

Doris Wall Larson

Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Wood

Greg Beatty

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DORIS WALL LARSON

EARTH, WATER, FIRE, AIR and WOOD

GREG BEATTY

One of the most discussed phenomena of the late 1990s is the resurgence in Western culture of spirituality. After a period of malaise occasioned by disenchantment with organized religion, and an excessive preoccupation with accumulating wealth, people have begun to seek spiritual renewal. In *Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Wood*, Saskatoon sculptor Doris Wall Larson presents a series of painstakingly carved basswood objects which offer viewers an insight into her own quest for spiritual enlightenment.

Born into a Mennonite family in rural Saskatchewan in 1939, Larson strove to find a place for herself in the Christian faith, but eventually drifted away. "I'm at that point in my life," she says, "where I need to make peace with myself—my successes and failures, pains and losses. I need to reconcile myself to my place in the world." Because of its compatibility with the Western tradition of scientific exploration, she is strongly attracted to Buddhism. But she resists aligning herself with a specific religion. Consequently, the objects in this exhibition transcend time, place and culture. Not for her a narrow vision of spirituality. A walk in a park, a visit to an art gallery, a moment spent gazing up at the night sky—all are spiritually fulfilling.

Through her use of soft lighting and gently burbling water, Larson endeavoured to create a tranquil feeling in the gallery. Such peace is all too rare in this hectic age. But while it is true that most distractions are externally imposed, many people are uncomfortable with silence. Silence invites contemplation. And contemplation sometimes leads to unpleasant revelations. So they turn on the TV, switch on the radio, surf the Net, anything to avoid being alone with their thoughts.



The installation is divided into four parts. The largest, *Earth*, consists of a six-metre-square plywood platform covered with dirt in which a concentric circle pattern has been inscribed. Positioned on the platform's outer edge are eight womb-like "earth houses", each possessing doors and drawers that we can open and close. In an accompanying catalogue essay, Larson recalls a small box her grandfather made for her as a child, in which her mother kept all manner of keepsakes. In addition to the ritual objects stored here—eggs, bones, teeth—the earth houses contain painted and carved vignettes. In one, a set of cupped hands open to reveal soil. In another, four Greco-Roman columns suggest a temple. Fecund images of plants abound. Implicit in this homage to memory and identity is the notion of birth, and the manner in which it grounds us, be it through genetics, or the particular circumstances of family and culture which subsequently shape us.

The shrine-like quality of the houses is inescapable. To access their interiors we must kneel in

supplication. In Western culture, the veneration of relics has largely been abandoned. Not that we don't have our share of fetish objects. But instead of being historically based, they are the offspring of technology—the TV remote, for instance, or the computer mouse. Because they are continuously being supplanted by «new and improved» products, they lack the fixity of traditional ritual objects. To the extent that this enables us to avoid cultural stasis, it is positive. But fluidity of identity also leaves us vulnerable to slick advertising campaigns that prey on our insecurities. Rather than define our own selves, we passively allow marketers to do it for us.

Larson has used wood throughout thirty-year career. In the past, however, it was often highly processed. Here, she seeks to acknowledge its essence—such as by allowing the plywood grain to show through on the platform's side. She is attracted to wood because of its organic sensibility. Like the human body, it ages and decays. It also contains minor imperfections. Each of these factors limits the possibility of her work being commodified. Unfortunately,

she was somewhat betrayed by the wood platform when the inadvertent application of moist dirt caused major warpage incompatible with the solidity she sought to evoke.

Water consists of four sentinel vessels enclosing a block of wood carved to resemble a hollowed out tree trunk, complete with growth rings. Floating in a pool of rain water that had presumably collected there, are four red plastic eggs. As a fluid medium, water possesses the power to transform and purify. Its use here addresses the changes that inevitably occur in our lives as we age. Propelled by the current, the eggs move in a clockwise direction. From a macro perspective, they recall the rotation of the Earth and other planets around the sun. But equally valid is a micro reading in which the eggs represent electrons in orbit around an atomic nucleus. Despite Larson's desire to remain faithful to her material, two of the sentinel vessels resembled clay pots, while the other two were more obviously made of carved wood. Both clay and wood, of course, have long been used to fashion vessels for domestic and ceremonial purposes.

Doris Wall Larson,
*Earth, Water, Fire, Air
and Wood*, 1993-
1998. «Earth»
installation. Basswood,
plywood, earth,
casein, found objects.
244 x 244 x 81 cm.
Photo: Courtesy the
Rosemont Art Gallery.

