

## profile

## nature exposed

an interview with linda vallejo

by diane leon ferdico

"I always believed that I was a person of the world" says artist Linda Vallejo, who began painting at the age of four. Born in Los Angeles in 1951, her family moved often throughout her formative years, allowing her sense of self and cultural identity to be informed by varied experiences throughout the United States and abroad. She lived in Germany before attending school in California and Alabama, then graduated high school in Madrid, Spain, and went on to earn an MFA in Printmaking from California State University in Long Beach. She now lives with her family in Los Angeles, where she established her own studio and gallery, Galeria Las Americas.

Vallejo's body of work is a reflection of her international upbringing, drawing upon her education in art history, world cultures and traditions, and nature. "I have made a "personality" out of my studies and now that "personality" makes art images. It is impossible to separate my environment—whether intellectual, spiritual, or physical—from my art images. My art images are like my physical voice, where its resonance and tone cannot be separated from my personality, thoughts, or feelings."

Throughout her career, Vallejo has focused on what she defines as human's "metamorphic" relationship with nature. Her many oil paintings, gouaches, sculptures, and installations capture the essence of ecological, spiritual, and political power by contrasting the elements of nature (earth, water, fire, air) and feminine archetypes (mother earth) with that of human intervention. In her feminist works, she transforms the sky, trees, and female figure to reveal mythical interpretations of the earth goddess. In other works the mundane and urban unite nature and the community, while revealing the honesty of the world around us—should we be brave enough to look.



*A Prayer for the Earth,  
Carnegie Museum,  
Oxnard, CA, 2004*

In the ten years between 1980 and 1990 she completed over 100 earth-based sculptures for the series "Tree People," including two pieces titled "Mujer/Woman." Recalling the series she says, "I had a very large studio in downtown LA. I was collecting abandoned tree fragments from urban streets and bringing them back to life back at my studio!" Comprised of found tree fragment from the sprawling urban center, handmade paper, and mixed media, these "Tree People" represented the tree with its human counterpart as aspects of nature's pantheon of the gods of the earth, water, fire, and air. The aim here was to propose the question: "How would humanity appear if we acknowledged our fundamental relationship to nature?"

Her fascination with the resolution of nature and urbanity continued with the 1993 gouache installation series entitled, "The Death of Urban Humanity: A World Without Soul." Working from her studio in downtown LA, she says, "I knew that I needed to paint my impression of the city, but I didn't want to paint a skyline with palm trees and such. Instead I

waited for several years until the image "came to me." When the images did come to her, Vallejo says she wanted to make a statement about a city without soul, without nature, and without an understanding of the importance of our relationship with nature in creating the "cycle of life."

"As a believer in the beauty and nourishment presented by nature, the city is a difficult place...filled with trash and filth, air and noise pollution, and crime, in comparison to pristine nature." The resulting work consists of two large drawings influenced by Goya's "Disastres" (Disasters of War), as well as a floor installation piece made up of a "mandala" of manipulated photos of war dead over a 200-year period, and finally an assemblage of the elements for earth, water, fire and air as symbols of Hope for a world headed toward ruin.

The images of war and violence contrast sharply against those of tranquil mother earth, focusing the viewer's attention on the devastation of the urban center; the destruc-

tion of nature, and concurrently, the destruction of humanity's "natural spirit."

Between 1996 and 2004 Vallejo returned to painting, completing two suites entitled, "Los Cielos" and "Nature and Spirit." Whereas her earlier work had focused on the destructive powers of man, these portfolios contained "giant, luminous skies, pristine, living oceans, and broad landscapes to depict the beauty of humanity's intrinsic connection to nature."

In 2003 Vallejo returned to installation work. "After 9/11 I was moved—as many artists were—to create a statement about the devastation, but I waited until an image 'came to me.'" Inspiration arrived in the form of an invitation from the Los Angeles gallery Tropico Nopal to create an altar for a Day of the Dead Celebration. "I shared with the gallery owner and curator, Reyes Rodriguez, that I would not be installing a traditional altar, but rather an "art inspired altar." I decided to create a piece dedicated to war dead as my response to 9/11."

In addition to the completed gouaches from her work, "The Death of Urban Humanity," the installation also included a "half moon" mandala featuring digital images of war dead, beginning with the American Civil War, and continuing with WWI, WWII, The Korean Conflict, Vietnam, Iraq, as well as Auschwitz and Hiroshima, all manipulated for effect. The elements of Earth, Water, Fire and Air encircled the images of devastation as symbols of Hope. Aptly titled "HOPE, In the Midst of the War, Death and Destruction," the installation was to be the first of many of Vallejo's works focused on an anti-war sentiment.

