

February 2012: Interview with Lita Albuquerque



Lita Albuquerque, 287 Steps (installation view), Photo credit: Brian Forrest, Courtesy of the artist and Craig Krull Gallery

Interview with Albuquerque

287 Steps at Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, January 21– February 25, 2012
Spine of the Earth for Pacific Standard Time, January 22, 2012

What would Pacific Standard Time: Art in Los Angeles 1945-1980 be without the astounding Lita Albuquerque? The Santa Monica-based artist emerged on the California art scene as part of the Light and Space movement and later won international acclaim for her unique installations at major sites around the world, from LA to Washington, Cairo and even Antarctica. Born in the US, but raised in Tunisia and Paris, Albuquerque consistently invites us to see the world—not just the art world— from a wider angle. Her recent solo exhibition 287 Steps at Craig Krull Gallery coincided with a two-hour life performance recreating her 1980 large-scale outdoor performance piece Spine of the Earth 2012 at Baldwin Hills Scenic Outlook that took place on January 22, 2012 and started around noon. Whitehot's Simone Kussatz spoke to her about how things change over time.

Whitehot: When I watched a video of your "Spine of the Earth" from 1980 it seemed quite different from yesterday's "Spine of the Earth 2012" at the Baldwin Hills Scenic Center.

Lita Albuquerque: "Spine of the Earth" from 1980 was a starting point for a complete reinvention of what was a two-dimensional drawing on a flat, minimal surface to a social sculpture existing on multiple levels and in three-dimensional space. Or one can say it shifted from drawing to sculpture, and to a sculpture that is performative and social.

Whitehot: What is the similarity between them?

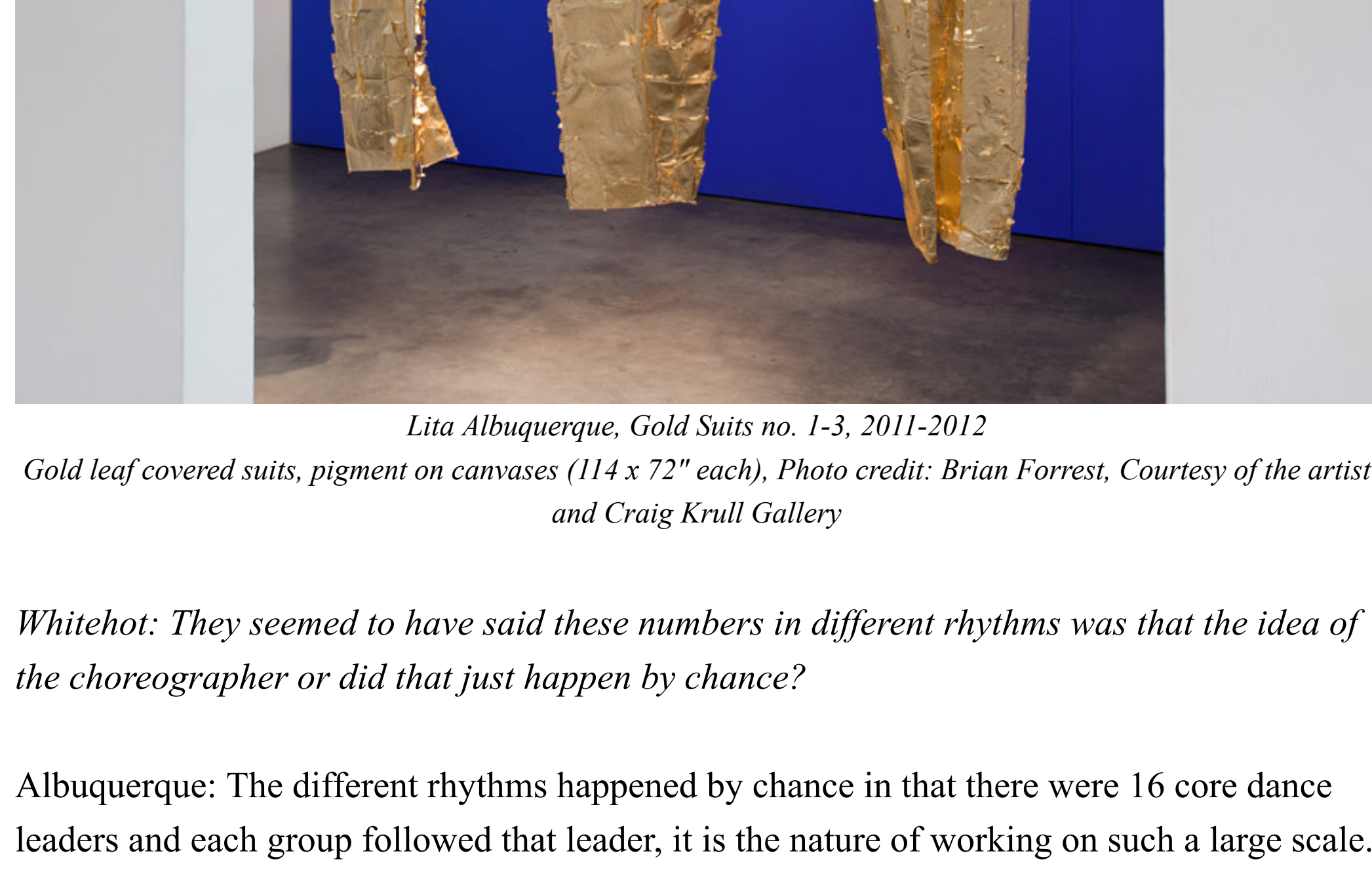
Albuquerque: The similarity is that in each piece the entirety of the work could only be seen from the air. In the case of the 1980 project, the drawing was so immense and on such a flat space that it went beyond peripheral vision. With "Spine of the Earth 2012" the same thing occurred, the fact that it was situated on multiple levels, it also could not be seen in its entirety from the ground. I was interested in that impossibility of vision: being able to perceive only what is around us, yet aware that there is a much larger picture, that what we are perceiving is only part of a much larger vision. That impossibility intrigued me.

