

Echoes: Women Inspired by Nature – Rabyn Blake and Linda Vallejo

Reviewed by Flavia Potenza

To put a finer point on it, these are inspired women artists inspired by and devoted to nature.

In an impressively curated exhibit at Orange County's Center for Contemporary Art (OCCCA), Topangans Rabyn Blake and Linda Vallejo join a daunting group of 21 women artists, each of whom presents her response to nature conjured from the mysterious depths of these artists' unfathomable imagination.

Vallejo co-curated "Echoes: Women Inspired by Nature" with writer Betty Ann Brown in acknowledgement of 2007 being designated as a tribute year to feminist art. Their vision was to create a show that would celebrate women artists in Southern California and encourage a dialogue among them.

Rabyn Blake

Blake says she is "inspired by the people I see in my daily life. My creative process fuses literary, aesthetic and psychological influences and I am drawn to the human figure with its embodiment of classic mythic, as well as contemporary aspects of human lives. Babies and fetal forms have been a large part of my work since the 70's, always representing the angelic potential and fragility of our species. To my mind the miniature adults, placid bald figures, have Boschian as well as alien origins. In combination with found natural materials, they form their own ecologies to announce their survival issues.

"My method of working involves modeling porcelain clay and discovering sheddings of Nature to furnish the tableaux. I use dental tools to detail the creatures before placing them in the hermetic chamber of the kiln. Out they come, ready for their roles. Child's play, really."

Blake's two sculptures, *One Life* (2001) and *The Crossing* (2007) – fragile vessels, based on ancient Egyptian boats for the dead, made of bark and paper with passive porcelain figures atop – rest serenely on pedestals behind a large plate glass window at the front of the OCCCA gallery presenting to passersby all the ramifications of a journey to unknown destinations. Is *The Crossing* an invocation of Homer's "The Iliad" with a feminist twist? How can the blindfolded woman sitting amidships be writing? And what is the significance of the youth in front of her gazing past a fierce-looking eagle's head bowsprit to the horizon?

One Life actually depicts three lives on the same journey: that of a man bound in front of the mast and a pregnant woman asleep behind him. "As I situated the miniature porcelain figures into the settings of natural materials," Blake writes in her Artist's Statement, "contexts emerged evoking layers of myth, poetry or science. I confess to a pervasive sense of loss – expulsion from Paradise being the mood – as I was making them, echoes of nature sounding a requiem."

But, she continues, "Today, this day, I also see them as voyagers. There is a finite time for accomplishing this work [of rescuing the earth] as we glide to the final destination like the youth on his soul boat, *The Crossing*." Blake wonders, "Do we all vacillate between optimism and despair where the earth's fate lies.

Linda Vallejo

In her own, very different way, Linda Vallejo's art emerges from 30 years of studies of indigenous peoples and participating in Native American ceremonials. For 15 of those years she "poured water" for sweat lodges in prisons.

Her deep appreciation of the power, beauty and fragility of Mother Earth is reflected in her mixed-media installation, *A Prayer for the Earth* (2007). It is a mandala, a sacred circle based on indigenous philosophies and symbols. The outside circle of the mandala shows photographs of tragic images of pollution that contrast with the inner circle images of indigenous peoples "praying for their mother, the earth." The mandala, centered in a large square platform on the floor, is surrounded by four assemblages placed at the four corners and made with creek stones, dried plants and twigs indigenous to Topanga, and feathers and shells representing "Earth, Water, Fire and Air, the four eternal, primordial elements."

This is the fifth time *A Prayer for the Earth* has been shown and each time it changes, says Vallejo, to accommodate the location. To see the other variations, go to her Web site, www.lindavallejo.com.

This time the installation is dominated by *Electric Oaks on the Hillside*, a large painting of a California Live Oak and a Valley Oak, that Vallejo says, "unites imagery with spiritual action." Below that and flanking the mandala, are two of her *Tree People*: *Mr. Winter* aka *The Spirit of Nature, Winter* (1987) and *Mrs. Winter* (1989) to symbolize the beauty of the seasons. *Death and Rebirth*, with its base full of skulls (death), multiple faces above and a butterfly (rebirth) emerging from the hair of twisted roots, is centered at the top of the mandala. These sculptures are made with tree fragments – dried tree limbs and rooted stumps – found in downtown L.A. with the bodies and faces sculpted of hand-made paper and acrylic.

Vallejo is passionate in her desire to protect and preserve the earth. "As artists," she says, "we are obligated to say something." Her message here is, "Pray for the earth."

At this point, it is necessary to acknowledge, at least briefly, some of the other artists who contributed to the show. The catalog essay, written by Betty Ann Brown, sums up their participation as "responding to nature in three elegantly interconnected ways: art that reveals an awe of nature's beauty and power; art that manifests a feeling of meditative oneness with nature (rather than domination over nature or separation from it.); and art that mourns the losses from environmental abuse."

It is exciting to see Judy Baca's *La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra, Colorado, 2000* (aluminum foil print from original acrylic on canvas), in which she explores the concept of land having memory. In this work, we see the ancestors peering at us from the water, rocks and hills.

Another outstanding installation is Akiko Jackson's *Exponential Growth, 2006*, "forty large belly-pods that portray the forty weeks of gestation during human pregnancy. They are made of clay with glazes she created herself in pale tones of orange, sage and lavender." They are arranged in the center of one of the galleries so visitors can walk among them and touch them. After the show, they will be returned to Cal State Northridge, where Jackson hopes they will become part of their permanent collection.

YaYa Chou's sculptures, *Chandelier* and *Joy-Coated*, originated, she says, "from my concern about safety. *Chandelier* is bright red and yellow and looks exquisite. As you draw close you see it is made of Gummi Bears. *Joy-Coated* is a kneeling child

mannequin coated with Gummi Bears. Its feet are melting into a sugary red ooze while its shiny little hands look as if they are about to. It's an eerily comedic view of the dangers present in our foods.

Pamela Grau Twena's *Protecting the Seeds* is another warning of what Nature may do to protect herself. Seven apple-like spheres appear to be growing tentacles, implying mutation as a result of "humanity's disregard for nature"

Finally, my apologies for not being able to explore all of these artists' amazing and thought-provoking works. (After all, this is the **Topanga Messenger**.) But their message is clear: If Nature becomes a mere echo of herself, what becomes of us?

Echoes: Women Inspired by Nature runs through May 20 at the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, 117 N. Sycamore, Santa Ana, 92701. For more information: www.occca.org or 714.667.1517. Full Color Catalog available on request.

BOX:

"We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And to know the place for the first time."
Anonymous

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