In 2004, she presented "A Prayer for the Earth," a political, ecological, and spiritual piece that again focused on the reconciliation of opposites: the beauty and tranquility of nature with urban violence and carnage. "A Prayer" she says, "is the culmination of twenty years of work in sculpture, painting, and study of Indigenous religion, philosophy and symbolism."

This new installation created a complete environment using a combination of paintings representing the beauty of the earth, sculpture focusing on our metamorphic relationship with nature, and a central mandala of manipulated photographs containing tragic images of the earth's destruction, all surrounded by an assemblage of symbols of Earth, Water, Fire and Air. Vallejo says, "It is through these four simple, yet fundamental elements of the natural world that we find "A Prayer for the Earth."

In 2005 and 2006 Vallejo continued producing portfolios of oil paintings on canvas, as well as composing full immersive environments that included multiple, interconnecting multi-media and mixed-media pieces focused on the alternative reality of our technologically based, war-ridden world. "I'm a political being," she says, "and art is my way of presenting issues to the public."

With her latest digital installation work, she finds herself "melding" nature with the 21st century age of mechanization, computerization, global communications, and technology. This type of imagery does not seek to "reconcile" ancient cultures with nature, but rather to draw a specific battle line between the indigenous belief of protecting nature,



*Dreaming of Earth, 2003*

women, and family, and the post-modern philosophy of "anything goes," including the destruction of the earth and its resources through pollution, and the denigration of women and children through sex slavery and pornography.

Her installations "Censored, GTMK?" and "The Ferris Wheel" each provoke viewers into a deep thought process about the consequences of human action, and inaction, on the part of mother earth and humanity, juxtaposing the beauty of nature and the political and ecological horrors of war and pollution.

In August Vallejo participated in "An Intergenerational Conversation," an open conversation on feminism, art, gender and politics directed by Suzanne Lacy in Los Angeles. Here Vallejo and fifteen other artists exchanged

words among themselves and the audience about ways in which women artists understand and interpret feminism through their work.

Looking back, Vallejo admits that issues of gender, society, and culture were not immediately apparent to her. "I did not understand that there were any social or cultural barriers until much later in my career. My family was always supportive of my desire to study and understand culture and the arts. It was not until I completed my MFA that I began to understand the hierarchy of the art world and women's place in it. I now know that women—particularly women of color—are generally relegated to a lesser position, with their voices being misunderstood or denigrated in the art world and its marketplace."

Vallejo is dedicated to her family and community, yet maintains her independence to focus on issues that are of importance to her. One of those issues is the oak tree.

"Recently, the oak was designated as the 'national tree' because it grows in many states of the union. The oak is a symbol of strength, longevity, and sustenance. In California there are several native oaks that are now on the endangered species list. We have been given the privilege of protecting our home, our natural surroundings, and we must learn to take this responsibility to heart.

In the summer of 2006, Vallejo participated in an exhibition to honor of the oak tree. "The Tree of Life: Individual and Traditional Interpretations" explored the archetype in three paintings in various media. Her painting, "Sacred Oak: A Prayer for a World at War" draws attention not only ritual, but also to the environment. "I paint the oak to remind us of its beauty and symbolic meaning," she says. "The significance of the oak is that it collects knowledge; they were here before us. In 'A Prayer for a World at War,' the oak grows firmly from a world on fire with war. As humanity continues to destroy itself through meaningless war and destruction, nature protects us and the circle of life."

Vallejo's images and message have received wide attention in museums, garnering fellowships, awards, publications and press. In a recent article in Art News, Suzanne Muchnic declared Vallejo's work consumed by "the feminine unconscious and issues of religion and mortality." While Vallejo says she was grateful to Muchnic for mentioning the "unthinkable" (i.e. spirituality in art) she wished she had used the word "spirituality" in place of "religion."

For herself, after decades of study

and art making, Vallejo says that the focus of her work is now the search for an “absolute truth as it exists in nature.” When asked about her perceived role in society—and that of her art—she is reluctant to answer, leaving the question to the world to decipher: “All I can do is exhibit the work as often as I can, find collectors, dealers, and curators willing to invest in my images and statement, place the work in the eye of the press as often as possible, and trust that when my time is complete society will have a place for me.”

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For further information on the artist, please visit her website at [www.lindavallejo.com](http://www.lindavallejo.com).

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*Diane Leon Ferdico was born in New York City. She has a BA in art history from New York University, and an MA from the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, NYU, The Draper Interdisciplinary Master's in Humanities and Social Thought. She is an adjunct associate professor of arts at NYU, Paul McGhee Undergraduate liberal arts degree program. She also writes personal essays and articles and is a member of The National Association of Women Artists and Life Member of the Art Students League. Diane maintains an apartment in Spain with her husband, artist John Ferdico. See her work at [www.ManhattanArts.com](http://www.ManhattanArts.com).*

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