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Cover Story

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Strange Paradise

The surreal garden of Linda Infante Lyons

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"Oh my GOD!!!" I screamed. "I want to eat these paintings!!!"

Jannah Atkins, Curator and Exhibit Coordinator for Alaska Pacific University, turned around and smiled.

"Aren't they wonderful?" she beamed. "The artist is Linda Infante-Lyons."

I paced back and forth with greedy eyes before the dozen or so paintings in the collection Atkins was hanging last fall in APU's Grant Hall gallery, entitled "Jardin de la Nostalgia." Surreal plants, birds, and cats glowed from the canvases in delicious blues, and mouth-watering greens and yellows that left my pulse racing and the tang of citrus on my tongue.

By the time I left, a small crowd was gathered in the gallery around the exhibit, and I had dropped a chunk of cash I couldn't afford on a large painting I decided I would rather die than let anyone else possess. I was not alone in my opinion of Infante-Lyons' enormous talent. Several of the artist's paintings were purchased that afternoon, and by the end of

opening night, almost all had been sold. I clutched Infante-Lyons' hand with excited, inarticulate adoration following her brief explanation of her work

"Can I come by your studio and see your other work some time?" I asked the serene blonde artist.

"Sure," she smiled, amused.

The painting I purchased, "Kenai Blue," is the first piece that Linda Infante-Lyons completed upon returning to Alaska two years ago after living for 12 years in Chile, where she began her life as an artist. Like her other work, the dominant theme of "Kenai Blue" is intense color, which gives it the same feel as the paintings of other artists from Latin American cultures like Frida Kahlo, to whom her work has been compared by critics. Unlike Kahlo, whose colors run "hot," Infante-Lyons juxtaposes saturated warm and cool colors into a pleasing, harmonious balance. ("Balance is everything," she says.) The overall effect is one of calm, whereas Kahlo's use of angry reds and sharp, vivid greens (combined with disturbing imagery) grabs the viewer by the throat. At the same time, color that transfixes the eye is the point for both artists, and both are reaching for an immediate, gut-level response to their work that circumvents detached intellectualism. First react. Then reflect.

The subjects of "Kenai Blue" (and Infante-Lyons' other works) are also similar to those of Kahlo's—animals, plants, and the occasional human. Both artists have painted magnificent and arresting self-portraits. It is in the self-portraits that Linda Infante-Lyons herself sees the real similarities between her paintings and those of Frida Kahlo.

"Especially the look in the face of the portraits," she says. "But not in their feeling, nor in their message. Kahlo was working out her pain, the pain of her childhood, of a streetcar accident [which resulted in a lifetime struggle with terrible back pain and multiple, unsuccessful surgeries]. Maybe there's a similarity in the general feeling of Central and South American painting. But the comparison to Kahlo has been made more by the Anchorage critics than the critics in Chile."

"Kenai Blue" is unique among Infante-Lyons' paintings, in that the subject is Alaska—a cow parsnip, a salmon, and the Kenai River seen outside the window of a log cabin. All are iconic. Most of her paintings have neither a clear time nor place, but the colors with which these images are rendered give the painting the emotionalism that is characteristic of her style, and which distinguishes this particular painting from "Alaskan art." The woman in the painting, a blonde wrapped in a colorful shawl, seems to represent the artist herself, deeply influenced by a long hiatus in South America. The female subject does and does not belong in these surroundings, which gives the painting a feel typical of Latin American magical realism.

While Infante-Lyons always drew as a child, it wasn't until she moved with her husband,

Matias, to his native Chile, that she began her life as an artist. Even then, she spent the first several years of their stay in South America focusing on raising her three young daughters and planting massive vegetable and flower gardens. She was off the career path, but in Chile, she says, she felt no pressure about her choice.

"People didn't ask me 'What do you do?' Instead, they'd ask 'How many children do you have?'" she says.

Eventually, the beautiful landscape of the foothills outside Santiago (where they made their first home) inspired Infante-Lyons to take up pastels. She knew she was onto something. When the family moved to Viña del Mar, on the coast, Infante-Lyons enrolled in a fine arts school in nearby Valparaíso, and took up painting for the first time.

"Painting," she says, "was just waiting to happen."

