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# LITA ALBUQUERQUE: ALWAYS SPINNING WITH THE SUN

BY RENÉ DE LOFFRE



## In occasion of Earth Day, we went through our archives and dug up our 2014 interview with inspiring environmental artist Lita Albuquerque.

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Flying at 30,000 feet, you might glance out the airplane window and observe novel lines and shapes on the ground below. Depending on who you are, you may remark that they resemble Nazca Lines, ancient geoglyphs from around 400 A.D. created by the Nazca culture of Peru. But wait, there's an ancient Egyptian pyramid down there as well. Since you're flying over Washington D.C., you're appropriately puzzled. These geoglyphs, it turns out, are actually trenches dug on both sides of the Washington Monument.

They are art works of internationally known and lauded Lita Albuquerque, a Santa Monica, California-based artist since the 1970s and long-time faculty member of Art Center School of Design in Pasadena. With unrestrained abandon, she has always considered the entire globe her expanded canvas. Yet it's a fallacy to imagine that her land transformational pieces, which she terms "Ephemeral Works," are the only tools in her artistic toolbox.

Albuquerque produces works with film and video; she establishes amazing installations of megalithic-like circles, loops, spheres, etc., that seem to swim in a spacious void; she engages in public projects, often working with architects, where urban structures undergo her unique transformations. While these frenetic efforts might be enough to fill the time of most artists, she also continues to produce equally ambitious and original paintings and drawings.

Her widespread oeuvre is amazingly consistent, a brilliant geometric syntax of shapes and lines throughout. All this enmeshed iconography has a very definite objective for the artist: to bring to viewers a better sense of their place (call it a relative scale), of what she calls the "enormity of infinite space and eternal time." You might debate questions of infinity or eternity with Lita Albuquerque, but will find it hard to resist her art's existential impact.

*How does geography factor into the inception of your installations?* Geography, location, and the natural environment are all very important parts in the conceptualization of my work. Since my intention is precisely to anchor a specific time and place, as if to take a slice through time and space, site becomes important to locate a certain moment in time. Where the work is located is important, not only for that kind of anchoring, but also for the work's aesthetic. The location is one thing, the look of the piece is what I feel burns the image into the mind of the viewer. The environment where the piece is located is an integral part that fits nicely into the concept of the interrelationship (and interdependence) of the viewer with the environment. We are completely connected to what is around us.

*What environment has created the biggest logistical headache, and have there been any projects that didn't succeed quite as you had hoped due to factors that were beyond your control?* There are two kinds of headaches I have experienced—the logistical, which you ask me about, and the political. The biggest political nightmare I encountered was with my project "Sol Star" for the Sixth International Cairo Biennale in Egypt. I had created a pattern of dozens of hexagonal patterns just south of the Pyramids to conflate the relationship between the honeybee, (symbol of lower Egypt in Ancient times) the Pyramids, and the Stars above. Again it was a complex conceptual work of the interrelationship of biological life to the stars through the precise placement of these large astronomical monuments. Instead, it got interpreted as my doing dozens of Stars of David. AP picked it up, as did all the TV stations in Cairo and I was accused of being a Jewish spy. All of a sudden I went from being an artist to being a political pawn but was saved from being thrown in jail at the last moment by Dr. Zahi Hawass, head of the Giza Plateau, and by the AIA who had funded the project. However, in order for the work to actually open on time for the Biennale, I had to come up and execute another idea in 24 hours. Thank goodness I had always wanted to place the Pyramids in a field of stars and that is what we did. So yes, those were factors beyond my control. Any time an artist does something in the public sphere, it is open to all kinds of unexpected outcomes. Which in a way, now, has become part of the work. The work is foremost aesthetic and conceptual but it also becomes alive and part of the public sphere.

In terms of a logistical headache, all of my work involves a tremendous amount of logistics, but the one that had the most complexities we had to deal with was my wanting to create a reverse sky at the South Pole with 99 blue spheres aligned to the stars above. This was the making of *Stellar Axis: Antarctica*. Fortunately I had an extraordinary team both in Los Angeles and in Antarctica. I worked with Simon Balm, a British astronomer who had been at the South Pole for a year through a National Science Foundation Grant, and through Sophie Pegrum, a videographer. I found out that the NSF also gave grants to artists. Writing up a government grant was the first of the logistical headaches but was done by Rochelle Fabb, my assistant at the time. It took 3 years to get accepted but we finally did, and in that time we worked out all the other logistics. There were so many factors that we had to deal with: Following all the rules for the National Science Foundation, having a work that would not disperse particles on the pristine environment, we actually had toxicologist reports to make sure everything we brought was safe. Once I decided on spheres, a new set of questions emerged: how to create them so we could handle them in -40 degree weather (the team I had in Los Angeles was awesome), how to pack them, ship them, of course being conscious the whole time of leaving as small of a footprint on the continent as possible, how to get 600 cubic feet of cargo down to Antarctica, and how to get from McMurdo station to where the project was installed about 12 miles away in -40 degree weather, not even mentioning the fundraising we had to do to be able to create the spheres. In the end it was an amazing art installation as well as an unforgettable art expedition.