Whitehot: In which way were the spirals themselves different from your current and earlier work?

Albuquerque: In "Spine of the Earth" from 1980 the main part of the drawing consisted of a 600-foot diameter red spiral coming out of the center of two intersecting lines. In "Spine of the Earth 2012" I asked myself what if the people became the pigment -- what if it was not pigment but people? And what if the geometry of the original work was represented by the same strong color, but as a living breathing version of it? And what if the center of that spiral was determined by the landing of a skydiver who would initiate the spiral...? It became one hundred performers dressed in red spiraling around her. When the spiral was complete, 400 performers also dressed in red joined the end of the spiral as it unraveled down the stairs to form a line down 375 feet and 287 steps to the bottom of the hill. Once the first performer was on the last stair at the bottom of the hill, and the rest of the performers were on the descending stairs, they stopped for four minutes, forming the spine of the earth in the middle of the landscape. After four minutes they walked off to the left until the last performer was out of sight. What had been a line drawing on the desert sand had become a moving human line from sky to earth.

Whitehot: The participants dressed in red suits shouted numbers while marching down the hill. Why?

Albuquerque: The performers were instructed by WIFE -- the three person dance company that came on the project to help with the movement -- to say "one one thousand" with one step, "two one thousand" with the other, as a way of helping them with the movement's tempo and as a way of keeping focused. It started out as simply instructional and practical. What was interesting is that I had wanted to use sound in the work, and that simple instruction gave it that rhythmic almost metronomic quality I was interested in.



*Lita Albuquerque, Gold Suits no. 1-3, 2011-2012
Gold leaf covered suits, pigment on canvases (114 x 72" each), Photo credit: Brian Forrest, Courtesy of the artist and Craig Krull Gallery*

Whitehot: They seemed to have said these numbers in different rhythms was that the idea of the choreographer or did that just happen by chance?

Albuquerque: The different rhythms happened by chance in that there were 16 core dance leaders and each group followed that leader, it is the nature of working on such a large scale. I did like it as it had a kind of syncopation to it, which made me reflect on sounds arriving at different times, landing in our ears, suggesting an elongation of space.

Whitehot: Can you please talk a bit more about the connection between the skydiver and the marchers?

Albuquerque: Both are meant to represent a vertical line going from sky to earth -- forming the spine of the earth. The skydiver with the trail of red smoke formed a vertical line from sky to earth, which initiated the movement of the performers from the top of the overlook down 375 feet to the bottom of the hill. With her landing, the skydiver also initiated the movement around which the spiral started. She was the point of contact between sky and earth.

