



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Lita Albuquerque,
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Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lita Albuquerque on August 12, 2020. The interview took place at Albuquerque's studio in Santa Monica, California, and was conducted by Matthew Simms for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MATTHEW SIMMS: All right. We are recording. We're live. So, this is Matthew Simms, speaking with the ever-inspiring artist, Lita Albuquerque, in her studio in Santa Monica, I think?

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: The day is—what is today? August 12th, 20—12th, I think [inaudible].

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: [Laughs.]

MATTHEW SIMMS: 2020. And this is for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. We're calling this the Pandemic Project, although if you have a better name for it, let me know.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Okay.

MATTHEW SIMMS: But we're doing all these little 20-minute oral histories where we check in with our friends, which is what I wanted to do with you. So, I'll just start by asking you. How've you been? How are you weathering the pandemic?

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Well, yeah. Well, when you say, you know, if you have any idea of calling it something else, I kind of think of this year as the fulcrum year.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Fulcrum.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: I had all kinds of anticipations, as we all did, about 2020. But for me, and I don't mean to sound Pollyanna-ish, but I really feel that this is a transformational year, and that the way we're getting there is not the way we would have expected. But in fact, it's truly as if—well, one of the ways I like to think about it is the idea—I'm really interested in this cultural historian. His name is Thomas Berry. And he talks about how—oh, he's really wonderful. He talks about—he wrote a book in 1999 called *The Great Work*. He's no longer with us, but he was saying how we're the end of the old story that started 2,000 years ago and that we need to create a new story and that new story is of us in the cosmos, which made my heart sing, since that's really what my work has really been about, that kind of um, perspective.

And then he talks about, there's three universal laws. The first one is of multiplicity and diversity, the fact that everything in the universe is unique. The second one, which really has taken my attention, is that everything, everything, has an interiority and a subjectivity that expresses itself, that is continually expressing itself. And the third one is, through that subjectivity and through that diversity, we're all interconnected. So, I have experienced this period, um, as light itself, expressing itself in a way—in a much greater way than—I mean, physically, I feel that. I mean, I've always taken the pulse of that kind of energetic things going on. But it seems as if light has come in and is expressing itself through—you know, obviously, it's shining on darkness. All of this. So, it's very—it's quite an upheaval. And also, the reason I call it the transformational fulcrum year and into transformation, is we've all had to go inward. As we've all talked about. There's never been a time on planet earth where every single person on the planet is doing the same thing, meaning they're all at home, right? And are able to observe what we've done, what we've done to nature.

Personally, what happened to me on March 15th, we moved out of the barn, you know where that was, the A. Quincy Jones people thing [laughs] and into this wonderful, wonderful place, only about a mile and a half from our burnt-out property. It's like, um, there was a waterfall, small waterfall, and a creek, and bunnies, and coyotes, and crows. And I have a little studio

there; I'm not there today. But I have a little studio, maybe seven feet wide by 20 feet, with a window to the creek and a desk right there. And I can observe all these things.

And in the beginning—for me, in the beginning—well, it was two things. It was also moving from a very transitional place for us. It was right after the fire, 15 months of that. But also, in the city, to this wonderful, very—nature, into nature.

[00:05:03]

And so, I was able to just really observe nature and all of us felt this, how it came alive, you know? Like, our retreating, all of a sudden, nature comes back very quickly. And I think that's a very important point. Whether or not it's going to stay that way is something, obviously, to be seen. But I think one of the things that's happened is it's really been a very interior time, since the lockdown. Uh, we've all had to adjust, you know, being home with husbands, wives, children, you know, all of that. But obviously, as an artist, it isn't that different, um, in that, that is what we do, um. But in my case, I wasn't here in the studio in Santa Monica, um, so I was able to kind of settle in.

I really had time to dream. I really had time to write. One of my morning rituals is to go—I do these energetic meditations on the beach while I'm running. That kind of came to me about 25 years ago. And then I go swimming in the ocean every day. When they locked down the beaches, I was, you know, in really bad trouble [laughs]. But I was able to go back to do that. That really is very nourishing. And then, all my assistants were, pretty much, working. They still work, but in their different studios, as opposed to the main studio. I also moved another studio downtown, which I've only been to now. That place, I really had to come back to. Here, I came back, hmm, what? About a month ago, I think. Something like that. But still not as much. I'm mainly in Malibu in the small studio. And there [inaudible], which was an amazing project. That was in January. And it was, uh, in the desert there.

MATTHEW SIMMS: In Saudi Arabia?

