

## GALLERY WATCH

New totems & cosmology

### Honoring the feminine Exorcising bigotry & developers



BY DINA BURSZTYN

Several months ago a high school student sent an e-mail, responding to my web page; she wanted to know how I had become an artist and how it is that I get my ideas. I was busy at the time and, also I wanted some time to rethink my usual answers. When I finally sat down to reply, her e-mail address was nowhere to be found. I am writing this with her in mind. Maybe she will come across this magazine.

*La siesta* was a very serious matter in my hometown; for me it was rather deadly serious. Every single summer day, the whole city, around 2 p.m., would come to a complete stop and fall asleep. It was a sickness that afflicted everyone, old and young, rich and poor; even dogs and cats would retreat to a cool spot to prepare for a very long snooze. It seemed I was the only exception to the rule, the only one immune to this affliction. Fortunately, my mother, after some hard bargaining and repeated promises to keep a vow of silence, allowed me to stay up.

I would perch on the huge fig tree in our yard, listen to the buzzing flies, and the soulful cooing of the doves. There were no other sounds, (ants were awake but silent), and often I would wonder what if everybody were to die leaving me the only survivor on earth? Then, the patio wall facing the mountains would disappear and a group of beautiful giants would arrive. I called them "Martians," and they always wanted to know what life on Earth was about before everyone went to sleep forever. I didn't



Above, left: Gargoyle to scare developers in New York City. Above: "Lady Winter's End."

know where to begin. I would rehearse something in my mind but it wouldn't work. The giants didn't really talk; they communicated somehow telepathically, and I would ask them silently, to please come another time. I needed some time to think and in a flash they would be gone, some times to Mars and some times to the heart of the mountains, the Andes.

The Martians were gone with my childhood but their inquiries never left me: what's life on earth about? How I can explain my experiences? What stories do I have to tell about this time and place?

I grew up in the '50s and '60s and my parents taught me to believe that progress for all humanity was around the corner, technology would liberate humanity from menial labor; everyone would be devoted to the arts, science, and pleasurable contemplation. I wanted to be an inventor, I wanted to invent a time travel machine, a pill to become invisible, a new color, a camera to record dreams, but I didn't know how. So I started to write stories.

Circumstances rather than choice brought me to NYC. I came just after graduating from college in my native Argentina, with a degree in Literature. I wanted to be a writer, but after being transplanted I became speechless, literally as well as metaphorically. I didn't know much English then, and unwittingly I had turned into an "illegal alien." Language became elusive, deceiving and untranslatable. Words were flat, had no shadows. At the same time the military juntas in Argentina were making people "disappear." For me it felt as if the whole country had disappeared.

Perhaps all of this propelled me to act on an old urge: to recreate the world, with my hands, in a tangible manner and in a different manner.

I took one free ceramic class, (it was the only ceramic class I ever took) and I was hooked. I couldn't stop making things, all kinds of things. I felt like an archaeologist; everything was buried in the clay. I just had to pull it all out. Often, I would laugh for the sheer joy of working, with no intention whatsoever of making "art" or becoming an artist. The hardest challenge was to have to begin saying that I was making art, that I was indeed an artist.

Artistically, I was then and continue to be inspired by the cultures that don't have a word for art. I am interested in breaking



Above: Lady Echo. Below: Lady Dreams.



categories and linear hierarchical systems, in marrying cultures, times, and ways of thinking, thus I conceive most of my pieces as contemporary artifacts. Through the years I have been working on a series that periodically needed updating (according to changing social, political, and/or personal needs). The "Necessary Machines" series includes "Mailbox for Unwritten Letters," "Typewriter for not Typing," "Typewriter to Type Sunset," "Dream Processor," "Computer to Slow Down," "Computer Disc with the Program of the Universe," "Phone to Talk to the Sea," "Cell Phone to Talk to Oneself," "Machine to Turn Illegal Aliens into Legal" and many others.

Often, I make a synthesis between the old and the new, as in the "Gargoyles to Scare Developers," which I was able to place permanently on the facades of several buildings in NYC.

My most recent series of totems and large female figures is an effort to create a democratic mythology: reordering, editing, updating and adding to old cosmologies, (both in subject matter and aesthetics). Also, I am interested in how old traditions adapt to new realities.

When I saw pumpkins filled with pennies gingerly placed on the coast of the Hudson River, I realized how far Ochun has traveled. Ochun, the Yoruba goddess of rivers and love, enjoys partying and indulging in sensual pleasure. She was smuggled to the Caribbean by slaves and smuggled again by their descendants into the United States. In her honor, I made "Lady River." After visiting Japan and seeing many representations of the Buddha and all male, I made a "Lady Buddha." When I read that yet another boat carrying Haitians trying to reach Florida had sunk, I made "Lady Sea, Protector of Illegal Aliens," as a wish and a prayer. "Quetzalcoat's Children" is loosely based in Mesoamerican myths but with a twist: the jaguar spots are masked Zapatistas. "Lady Demons" exorcises vicious circles, bigotry, genetically altered foods, art czars and many other common ills.

"Lady Winter's End" is a moment in the forest and like her, "Lady Tangerine," "Lady Sound" and "Lady Echo" emerged without much planning from my part. Usually, I start with a concept but my pieces tend to develop along plans of their own. Sometimes, they come with a story to tell; words after all, did come back. ■