Valparaíso, which means "to go to paradise," is one of Chile's oldest cities. Founded in 1536 by the Spanish, it prospered as a port until the construction of the Panama Canal in 1914. Since then, the city of 294,000 has decayed. Infante-Lyons describes it as "sad, poor, and smelly, with shanty towns hanging on the hills." Yet hints of the city's former greatness remain, she says. There are beautiful European-style houses built in previous centuries by German and British immigrants, and one of poet Pablo Neruda's eccentric homes serves as a public museum. It has a lively artists' community, "and the city is still very much alive, with lots of people and lovely open markets."

She spent three years taking studio classes in a non-degree capacity in Valparaíso, and it was here that her commitment to a life as an artist took root. She was inspired by the commitment of the people to their art, in spite of the terrible poverty that now grips the city.

Infante-Lyons describes herself as someone who plunges into whatever she's doing with her full being ("I didn't just jog to get in shape after my pregnancies," she says. "I took up running triathlons."), but when she started painting, she says she found her true niche.

"Painting is it," she laughs. Her smile is slow, ironic, and lovely. Her pale skin has a sprinkling of mocha freckles across high cheeks. At 41, Infante-Lyons is a beautiful woman, a fact which dawns on you the more you look at and interact with her. Perhaps this is because her manner is so subdued and peaceful, and most of her expression seems to come from her enormous, light blue eyes. Her voice is rich, yet breathy, her words measured.

It wasn't until a year after I saw her first exhibition that I finally had a chance to wander through Infante-Lyons' studio, when I recently previewed her new work for her new show, "La Siembra" ("To Plant a Seed"). In my experience, artists' studios fall into one of two categories: They are either a chaotic mess, or a work of art in themselves. Infante-Lyons' studio is the latter. It's as neat as a pin, her books lined up on their shelves, brushes and paints in orderly containers, awaiting her command, and small clusters of

interesting objects, especially dried plants, lying about here and there in pleasing arrangements. Her collection of new paintings hangs on two walls. These works are every bit as bold and imaginative as her work from "Jardin de la Nostalgia." In "Los Choroy de Pucón," chubby tropical birds surround a fat, friendly volcano billowing pinkish plumes of smoke. Another lone, exotic bird resembling a peacock waddles up a simple, golden canvas paved with fat stones in "La Invitación." "The Musti Tree" presents a ginger-colored rat next to a tree of life that defies specification. The subjects are virtually the same as those in her previous show—birds, a cat in "Urban Tiger," a commissioned portrait of a little girl, entitled "Sophie," and the plants, always the plants. They are the real stars of Infante-Lyons' paintings, the central theme and most unique feature. In the piece that gives the show its title, a series of plants resembling a cross between a pineapple and an over-sized buttercup emerge from the golden earth, as if being born. They are fat and juicy, and look as though they might sprout legs and run away once freed from the soil. They might even bite.

I asked Infante-Lyons where she got her ideas for such funky vegetation. She pulled a book of photographs taken by 19th century Russian photographer Karl Blossfeldt off one of her shelves. I flipped through page after page of black and white close-ups of strange plants with curling, spiky, fat pods I had no idea existed in nature. This was one of her inspirations. Another is the vegetation in whatever environment she finds herself, be it Anchorage, Alaska, where she was raised, or Santiago, Chile.

"Once I know the names of (local) plants, I feel at home," she said.

Plants have always held a special fascination for Infante-Lyons. She cites Peter Tomkins' book, *The Secret Life of Plants*, as having a profound influence on her as a girl. Tomkin's scientific exposé on plant consciousness inspired a young Infante-Lyons to conduct her own experiments on houseplants.

"So I was nice to some of them, talking to them and telling them how beautiful they were, and they grew. I was mean to others, thinking bad things about them, and they sort of..." here the artist laughs and mimes shriveling up like the plants of experimental group B.

I was not surprised, then, when she told me that she began her professional life as a biologist. She majored in biology at Whitman College, and although she had a brief stint as a scientific illustrator, her artistic career was still several years in the future. Most of her short career as a scientist was spent in a lab doing cancer research. The scientist's eye for detail is apparent in the images of plants found in her paintings. They are rendered with an anatomical precision reminiscent of the splendid botanical watercolors of the Victorian era.

Another clear influence on Infante-Lyons' signature style was her Alutiiq/Russian grandmother, who provided her with numerous experiences in nature when she was young, and was the source of the artist's own perspective on the world, which she sees as "magical and exciting."

