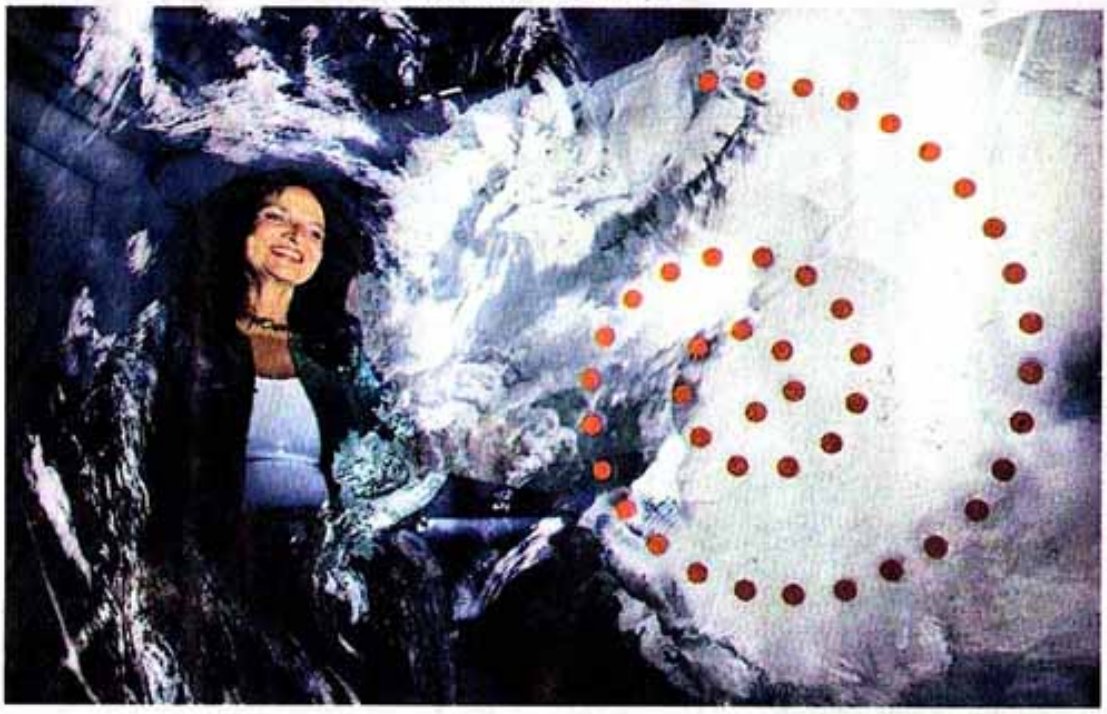
Los Angeles Times
CALENDAR
Wednesday, July 19, 2006



GENARO MOLINA *Los Angeles Times*

INSPIRATION: *Lita Albuquerque's image is reflected in a photograph of a bird's-eye view of Antarctica at her Santa Monica studio. The dots inspired her to create "Stellar Axis: Antarctica."*

Fleeting Albuquerque heavens in Antarctica

The L.A. artist's team will map 'Stellar Axis' and then take it apart, thanks to a U.S. grant.