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: So. And also, on March 10th, we had—I was asked to do a project for the Huntington Gardens, for their centennial. And we had installed this boulder, but we hadn't finished doing it. So it was stopped. But then, at the end of June, we were able to complete it. So, it's one of the few works that can be seen physically. It's called *Red Earth*. And it's very much—it's in the middle of this bamboo grove. And it's a boulder with red pigment just, kind of, on it. And then on the bamboo, there's copper rings that kind of shimmer with the sun. It's very musical. And it's kind of great.

MATTHEW SIMMS: And is this located in the—because there are a couple different places with bamboo over there. One is up by the Japanese garden—

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: And then one is down—

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Where is your—

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: The Japanese—it's the Japanese garden.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yeah, in the bamboo grove of the Japanese garden. So, it was kind of wonderful to be able to complete that project. And I've also done some writing. I did a piece called *Beauty, Transcendence, and the Sublime*. Um, it was for—you probably know. It's for Compound, which is new cultural center in Long Beach. And they have a publication called *Compounded*. And I did a piece about what it's like to be in the—during the pandemic. And I spoke about nature coming back and those kinds of ideas. Um—

MATTHEW SIMMS: You hear these stories about—already at the beginning, you heard about dolphins coming back into um, the bay of Naples, or some place. I mean, all these things. I saw

dolphins here in Long Beach coming up into this marine stadium area, which you never see.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Wow.

MATTHEW SIMMS: There is this, kind of, nature tentatively is trying to figure out, "Wait a minute, can we spread over into these areas now? Is it safe?" You know? So, it's interesting to wonder how things will—you know, what the future holds.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes. Yes, it certainly is a time that makes you think about our effect on the environment. And you see it very rapidly. And I think that's one of the—the fact that we can be quiet; we can be in one place. I mean, I feel very fortunate that I'm in this nature place to begin with. But to be able to see what we do to the environment, and then, what do we do about it? You know, like, what—

[00:10:07]

MATTHEW SIMMS: And you have been interested in—I don't want to say—I mean, the environment is a catch-all in a way, but you've been interested in environmental systems, relationships, from small—from macro to micro, pieces behind you—seeing pieces from, uh, temporary, site-specific performances that you've done, um. So, I can understand how all of this would resonate in a very, um, personal and aesthetic way for you in terms of your practice.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Has it pushed you in new directions? Are there new thoughts of, "Hey, here's something I really want to respond to?" I mean, I don't know if it's how to—in addition to thinking, and in addition to having that moment, is there—have you thought of ways that, "Oh, this is something I want to do to respond to that in my practice as an artist?"

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: It's burgeoning. It's more in the thinking, kind of, you know, um, kind of, in the cauldron [laughs]. Kind of, but not specifically. I'm going to do a piece that's going to be that.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yes.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: But it's hard for it—it's hard not to think about it. Whether or not it's going to come out in the work specifically, I'm not sure. I want—I'd love to address it, but I just don't know yet. I have thought in terms of opera [laughs]. You know, the idea of really performative, narrative, operatic, um. One of the things I've been doing is editing this film that I think I showed you.

MATTHEW SIMMS: [Inaudible] I remember [inaudible].

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes. And it's part of a—it's a series of films I'm making, and the next piece I want to do is going to be in Africa. So, I'm just beginning to develop what that's going to be, uh. So, I wouldn't be surprised if it encompasses it on some level.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yes.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yeah.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well, I had um,—I was interested to hear you mention the work that you had done for Desert X in Saudi Arabia. I know that you had also done a piece for Desert X in—

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: —the Coachella valley. That had to do with sound and listening.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Has sound always been something that you are interested in? Is it—I mean, you were talking about opera and that. I'm just interested in that, because you work on many levels. Your work is so complexly and finely integrated, that I was just wondering about the question of sound.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yeah. One of my first loves was dance, and then theater. And—but I went into the visual arts. And as, and then I wrote—I started really writing, and I had this text for quite

a while, and didn't quite know what to do with it. I thought it was going to be a book. And then I started incorporating that into my work. So, that's coming in more and more. And the idea of sound is something that I'm—I mean, we're all so inspired by music, by that. And yes, it's something—I mean, I admire people like Robert Wilson, Phil Glass. I'm a great—uh, quite a fan of—I love that kind of work.

Um, and I do see—I do see—what I'm interested in is for the work to inspire. You know, I'm really interested in inspiring other people. I mean, that's—one of the things that happened during the lockdown; I was driving down the very, uh, windy canyon down to the ocean, and I realized what my mission in life was [laughs]. And that my mission in life is to be happy, and then to share that happiness, right? And it was, like, so simple, and yet, so real. And it's that thing of, what do you do every day that gives you joy? And, I mean, it sounds—but it's so—I mean, obviously there's obstacles, and there's the darkness, and there's what's going on socially and politically that's very much a part. But it's to be inspired and to inspire. And I think that's so—I think we all have that as artists. And we all have that as human beings.

