

sol star

lita albuquerque





Lita Albuquerque on Giza Plateau,
at Abusir Pyramid, May 1996

ليتا البوكيركي فوق هضبة الجيزة
عند هرم أبو صير، مايو ١٩٩٦

lita albuquerque:
as above, so below
rosetta brooks

No road, no path,

No land marks

Show the way there.

You must go by the stars.¹

Thomas Merton

It's not hard to believe in the power of the starry night sky when you live in the desert, where the darkness of night can be impenetrably black and the silence can muffle even the sound of your breathing and where, when the ring around the moon glows iridescent, hazy, almost supernatural, you feel capable of any action. The vast, stark, empty, endless horizontal space that is the hallmark of desert skies feels like a manifestation of the infinite. Prolonged contemplation of it can make you believe that anything is possible, that we haven't even begun to comprehend the unfathomable mysteries of this world and that — just maybe — the systems that we use for explaining the world to ourselves may not be anywhere near adequate.

The desert has always exerted a powerful fascination over Lita Albuquerque. In her art work and in her life it represents "a place of source, of power, of silence and of connection."² As actual terrain and symbolic landscape, the desert environment has figured prominently in a number of Albuquerque's ephemeral works. Thus her project for the Cairo Biennial, *sol star*, will be the latest in a series of works begun in the mid-1970s. The work will consist of a wide, long line of blue pigment laid on the earth's surface in the Egyptian desert somewhere between the Giza Pyramids and the Zoser Step Pyramid. Bees and scarab beetles, symbolic elements which Albuquerque has used in other works, will be placed within the blue line in star patterns that mirror and reflect the constellations of the Egyptian sky. Desert winds will eventually scatter the pigment, destroying the carefully placed



Lita Albuquerque in the Mojave Desert,
January 1978

لیتا البکیکی فی صحراء موهاف.
ینایر ۱۹۷۸

line, but this process will recreate the movement and momentum of the changing sky.

The project's similarity to previous desert pieces by Albuquerque, such as *Rock and Pigment Installation*, 1978, *Man and the Mountain I & II*, 1978/9 and *The Spine of the Earth*, 1980, is striking. Painterly materials including colored pigment and gold leaf combine with the desert's natural rocks, sand, light and wind to create poetic moments. For an instant, man-made and natural components come together before drifting away, back to their fragmented parts. And yet, for this artist, such moments resonate, sparking archetypal memories and elusive spirits that connect disparate elements of the world to one another, creating a concrete poetry for the eye. Albuquerque understands instinctively that life is a matter of walking into, and holding, a moment; that we have to experience *moments* before we can experience *seeing*. Our eyes open only when we sense the passage of time.

For Albuquerque, the desert is the symbolic and actual crossroads of three forces: the topographical, the cosmological and the mystical. Here, the real and the imaginary intersect and find their resting place, neither one taking precedence over the other. Here, the rational is redefined, the imagination is revered, and concepts of time and space can no longer be taken for granted; the very essence of a dream is both palpable and actual, sometimes taking the form of mirages or visions, indicating that the world in all its complexity holds invaluable knowledge, unavailable to the naked eye, about the world's spirit and our own.

Topographically, the desert is an arid land that shows the marked, visible presence of its creation. Volcanic craters scattered across its plains, fissure lines of seismic explosions, and rich valleys and canyons remain as the remarkable products of earthquakes, erosion and drought. In cosmological terms (by which I mean the general science or philosophy of the universe), the desert — like the sea, the mountains and the sky — is one of the forms of nature which functions as a mythic landscape. It is therefore no accident that all four elements play unique roles in Albuquerque's art. Finally, in mystical terms, the desert is a place for visions. Saints, hermits and some of history's greatest religious leaders have had their most extreme, profound moments of ecstasy and despair in these silent, barren expanses.

In the desert landscape, the extremities of the environment can be violently hostile and yet strangely healing. As a place where the ordinary confronts the ultimate and is transformed, the desert exists as an archetype, living in the minds of all people. It occupies a potent place in the imagination, representing the desolate times when one faces alone the greatest demands of existence. More than just a



Installation of 'The Horizon Is the Place
That Maintains the Memory,' 1981
12 feet x 12 feet x 12 feet
copper, granite, and pigment
Created for the Hirshhorn Museum,
Washington, DC

"الأفق هو المكان الذي
يحفظ الذكرى"، ١٩٨١
١٢ قدم X ١٢ قدم X ١٢ قدم
نحاس، جرانيت ومادة ملونة
أعد من أجل متحف هيرشورن،
واشنطن العاصمة

land form, the desert is perceived by many to be a sacred place. We need it to exist in our dreams, to feed our visions, to confront the most powerful aspects of earth and "heaven."