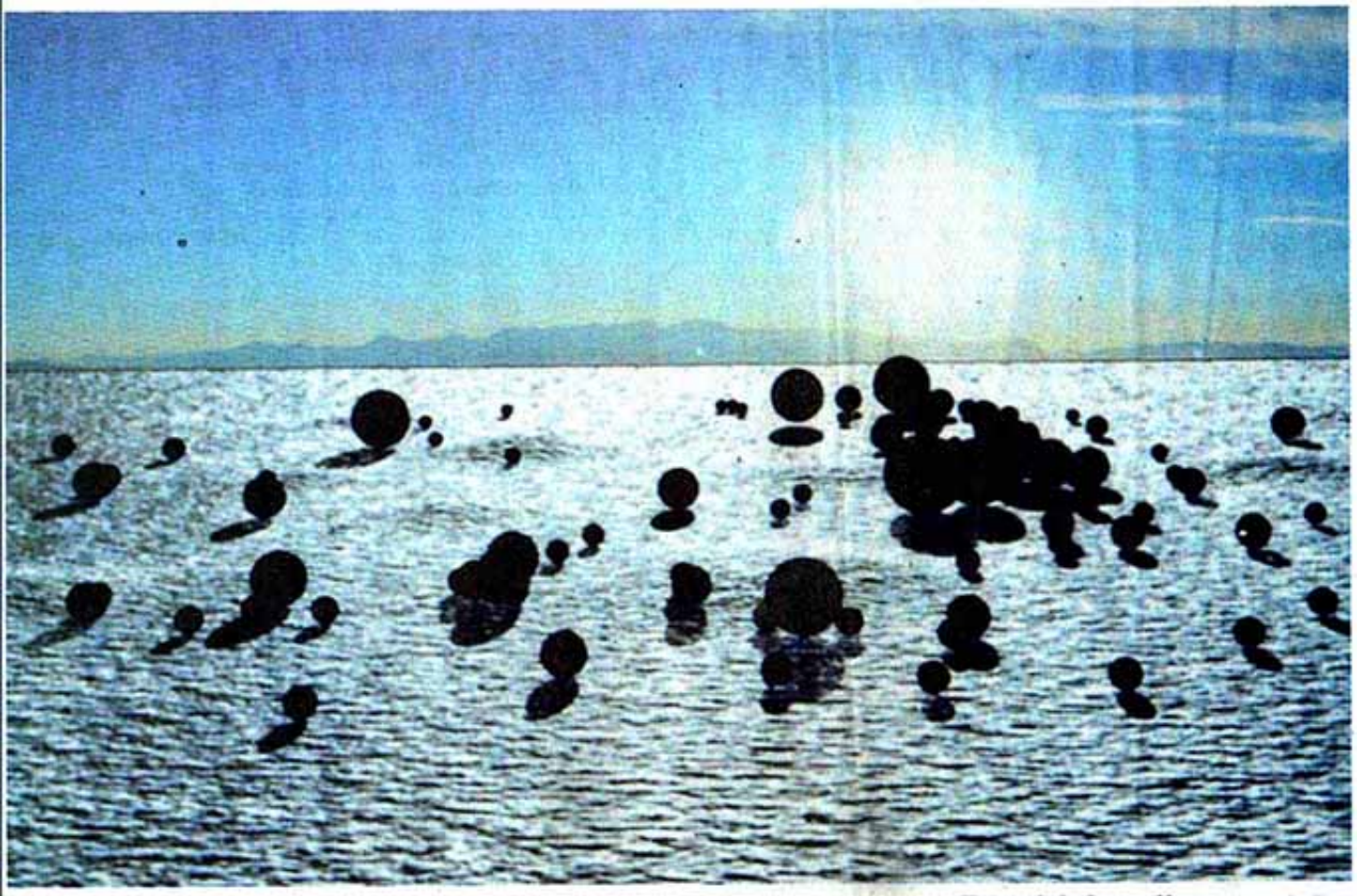
By SCARLET CHENG
Special to The Times

Los Angeles artist Lita Albuquerque and a team of four will travel to Antarctica in December to create a replica of the sky overhead on the frozen expanse, a work of art made possible by a grant from the National Science Foundation, a federal agency.

It will be the first temporary earthwork installation created on the remote continent under the NSF's little-known Antarctic Artists and Writers Program — and perhaps the first ever in Antarctica, although the government doesn't keep records on works created under other governments' sponsorship.

"I'm ecstatic," says Albuquerque, who says she dreamed for a decade of creating the installation and received the final go-ahead this month after a lengthy application and merit-review process. "I couldn't go to Antarctica without government support." An NSF spokeswoman says no dollar figure is available for the cost of the grant, which provides transportation and logistical support for the three-week residency but no cash. But Albuquerque says, "It would have cost me well over a million dollars to go on my own," not including the estimated $750,000 she must raise.

