

Down-to-Earth Artist Gets Inspiration From Universal Forces

■ **Art:** Lita Albuquerque tells an audience at the Laguna Art Museum what's behind her environmental creations.

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LAGUNA BEACH—The constant blowing of the wind, the flat horizon and "violent eruptions of birds singing" created the sensual backdrop for Lita Albuquerque's youth in a Tunisian fishing village. "Nature became my companion," the artist, who now lives in Los Angeles, told a captivated audience at the Laguna Art Museum on Thursday morning. "I really grew up thinking about my relationship to the environment."

Albuquerque initially summarized her art matter-of-factly as dealing with "geometry, alignments [of objects], color and combination of metals with geometry and color." But she devoted most of her talk to the ways she feels it expresses her perceptions of major forces in the universe.

"I don't work for the mind," she emphasized. "I work phenomenally, perceiving through all the senses. My intelligence is from the body, not from the mind. When one sees [my work], one does respond through the body. Everything I do is symbolic."

Albuquerque, 43, has exhibited her installations and paintings widely in the United States and is the subject of a retrospective exhibition opening Jan. 18 at the Santa Monica Museum. An untitled painting of hers from 1985 recently was acquired for the Laguna Art Museum by its Contemporary Collector's Council.

A vibrant woman whose face is framed by shaggy curtains of long dark hair, she often couches her remarks in New Age metaphysical terms.

She refers to gold—which she has used extensively in her work during the past three years—as "a very transformative color." Her previous use of copper was "about the reflectivity of the planet." The full moon that waxed during the creation of one of her works gave her



GARY AMBROSE / Los Angeles Times

Lita Albuquerque with an untitled painting of hers that recently was acquired by the Laguna Art Museum.

"tremendous energies." And toward the end of her "Good Morning Laguna" talk, she confided mysteriously that she is "very involved in power spots."

Her color slides of site-specific work, such as "Malibu Line," frequently elicited oohs and ahhs from her audience. In the piece, a broad path of bright blue pigment stretching down a bluff to the ocean creates a vivid T-shaped area of color, like a secret channel of the sea.

The piece is from 1978 when, after moving from Malibu to an inland Venice studio, she had stopped making art. Something was missing. "I didn't have that view," she said. "The horizon line wasn't there."

She began taking walks near the beach and photographing "the verticality of my body in relation to the horizon." She realized that the intersection of her body and the horizon produced a cross form. ("That's where symbols come from.") The experience moved her to dig a

trench on the bluff and fill it with blue pigment.

Blue became her trademark color, evocative of "space, the universe." On a trip to Death Valley, she decided she wanted to cover all the rocks with blue pigment so they would "dissolve into the sky." Although friends restrained her from attempting the project, she has made several pieces in dry lake beds that involve the dusting of rocks or earth with color. (In response to a question from the audience, she said she uses clay-based pigments that are not toxic.)

These pieces are ephemeral, of course, changing with every breath of wind. At first, Albuquerque said she worried that the wind would ruin her images of figures, circles and triangles. But she became intrigued with the way the pigment interacted with the forces of nature—or even with the intrusive actions of motorcyclists leaving wheel tracks in the earth.

For "Windows Into the Earth," made for a private home, she set a triangular patch of blue pigment on the unfinished driveway. The piece subsequently was covered by asphalt, but Albuquerque said she considers it to be still in place—even if unseen—awaiting some puzzled future archeologist.

Her "Washington Monument Project, The Red Pyramid," from 1980, traced the tip of the shadow of the famous obelisk in Washington as it fell due west, north and east by means of 80-foot-long, 8-inch-deep, V-shaped trenches of red pigment. To the artist, the geometry created by the relationship of the Earth revolving around the sun conveys a kind of primal energy.

Although she briefly acknowledged the red tape involved in that piece (it "was right in front of the White House!"), Albuquerque didn't dwell on the logistics of making her work, even though at the time she had to juggle everything with the help of only one assistant. (She now has five.)

Clearly, she preferred to dwell on the perceptions that enrich her from traveling—to the Yucatan, to Egypt, or even to Sedona, Ariz. There, she said, a mere three days of drinking in the sensory qualities of the landscape gave her ideas for two years of work.