[00:14:59]

So yes, it's something—I'm definitely—the piece at Sunnylands at Desert X in 2017 was—I was so thrilled, because it was the combination of writing, the libretto; singing; the Los Angeles Master Chorale was singing; there was music that—someone I collaborated with, did the music. There was the choreography; there was dance; there was, then, the sculpture; then there was the performance. But then, there was the site. And the site—and every single one of things were equal, which was really fascinating to me. It was like a living painting, but it was, like, the music, dance, performance, color, costuming. All that had equal, you know, had equal say, kind of.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: And I love that. I have to admit, one of my inspirational things is to watch dancers rehearse. I'm kind of like, I think of Degas, you know, in all his drawings of doing that and, yeah. So, when you go to those places, then, they engender other things.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah, and the idea that at the center of this was this body, female body, that had its ear to the ground. At first, we weren't quite sure what the posture was, and then it was, oh, listening. And then, interestingly enough for the next piece you did with Desert X in Saudi Arabia, it was another female form in this—I mean, you'll have to maybe say one or two things about this blue that you love. We see behind you here—

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yeah.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Those figures were in that same color, as well.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yeah. Well, there's a number of things. The blue really comes out of—I grew up in North Africa in Tunisia, and there's a town called Sidi Bou Said. And it's very much like Greece. But in the 19th century, actually, it was a Frenchman who came and introduced that color. And it's on a hill. And it's super famous. I want to have a house there, but it's, you know, like, exorbitant [laughs], you know, over Paris and New York. And so it's whitewashed and then blue. There's blue—all the windows are blue; the doors are blue. You know, this kind of thing. And so, that was one of the things.

And one, uh—in the '70s, I think, I was back at our house in Tunisia and the nighttime sky was not black; it was this deep blue. And so, that was one thing. But the big influence came from a friend of mine. Her name is Susan Kaiser Vogel. She was a light and space artist. And for her MFA show, she had done a piece called *Blue Flame*, which was essentially a 10 feet by 10 feet by 10 feet brick room. And this is pre-Turrell. It was just four walls. It was outdoors. And she had very lightly drawn light blue, not this blue, but light blue pastel. So, when you went inside the room, you looked up and you saw the sky. The blue of her pastel totally melted into the sky.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: And I thought, "Oh, my God." And we're best friends, you know, and we're like—I said, "This is it." And I started doing projects that were uniting the earth and the sky. So that catalogues it. That was a big—

MATTHEW SIMMS: And this pigment you've used, also, um, as material that you've spread out on the earth.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Very early on, you did a, kind of, a little furrow with the blue pigment in it in Malibu, I know.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: The figures, now, being cast in this, are they in polyester resin? I'm not sure, the figures—

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Well, the last one was aluminum, actually. The very first one was plaster.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: The second one, which I did in Switzerland, was, um—that was resin.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: And I'm going to be doing another one. But let me tell you a little bit about what the figure is. So, the text that I'd written, it was back in 2003, uh, was about a 25th century female astronaut, who comes to his planet to teach us about the stars and our relationship to the cosmos. The first piece that I did, it was a film that I called *20/20: Accelerando*. So, accelerating towards 20/20. And as she comes to earth, she crashes and forgets her mission. And so, that was all about her remembering. It's really a symbol for us as humans, you know, where do we come from? That kind of thing. And then, I'm now taking her to different places.

[00:20:01]

Like, at Desert X, she was listening to the earth. But she was also telling us to listen. For me, the piece at Desert X, the first one, was a very political piece. It was one of my first political pieces. It was right after the election in 2016, but it was in 2017. And what—I'm very much someone who does projects in the desert, and here was Desert X, right? And instead I chose Sunnylands. And the reason I chose Sunnylands is because I'd heard what they did, in terms of having heads of state come there to have—to discuss world politics. And I thought, wouldn't it be great, in this site of political power, to infuse cosmic power? So that's what I was doing. So, with the—it was call to action, in a way. It was call to listen.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: It was also about silence. And uh, so, the blue figure—oh. The blue also comes from another thing, where uh, way back when, I would close my eyes and I would see entire planets covered in ultramarine granular pigment. And so, I feel that something in our DNA, some kind of memory—uh, the blue line that you're talking about is almost like a burial. Um, I continually have those kinds of images. I did these glass boxes, just filled with the blue pigment. I wrote the word "remembrance" on it. So, it's really looking at the planet from a very future, uh, place.