*Your performance art often involves the participation of large numbers of volunteers. Do you see these individuals as being small parts of your performance? Do you see yourself as more of a curator collecting the performances of others, or is it something completely different?* I have always used participants in my performances. Artworks on this scale are collaborative, and each individual involved adds something quite unique to the work. I am fascinated with the concept of the one and the many—that each person is a vital part of any experience, but it isn't until many people get together that the experience and meaning is dually magnified to form a singular vision. I find that very powerful. I started using hundreds of participants with "Spine of the Earth 2012" when I was asked by The Getty Museum to reconstruct a work I had done in 1980 for their Pacific Standard Time Performance Festival. The site had changed and the challenge was to recreate something that had been done on a flat surface of a dry lakebed to a steep hill with 287 steps going down to the street. It was at that time that I decided to change using pigment to using people to recreate the "drawing" I had made on the dry lakebed. I needed as many people as it would take to fill the 375 feet of vertical space; instead of painting with pigments I was having the individuals be the paint itself going down the mountain. Of course it became something else and the experience of being a part of the performance was quite different than seeing the image that they formed, through the aerial photography taken by Michael Light. All of a sudden, they understood they were part of a much larger vision, a metaphor for our lives. What fascinates me is that each individual is an integral part of an image that is being created by him or her, that it could not exist without each one, almost the same as thinking of the particles that make up the cosmos. Once we begin to understand the interrelationship and interdependence of each particle that makes up our universe, it changes how we look at our lives.

*Is there a reason red and blue are recurring colors in your work?* I was raised in Tunisia, North Africa, famous for its ultramarine doors and windows on the whitewashed buildings. That blue against the white made an imprint on my mind (as well as the summer nighttime skies, which are this beautiful dark blue). In the mid-seventies I started doing works out in the landscape and they were all with this blue, which for me was a way of uniting the earth and the sky. I had made a commitment that my work was going to be about the relationship between the earth and the sky. On a purely visual level I love what Goethe says about it: "We enjoy gazing upon blue—not because it forces itself upon us, but because it draws us after it." And for me, it is that impulse to pursue blue that enthralls me, and it is that pursuit that takes us to the sky!

Red has also always been in my work, as the fire engine that exists in the interior of the earth. I love thinking about the formation of planets and, of course, of the earth, coming from the bursting of supernovae, stars being pure fiery energy, that everything comes from that fire.

*What inspires you?* Tunisia, and the landscape of Tunisia was my first inspiration. The colors there, the wind, the relationship to the coastline, and the poetry that exists in the air, the smell of jasmine, synesthesia... maybe that is why I am so inspired by theatre, by dance. I start out every morning with a run on the beach that then ends in a swim in the ocean no matter what the weather is. This rigorous and physical interaction with the environment gives me great inspiration and gets me out of my head and allows for ideas to flow in. I also get inspired on airplanes. Somehow being removed from the gravitational pull of the earth helps ideas flow in and get on the page. The concept for "Stellar Axis" came out of one of those airplane flights, all in one swoop, as if handed to me on a silver platter. Of course I surround myself with great art, dance, music on an almost constant level. Robert Wilson, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, Pina Bausch and Batsheva Dance Company are a few of my favorite performers, as are the musicians Devendra Banhart, Rodrigo Amarante, and the bands Hecuba, Antony and the Johnsons. In terms of literature I still go back to writers like Lawrence Durrell, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Haruki Murakami and Zecharia Sitchin. Travel to remote places in the world always brings out inspiration in me.

*Have you ever reached a point in the creation of your art where you felt you needed to push further or pull back on an original concept?* Of course. I always feel I can push it further and am always surprised when the best solution seems to be the most reductive—the simplicity of it seems to make more of an impact and convey what I am trying to say.

*How does modern technology influence your work?* I love that the word technology comes from the Greek word *techné*, which means art, and all art involves some sort of technology whether it is a simple lead pencil or state-of-the-art multimedia projection. Modern technology permits me to do projects I could not normally do. There is a through line in my work of earth/sky relationship, of body's relationship to earth/sky/cosmos and I like to visualize that in different media as best suits the particular concept of the piece. In "Beekeeper" (2006), a computer generated program, I collaborated with Jon Beasley and Chandler McWilliams to conflate the image of a beekeeper with an astronaut becoming particles, becoming bees, and becoming stars. I could have never done it without Chandler McWilliams creating an original program tracing the movement of each particle. In "Particle Horizon" (2014), I worked with astrophysicist John Good, from Caltech, to program Stellarium to represent the rotation of the stars at the North Pole, the South Pole and the Equator. Currently I will be having a screening of "Stellar Axis: The Fourth Chapter" with a state-of-the-art projector and sound system at the Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles. Each and every one of these technologies enhances the experience of what I am trying to convey.