[See Stellar, Page E6]



Photographs by GENARO MOLINA *Los Angeles Times*

SNEAK PREVIEW: *An artist's rendering of what Lita Albuquerque's Antarctica exhibit will look like once it is installed.*

Fleeting, yes, but stellar

[*Stellar, from Page E1*]

Titled "Stellar Axis: Antarctica" and about 800 feet in diameter, the installation will place blue spheres representing constellations on the Ross Ice Shelf near McMurdo Station, the largest of three U.S. government-run research facilities in Antarctica. The installation will remain in place for about a week, after which its disassembled parts will be returned to the U.S., where they are being sold as part of the fundraising effort.

The NSF, which runs American research programs at the North and South poles, awards about five grants annually through the artists and writers program. At five people, Albuquerque's team will be the largest to participate since the program was created in 1992. In addition to the artist, her group will include astronomer Simon Balm, filmmakers Sophie Pegrum and Jon Evan Beasley, and one more person yet to be determined. All are unpaid volunteers, Albuquerque says.

Other artist and writer grant recipients this year are concep

GETTING STARTED: *Albuquerque, left, works on her project with John Beasley and Ginger Matsuura inside her studio. The spheres are part of a model for the sculpture component of the project.*

tual artist Xavier Cortada of Miami, filmmakers Werner Herzog and Anne Aghion, sculptor David Ruth and an additional recipient yet to be announced.

Los Angeles-based Herzog, known for his feature films, including "Grizzly Man" and "Aguirre: The Wrath of God," plans to stay five weeks to shoot a documentary about the "inner landscape" of the area. He will be accompanied by a cinematographer.

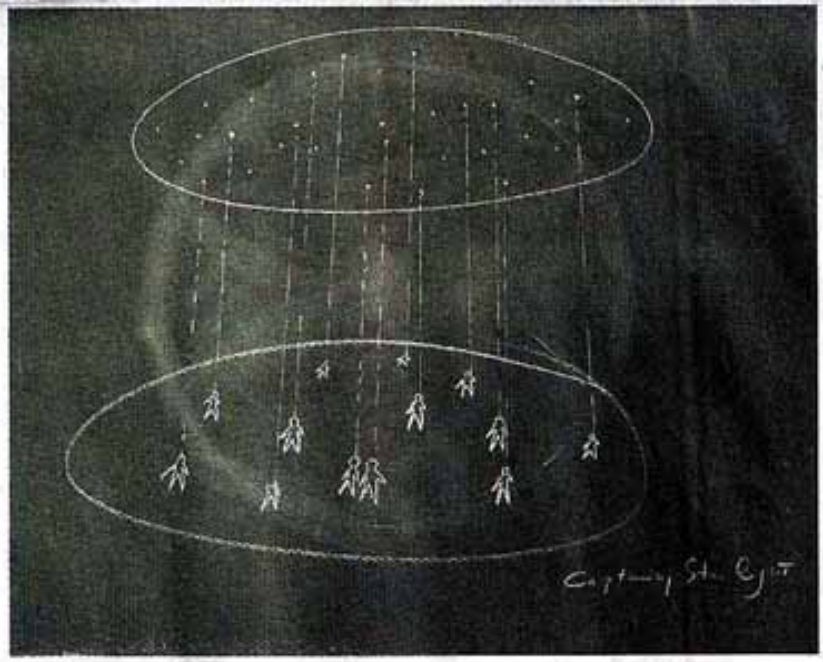
Aghion, of New York, will shoot a documentary about research teams working in Antarctica's extreme environment. And Ruth, based in Oakland, will study Antarctic ice to help him duplicate and synthesize the look in cast glass.

In a recent meeting at her Santa Monica studio, Albuquerque explains that her project will involve placing spheres on the ice representing 97 of the brightest stars overhead at the summer solstice, which will occur when the group is there. If all goes well — and if they can persuade enough people at McMurdo to participate — the team will also stage a performance in which participants pick up the spheres and move in a counterclockwise spiral, mirroring the pattern of the stars. Plans also are afoot for a webcam and a blog.

The spheres will be painted ultramarine blue — a color Albuquerque uses in much of her work — and made in seven sizes to correspond to the luminosity of the stars they represent. The largest will be Sirius, the Dog Star in the constellation Canis Major, which will be 4 feet in diameter. The smallest spheres, 52 of them, will be 10 inches in diameter

Dotting a long table in the middle of the studio is an arrangement of a dozen blue spheres. Most of these are stand-ins made of polystyrene, a material prohibited in Antarctica, where the United States adheres to self-imposed environmental regulations.

