

The Electrics

by Betty Ann Brown

Vallejo's beloved subjects--people and nature--come together in *The Electrics*, the recent paintings that are expressively energized by vivid color and vibrating form. In this series, the artist has returned to the cosmic vision search initiated in her ceremonially imbued art from the 1980s. The paintings depict the altered state of the sacred that Vallejo experienced in Native American rituals.

The Electrics are unified by a brilliant, almost psychedelic palette. From lime green to hot pink, the colors Vallejo chooses recall the intensity and artificiality of early aniline dyes. The paintings are also characterized by consistent calligraphic marks. The tight curls, narrow angles, and parallel hatches all derive from one of the artist's important early experiences. When Vallejo's family lived in Spain, they traveled to the Muslim palace in Granada known as the Alhambra. The young artist was so impressed by the Arabic script used as architectural decoration that she copied it into a notebook—and then repeated the forms again and again. The calligraphy emerges in her early etchings from art school, in later drawings, and now in *The Electrics*.

In the early years of the new millennium, Vallejo began to focus on portraits of single oak trees. I say "portraits" deliberately: these are not generic paintings of plants. Instead they are carefully detailed depictions of individual trees--the wardens and witnesses of Topanga Canyon and other celebrated sites in California, such as Joshua Tree and Boney Ridge. As she works on these tree portraits, Vallejo seems to understand Rabindranath Tagore's assertion that "Trees are Earth's endless effort to speak to the listening heaven."¹

One of the most impressive from the series is *Electric Oak Arco Iris* from 2009. Arco iris means rainbow in Spanish but this is no ordinary depiction of a rainbow. The rounded, heavy-limbed oak stands in the center of the four by four-foot canvas. A tiny yellow sun cuts through a fork in two main branches and ignites the tree with green, blue and red light that rushes out to transform the sky into purple and orange, then surges into the earth to reveal translucent roots swelling through the land. It is a fierce and hallucinogenic portrayal of the awesome powers of nature. Like the growing number of Electric trees and portraits, *Electric Oak Arco Iris* is also a stunningly beautiful and visionary gift.