

**Linda Vallejo “Fierce Beauty” A Forty Year Retrospective**

**catalog essay by**

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THE EARTH IS A HEAVENLY BODY:

THE MYTHOPOETIC UNIVERSE OF LINDA VALLEJO

Linda Vallejo’s cosmic vision narrates a mythic journey from Nepantla, the space between divided worlds (cultures, lands, states of consciousness, ideologies, identities), to an envisaged archetypal realm of light, an *enlightenment*, that begins to be perceived as her protagonist, Mud Woman/Earth Mother, reconnects heaven with earth via the illuminated vision of the Tree of Life. Through her body of work known as *The Electrics*, Vallejo’s earthly realm of electrified trees is aligned with the archetypal Tree of Life, a cross-cultural shamanic template for the connection of the lower, middle, and upper realms of all creation. In Vallejo’s oeuvre, the Tree of Life manifests its earthly incarnation as an oak tree, and, in fact, Linda’s studio is located right above a grove of sacred oaks. Mud Woman’s spiritual teaching when she appears on the *Altar of Postmodern Trash* (2007) contrasts an image of the destruction of the modern city before which she stands with that of another image on a different altar. In *Earth’s Altar Silver* (2008), she is born, like Venus, from a seashell and stands before a radiant

electric oak. This vibrant, light-filled altar proposes the possibility of rebirth from the ashes of postmodern civilization to an organic, ecofeminist civilization via the blessings of the Tree of Life.

Dating from prehistory, the oak's acorns have long constituted a staple of both oak food (acorn mush) and oak medicine. The oak has provided nourishment for indigenous populations and has served as a kind of manna for survival under all types of difficult conditions.

As an ecofeminist Nephantlanean, Vallejo, the artist, has identified the dualisms, divisions, borders, boundaries, and separations that were constructed by the ideologies of the West referred to by Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature*, when she wrote:

The ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother links women's history with the history of the environment and ecological change. The female earth was central to the organic cosmology that was undermined by the Scientific Revolution and the rise of a market-oriented culture in early modern Europe.<sup>1</sup>

The metaphor of the earth as a nurturing mother was gradually to vanish as a dominant image as the Scientific Revolution proceeded to mechanize and to rationalize the world view....<sup>2</sup>

Vallejo's artistic vision extends the scope of the worlds that the contemporary Nephantlanean artist must bridge between identities to a cosmological level in which, as Merchant has written, the "world we have lost was organic."<sup>3</sup> In the contemporary era, we find that we have inherited various amnesias toward our former organic connectivity with the Earth Mother and toward our former alignments between our planet and the

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

entire cosmos, for *the earth is a heavenly body*. It is now our mission to reconnect the ancient organic worldview that honored Mother Earth as sacred with life in a modern world transformed by technology so that we may never again forget our interconnectedness with the earth and the cosmos.

Having worked with indigenous people, both leading and participating in sacred ceremonies for many decades, Vallejo is acutely aware of these alignments between the earth and the heavens (the solstices, the equinoxes, the convergences of constellations with sacred human events), and she has not been overtaken by the cultural amnesia that has spread across the Western world. As a *Nepantlera* (this is a Nahuatl term used by Gloria Anzaldua to identify those who negotiate between discordant spaces, be they nations, intellectual spaces, psychic spaces, civilizations, or, in this case, ideological spaces), Vallejo is a “threshold person,” identified by Anzaldua as one who lives “within and among multiple worlds.”<sup>4</sup> Threshold people develop a perspective from their space in the cracks between worlds in which to invent holistic, relational theories and tactics that enable them to “reconceive or in other ways transform the various worlds in which they exist.”<sup>5</sup>

Another early *Nepantlera* was Frida Kahlo, whose painting *The Two Fridas* (1939) expressed her dual identity: one side of her was an indigenous woman, the other, a European who was, in fact, partly of Jewish ancestry. Both Anzaldua and Vallejo fall into the lineage of Kahlo, who expressed the tensions in this hybridity through art and sought to create a bridge between the diverse worlds in which artists live.

