

contemporary

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special issue on art and architecture

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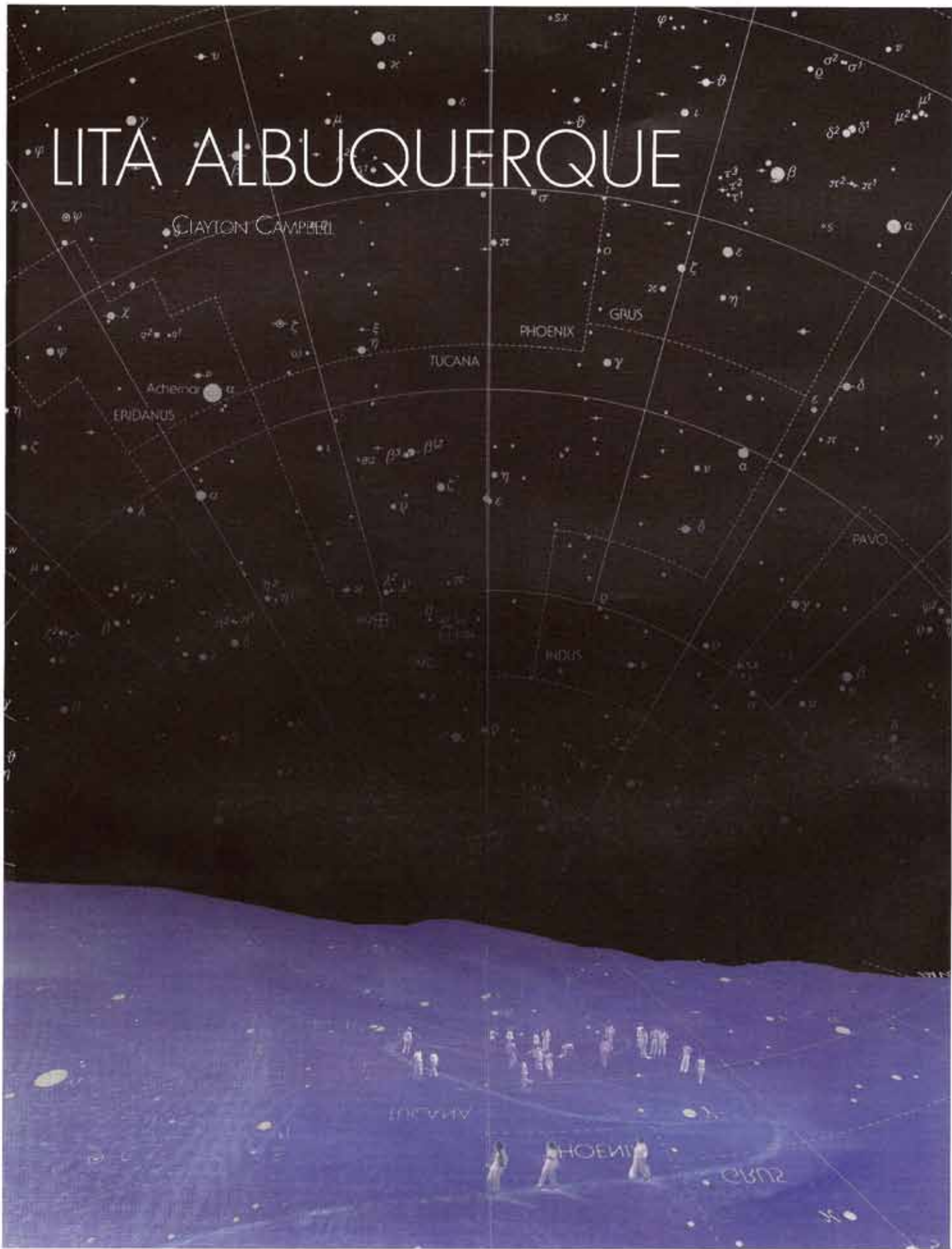
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Sol Star, Giza Plateau, Egypt, 1996. Photo: Tarek Naga. Opposite: Stellar Axis, Antarctica, 2006. Next pages: The Red Pyramid (Washington Monument Project), Washington D.C., 1980. All images courtesy: the artist

