

EARTH AS SACRED SPACE

by Vijali (edited by Patricia Sanders)

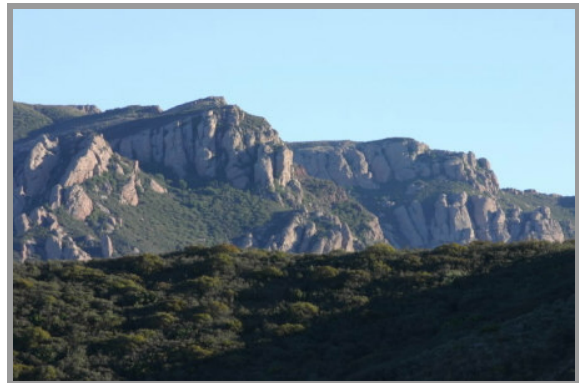
first appeared in *Earthwalking Sky Dancers: Women's Pilgrimages to Sacred Places*, edited by Leila Castle, published by Frog, Ltd, 1996.

I flew! The thirteen hours of driving from the Hopi Reservation, seemed like three. The spirit of the Kachina dances, the rhythm of the drum, the earth's heartbeat still surged through me. But as time passed on the road, I could see and feel the light buoyancy of the northern Arizona air thicken and congeal around me as I drove into the Los Angeles basin. Breathing became an effort. My shoulders tightened. Heavy, brown smog obscured the horizon. My car joined the growing swarm on the freeway pressing forward relentlessly as if herded toward our destiny by some unknown slaughterer. As I turned off the freeway, high-rise buildings enveloped me, blocking out the sky that had been so close to me on the reservation. I looked out the car window....people appeared sandwiched between smog and pavement. "How absurd! What am I doing here?" wailed some indignant voice within me. "Where is our power place, our Hopiland filled with meaning, our mountain peaks to summon the Kachina spirits? Where is OUR spirit-based community in Los Angeles? Where is OUR sacred mountain?"

Days passed. Early one morning, before sunrise, I sat up in bed with a start. "Yes, we do have our sacred mountain", I thought out-loud. I remembered the first time I laid my eyes on Boney Mountain, its backbone of twelve-storey high stone pillars

rising like a row of deities. It was love at first sight.

I jumped out of bed, grabbed my sleeping bag, climbed into my car and drove toward the Mountain, pulled by the spirit of this sacred place. Driving up the long, winding earth road, I thought back to the Chumash medicine man who had told me that this peak, the highest ridge in the Santa Monica Mountains, was the power place of this area. The range runs east and west, sacred directions for Native Americans. I found the cave I remembered from my last trip....a cave filled with Chumash pictographs....and prepared to stay the night in quest of my own way to live in harmony with the earth.



Boney Mountain

The mountain gave me an answer. I stayed on Boney Mountain from 1982 to 1987, trading the comforts of my Santa Monica home and the companionship of my husband to live alone in an abandoned trailer. My life took on a new simplicity. I began to synchronize with the rhythms of nature. Each morning I rose early to greet the sun from a high plateau and at the end of each day I returned to wish the sun farewell. Every simple act became a ritual....hauling water and bathing outside using a bucket and ladle, gathering wild greens for salads and sage for tea. I made peace with the

rattlesnakes that lived beneath my trailer and the bobcats and mountain lion that roamed nearby.

By living close to nature in this way, Boney was transformed into sacred space for me. I believe that a sacred space may be any place, not just ones designated by our ancestors. We may create them as I did on the Mountain by entering into the spirit of a place through simple actions performed in a reverent way. Every object of my daily life took on a special meaning. The trowel I used for the toilet was as sacred for me as a chalice used in communion.

Even as a child I knew the sacredness of personal space. I remember going behind my grandmother's house in Dallas to a place where I could hide behind tall weeds. I would sit for hours in my circle of stones. As a ritual I placed dandelions and honeysuckle blossoms on the ground. That space was so special I never revealed it to anyone, not even my closest playmates. How comforting to be there by myself as I mourned the death of a girlfriend or wept for my mother and father who had abandoned me at the age of two.

Sacred spaces can be created even in cities. In the late 1970's I felt a need for a sacred simplicity within my Los Angeles home. On a sudden inspiration, I took everything out of a closet and painted it white. Within this purified space I placed a stone, a leaf, a bowl of water and a sitting cloth from the Amazon....things special to me at that moment. I had create my own sacred space, my power place right there in the city.

For me as a sculptor, the process of carving and painting is itself a ritual. When I became frustrated with the commercialism of the art scene, I closed my studio and started carving stone outcroppings in wilderness areas. The first one was the

Winged Woman carved in the Simi Hills outside of Los Angeles. I found a group of large sandstone boulders that suggested a woman's face and a wing. Beneath her lay a stone shaped like a man. By the time I completed the sculpture, I realized the woman reflected the need for feminine spirit to emerge in our society. One day I returned to the Winged Woman and found people sitting in front of her and meditating. I realized, then, that art can be used to create sacred spaces.