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<sup>4</sup> AnaLouise Keating, *Entremundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldua* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 2008), 1, 2-10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

For all of the creative female artists and writers in Kahlo's Nepantlera lineage, art creates a bridge between the worlds. Vallejo's oeuvre creates not only a bridge, but also a healing. During the course of her journey from one medium to another, from genre to genre, from one category of exploration to another (landscapes, skyscapes, installations, constructions, sculpture, computer-altered imagery), she also proposes an oak medicine, a form of inspired knowledge of where to begin to treat the imbalance in our world. From her studio in Topanga Canyon, California, overlooking a grove of oak trees, Vallejo would certainly be the first to notice any symptoms of the disease to which the California Oak had succumbed (e.g. Sudden Oak Death, SOD). Vallejo's most recent series, *The Electrics*, truly constitutes a rainbow bridge to a healing of all trees via the colorful auras of the *Electrics* as they radiate the powerful energies of the archetypal Tree of Life via the Oak, throughout their environment.

## 1. NEPANTLA

When Linda Vallejo and I met in a Los Angeles cafe in the fall of 2009 for a discussion of her work, she affirmed repeatedly that the horizon line is always present in all of her landscapes. As we explored the illusory boundary between the earth and the sky that the horizon represents, we spoke of the ways in which the horizon line changes as we move. There is no real horizon line, no permanent or true boundary inscribed between the earth and the sky. It is always changing. Yet the painted horizon line is there to remind us that the earth is embedded within the sky, not separate from it. The horizon moves with our leaps from one location in terrestrial or psychic space to another. In a similar manner, Vallejo may inhabit the ancient world at one moment and the modern world the next. She travels from country to country and creates art in a variety of

genres and media, taking Nepantlerean leaps into the unknown to follow new horizons and to bring the worlds together and transcribing what was known in one to what is yet to be known in the other. As she said to me, “I was born a Nepantla. I moved to Germany at age three. When you are a Nepantla, you have to jump. It’s what you do when you land that’s important. You must get into what you find when you cross that border.” The Nepantlera takes off or, as she expressed it, “jumps off the cliff” without knowing exactly where she will land. She crosses the boundaries between the conscious and the unconscious, between the dream world and the waking world, between the real and the imaginary, between the Mesoamerican mythos and Euro-American modernism, between the world above and the world below. Her art is *not*, she vehemently proclaimed, “at all about the personal cathartic.”

This is not a journey of one individual woman, but of our planet’s female inhabitants and how they have been severed from their connectivity to earth and sky since the seventeenth century, when the dichotomy between the previous organic worldview and the mechanistic one began to dominate philosophy and science in the West. Vallejo’s art reminds us of our primordial home, of our life on a planet that is in a constellation in the universe. Her images show us cosmic women alive in the clouds. They often cross the horizon and interact with the earth as well. They are Nepantleras who travel with daring and integrity as they leap from world to world without fear and always return to the center through ceremony, which develops forbearance and dedication that strengthen and ground the spirit.

An iconic image of Vallejo’s Nepantlera can be seen in her painting *Reflecting Pool* (1997). Here an all-knowing eye in the sky is looking down upon a woman bowing to touch the earth (the pose one takes when entering the sweat lodge). The woman’s

outline is illuminated so that she resembles a glowing constellation; her border is made of light. Because the earth and the sky inhabit the same constellation and the same universe, the planet is blue like the sky. The woman looking for herself in the earth is also a heavenly body. The eye above, an iconic Mesoamerican eye, represents inner knowing, but it also seems to be shedding a tear. Vallejo told me that this painting was inspired by Jung and is about looking for a key that makes us all one. I would add that when we speak of “us all,” we mean not only humans but also the spirits in the sky—the ancestors, the wisdom figures, the guides. Perhaps the ancestral Mesoamerican tear represents a lament for our loss of the knowledge of the organic world and our relationship with it.

