

COVER STORY

Artistry converges in Montalvo

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Center for Latino Arts with a ceremony commemorating the Day of the Dead.

Other events include a writing workshop conducted by Anzaldúa, lead artist for the *Nepantla* Project, today; and art workshops for homeless children led by painter Santa Barraza.

"The concept of *nepantla* is uniquely appropriate to Montalvo, and to this project," Wood said as she led the way to artists' studios tucked in the estate's evergreen woods. "Artists are always in that space when they come here. They're removed from their daily lives. They become disassociated. *Nepantla* is a good word to describe what goes on. It's magical."

Coalescing collaboration

The term describes the nature of the collaboration, too. It started 18 months ago as a conversation between Wood and Jaime Alvarado, executive director of the Center for Latino Arts (MACLA). "We started talking about the nature of collaboration, and one of the questions we asked was: How does a \$2 million-plus organization like ours collaborate with a small non-profit like MACLA?"

said Wood. "We realized the tensions between our organizations," added Alvarado. "Montalvo is based on a historic estate and on a tradition of late 19th-century art. MACLA is based in the Chicano movement of the 1970s, and we're in a day-to-day struggle to survive. We wanted a project that would test our organizations and address those differences."

Then Alvarado discovered Anzaldúa's *nepantla* concept in a catalog essay she wrote for the "Las Fronteras" exhibition at the San Jose Museum of Art. Anzaldúa asked Barraza to join the project, and they chose three other female artists.

Liliana Wilson Grez, a Chilean painter who lives in Austin, Texas, is sharing a studio with Cristina Luna, a painter from Mexico City. Both have been working furiously. A table is covered with Luna's small watercolors, and two majestic figures, arms outstretched, fly across a huge work-in-progress. Grez has finished three small canvasses in 10 days.

"Gloria's writing has given me words for what I'm doing," says Grez. "There are a lot of issues I deal with in my work that have to do with immigration, moving from place to place, with not belonging to a single place."

"For me, *nepantla* is an expression of being a woman," says Luna. "I need to work with the mystical, and that is how women tend to see life. They are in the margin, like people on the border, like children and the poor."

Re-interpreting myths

Ideas born of the artists' nighttime discussions have been transmuted into visual language in the studio. The women are re-interpreting the myths behind Mexico's feminine triumvirate of La Llorona, Malinche and La Virgen. Miserable La Llorona, who searches for her drowned children, is usually depicted as a terrifying harpy. In one painting, Grez has recast her as a pensive young woman who gazes at a barren landscape.

In her studio, Barraza is working on three large-scale pieces simultaneously, liberally mixing images from Mayan, Aztec and contemporary culture. One work features the image of Malinche, mistress of the conqueror Cortez and mother of his child. In the painting, the progenitor of *nepantla*'s mixed-blood legacy keeps company with another icon, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and Barraza's grandmother.

"Chicanos are taking La Malinche as a symbol of empower-



Cristina Luna, a painter from Mexico City, works on small watercolors while two majestic outstretched arms fly across a huge work-in-progress behind her.

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MERCURY NEWS

ment," said Barraza "They're revising history because La Malinche has always been a negative image. I see her as a victim of circumstance. She was sold by her people; she was violated, but she was never conquered. She was able to forgive. My images are intended to give people that pride of the spirit."

For Isabel Espinosa, a playwright from Chiapas, Mexico, the residency "*en nepantla*" has al-

lowed a return to the dream country of memory. "Here, I'm in another world. I listen to the songs of birds and the movements of animals, and I have to express who I am in this reality."

El Día de los Muertos, when living and spirit worlds intersect, is a perfect time to reap the fruits of *nepantla* exchange.

"Part of this project is respecting the artistic process," says Wood. ■