

Nancy Azara: The Shaman is a Feminist Artist



Heart Wall by Nancy Azara, 2000

by Phyllis Chesler

I have been living with the most magnificent sculpture by the great feminist artist, Nancy Azara, for more than fourteen years now. It is a living, breathing work of wall art, its vibrant colors enhance every other color in my living room. In this piece, Azara incorporated our handprints, both mine and my partner's, into a work of gilded gold, magenta/maroon/ruby, red/orange, green, and silver. Its predecessor was an inspired work she did for a hospital hallway in which she incorporated the healing hands of the doctors: "Hand Garden/Doctor's Wall" (2004).

Azara's deep magentas are the color of blood, of sacrifice, of death, and of re-birth. It pulses and flows and vibrates in her work. She constructs totems, altars, amulets.

Azara's sculpture shares my living room with work by other great feminist artists: Helene Aylon, Darla Bjork, Judy Chicago, Mary Beth Edelson, and Kate Millett—and with some controversial political art by the Scandinavian artist, Lars Vilks, and a small and endearing piece by Peter Max. Can you imagine the energy, the memories, in this room alone which is

also filled with graceful palm fronds and plants?

“(Her work) signifies the collective voice of the feminine reemerging after years of censorship, oppression and violence”

Azara has a new show up at the Carter Burden gallery in New York City for which she prepared a monograph to accompany the exhibition. Unsurprisingly, perfectly, it is titled “Votives.” Indeed, her art is a reverential Ode to the Great Mother, the feminine Divine. In the monograph, the curator and appraiser, Patricia Watts, describes Azara’s use of “richly colored tempera paints made with egg yolk, natural pigments, and handsome gesso combined with her use of 22-carat gold and aluminum leaf to...fuse light with form and color...During the Renaissance, gold leaf adorned altarpieces and represented the spiritual, rather than the physical presence of material wealth.”

In an interview published in the “Votives” monograph, Azara tells art critic, Kay Turner:

“I attended a class in the New York theatre district, costume design...I still light my sculptures in this theatrical manner. I also think that I’ve been influenced by the shapes and tones of light in Roman Catholic church settings.”

Although Azara was raised Catholic, it is as a Second Wave feminist that she has expanded our understanding of the Divine Mother and granted us access to that sacred energy. Azara says: “I wait for the shape to come to me. I communicate with the wood.”

I always thought that Azara should have been hired to create the sets for the opera “Norma,” Bellini’s bel canto work about a Druid High-Priestess whose signature aria is “Casta Diva,” which is a very Catholic-pagan prayer to the Moon Goddess.

Azara also told Turner:

“As a child, I first began to notice wood in furniture and began to understand that they had been trees...the most astounding memory for me, which continues all through my life, is the idea of the trees and the darkness of trees in the rain, the darkness of the trees as the sun goes down , the brightness of the trees as the sun comes out...the way trees move during storms frightens me a lot...They make a sound, a crackling sound, which is really quite amazing.”

A “votive,” (as in a votive candle), is an act of devotion, an expression of gratitude, perhaps also a prayer. Azara does not cut down trees—she seeks out fallen trees, logs, discarded pieces of lumber, and rescues them to release their still living inner being.

“My advice to feminist artists, lesbian artists, feminists, is to follow your vision”

In “Votives,” Azara writes: “Because I love trees, I started as a woodcarver. As a child I felt that they spoke to me and comforted me...I began to appreciate that looking at and making art has magical properties and healing qualities inherent in it.”

Azara has created beautiful and powerful works such as “Spirit House of the Mother,” (1994) a golden house, a sanctuary or a refuge of sorts, one that a woman can enter and be enclosed in a Goddess’s embrace, the kind of embrace that so many of us longed for and could not and did not receive in patriarchal families. As artist, scribe and “spiritual gangsta” Katie Cercone writes:

“Azara’s artwork can be quite flashy...her large scale structures reveal towering enclosures and elevated altars to uncompromising female divinity. (Her work) signifies the collective voice of the feminine reemerging after years of

ensorship, oppression and violence...(upon reading Kay Turner's work on Women's Altars) it completely reframed my personal sense of my grandmother's worship of the Catholic Virgin Mary to view it as an act of self-preservation, resistance, and centering of female divinity amidst the oppressive mind-control of mid-century American Catholicism."

Azara has sculpted works for her mother ("Leaf Altar for Nunzia. 1913-2004"); and for her granddaughter ("Maxi's Wall"). I happen to love her "Great Coat" (1997) and her "Jacket from the Silk Road." (2012). Azara says that this work "has a centerpiece which is a pattern from a thousand years ago. The people in the graves were buried wearing this same jacket which is still popular today."

I'd wear one while I was still very much alive.

In the 1970s, Azara's psychic, intuitive, and feminine work was transgressive. Like other Second Wavers, she not only did her own work—she reached out to other artists and art students. In 1979, Azara co-founded the New York Feminist Art Institute (NYFAI) which held workshops, consciousness-raising groups, classes in painting, drawing, and filmmaking, and which honored women artists such as Louise Nevelson, Lenore Tawney, Louise Bourgeois, Faith Ringgold, Elaine de Kooning, as well as feminist art historian, Arlene Raven. NYFAI also offered poetry classes and held readings with poets Jewelle Gomez and Ntozake Shange. This undertaking was foundational, a breakthrough. Nothing quite like it could be found anywhere else.

Azara kept on, she kept soldiering on, she kept keeping on, despite the extraordinary obstacles women artists faced—and still do. Azara's vision is unique, uncompromising, classical.

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Azara's use of the goddess is, as she told Kay Turner, "a metaphor for women's self-esteem...nowadays, women are painting themselves as the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Buddha. This is a sea change. Women in the feminist spirituality art movement took great liberties with these sacrosanct figures and made them our own."

In 2007, Nancy began a series of intergenerational dialogues about feminist art. Three generations of artists are still meeting.

In a recent interview, Nancy told me:

"I have been an artist in service to an aesthetic spiritual and political calling...I was mostly slowed down by my own voices that were too critical, held back permission, caused fear. In my generation, I was taught to be silent and pleasant and not to question. When I was young, there were no feminist artists—only "lady painters" and sculptresses and women art students who were expected to make good supportive wives to their husbands. To be a woman artist even today takes a lot of courage."

"When I was younger, I was influenced by African art, and Native American art, especially the spiritual references in it. And art from India has been a major love of mine, probably for the same reason. Folk Art, for its sincerity is a major love too."

Azara has been influenced by the painter, Edwin Dickinson, and she loves the work of "Meret Oppenheim, Lenore Tawney, and the German Expressionist sculptors. (She) also thinks that "Louise Bourgeois is an amazing artist, as is Eva Hesse and Louise Nevelson.

Azara still holds annual workshops, teaches, and mentors other artists. She is also the author of "Spirit Taking Form: Making a Spiritual Practice of Making Art." It is available through

Red Wheel/Weiser. Her work may be found in Collections at the Brooklyn Museum, Los Angeles County Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Modern Museum of Art, National Gallery of Women in the Arts, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Provincetown Art Association and Museum.

When I asked Nancy who has helped her in terms of her work, she answered:

“I have been helped by many persons along the way, some artists, some not. My advice to feminist artists, lesbian artists, feminists, is to follow your vision.”

First published in [4W](#).

See more of Nancy's Art:

<https://www.nancyazara.com/large-scale-installations>

<https://www.nancyazara.com/feminist-structures-and-altar-works>