

Tapping the Unconscious

Linda Vallejo
at Galeria Nueva

BY SHIRLE GOTTLIEB

For the past ten years, Linda Vallejo has sought meaningful ways of creating an art that is synonymous with her spiritual beliefs. Although she was raised as a Catholic, Vallejo has studied the ancient religions of the world and also feels an intense identity with her own indigenous origins.

"As a Chicana," the artist writes, "I see nature as a source of nourishment and inspiration. There is a profound connection between the human spirit and the

spirit of nature. I feel that I'm part of a long, rich continuum of Native American heritage. It relates to me personally—my heart, my life, my soul. It gives me an internal understanding of pain, hurt and joy that every human being must face... a sense of being one with nature and every living creature on earth."

Just as many ancient peoples have acknowledged the duality of life (respecting the opposing principles of nature with reverence, while searching for physical/spiritual

balance and harmony), so does Vallejo. Incorporating "Chicanismo" cultural concepts into her own esthetic, she explores the images of "Mother Earth" and Mesoamerican mythology within a context of our own polluted contemporary world.

For much of her career, Vallejo's central symbol has been the tree. What began as a "Tree of Life" altar/installation (a tree branch decorated with all manner of totemic objects and personal paraphernalia) evolved into a series of "Tree of Life" sculptures. These were constructed from tree fragments which Vallejo mounted, polished, painted and embellished with paper masks (evoking wood spirits), feathers, beads, religious icons, anything that intuitively fit the configuration of the wood itself.

Several years ago, Vallejo began making artwork to celebrate the Day of the Dead. The "Tree People" sculptures quite naturally evolved into boxes that contained carved wooden figures, dramatically set into staged environments painted in raw color. Vallejo's interest in painting was rekindled, and changed direction again as she began to work with the large paintings and sculptures she calls *Images of the Earth: Ancestral Memories*, currently at Galeria Nueva.

Although the tree remains an important personal icon, the nude figure has become predominant. What finally has appeared is a mature interplay of figure and

tree—often one and the same—as they emerge and dissolve in and out of a single form. A spiritual aura hovers around these provocative images, and it goes deep enough to tap a collective subconscious. Whether this imagery is read as personal iconography or as primal archetype, it nevertheless retains a haunting presence in its allusion to creation mythology.

Over and over, Vallejo presents us with a personification of nature. In pictures such as *Birth*, *Spirit of Trees*, *Life Princess*, *Dawn* or *Milagro (miracle)*, Vallejo employs the nude female form, the tree and an androgynous face, experienced as a single image. Spatial considerations may vary, but the subliminal narration remains the same: nature and humanity are one—the living spirit is expanded, nourished and enriched by the connection.

Meanwhile, other paintings illustrate Vallejo's concerns about global ecology. In works such as *Fire* and *La Puerta*, we peer through large arches in the walls of Greco/Roman architectural forms (which refer to the birth of Western civilization) and see alarming scenes in the far distance. Using Renaissance perspective, Vallejo juxtaposes Old World cultures and New World concerns about nature. Through these archways, we find both apocalyptic versions of industrial pollution and pure nature. But, as suggested by *Choices*, the future of the planet



Linda Vallejo, *The Voice Within*, 1990, oil on canvas, 10" x 8", at Galeria Nueva, Los Angeles. (Photo: Alejandro Rosas.)

is ours to shape.

Ten mixed-media sculptures are also on exhibit, and one deserves special attention. A large wallpiece, *Time Tree*, is constructed from a tree branch and other assorted materials. The branch is sun-bleached, covered with dust, dying. Facsimiles of scorched corn jut up against a jagged piece of burnished sky. On the trunk of the tree branch, there is a rudimentary face, half-animal and half-human. The implications are clear. Time is running out, and the shriveled roots of the *Time Tree* beg to be planted. The earth requires immediate attention.

Images of the Earth: Ancestral Memories by Linda Vallejo through November 24 at Galeria Nueva, 912 E. 3rd St., Los Angeles.