

Written by Ann Landi, contributing editor of ARTnews and author of the four-volume Schirmer Encyclopedia of Art, to accompany a series of national solo exhibitions:

Linda Vallejo's art grows out of her experiences with different cultures over the course of decades of far-flung travel and careful study. The daughter of an Air Force colonel, she spent several years in Europe as a child and young woman, absorbing Western traditions in the great museums and ancient sites. She turned to painting and drawing at an early age: "Art and artistic expression were my first language," as she puts it. When she returned to the U.S. after attending high school and college in Spain, Vallejo became interested in contemporary Chicano culture. She and her husband also spent time traveling through Mexico, visiting Mayan and Aztec ruins and learning the history of that civilization. And from her home base in Topanga Canyon, California, she has been involved with Native American and Mexican rituals and ceremonies for the past 25 years.

That makes for a rich and heady brew of influences, all of which become distilled in Vallejo's hands into compelling installations, paintings, sculpture, and collages. But the starting point for this varied and visually rich output is almost always nature. For many years Vallejo has been involved with participating in and presenting Native American ceremonies, some of which take place in remote locales, far from so-called civilization. "You're literally in the middle of nature," she says, "and more often than not you are participating in a ceremony that allows you to look at sky and landscape for hours and days on end." Some of the magical, almost hallucinatory quality of those experiences makes their way into her paintings, such as *Full Moon at Dusk* (2000) and *Santa Monica Mountain Range, Boney Ridge* (2006).

Ceremony and nature are also at the heart of Vallejo's installations, particularly *A Prayer for the Earth* (2004), which brought together so many different components of the artist's vision. In part the theme was the devastation done to the planet, but the work also touches on the healing powers of ceremony and the interaction of the basic elements: earth, water, fire, and air. Vallejo invented a powerful ritualistic site of her own in this work, a modern-day space for contemplation that nonetheless echoes the kinds of totems and sacred places we associate with Native American traditions.

Trees are another aspect of the natural world that have a deep significance for the artist, and as she has pointed out, almost every culture has some sort of Tree of Life symbol. When she focuses on individual trees, as in *Golden Yucca* (2006), she gives them the dignity and mystery of portraits. The artist lives in an area surrounded by venerable but endangered oaks, and these have become the basis for a series of "electrified" paintings: the trees appear to glow with an almost otherworldly light. "When I look back on these works now, I can see that what's happened is my almost supernatural vision of the tree," Vallejo says. "The electric trees echo my experiences with ceremony."

They also recall the reverence and animation that artists like van Gogh and O'Keeffe brought to their paintings of the natural world. In spite of her involvement with indigenous cultures of the American West and Mexico, Vallejo's exposure to European art still plays a role in her iconography. The altars she has been making in recent years reference the richly gilded polyptychs of Gothic art, particularly the International Style, but Vallejo recycles her own images

as digital prints and turns these into shrines commemorating the rapidly vanishing beauties of the our wild spaces. Western religious art also underlies the shapes of her “Postmodern Trash” series, which recycles the detritus of our daily lives – in particular, Styrofoam – into deeply ironic shrines and votive objects.

And throughout her recent art appears a figure who also has a religious significance: the voluptuous female Vallejo calls the Mud Woman. She is a substantial, earthy character, a surrogate for the artist but also a symbol of Every Woman, and she recalls the fertility goddesses that have appeared in just about every culture since the dawn of time. She is the Eternal Feminine who in some works appears ready to be worshipped and in others seems to be sadly presiding over the waste and devastation around us. That Vallejo is able to channel and draw on so many aspects of her multicultural experience without breaking stride or overloading the viewer is a testament to her strengths as an artist. And her recognition that culture is no longer a matter of one dominant tradition makes her very much part of a mainstream that is constantly looking to expand the borders and boundaries of contemporary art and life.