"Everything taken in must be taken out," says Balm, who teaches astronomy at Santa Monica College. "And everything placed outside must be able to withstand a hurricane-force storm. Polystyrene can't do that. It will break up into little pieces and fly around."



ART IN MOTION: *A conceptual drawing for the performance that will complement Albuquerque's "Stellar Axis: Antarctica."*

To solve the problem, the group found a manufacturer in Compton, Performance Composites, to fabricate the spheres from fiberglass.

And when the NSF balked at shipping 97 spheres — too bulky; the government's priority is scientific research, after all — that led to another alternative: hemispheres. The half-spheres will be nested for shipping, cutting the bulk from about 650 to 200 cubic feet. The spheres will be assembled on the ice during the installation process.

But even with the compromises, art projects of this scale don't come cheaply. Under the terms of the grant, government support for Albuquerque and her team will include flying them from Los Angeles to Christchurch, New Zealand, and then on to McMurdo, six to eight hours away depending on the weather and type of aircraft. In Christchurch, each participant will be fitted with polar wear to withstand the extreme temperatures. The government also will feed and house them for the three weeks they plan to be there. Housing in Christchurch will be their own responsibility, as are the spheres, cameras, film and any other equipment.

Albuquerque says her $750,000 share includes preparation of a book and post-production work on the documentary film Pegrum will shoot. Fabrication of the spheres alone will cost $165,000, but Albuquerque is raising money by selling them. Each is named for the star it represents and will be priced according to size.

During the austral summer — seasons are reversed in the Southern Hemisphere — 1,100 to 1,200 people work at McMurdo. About one-third are researchers conducting projects, most scientific in nature; two-thirds provide logistical support. According to the agency's website, the NSF has a total annual budget of about $5.5 billion, and it funds about 10,000 new awards annually in a variety of research areas.

Kim Silverman, the NSF program officer in charge of the artists and writers program, says the effort is part of the agency's educational mandate. "The agency sees a lot of value in having artists and writers go down there and do work, which they can bring back to share with a wider public," Silverman says. "It helps showcase our work and why the continent is so important to the planet. With global warming such a huge topic of concern and interest, the poles are especially good places to look at that."

Applicants submit a detailed project proposal that must relate to the site. An outside panel of artists, writers, educators and scientists reviews applications "based on the two overall criteria, intellectual merit and broader impact," Silverman says. The latter includes how they plan to communicate or expose their work — whether through publication, lecture, exhibition, theatrical distribution and so on. "It's very similar to what we ask from the scientists applying to go, but in this case we also ask to see portfolios."

In Albuquerque's case, the public component will consist of lectures, exhibitions, publications and at least the one film.

Albuquerque says the inspiration for the project came in 1992, when she visited New Zealand and was able to sense the gravitational pull of Antarctica. "I suddenly felt I wanted to do a project at both poles, North and South."

When going to the South Pole proved unfeasible because of limited facilities, Balm, who had spent a year at McMurdo in the mid-1990s helping to install a radio telescope, suggested going there instead.

Albuquerque attributes her affinity for the Earth and sky to being born and raised in Tunisia, North Africa, surrounded by nature. That childhood awe and inspiration is reflected in her early earthworks from the 1970s and in recent drawings, prints, sculpture and installations. One of the largest works, created for the sixth International Cairo Biennale in 1996, used pigments laid out on the Giza Plateau to represent star patterns. In the last decade, a number of public art commissions have shown similar concerns, including "Golden State" for the State Capitol Area East End Complex in Sacramento and the "Celestial Disk Fountain" at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles.

"I'm driven by images or word phrases," Albuquerque says. "When I started to think about doing a star alignment on both poles, an image came to me — it's about the alignment of the entire planet." She says she wants to convey the idea of individuals' connection to the whole, as well as to one another. "I've always been interested in doing works on a scale that would make people think about themselves from a larger perspective and consciousness."