rituals.

The Electrics are unified by a brilliant, almost psychedelic palette. From lime green to hot pink, the colors Vallejo chooses recall the intensity and artificiality of early aniline dyes. The paintings are also characterized by consistent calligraphic marks. The tight curls, narrow angles, and parallel hatches all derive from one of the artist’s important early experiences. When Vallejo’s family lived in Spain, they traveled to the Muslim palace in Granada known as the Alhambra. The young artist was so impressed by the Arabic script used as architectural decoration that she copied it into a notebook—and then repeated the forms again and again. The calligraphy emerges in her early etchings from art school, in later drawings, and now in *The Electrics*.

In the early years of the new millennium, Vallejo began to focus on portraits of single oak trees. I say “portraits” deliberately: these are not generic paintings of plants. Instead they are carefully detailed depictions of individual trees—the wardens and witnesses of Topanga Canyon and other celebrated sites in California, such as Joshua Tree and Boney Ridge. As she works on these tree portraits, Vallejo seems to understand Rabindranath Tagore’s assertion that “Trees are Earth’s endless effort to speak to the listening heaven.” (32)

One of the most impressive from the series is *Electric Oak Arco Iris* from 2009. *Arco iris* means rainbow in Spanish but this is no ordinary depiction of a rainbow. The rounded, heavy-limbed oak stands in the center of the four by four-foot canvas. A tiny yellow sun cuts through a fork in two main branches and ignites the tree with green, blue and red light that rushes out to transform the sky into purple and orange, then surges into the earth to reveal translucent roots swelling through the land. It is a fierce and hallucinogenic portrayal of the awesome powers of nature. Like the growing number of Electric trees and portraits, *Electric Oak Arco Iris* is also a stunningly beautiful and visionary gift.

Prayers for the Earth

The interpretation of Vallejo's art as gift is perhaps best understood through analysis of her *Prayer for the Earth* installations. The artist created her first *Prayer for the Earth* at the Carnegie Museum in Oxnard, California, in 2004, and has created seven since then including installations at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (2006), Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles (2006), National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago (2008), Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Park (2008), and the San Luis Obispo Cultural Art Center (2009).

While each *Prayer for the Earth* is unique, all of them are room-sized installations that include a large assembled floor piece, groups of the Tree People sculptures, and several paintings of earth and sky and trees. The floor pieces are composed of natural materials—primarily stones, sand, shells, flowers and leaves—that are clustered to refer to the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. The natural components are juxtaposed with fabricated components—photographs, paintings, and sculptures—that often depict humankind's devastation of the natural world.

Although raised on a rectangular platform, the central component of the floor piece is round in form, often with four tandem elements that refer to the cardinal directions. The round form evokes the archetypal symbol of the sacred circle. Mythologist Joseph Campbell discusses the importance of the circle as symbol in many cultures. "The word 'religion' means *religio*, linking back. If we say it is the one life in all of us, then my separate life has been linked to the one life, *religio*, linked back. This has become symbolized in the images of religion, which represent that connecting link [and] one of the most powerful religious symbols is the circle." (33) Campbell goes on to discuss the circles as mandalas. "Mandala is the Sanskrit word for circle, but a circle that is coordinated or symbolically designed so that it has the meaning of a cosmic order. When composing mandalas, you are trying to coordinate your personal circle with the universal circle." (34)

Although Campbell focuses on Sanskrit mandalas, there are mandala-like renderings in many world cultures. There are Hindu mandalas which "function as revelatory symbols of cosmic truths and as instructional charts of the spiritual aspect of human experience." (35) There are Buddhist mandalas: elaborate sand paintings that monks create as visual prayers and then destroy. Indigenous Australians create mandala-like stone circles known as Bora Rings during initiation rituals. (36)

Navajo sandpaintings also can be compared to mandalas—and to Vallejo's sacred circles. (As it happens, the Navajo are one of the Native American groups whose ceremonies the artist has studied and supported.) Like Buddhist mandalas, Navajo sandpaintings are ephemeral artworks, created for a brief period, then destroyed. According to tradition, the Navajo sandpaintings that are made for sale to tourists do not exactly reproduce the ones used in rituals.

When Navajo Singers [healers] endeavor to heal a member of their tribe, they create sacred symmetrical diagrams of sand. As with Vallejo's *Prayer for the Earth* installations, Navajo sandpaintings often include symbolic depictions of the cardinal directions. The Navajo believe that sitting in the sandpainting allows patient to absorb some of the art's power: depictions of natural order and balance can heal by re-aligning the patient with the innate harmony of the universe.

French sociologist Emile Durkheim defines rituals as actions that help to preserve order within the social sphere. (37) The healing rituals involving Navajo sandpaintings accomplish precisely this. If the sand-painted image is balanced and ordered, the life of the patient who communes with it is “re-ordered.”

Navajo sandpaintings can also be interpreted as healing gifts. In this regard, they are artworks that serve the gift function analyzed by Lewis Hyde in his seminal study. *The Gift, Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. (38) Hyde notes that artistic gifts can be transformational. (39) Transformation is precisely what the Navajo Singers want to bring about. (40)

If Hyde were writing today, he might focus on a contemporary artist like Linda Vallejo, an artist whose oeuvre is comprised of compelling gifts. Vallejo’s works—from the early pre-Columbian inspired assemblage pieces, to the Tree People, to the paintings of spirits in nature, to the singular depictions of skies and mountains and trees, to the Postmodern altars, to the Prayers for the Earth installations—are beautifully crafted offerings. Like the ceremonies the artist continues to organize, her artworks “feed” us spiritually as well as visually. Made by an extraordinary woman and presented to a world in great need, they are indeed artistic gifts.

“Where there is no gift, there is no art.”

Lewis Hyde (41)