"Heaven" and earth, the mysteries of above, below and beyond, serve as both content and context for Albuquerque's project for the Cairo Biennial. They are also the subject of a proposal for a theoretical environmental installation illustrated in the catalogue. The site for this theoretical proposition is again the Egyptian desert. The artist's materials would include three existing pyramids, sacred landmarks and symbols of the Ancient, Eastern world. Albuquerque's proposed project would entail capping the pinnacles of these pyramids with gold. In the desert sands of the Giza Plateau, beneath the ancient structures, depressions would be dug into the earth and filled with blue cobalt pigment in patterns mirroring the stars of the Egyptian sky above.

The simplicity of the action in its monumental setting would be a demonstration of the complexities of the workings of the universe and a reminder of our human interaction in a universe filled with inexplicable phenomenon. For a fleeting moment, for a passing instant, the great pyramids would hover between two starry constellations. The oceanic, boundless, inky black night sky and the desert sands, which themselves are products of oceanic upheaval and renewal, would mirror one another, suspending the pyramids between their flow, between two fields of stars, silently reminding us that the world — as Shakespeare, William Blake and many other poets and scholars throughout history have recognized — is full of mysteries and as yet unexplainable forces.

We are reminded too of the ancient Egyptian belief that stars are souls. In classical Greek literature, Plato has told us that Egyptian priests believed that human souls are stars which return back to the sky when they die. The creator, he wrote, made "souls in equal number with the stars and distributed them, each soul to its several star ... and he who should live well for his due span of time should journey back to the habitation of his consort star"³

In this imaginary context, Albuquerque's stellar maps are equated, metaphorically speaking, with the souls of the dead in their earthly and primordial forms. The maps are the physical, metaphysical and spiritual intersection of ancient and contemporary beings, configurations whose harmonies resonate with all the souls from all times.

There is a stark, dramatic beauty to the combinations that Albuquerque reawakens in us — a synchronous poetry. What do these combinations mean? About what are we being asked to speculate? Western scientific thinking doesn't allow us to link such seemingly disparate ideas. The goal of modern science is to determine simple truths. Science accommodates our desire to weigh, sift through, select, classify and isolate information, to reduce a mass of evidence to a single,

*Washington Monument Project,
The Red Pyramid, 1980*
80 feet (height) x 80 feet (width)
powdered pigment
Washington, DC
Created for the
International Sculpture Conference,
Washington, DC
(View from the monument)



مشروع نصب واشنطن التذكاري
الهرم الأحمر، ١٩٨٠
٨٠ قدم (ارتفاع) x ٨٠ قدم (عرض)
مادة ملونة مسحوقية
واشنطن العاصمة
تم تجهيزه من أجل:
معرض النحت الدولي،
واشنطن العاصمة
(رؤية منظورية من الأرض)



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unequivocal conclusion — cause and effect. Chance, coincidence and the seemingly random incident are not permitted in this philosophical view of the world.

Albuquerque's art, however, has always recognized that our Western mental maps and systems for acquiring knowledge and understanding about the universe are only part of the story. Today in the East, as in ancient times, people often attempt to understand humanity in relation to the cosmos (the Greek term for the world perceived as a perfectly ordered system). According to ancient Eastern philosophies, whatever happens at a given moment inevitably possesses qualities peculiar to that moment, whether we realize it or not, whether we can see them or not. The world, Albuquerque suggests in keeping with this philosophical vantage point, cannot therefore be reduced to the pragmatics of our everyday reality. Rather, the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown fit together as a complete reality.

The power of these projects, like energy involved in all of Albuquerque's art, is that they give us a gateway into the mysteries of the cosmos and by extension into our own selves. Albuquerque's works shift us into another current, another channel, another level. Nothing much seems to have changed outwardly, yet *everything* has changed. The fact that these states are universally felt but cannot be measured is not an argument against the feelings. It is simply proof of the inadequacy of the measurement.

notes:

1.
Macarius the Younger, Collected Poems. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1977.
2.
From an interview with Lita Albuquerque by Jan Butterfield in 1989.
3.
Timaeus and Critias, by Plato. Penguin Books, 1977.