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Lita Albuquerque subverted land art’s boys club – she’s finally getting her due

The artist upended the macho 1970s movement and made Malibu her haven — then the fire came

Lita Albuquerque © Photographed by Peyton Fulford for the FT

Lucy Davies FEBRUARY 12 2025

In her creekside cabin in Malibu, Lita Albuquerque is waiting for the dawn. She comes here in the peace of early morning to make drawings and sometimes write, and after a set of energetic meditations that help connect her to the land and sun.

So far, so Californian. But, for the 79-year-old artist, the ritual has a deeper purpose. Since she came to prominence as part of the light & space and land art movements that arose in 1960s and 1970s Los Angeles, the Earth’s surface has been her canvas and material; her work a means of engaging with the cosmos and our place within it.

“There’s no way I would make this kind of art if I lived in New York or Paris or London,” Albuquerque says. “It’s very much about the kind of space we have here.” She describes for me the birds outside the cabin, her view of the mountains. Behind her, the long leathery leaves of an oleander tree press close against the glass. “I’ve always made sure I live in nature.”

Interventions in nature, using rocks, soil or sand that she “enlivened” with pigment, made Albuquerque’s name. “Malibu Line” (1978), for instance, was a vivid ultramarine trench that seemed to yoke together ocean, earth and sky. For “Rock and Pigment” (1978), meanwhile, she placed coloured rocks on a dry lake bed in the Californian desert, in alignment with and matching the colours of the stars. (That stars have different colours — who knew! — is one of many cosmological nuggets with which Albuquerque matter-of-factly laces our conversation.)

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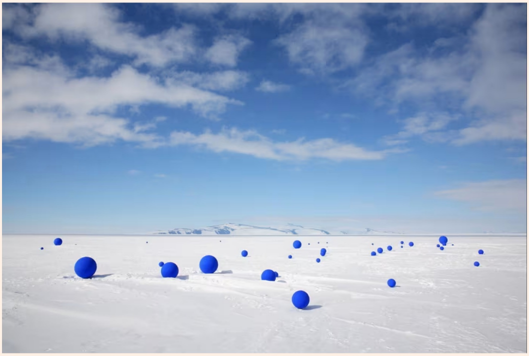
Today, those same elemental materials remain a hallmark of her work, which in the intervening half-century has travelled beyond the California wilderness to far-flung locales such as Antarctica. There, for her piece “Stellar Axis” (2006), Albuquerque fixed 99 blue fibreglass spheres to an ice shelf in 110mph winds, mapping the constellations above the South Pole.

Her newest work, however, will be installed very close to home: in the gardens of the Frieze LA fair as part of *Inside Out*, a presentation by Art Production Fund, a non-profit dedicated to commissioning public art projects. She conceived of the piece — a coloured boulder — many months ago but has recently renamed it “Turbulence”, in response to the wildfires.



‘Stellar Axis’ (2006), a piece Albuquerque created during an Antarctic expedition © courtesy of the artist and Nevada Museum of Art, photo by Jean de Pomereu, copyright Lita Albuquerque Studio

When we meet, she hasn’t yet found quite the right boulder: “I want the height of a person, to give it some kind of scale.” She is drawn to simple forms, she says, “because I make ephemeral art and what remains is the trace. Pure forms, pure colour, pure geometry, they stay in your mind. Like Malevich with his ‘Black Square’. It’s really about perception.”

Perception was everything to the light & space and land art movements, when artists including Michael Heizer, Robert Irwin, Walter De Maria and James Turrell sought to create situations or installations that made the viewer acutely aware of sensory experience. Unlike her male contemporaries, however, for whom huge, everlasting, often baroque statements were king, Albuquerque’s interventions have tended to be light-touch and impermanent. Most were unmade by rain, wind or plant growth long ago.

In a cruel instance of life imitating art, in 2018, Albuquerque’s long-term base in Malibu burnt to ash in the Woolsey wildfire, robbing her of the home in which she and husband Carey Peck (son of actor Gregory) had raised their three children as well as her studio and archive. She also lost precious heirlooms, including recordings of her Tunisian grandmother singing the ancient Andalusian music malouf, and manuscripts for her mother’s plays, which were performed in 1930s Paris.