Whitehot: Was there a specific reason for choosing the Baldwin Hills location?

Albuquerque: Yes. My work of the seventies was very much about how landscape and the work of art are inextricably linked. By taking my work to desert sites I was interested in the immense horizon and the perceptual field that extended beyond vision. This site is a very different kind of topography. What extends beyond vision here is the city of LA below us, and floating above the city is this overlook open to the sky. Down from the overlook are 287 rough haved stone stairs going down to the bottom of the hill. I was simultaneously attracted by the stairs that looked as if they could have been stairs leading to an ancient temple, and the spectacular views of Los Angeles that extended beyond vision. I also liked the fact that you couldn't see the overlook and the stairs at the same time that refers to that impossibility of vision I was talking about earlier.

Whitehot: You currently have a solo exhibition 287 Steps at Craig Krull Gallery. Is that what the title is referring to?

Albuquerque: The preparations for the show 287 Steps at Craig Krull's and the Spine of the Earth 2012 were happening simultaneously over the last year and a half and each influenced the other. Each has to do with bodies in space and with shifts in materiality. I chose "287 Steps" as the title for the gallery exhibition based on the 287 steps that physically exist at the Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook. The relationship of that title to the show is a poetic and open-ended one, hopefully one that raises questions about it. The exhibit explores ideas of transmutation and transformation: how materials can shift from one state to another, from one dimension to another. It is not meant to have meaning, it is meant to open up conversation and inquiry.

Whitehot: How is 287 Steps thematically related to Spine of the Earth 2012?

Albuquerque: Most of my work has been abstract, whether it was with my ephemeral works of the Seventies or in painting and sculpture. In both Spine of the Earth and 287 Steps I am taking the pigment, the raw material into the figurative, into an immersive experience of material through the figurative. In Spine of the Earth 2012 what had been red pigment becomes red bodies in space; in 287 Steps the "Pigment Figure no. 1" looks as if it is literally made of pigment that becomes body. The gold suits refer to material and body. Both works explore ideas about color, materials and bodies in space and the connection between earth and sky.

Whitehot: The press release mentions that the blue figure, based on your body, is echoing the excavated bodies from Pompeii. What is it that fascinated you about that?

Albuquerque: What fascinated me about the excavated bodies from Pompeii is the moment of impact and transformation. I am intrigued with what that says about materiality and how centuries later, that moment exists in our present albeit in a transformed materiality.

Whitehot: And how is that tied to the blue figure and the gold leaf suits and paintings?

Albuquerque: I had heard about discoveries of blue pigment in ancient tombs and I wanted "Pigment Figure no. 1" to look as if it were made entirely from blue powdered pigment as if it had been excavated from an ancient cave, as if over time, the pigment had compacted to become body. All three are explorations of materials and ephemerality. And although the ephemeral represents the fleeting, it leaves a trace that lasts through time. Each distinct installation, through the language of the ephemeral resides in a sensation of past, present and future. All three installations are an exploration of body or embodiment in a state of becoming.

