

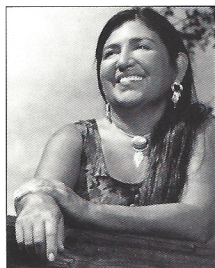
CONTEMPORARY CHICANA AND CHICANO ART VOLUME II



Linda Vallejo

b. 1951, Los Angeles, California

Michele A. H. Smith



"My artwork revolves around my dual experiences as a woman and a Chicana living in the late twentieth century and studying the ancient indigenous traditions of Mexico and the Americas. I have worked to discover woman in her modern and ancient place as a source of strength, love, and integrity. I believe that all women are a part of the earth and can be inspired by a relationship with and through nature.

"It is my firm belief that woman is the symbol of the earth and that each woman can learn aspects of loyalty, integrity, honor, generosity, and courage directly from the earth."

Vallejo

Linda Vallejo's childhood provided her with two lasting influences on her life and career: a large and loving family and the peripatetic existence of the child of an armed-forces career parent. Born in Los Angeles, she lived there with her family until her father graduated from college. When he joined the U.S. Air Force as an officer, the family moved to Germany for a time, then back to the United States, where her father was stationed variously in Missouri, Arizona, Texas, California, and Alabama. In later years Vallejo has retained vivid memories of Alabama in the early 1960s, during the period of civil rights unrest, and of long road trips to visit extended family in Los Angeles. During her teen years the family returned to Europe, and she finished high school in Spain. There she learned Spanish and studied and was deeply impressed by the works of Dalí and Picasso. She also traveled throughout Europe to study other artists, feeding her interest in art developed in early childhood (she remembers painting at the age of four). Returning to the United States, she relocated to California and enrolled in Whittier College, earning her B.F.A. in 1973. This was followed by further study at California State University, Long Beach, where she received her M.F.A. in 1978. She became an artist in residence with the California Arts Council, simultaneously continuing to produce her personal art, and then became a gallery owner with the opening of Galería las Américas in Los Angeles.

Vallejo's significant impact originates in her distinctive ability to reconcile diverse influences of indigenous pre-Hispanic culture with a well-grounded art historical exposure.



Tonantzin, 1988, handmade paper and wood, 36" x 14" x 14"

Her work exhibits a confidence and passion engaging the viewer in a rumination that is directed without depending on polemics. Works from her *Death of Urban Humanity* series are powerful as much for their personal plea as for their striking imagery. Vallejo's subjects move beyond mundane rhetoric with a stylistic maturity that undermines the reason of the political. Tangible and inevitable, the work of this artist sacrifices the abstract notion for the specific struggle, effectively replacing debate with responsibility. This is achieved by the successful orientation of the viewer in an erudite consideration of urbanism in decline and the imperiled position of those in its wake. For a population of Chicanos increasingly situated in the cityscapes of America, Vallejo's work is an expansive statement on the real threats challenging her community.

The Death of Urban Humanity: A World without Soul is an urgent social action. An apocalyptic yellow infects a decaying skyline. A looming skull dominates the field, still burdened by the lingering flesh of its corporeality. A suffocated sun hangs betrayed by this decaying presence. This work speaks loudly to the

decapitated existence of the urban centers of the United States in the new millennium. Addressing social and environmental issues equally, Vallejo rejects solipsistic condemnation and forwards the viewer a skeleton key to the meaning. Always present is the potential for regeneration. Drawing ambitiously on her advanced knowledge of Mesoamerican religion, Vallejo's skull is both cautionary and constructive. The cyclical understanding of life and death applied here inherently suggests a repressed vitality capable of self-preservation and endurance. The throbbing

atmosphere is emblematic of a tension that is as capable of sprouting flowers as it is headstones.

Tonantzin is exemplary of Vallejo's immersion in the native social and religious structures of the Western Hemisphere. A totem of asserted continuity, *Tonantzin* returns the pre-Hispanic deity to the contemporary milieu of Chicano iconography. The Aztec earth goddess of life and death, Tonantzin was abducted by the Spanish conquest and Catholicism. As in the case of many of the indigenous deities and rituals, a synchronism occurred between the emerging Catholic culture and the social systems of native peoples of the Americas. Vallejo is carefully advancing this process in this work. Crafted in the dimensions of the popular *santos* (saints), sculptures prevalent in Mexican and Chicano homes, *Tonantzin* takes its proper place alongside other important religious icons. The fleshy masses bursting from the figure's trunk reference the debt to the earth recognized by indigenous cultures. A refined figure rises in handmade silver paper, a critical connecting point for

(1995), Shinji Shumeikai, Pasadena, CA (1999), Social Public Art Resource Center, Los Angeles (2000), and the on-line exhibition *Aztlannet.com* (1998-99). She has been recognized by the California Arts Council and the City of Los Angeles and is the recipient of the Latinas Making History Award (1991) and the Artist Award of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (1999). (JA)