*Evening Prayer* (2000) locates the woman in the sky, as does *Mist* (2003), and in *Struck by Lightning* (2007), the woman in the sky is electrified and illuminated. These women may also be spirits, ancestors, and guides. But Vallejo’s women are never in a divisive relationship between earth and sky. In *Dreaming of the Earth* (2003), the female figure melds into the earth. *Transformation* (1993), a gouache on paper, depicts a *mariposa* (butterfly-faced) woman whose body crosses the sky and the horizon, with the lower part of her body passing through the region of earth. This painting relates to *Mujer Mariposa* (1993), a butterfly-faced image of feminine metamorphosis and of woman’s intertwined identity with nonhuman nature. Two other masked women, *Self-Portrait Day* (2006) and *Self-Portrait Night* (2006) sport leaves on their faces (sage on *Day*, a maple leaf on *Night*), which are also mask-like visages.

Butterflies and leaves link these women to the animal and vegetal kingdoms/queendoms. They also create symbolic hybrids with butterfly faces, suggesting the metamorphosis of the self. In *Youth* (2002) and *Struck by Lightning*

(2009), where the woman's face is either illuminated or struck by lightning, we realize that woman's celestial power is akin to the voltage of lightning. It can symbolize the enlightenment brought to us by the cosmic powers of the female, whose origins are always both spiritual and earthly.

Vallejo's installations in the various reconfigurations of *A Prayer for the Earth* (2003–2009) create spaces for sacred ceremonies within the gallery and honor the four directions, the elements, the creatures of the earth, and the entire interconnected universe of both human and nonhuman life forms, both ancestral and contemporary. Earth and sky are always envisaged in an interconnected relationship with each other and with the human presence that mediates between them and unites the living to the dead and the past to the present in a continuum of civilizations and cultures that are connected through cycles of creation, destruction, and rebirth.

As she told me when I was privileged to see the paintings in her storage space, Vallejo is inspired by the breathtaking photos of giant cloud formations taken by the Hubble Telescope. *Thunder, Lightning, and Rain* (2006) is a huge multicolored sky with an explosive lightning flash at the bottom. The clouds "are *beings* and not necessarily human, but other shapes." The lightning display at the bottom of the immense splendor of the multi-colored sky with a golden ball in the center shows the grandeur and beauty that the artist has seen in the giant cloud formations of the Hubble photos.

The cloud *beings* are active and eloquent in all of Vallejo's skylscapes. They seem to be propelling the universal forces. They are *beings* whose essence interconnects with our spirit, just as the winds and the air spread their celestial energies over the earth. We surely inhale the cloud *beings* whenever we breathe deeply and with intention. We are in that sense partly cloud *beings* ourselves.

## 2. MUD WOMAN

Mud Woman is a vital, breathing woman covered in mud--a living sculpture. In one image, she is lying face down on the earth, perhaps weeping, posed as if desiring to reconnect in an intimate way with the terrestrial ground of being. In another image, she is reclining upon the earth in a moment of repose as she is taking in the energies of the atmosphere and merging them with the grass and the ground. The name Mud Woman refers to Ana Mendieta's Mud Women, but whereas Mendieta's Mud Women remind us that we are made of the clay of the earth, as in her *Siluetas Series* (1977), or formed of mud in the shape of islands (*Isla*, 1981), or that we share our skin color and texture with the bark of a tree, as in her *Tree of Life Series* (1977), Vallejo's Mud Woman is the protagonist of her mythopoetic narrative. The great Mesoamerican eye in the sky weeps over our culture's rejection of Mud Woman from contemporary Western consciousness. Perhaps, in her lament for the amnesia of contemporary humans who have neglected all memory of her, she fell face down upon the earth. Mud Woman also manifests against a beautiful pink sky, where she seems to be an apparition, like Turquoise Woman might be for Native Americans, who would perceive her vision in the sky above a mountain.

Vallejo's Mud Woman is often a symbolic figure that appears on her *Postmodern Trash* altars holding an image of the earth's chemical wastes, of pollution, or of the earth on fire. Vallejo has made her own gesture of offering as she recycles reproduced digital images of her own paintings to decorate the altars in which Mud Woman appears. In one altar from this series, Mud Woman is born of a seashell like Venus in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (ca. 1485). Born from the sea, she is our goddess, the spirit of all life. She has



visited all the realms of the Tree of Life, the *axis mundi*, and can materialize before us from the sea, the earth, or the sky. She is our creator, and we suddenly realize that we have trashed her. As her earthly habitat, our planet, is undergoing systematic eco-destruction, she is experiencing both sadness and a passion to teach so that we may come to our senses.