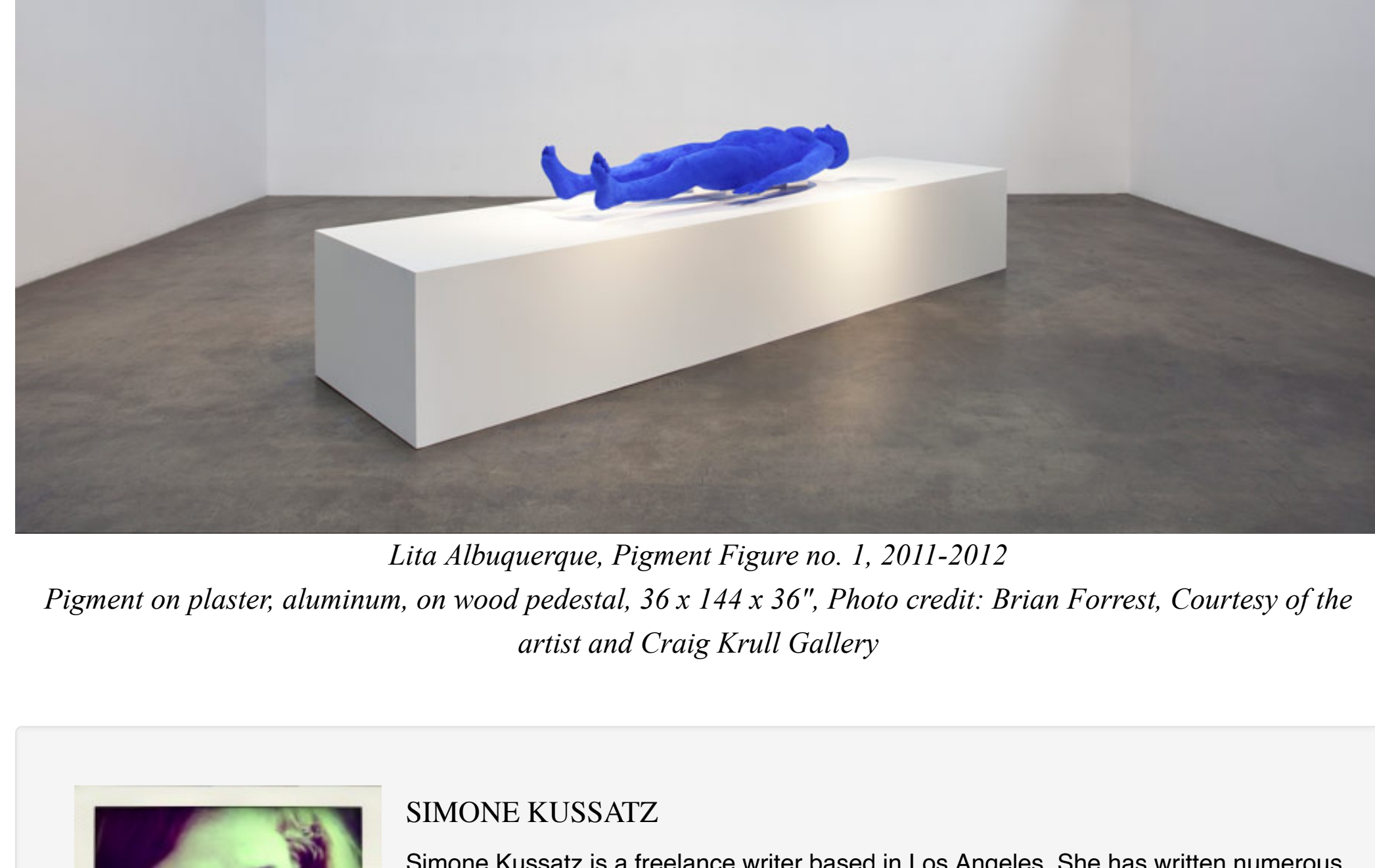
Whitehot: The way I see your paintings is that they symbolize something in motion, transitory, hence they become a visual language for the meaning of ephemeral. What do they represent to you?

Albuquerque: I don't think of particles of pigment as being symbolic. I think they are very much rooted in what they are: particles of pigment carried by the wind and deposited into the wet paint. I do think of them as a photographic process. They are a record of a motion, an intersection of the elements. They are an embodiment of the ephemeral. I was never interested in natural color. The paintings are not a representation of any kind but an embodiment and I wanted that embodiment to make an imprint in our perceptual system by utilizing colors that function alchemically.