Reviews and Commentaries

"During the past two decades, Linda's work, both as an emerging artist and now as a well established professional artist, has reflected her dual experiences as a woman and Chicana living in the late twentieth century, whose work is centered in the ancient indigenous traditions of Mexico and the Americas yet speaks to the contemporary world. As an emerging artist in the early 80s, Linda began exploring relationships to nature and the spiritual legacy of her Mexican

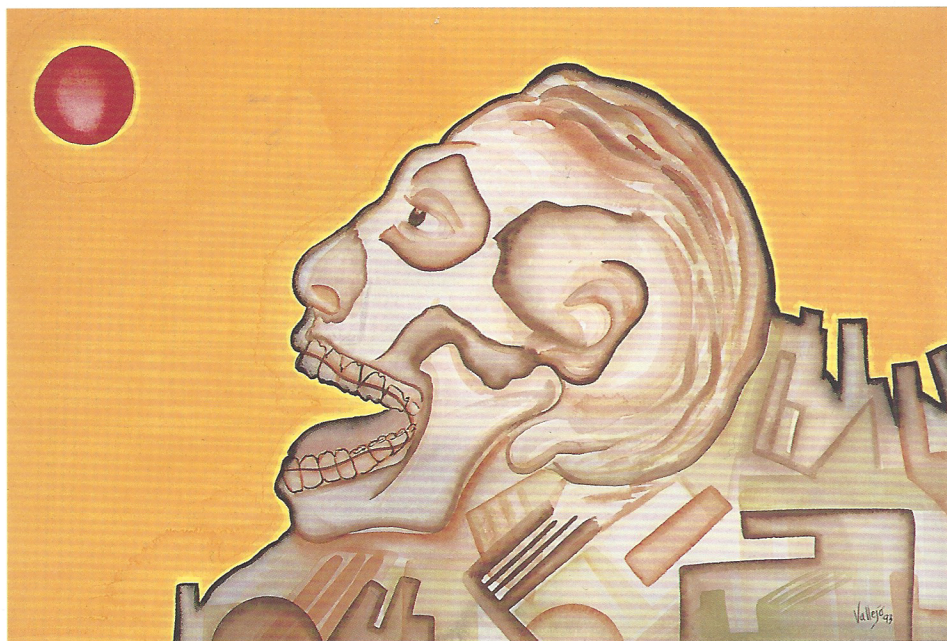
heritage with three-dimensional, mixed-media constructions, from which evolved her Tree People series where human forms were created from small trees, leaves, and branches. In the 1990s, Linda's Tree People evolved into the series she called Woman of Love and Integrity, which became the foundation for her current series, *Los Cielos/The Heavens*. Here the female form as symbol of the earth speaks to the hopes and dreams, as well as feelings of loss and loneliness, many women experience and how connecting to Mother Earth can heal an empty spirit."

Sybil Venegas in *Los Cielos* catalog, SPARC, Los Angeles, 2000

"Linda's art is among the most indigenous-based of any of the Chicano artists of Los Angeles. Her art works over the past twenty-five years evoke

the spirit of a Mesoamerican shaman chronicling the story of her people's creation and journey through transcendent time and space, especially its women. Yet Linda has mostly been excluded from too many important Chicano art exhibitions for not being Chicano enough and has been likewise excluded from non-Chicano exhibitions for being too Chicano. Some have complained that her work is not easy to categorize. That need to categorize in order to understand is perhaps one of the problems with today's art establishment—a practice too many Chicanos are more than willing to emulate. And yet I find it quite easy now at least to categorize Linda's work as unique, original, and totally engrossing. Her visual language may disturb some viewers because it transcends mere notions of linear nature. As for me, her work makes me lose my balance one moment and makes things much clearer the next."

Armando Durón in *Los Cielos* catalog, 2000



The Death of Urban Humanity: A World without Soul, 1993, gouache on paper, 22" x 15"

the celestial and the terrestrial. The potential of *Tonantzin* exists in its promise to reveal the historical endurance of a religious belief system that has suffered not from extinction, but an anonymous translation.

Vallejo's paintings have been seen in group exhibitions including *Reflexiones de Nuestro Continente* (Galería las Américas, Los Angeles, 1993), *Reencuentro 1993* (Mexican Cultural/Trade Convention, Los Angeles, 1993), *Unidos Todo el Continente* (Galería las Américas, 1993), *Gathering Medicine* (Art in General, New York, 1993), *Las Sirenas* (Galería las Américas, 1995), *Grand Inaugural Exhibition* (Galería las Américas, 1996), and *Dreams and Reality* (University of Judaism, Bel Air, CA, 2001), as well as the touring exhibitions *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation (CARA)* (1990-93) and *Across the Street* (1996-97). She has also mounted several one-woman shows at Galería las Américas (1994), José Gálvez Art Gallery, Tucson, AZ