It is Mud Woman who embodies the knowledge that will lead us into the light of spiritual transformation through the lessons of the Tree of Life. She is not only a teacher and a priestess, but also a shaman and a *curandera*. Note how in one of the *Postmodern Trash altars (Earth's Altar Silver, 2008)*, Mud Woman is standing in front of an electric oak tree, where, like the Buddha in front of the Bodhi tree, she gives her most urgent spiritual teaching. It is a lesson connected to the Tree of Life, and it is about the rewards we will reap when we come to see the Tree of Life reincarnating again in forests and sacred oak groves here on Earth. When the Tree of Life manifests before our eyes, we will bear witness to the rebirth of the great archetypal Oak, the Sacred Tree, that is permanently alive in the spirit world and whose aura now appears to us in *The Electrics*.

### 3. THE TREE OF LIFE: *THE ELECTRICS*

Making another Nepantlerean leap into work in a new medium, Vallejo experimented with the computer to create her alluring series, *The Electrics*. Considering the split between the organic world view and the mechanistic one that, according to Merchant, has to be bridged today, Vallejo's electric oaks surely constitute an aesthetic fusion of those two worlds in a new medium. While the Cosmic Tree (or World Tree) is an archetypal symbol that many cultures invoke to map the interconnectedness between the lower world, the middle world (where we reside), and the upper world (the heavens)

and is also a spiritual entity invoked by shamans in a diversity of cultures to travel between the worlds in search of a healing, I turn here to the Native American story of the Sacred Tree to specify what the Tree of Life means within a Native American context. *The Story of the Sacred Tree* is introduced by Jane Goodall and narrated by Judie Bopp, Michael Bopp, Lee Brown, and Phil Lane Jr. in a small book produced by the Four Worlds Development Project.<sup>6</sup> For native peoples, the archetype of the Sacred Tree is immortal; it is the earthly tree that will vanish. The Sacred Tree will continue to exist, but what is important is that we learn to merit its blessings and its fruits. The Tree is not only the giver of sustenance, but it is also connected to the entire life of the community. The authors write as follows:

The ancient ones taught us that the life of the Tree is the life of the people. If the people wander far away from the protective shadow of the Tree, if they forget to seek the nourishment of its fruit, or if they should turn against the Tree and attempt to destroy it, great sorrow will fall upon the people. Many will become sick at heart. The people will lose their power. They will cease to dream dreams and see visions. ... They will forget how to survive in their own land. Their lives will become filled with anger and gloom. Little by little they will poison themselves and all they touch.

It was foretold that these things would come to pass, but that the Tree would never die. And as long as the Tree lives, the people live. It was also foretold that the day would come when the people would awaken, as if from a

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<sup>6</sup> Judie Bopp, Michael Bopp, Lee Brown, Phil Lane, Jr. and Elders, *The Sacred Tree* (White Rock, B.C., 1984, 1985).

long, drugged sleep; that they would begin, timidly at first but then with great urgency, to search again for the Sacred Tree.<sup>7</sup>

The oak trees that appear in *The Electrics* have large canopies that are in contact with the sky. We do not, however, see the leaves in the canopies. What we do see in *Electric Oak: Arco Iris* (2009) and *Electric Oak: Rooted to the Earth* (2009) is a multi-colored lightshow. Other *Electrics* feature a single hue of light that some have called an aura. These trees are both real and spiritual. The *chi* that radiates out from their canopy, illuminated by pink, orange, yellow, fuschia, blue, purple, tan, green, blue, and white vibratory energies, is the healing force of the universe. In *Sacred Oak: A Prayer for a World at War* (2002), the tree seems to have levitated, roots and all, and its canopy is up in the sky with the sun.