Lita Albuquerque stands over the latest version of her 'Malibu Line', a piece of land art first created in 1978 © Photographed by Peyton Fulford for the FT

Lita Albuquerque rubs her hands on the ultramarine blue pigment of her 'Malibu Line' © Photographed by Peyton Fulford for the FT

The shock of it temporarily unmoored Albuquerque. "Where do I go from here? Either as a human, or as an artist. It was absolutely horrifying; it's never far from my consciousness." On the day that we speak, amid the wildfires, Malibu is expecting 80mph winds: "[environmental catastrophe] is no longer a rarity, it's a reality".

Lately, though, she has felt filled with a new energy — and it shows. In the past two years she has exhibited at the Venice Biennale, in Brussels and as part of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time project. She also remade "Malibu Line" on her property, where she and Peck are rebuilding their home — which was cathartic.

Albuquerque was born in LA in 1946, where her diamond dealer father owned a jewellery store in Beverly Hills. He met her mother Férida (pen name Fred Harlen) aboard the ship she escaped Tunis in the 1940s on, and lived with her and his wife in a *ménage à trois*. When Albuquerque was five months old, the relationship broke down and her mother returned to Tunisia, where Albuquerque grew up in a convent boarding school overlooking the ruins of ancient Carthage and the Mediterranean. "There were these marble columns, I thought of them as sentinels, and the information and history the stone contained. That's always been a powerful image for me."

When she was 11, they returned to California, where she later studied art history at UCLA. Of far more influence, however, was meeting light & space artist Robert Irwin ("I wasn't even one of his students, but he liked to come to the studios and talk. It was important to him to share his ideas, and that's what I ate, like plums") and seeing JMW Turner paintings at the Tate Gallery in London ("a revelation in terms of expression and light . . . It was the first time that I started thinking abstractly").

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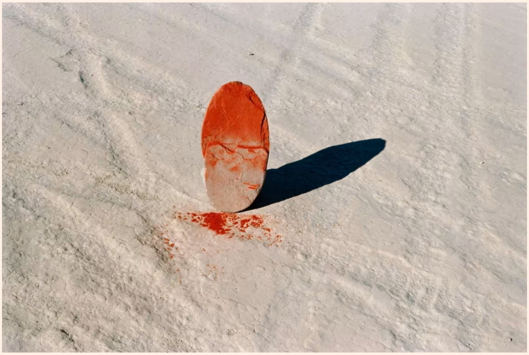

‘Rock and Pigment’ (1978), an ephemeral land art piece created in the Mojave Desert © Courtesy of the artist and Galerie La Patinoire Royale Bach

In her twenties, she lived at The Property, a Malibu artists’ colony populated by painters, musicians, poets, screenwriters and actors. She married her first husband there, the late photographer and flamenco guitarist Steve Kahn. “It was an amazing time of creativity and togetherness. The land had this sweet energy, and a trail so high that when you looked out at the ocean you could see the curvature of the Earth. That’s when I started to think about perception.”

She and Kahn moved to a studio in Venice Beach, where light & space was taking shape: “I was surrounded by the Venice boys, part of that incredible moment,” she says. “Jim [Turrell] was making his Mendota Hotel series [1966] a block away, but I don’t think any of us thought of it as a career then; it was just a lot of experimentation.”

Last year, Albuquerque was one of 12 artists featured in the landmark exhibition *Groundswell: Women of Land Art* at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, which shifted the focus of that notoriously male-dominated movement towards the women working successfully — if less ostentatiously — among them. Was it a very macho scene? “As women, we were both considered and not considered. But there weren’t that many of us, and I think at that time I wasn’t paying attention to whether we were being ignored. I mean, I knew we were, but the work was more important to me.”

Such can-do grit might be said to have fuelled Albuquerque’s entire career. When she hit on the idea for “Stellar Axis”, for instance, no one had ever made an ephemeral artwork in Antarctica before. “There was no way of even going there,” she tells me, “but eventually I found out the National Science Foundation gives grants, and then I met an astronomer who had been there for a year, and he gave me all kinds of tips.” Flying in on a tiny military plane, “I felt like I was with Nasa.” She was 60 at the time.

Twenty years on, Albuquerque is in fine form. She swims in the ocean most days, is working on a film with her daughter Jasmine, a dancer, and contemplating a third “Malibu Line” in Tunisia. “It’s always extraordinary to see where inquiry will take me,” she says. “That’s something I get from Robert Irwin: to think of the inquiry as a plough and what comes off it as the art. But the important thing is always the inquiry.”

Lia Albuquerque in the Malibu Bluffs © Photographed by Peyton Fulford for the FT

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