CONTEMPORARY artists respond to diverse architectural systems, replicating their beliefs in concrete tangible forms, and in effect making the world an embodiment of their beliefs. With 'land art', the systems referenced are both earthbound and celestial, manifesting a fascination with mysterious sites marked by evidence of ancient technology, such as the Nazca lines of Peru. A first generation of prominent practitioners working in the 1960s included Michael Heizer (*Double Negative*, 1969-70) and Robert Smithson (*Spiral Jetty*, 1970) and would be followed in the later 1970s by James Turrell (*Roden Crater*, 1992) and Lita Albuquerque (*The Red Pyramid: Washington Monument Project*, Washington D.C., 1980). Perceptions and interactions with the space and the everchanging nature of light created by the sun, moon, stars and other celestial events drive these artists. They reflect other civilisations throughout history that have built large structures embodying knowledge – scientific, cultural and spiritual.

While the men opted for solidity and permanence, Albuquerque's work is ephemeral, leaving little or no trace, and relies on photographic documentation as a remembrance of an action. Typically she uses raw pigment as the material for creating site specific interactions with the land and/or nearby structures. Albuquerque is concerned with the mysticism of the 'axis mundi', which figures into her own personal and esoteric practice of energetic meditations from which come visions of architectural worlds that she then seeks to authenticate in some ephemeral form. The 'axis mundi' is archetypal, representing in diverse cultures the world centre and the connection between heaven and earth that provides a path between the two. It is a common shamanic (or artist centric) concept, of the shaman/artist traversing the 'axis mundi' to bring back knowledge from the 'other' (external or internal) world. Two criteria, structure and place, constitute evidence of 'axis mundi' and examples include the Dome of the Rock and the Oracle at Delphi. Structures like the Hindi stupa, the Christian steeple, Islamic minaret, or the Mesopotamian ziggurat are architectural 'axis mundi', while the Norse Yggdrasil tree is a symbolic representation of the 'divine connector', much as the DNA strand or physics 'string theory' is today.

The secular skyscraper or monument is the modern 'axis mundi', and Albuquerque's 1980 *Red Pyramid* utilised the Washington Monument (a symbol

of the world centre of power), as a gnomon, transforming the monument into an enormous sundial. Her interest in the mathematical correlations used in the placement of historical and ancient monuments would also include the great pyramids. In 1996 her *Sol Star* project caused an uproar in the conservative Egyptian press which thought her design was a secret reflection of the Jewish Star of David. Instead, Albuquerque was examining the geometric correlations between the pyramids, star patterns and hexagonal patterns on the desert floor which represented the honeycomb pattern, as the honey bee is the symbol of Egypt. Reason prevailed, the orthodox community calmed down and *Sol Star* received the first prize in the Cairo Biennale.

Essential to Albuquerque's overall project is how the primary contrast between earth and sky establishes a basic polarity. The symbolism inherent in this polarity represents the metaphysical condition of mankind wherein each of us has a physical component (earth, matter) and a spiritual component (light, consciousness). Her use of 'sacred geometry' can be described as attributing a religious or cultural value to the graphical representation of the mathematical relationships and the design of objects that symbolise or represent these mathematical relationships. Her current work in progress originated as a 'vision' received through energetic meditation. The received image of a planet on whose surface gold-tipped pyramids were aligned with the stars above is informing the development of *Stellar Axis* (2006). In this enormous project, Albuquerque will simultaneously trace the pattern of the stars on the ice surface of the North and South Poles at the summer solstices, symbolising a shaft of starlight aligned with the rotational axis of the earth. She will be doing advance work this December with a team at the South Pole, as she prepares to manifest the most dramatic 'axis mundi' of her career. It is also, like her gentle dissection of power in *Red Pyramid*, important to note she is bringing attention to the polar caps at a time when we are becoming aware of their fragility in the face of global warming. In keeping with Albuquerque's sensibility, *Stellar Axis* will leave no trace behind.

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