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## ART REVIEW : Lita Albuquerque and Her Search for Unity

January 31, 1990 | KRISTINE McKENNA

Born in Santa Monica, artist Lita Albuquerque split her childhood years between a Tunisian fishing village, a Catholic convent in Carthage, and Paris. Albuquerque's family splintered when she was quite young, and this no doubt played a role in launching her on the quest for unity that is central to her art.

And Albuquerque has been on quite a quest indeed. She has traveled the globe and made pilgrimages to sacred sites around the world--her art, in fact, takes as primary inspiration the landscapes of the Yucatan, Egypt and the Arizona desert. In the course of her travels she has met Frank Lloyd Wright and Duchamp; she has familiarized herself with Zen, meditation, yoga, Tantric art, the occult, Jung and Madame Blavatsky. She has learned to sky dive, and has been profoundly affected by the experience of being rolled. In short, Albuquerque is a pedigreed New Age girl, and her artworks are essentially souvenirs of her journeys, both in the physical world, and in search of the inner reaches of her soul.

The subject of "Lita Albuquerque: Reflections," a retrospective exhibition on view at the Santa Monica Museum of Art through April 1, Albuquerque has produced a staggering amount of work, and the generous sampling included here is but a fraction of her output, which also includes stage sets, public arts projects, and earthworks. Curated by Henry Hopkins, this exquisitely installed show focuses on Albuquerque's studio work--paintings, sculptures, installations and drawings--of the past 12 years.

Acknowledging Robert Irwin, James Turrell and Eric Orr as major influences, Albuquerque is essentially a second-generation California light-and-space artist, and as such, her central themes are metaphysical phenomena, perception, and of course, light and space. In exploring her themes--which often boil down to the interchangeability of the microcosm and the macrocosm--she frequently turns to ideas rooted in geometry and astronomy, and her work has a quasi-scientific air. One could make the case that Georgia O'Keeffe also played a role in forging the road Albuquerque travels; like O'Keeffe, Albuquerque (who describes herself as being "very involved in power spots"), is drawn to dramatic landscapes which she interprets as vehicles for transcendence.

In 1978, Albuquerque's work underwent a major shift, moving from pure abstraction to a mixed-media style designed to address man's relationship to his environment (she describes the style she developed as "alchemical abstract art"). At this point the horizon line became a dominant motif for Albuquerque and she became fascinated by the notion that a cross is formed by the juxtaposition of the vertical human body and the horizon line. This seems a less than earth-

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shattering observation, but it nonetheless led Albuquerque to deduce that symbols are created through man's interrelationship with nature--an idea that pops up throughout the show.

In developing this theme she began executing what she refers to as ephemeral pieces; temporary earthworks involving patterns of intensely colored pigment applied to the surface of the earth. She made pieces in dry lake beds, and used red pigment to outline the shadow cast by the Washington Monument. Her ephemeral works, which are designed to be short lived, are represented by a series of large color photographs documenting works from 1978-83.

Other works find Albuquerque likening the iris of a human eye to a planet half in darkness and half in light, while a series of nine works on paper, "Earth/Sun/Moon," was inspired by gazing at the moon through high-powered binoculars for a period of two years. The centerpiece of the exhibition is "Reflection," a massive obelisk made of gold-leafed aluminum, poised on a circular reflective disk. An inscrutable form evocative of both the Tower of Babel and a lightning rod, "Reflection" is your basic spiritual growth tool; you get from it what you put into it.

The materials Albuquerque favors are as dazzling as her themes; glittering metals (copper and gold leaf primarily), luxurious shades of deep red, blue and purple, and large, imposing shapes. Albuquerque also writes and often combines original text (cosmic fables of creation) with related imagery. Several works of this style are included here.

At its best, Albuquerque's work is physically stunning. At its worst, it seems not nearly as rigorous as the subject at hand demands, and a trifle facile. Gold leaf, for instance, is a little too easy; you could slather this stuff on an old shoe and transform it into a magical talisman.

Moreover, though noble in intention, Albuquerque's metaphysics occasionally strike one as a bit simplistic. She fails to address the human foibles--anger, greed, fear--that stand as the chief obstacles to spiritual transcendence. Sad to say, neither a good pair of binoculars nor a sparkling painting of the heavens can bring about genuine vision.