If the task of the shaman is to climb the Sacred Tree/World Tree and search the different levels of existence to locate the lost soul of an ailing human (a process known in shamanism as soul retrieval), Mud Woman has clearly made this search and returned to us bringing the appropriate healing knowledge. Like shamans in all cultures, she has retrieved our lost soul and is returning it to us so that we may undergo a re-souling of humanity and the universe. As we can see in *The Electrics*, the oak appears in all seasons and at many moments of cosmic alignment (see *Electric Oak: Spring Equinox*, 2008, and *Electric Oak: Fall Equinox*, 2008) and at midnight, dusk, and dawn. The oak appears with the moon and with the sun and represents the cycles of life, rebirth, and regeneration. Its fruit, the acorn, is a gift from the Goddess of Creation that represents fertility, sustenance, and the cycles of regeneration.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 7.

The Tree of Life is a symbol of the departure from Nepantla. No longer are the worlds divided. They are connected to each other via the vital energies of The Tree of Life. The way we relate to the Sacred Tree is crucial to our ability to reap the blessings of existence in this universe. The Tree of Life is the central axis of the world that keeps all things in balance.

In Vallejo's *Electrics*, the variegated rays of light in the different canopies create the background lighting of the tree as they suffuse the atmosphere with their energy fields. The pink auras of many of the trees, for example, symbolize the power of Love. The color symbolism conveys a teaching for each color of the spectrum. These trees also appear to be pure visions or hallucinations.

However, the radiant aura of each archetypal/spiritual tree is merged with the imprint of the *real* California Oak and thus the *Electrics* represent the interconnected balance of both earthly and supernal powers. As the Sacred Tree transmits its essence of rainbow light to trees on earth, their auras are diffused to all living things, and serve to unify the entire human community with nature and the spiritual realms.

Linda Vallejo's ecofeminist, shamanic teaching is thus symbolized by rainbow enlightenment, a visionary lightshow that represents the many blessings of the archetypal and eternal Sacred Tree. This is what lends to her *Electrics* the charismatic resonance of an iconic image. The pure communicability and compelling beauty of the *Electrics* have the power to create a unity among all life forms embraced by the powers of Mother Earth and the Sacred Tree intertwined.

From Nepantla to *The Electrics*, Linda Vallejo's oeuvre has undergone a variety of mutations over the past forty years. This Nepantlerean artist has experienced multiple shape shiftings, diving fearlessly off the cliff of one world only to land in yet another still

more fabulous universe. Upon arrival, the artist is awestruck by the allure of each new world. Its sites and vistas compel her to invent a new visual language and to transform her medium of expression once again. The Nepantlerian artist quickly switches gear so that she can bring these discoveries to light, always pioneering, always experimenting with innovative techniques. Hence we come to *The Electrics*, created with the artistry of our newest multi-functional tool, the computer.

It is important to note that Nepantleras don't completely abandon their pasts when they jump off the cliff into foreign territory. They never leave their histories behind when they make their quantum leaps across the huge divides from one environment/one embodiment, to another. Nepantlera Linda Vallejo has envisaged her own journey. Traveling with her paintbrush and other creative tools in her pocket, she is always ready for the next body of work.

It is not only tools from her work in previous genres that travel with the Nepantlera. The values of both indigenous and modern cultures are also integrated into the continuum of her work. Mud Woman as Earth Mother also undergoes important metamorphoses as the Rainbow Enlightenment that is dispersed by the Electric Oaks nurtures her regeneration, and ultimately her healing. The journey never ends, and we know that the leaps will continue, springing unexpectedly and spontaneously from the deepest recesses of the artist's soul. Vallejo's artistic vision quest has only one requirement: a commitment to the journey with all its quantum leaps, its multiple migrations, and its myriad departures for new horizons. One should place all the transformations of Linda Vallejo's creative oeuvre within the larger framework of the Nepantlerian journey away from binary divisions and the tension between opposites,

towards the incorporation of all previous incarnations of the work and the self into the newest country of immigration, the largest country of all—that of the imagination.

The earth *is always* a heavenly body. In the oeuvre of Linda Vallejo, our “oak medicine” is symbolized by a rainbow lightshow in the sacred grove. It is a visionary portal that, when entered, reveals the pathway out of Nepantla. It guides us towards a regeneration of Mud Woman and a reflowering of life not only on planet Earth but also--through shamanic journeying and artistic imagination--on all the other heavenly bodies in the universe.