Winged Woman

Vijali

Years later....after my five-year retreat on Boney Mountain....I began an art project of creating sacred spaces through sculptures and performances at twelve sites circling the globe. I hoped these would help recall communities around the world to the sacredness of the earth itself. Boney had taught me that a sacred space was not just a personal power site, but that the whole earth is sacred ground. It no longer seemed enough to sit on a stone and feel the interconnectedness of all life. The need to transfer the experience of a private sacred space to all of nature led me to begin the project called the World Wheel: Global Peace through the Arts.

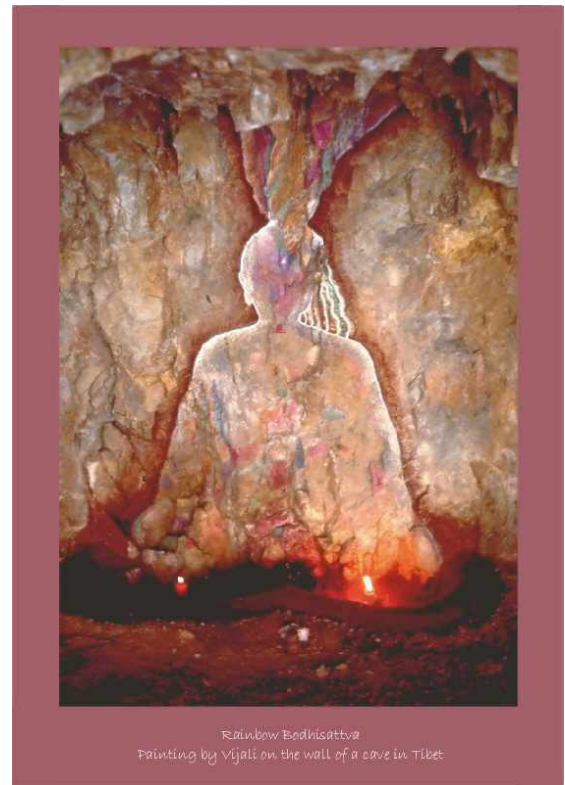
My journey has taken me from Malibu to the Seneca Reservation upstate New York, to the Alicante Mountains by the

Mediterranean Sea in Spain, the Umbrian forest in Italy, Tinos, an island in Greece, the desert of Egypt, the Dead Sea in Palestine and Israel, a tiny village in West Bengal, India, Shoto Terdrom in Tibet, Kunming in South West China, Lake Baikal in Siberia and the first wheel culminated in Japan. I have now begun a second wheel around the planet running through Ecuador, Brazil, Nigeria, Kenya, India, Australia, the waters of the South Pacific, Tuvalu and California.

One particular World Wheel experience shows how art can contribute to making a place sacred. In May, 1992, I created a painted relief in a cave at 16,000 feet on the Tibetan Plateau in the Terdrom Valley. My Rainbow Bodhisattva is a female figure, filled with prisms of color and seated in the lotus posture. Her legs are molded from the red clay of the cave floor. Neither a Buddha nor a Quan Yin, this is an energy body. I wanted to do a work traditional enough that the Buddhist nuns and hermits living in near by caves could identify with it, but I also wanted to embody a universal image that was not limited to any one concept of wholeness.

This light-filled figure symbolizes, instead, the underlying energy connecting everything, merging our innerspace with the space around us. I made my Bodhisattva feminine because I was saddened to find the image of Yeshe Tsogyal, the most prominent female holy figure in Tibet, shoved into an obscure corner of the shrine in Shoto Terdrom. It was in the feminine folds of this valley that she had lived in the 7th century for many years in a cave and received her final illumination. I longed to see Yeshe Tsogyal represented in shrines as an equal beside her spiritual mate, Padmasambhava, reflecting that harmony and balance that is so necessary today for

the health and continuation of life on this planet.



I did not know whether my creation would be recognized as a sacred site by Tibetans in the area. The answer came on the day I completed my work. Two nuns who were walking in the canyon came up to the cave. When they saw the figure they burst into tears, flushed and flung themselves face down on the ground in three, full-length prostrations. That moment was my reward; I knew that this image had touched something within them that was needed to be addressed and that this cave would be for them, from this moment on, a sacred space.

The reverence expressed by these nuns is something most Tibetans carry naturally in their lives. They may wear only patched clothes against the freezing cold, but they regard themselves as blessed to live on their sacred land. We have much to learn from them. If I can generate even a fraction of