I think of the year 7066. It's a—that's come into my writing. She comes from the 25th century. And so, it's really wonderful to hear Thomas Berry talk about that what we need to do now is the next story, which is us in the cosmos. And I'm seeing it everywhere. A lot of artists, musicians, you know, we're coming—or, not even artists. You know, we're coming into that, right? We're coming into understanding more and more. I was obsessed, for years, about the stars and our relationship to the stars. And that's why I did all these pieces with alignments. And I couldn't understand why I had that. It had to do with a certain—I like to think of myself as a navigator, kind of navigating the planet [laughs.] You know? I kind of—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Down the road in Malibu?

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yeah, down god knows where, right?

[They laugh.]

Where are we going? I better know where we're going. So, it's a lot of imagination. It's a lot of—it comes through writing. It comes through, just, images that come up. And it's all very interconnected, too.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah. Well, we're running down on time, though I would love to keep talking.

What kind of—I mean, you've said so much. And I, in a way, thought that, of many of the people I spoke to, you would have this sense of a larger interconnection because it's so much part of who you are and what your work is about, that kind of vastness that I think I told you when I first met you that you had this vastness of vision that I admire, um. So um, one thing I did want to, just, ask you, in closing, is that piece in Saudi Arabia was itself, also, a really radical gesture, in the sense that it was a representation of a woman in the desert. Was that something that was meaningful to you, that, you know—

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Oh. It was—yes, yes. I mean, I had wanted to continue my trajectory of the 25th century female astronaut. But to have that accepted in Saudi Arabia, where they had never had a representational figure, certainly not a woman, was extraordinary. And I heard that there hadn't been one since Mohammed, you know? So, talk about the revolutionary female archetype, you know? To be able to do that in January of the year 2020, which I totally believe is a fulcrum year, into this new story.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Um, and is a fulcrum year into transformation. And through craziness, right? Through horrendous things that are going on in the world. But that is—It really feels like that. So, to be able to have that—people told me I was crazy to do it. It was—I was going against a lot of what I was—you know, I was told not to do it. And I just had to do it. And also, my own history just made a lot of sense that I would do that. Uh, but the fact that it was such a revolutionary move, uh, for a woman—or an American woman [laughs] artist to do a piece that had never been done since the year 700 in Saudi Arabia in a place that had been so restrictive. They're totally opening their doors now. And the women I met there were just phenomenal.

[00:25:10]

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well, I'm sure that—I mean, that piece is inspiring in so many ways and has had—you know, I'm aware of a little bit of the press that came out at the time that was an urging people not to participate. But in the end, by participating, you had this incredibly positive, like you said, revolutionary, impact that is not, um, let's say—I mean, it's obvious in one way, but it's very subtle in another. So, I think it participates in this larger, vaster vision that I associate with you.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yeah, yeah. Thanks for seeing that.

MATTHEW SIMMS: There you go. So I sort of summed things up for you, but I did want to give you a chance to say anything else, if you had anything else that you wanted to say about 2020 and—

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yeah, um, well, the main thing I want to say is for people not to despair because it is—and to take the opportunity to go inward and to revolutionize themselves, you know?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: And I think what's happening in the social, political—well, I won't go into politics, but in the social, is incredibly positive. And having everyone able to express themselves. I mean, it's that whole thing going back to, everything in the universe, whether it's a human being, an animal, a rock, a planet, a galaxy, light, air, is—has a need to—not a need to. Expresses, right? And so, we need to allow for that happen. And I think we're doing that. I think we're in process; I mean, it's a lot of work and it's been going on for a long time. And I think this is the beginning of something extraordinary.

And I do want to conclude with this. I've spent the last five days packing up the fire archive, the objects that my friend Amy Sue had put together at Loren Vaughan's [ph] place, of the remains of what you had seen. And it was an extraordinary experience. Yesterday was the last day, and I feel I'm at a whole new, like—the beginning, the ending, and the beginning of a completely new phase. And it's like you—one has to be in the moment now. We have to be now. Can't be burdened with any notions of the past. And yet, understanding history and understanding the past. But to really be in the moment, in order to be able to survive, but also, in order to be able to inspire, so—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah, and to take advantage of this moment.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: And to take advantage of this moment.

MATTHEW SIMMS: You've used the word "revolution" several times. A turning, a kind of—a movement around starting. But also, up and out, perhaps.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Like you said, into a new moment.

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Yeah.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Wonderful to talk to you. I'm going to say goodbye—

LITA ALBUQUERQUE: Okay.

MATTHEW SIMMS: And stop the recording. Let's see, I stop it—where do I stop it? Here. Stop recording, uh.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]