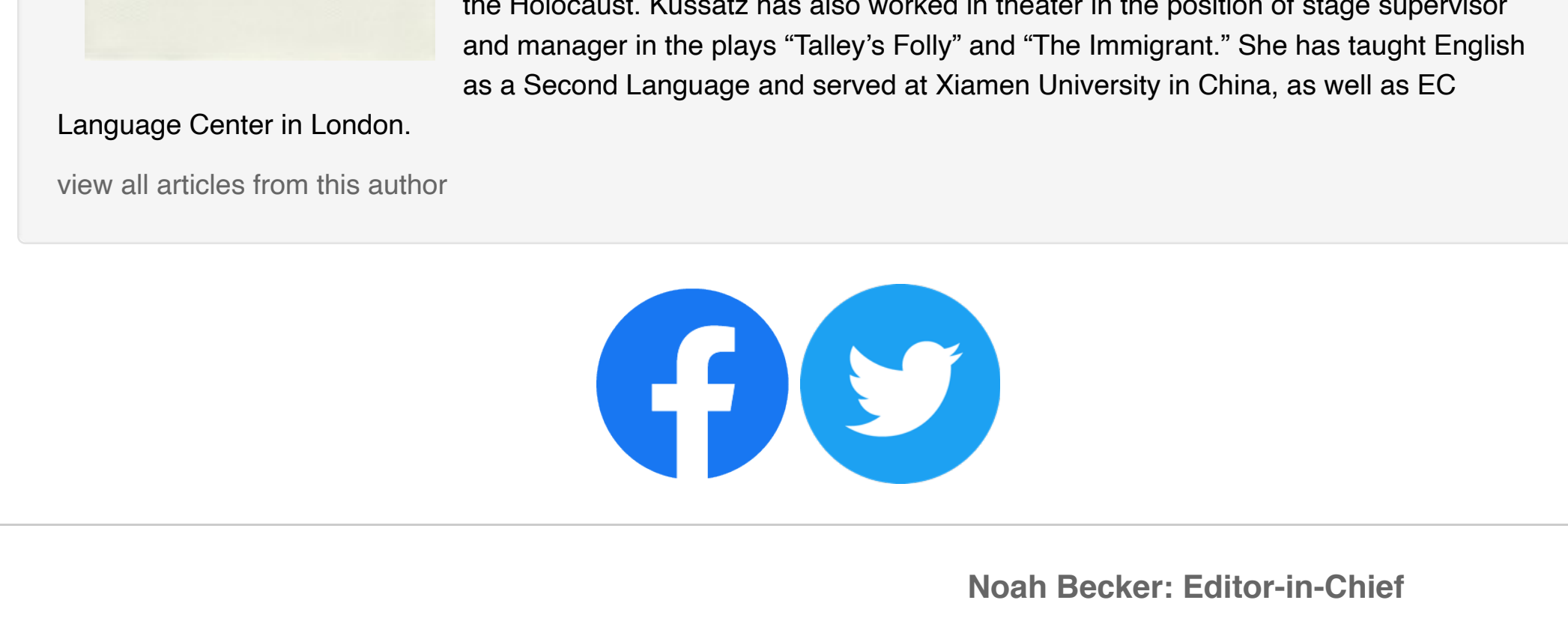
Whitehot: In "Stellar Axis" and "287 Steps" you used this beautiful cobalt blue. What is your connection to that color?

Albuquerque: The idea of the blue comes from many sources. First of all, whenever I close my eyes, that's the color I see, as if everything is covered in this ultramarine granular pigment. It was also inspired from growing up in North Africa where all the white-washed buildings have doors and windows painted in that blue, and the night time sky there, even though dark, has the sensation of blue. Blue has been a coveted color through art history, and ultramarine was an invention by chemists through a process of mixing clay and sulphur to produce what looks like lapis lazuli that artists could afford. It is also the color I initially used in my ephemeral projects out in the landscape where I wanted that color to be so strong and artificial that it would start to make you aware that everything else around it changes with the rotation of the earth around the sun and the changing of that light but that by its opaqueness it does not, it becomes a fulcrum around which light is perceived.

Whitehot: Thank you Ms. Albuquerque!



Spine of the Earth, 2012



*Lita Albuquerque, Wind Painting 01.05.12 3:33-10pm, PST, 2012.
Pigment on canvas, 54 x 54", Signed on verso, Photo credit: Brian Forrest, Courtesy of the artist and Craig Krull Gallery*

*Lita Albuquerque, Pigment Figure no. 1, 2011-2012
Pigment on plaster, aluminum, on wood pedestal, 36 x 144 x 36", Photo credit: Brian Forrest, Courtesy of the artist and Craig Krull Gallery*

SIMONE KUSSATZ
Simone Kussatz is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles. She has written numerous articles in the field of the arts for international and national magazines published in Germany, the US and UK, China, Iceland, and Switzerland. Kussatz was born in Aaspurg, Germany. She holds a Master's degree in American Studies, Journalism and psychology and received her education from Santa Monica College, UCLA and the Free University of Berlin. In 2004, she produced and hosted three TV-shows under the title "Metamorphosis", where she conducted interviews with Jewish artists in regard to the Holocaust. Kussatz has also worked in theater in the position of stage supervisor and manager in the plays "Talley's Folly" and "The Immigrant." She has taught English as a Second Language and served at Xiamen University in China, as well as EC Language Center in London.

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