*What do you think our environment will look like 50 years from now? Do you think that will affect how you make art?* It is hard to predict. If I were to listen to the scientists about what will happen to our oceans and consequently the rest of our environment it is pretty dire and I have no idea what this will look like. But I have always marveled at how our imagination runs ahead of us. In reality very little changes to our perception. What is dangerous at this time is that little change is what we have counted on, but this time there will be a change, it may not be visible but it will certainly be felt. Of course this affects me to wanting to make art that addresses those issues more and more. Bringing hundreds of people to the edge of the ocean is one way of doing this, as in "An Elongated Now" (2014), a performance just performed for the Laguna Art Museum's Art @ Nature festival that could be interpreted as exhibiting our concern for the planet.

**Feature Image:** Installation view from "Stellar Axis: Antarctica," (2006). 99 Blue Spheres. Ross Ice Shelf, Antarctica.

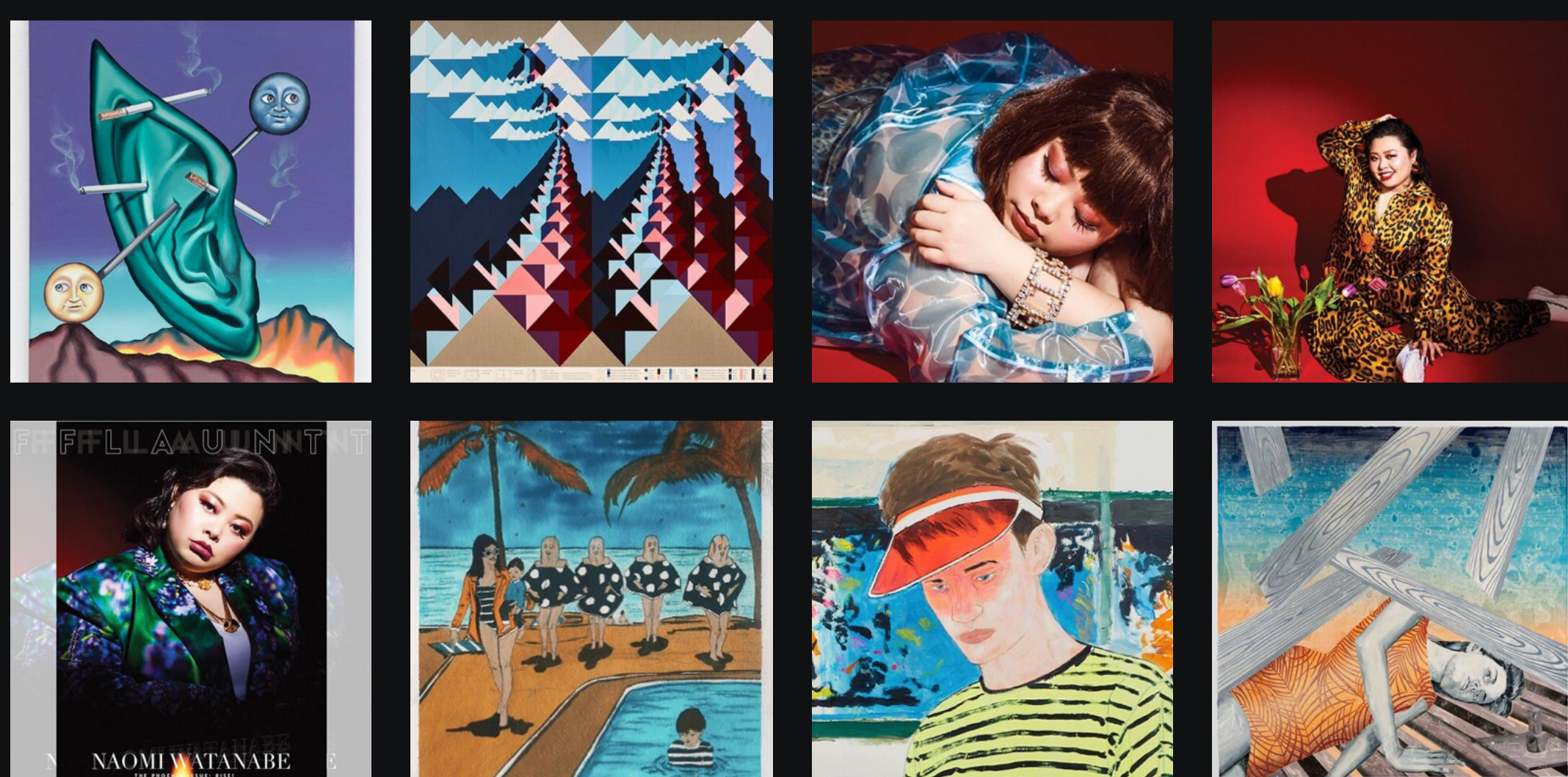
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