Infante-Lyons experienced some self-consciousness when her first works were shown alongside those of her colleagues at the fine arts school she attended in Valparaíso. Her classmates' work was equally vivid in color, but their subjects were often violent and fiercely political, influenced by the poverty and hardships the artists experienced under a political dictatorship. Infante-Lyons' serene cats stood in sharp contrast to these images.

"I felt sorry for my paintings," she laughs. "It was as if their paintings were going to kill mine!" The Chilean critics loved her work, however, calling it "a breath of fresh air."

"...Painting silently, with little production, she demonstrates her painting skills. Fine brush strokes compose a metaphysical landscape of impeccable technique, where a cat steadily observes the spectator... Infante-Lyons gives us a fragrant breeze, a window open to hope in the dense pictorial atmosphere of this port city," wrote Chilean critic Alvaro Donoso in *La Estrella* (1/30/98).

"Freshness" is a quality the artist admires in paintings, and what she says draws her to the work of medieval artists and Primitivists, like Henry Rousseau and Grandma Moses.

"There's a lack of pretension," she says, a lack of skill and technique that produces the fresh feel to this work. "It has an innocence to it," she says. Yet while Infante-Lyons' work certainly sounds innocent—chubby birds, cats, children and volcanoes blowing pink smoke—there is a subtle insidiousness, a hint of something darker. The plants in many of her paintings appear carnivorous, goofy vegetation with teeth, like something out of "A Little Shop of Horrors." A black, cartoony dog sits upright on the sidewalk in the corner of "Gimena de Valparaíso." His grin is malevolent, and a faint wariness plays across the face of the woman in the painting, her friend Gimena.

"Valparaíso is a dangerous city," Infante-Lyons tells me. And this is about as close to having any sort of "message" as Infante-Lyons' work gets. She doesn't generally have any idea what she's going to paint before she starts. Serendipity plays a large role in her creative process.

"I have a color in mind but that's it," she says emphatically. She starts by painting the entire canvas with one color, which suggests a horizon, which suggests something else, which in turn suggests something else, and so on.

"No sketches?" I ask. She says she tried that a few times, but she never ended up painting what she sketched, so she doesn't usually bother now. She did have to provide sketches for two competitions she entered recently—and won—a mural for the library at the new Russian Jack Elementary school, and two paintings for Government Hill Elementary school. Her work for both these installments was supported by the Municipality's program "1% for Art in Public Places."

Great art is always, in part, the result of a happy marriage between the artist's expression and the appropriate medium. Michelangelo was hampered by painting, and found his true "voice" in sculpture. Even his Sistine chapel, with the three-dimensionality and

anatomical precision of the figures, reveals his brilliance as a sculptor. Picasso's paintings, on the other hand, reveal his vision in a way that his sculptures do not. Infante-Lyons showed me a watercolor from among her very first works. Technically, it is very good, and the image, a plant, is recognizable from her other pieces. But the painting is dull and flat. It's hard to believe it's her work.

"Oooph," I cringed. "That just isn't it."

"No, it isn't," she agreed.

Linda Infante-Lyons' unique and spirited imagination truly comes to life in oils.

"So, how has your work developed over time?" I asked.

"It hasn't really," she says. "I paint pictures I like to look at." She says her style has always been what it is now, although her technique continues to improve. This is where I disagree with the artist. In looking over some of her earliest work, her more recent paintings from "Jardin de la Nostalgia," and her newest productions, there is a clear progression. The colors of her first oils are subdued, coy. The paintings from "Jardin" show a far bolder use of color, and an increasing sense of three-dimensionality, the result of more layering of the saturated aquas and greens. Her hand is more aggressive. Infante-Lyons' latest pieces are rendered in brilliant yellows and greens, seeming almost brazen in comparison to her earlier work. Given the centrality of color to the artist's style, this represents a significant development in her work, a show of greater confidence and daring. It also puts her work even closer to the Surrealist school.

"She has influences that have both cultural and historical significance in the school of Surrealism," says APU's Jannah Atkins. "The Surrealists, like Dalí, were trying to achieve a certain message about dreams. They were working in the '20s and '30s, at the same time as Freud, and discussing some of the same principles." Artists, like Infante-Lyons, will follow a certain school and paint under its influence for years, "whether or not that connection is conscious," she adds. "They pick it up through osmosis, intuitively."