Air consists of a delicately balanced wood horn two metres in length. To blow a horn, one must inhale, then exhale energetically through pursed lips. The presence of such an instrument here recalls the unconscious act we perform hundreds of times a day to draw life-giving oxygen into our bodies. While an environmental subtext runs through the exhibition, it is especially evident in *Air*. Soil and water pollution are undoubtedly serious problems. But watching the horn sway gently back and forth in the gallery while standing there breathing makes one aware of our fragile dependence on clean air. As an ancient means of communication, the horn is also suggestive of social congress—although the horn's imposing size lent an oddly patriarchal flavour to this reading

as most women would lack the lung capacity to make it sound properly.

The installation's final element, *Fire*, is composed of four totem-like female figures wearing ornate headdresses made of apples, latticed wood, tin and flames. From the interior of each woman's head, light shines through the eyes in emulation of fire. The four women are meant to symbolize the life force that burns within us. Viewing the grouping, I was reminded of Spring Hurlbut's research into the origins of classical architectural motifs, and her theory that columns were carved by pagan Greeks in an effort to recreate the forest grove where many of their ceremonies were originally held. Here we had a literal transcription of the column form in wood. Two of the female figures have

Asian/Slavic features. With their full lunar/solar faces and enigmatic smiles, they prompt a serene feeling. The third figure, outfitted in a cone-shaped tin helmet, resembles an ancient Middle Eastern warrior or noble. While not aggressive, the woman does convey a sense of strength, an unwillingness to submit—perhaps alluding to the survival instinct that lies at the core of our being. The final figure features a soot-blackened face encased in a halo of flame. With an anguished expression reminiscent of the tortured figure in Munch's *The Scream*, the woman is obviously in significant physical, psychological, or spiritual distress, as if the life force that burned within her had flared uncontrollably and begun to consume her. While powerful, the installation was marred somewhat by the need

for wood panels to support three of the columns on the carpeted floor (the fourth column had an extended base, and was thus able to stand on its own).

While Larson grounds *Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Wood* in her own personal experience, through her use of universally familiar materials and symbols, she manages to speak to every viewer regardless of their gender, ethnicity or age. This transcendence is magnified by the freedom granted us to touch her finely crafted objects. Through the trust she shows in us to handle her work with the care it deserves, she enhances the sense of intimacy, protection and preservation embodied in her installation. ■

Doris Wall Larson,
Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Wood
Rosemont Art Gallery, Regina
Feb. 3–Mar. 5, 1999

Claudio RIVERA-SEGUEL TRACKING a NOMAD

CURTIS JOSEPH COLLINS



The art of Claudio Rivera-Seguel is always transient, and thus reflects its creator's continual movements through metropolitan centres across North America, Europe and South America. Using urban refuse Rivera-Seguel transforms and produces spaces, often within an architectural sense, that contest mainstream standards of cultural signification. His installations as well as public actions executed during the final decade of this century, are based on a multinational language of altered symbols which are ultimately parodies of Western belief systems. The *LUZ=LUZ* simultaneous international public installations in Fredericton (Canada), Paris (France), and Santiago (Chile), during 1999 and 2000, represent his most ambitious series of interrelated ephemeral creations to date...

Claudio Rivera-Seguel was born in 1965 in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, and at the age of two was relocated to Concepción in southern Chile. His family moved from this small city to Santiago, the nation's capital, when he was an adolescent. In 1973, during General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte's military coup over the socialist Chilean government of Salvador Allende, the artist's father, Claudio Eduardo Rivera-

Villalobos was incarcerated as a political prisoner. After eighteen months of being moved from one concentration camp to another, Rivera-Villalobos gained exile for his family to Canada.

The young Rivera-Seguel attended elementary and secondary school in Vancouver, followed by two years of study in urban planning and economic geography at the University of British Columbia. In 1985 his family returned to Santiago where he enrolled in the architecture program at the University of Chile. During his undergraduate studies the artist was involved in a student revolt or "toma" (Spanish colloquial term for "occupation"), and was expelled by university officials pending review. However, following his re-admittance to the school, he was politically persecuted and decided to quit in protest. In 1988 Rivera-Seguel moved back to Vancouver and entered the Bachelor of Architecture program at the University of British Columbia, where he graduated in 1992.

This nomadic artist's career over the past ten years is marked by a variety of productions spread across three continents, including works created for specific locations in Santiago, Vancouver, New York, Montreal, and Paris. One of his earliest public actions,