



## LINDA MILLER-HONDO ARTIST

### Bill Smith

Absorbed by the overgrowth of vegetation, Linda Miller's home in the Hondo Valley is not easy to find. In a landscape that sinks away from the highway toward the river, her adobe is virtually hidden by lush foliage. To the west lies an orchard, replete with cherries and apricots. Surrounding the house and studio, the untrimmed primrose flowers and the currant and lilac bushes thrive.

Two dogs and Lily the goat greet me in the gravel driveway. As I approach, I am struck by how this little retreat is teeming with life: aside from the variety and abundance of plant life and the usual pets, swallows are darting about near the studio; chickens swarm through the brush; hummingbirds frenetically check out every bright object.

Later, as I got to know the artist, I found that the energy that permeates this spot also flows into and out of Linda Miller. Having seen her paintings, with their frozen meditative quality, I was a bit surprised to discover that she was so voluble, moving from one story to another in a continuous freeform, stream-of-consciousness flow, consistent with the unrestrained flow of life around her.

As difficult as it is to determine where nature stops and Linda's house begins, it is equally difficult to find the boundaries between the natural world and her artwork. "Those animals and everything I do are a part of my painting and my life." She claims. "And I have people who criticize me—say that I shouldn't spend so much time feeding the animals. Move into town. But they don't realize that each animal, each wildflower is a part of what my painting is about."

Linda grew up in Snyder, Texas. She finds the Hondo Valley to be a setting that affords continual inspiration:

"There was a time before I moved here that I was not as productive in my painting... you just come here, and there is this creativeness around you. I will see things that I have seen for many years, and I'll stop and see it for the first time, at a different angle.

"The light in the Valley changes. The wildlife and the things that I like just appear around in the Valley—and I would not have to go far to paint what I would paint for the rest of my life. I could go within a quarter of a mile. Winter is my special favorite. I like the grays and winter tones."

Another artist in the Valley said he thought Linda painted "from the inside out," while many artists work "from the outside in." Linda paints her own world, from an intimate point of view. She is inseparable from her surroundings—"inside" them. The natural world flows into and out of her studio and her consciousness; it is not merely a distant landscape. In her paintings, we seem to be seeing the "inside" of the animal, the dark mystery of which we are only marginally conscious—rather than bright pictures of the sunlight bouncing off the surface of things.

Swallows' nests surround the studio, wedged into the corner where adobe walls meet eaves and vigas. The swallows have actually "dug into" her home. She would never think of disturbing them merely for the sake of appearance, for the sake of orderliness so many of us compulsively strive for.



Linda's stories about swallows span a number of years:

"They bring good luck and good fortune. I've had people ask me, 'How did the swallows initially come?' I had always been intrigued with swallows. And I had never had one, much less hundreds of swallows. In 1985, I was sitting in my patio. I was looking out, and I could see so high that I could barely identify one single swallow, and I thought to myself, 'I am going to concentrate and see if I can communicate.' This is the most bizarre thing I have ever done. On that one bird I concentrated. I said, 'I want you to come build on my studio. Not my house. But my studio.' That was the beginning. I didn't think anything of it. Probably a week later someone said they stopped on the highway, and it was like a tornado, such masses of swallows swarming over my studio.

"Once as I walked around where they nest over my studio, I stopped to look up. There was a baby bird out of the nest. He can't get back in, and if he falls, he is going to fall hard. He doesn't have enough feathers to fly. So I counted quickly: four over; and as he fell, I took my hat off and caught him. I ran in and got the ladder and put him back in his nest.

"They are a very charming bird and they work really hard. I would compare their aerodynamics to the stealth bomber. When they fly, they fold their wings and glide. Just a beautiful bird.

"At some point, I was going to make their mud so that they wouldn't have to go so far. My handyman came and said, 'Don't you know that they go to the river and get the best mud?' It was better than what I had fixed for them—a mixture like adobe."

In her sympathy for the birds that are drawn to her place, Linda found a robin the morning after it had died from an early freeze. In a startling painting of the tiny corpse, she lets the canvas show through as the background. I questioned her about the artistic convention of "covering the canvas."

"Anyone can cover the canvas. But the canvas has a luminosity. You don't fight that texture. You use it. And this is like the elements. I painted the eaves of my studio. One year with life-time guarantee; the next, with a five-year guarantee. Then I decided the best thing to do was quit fighting it. Let it all peel off and go back to the natural wood."

There are many facets to Linda Miller. She is the gracious host who unlocks the gate before you arrive; and the artist who values her privacy—who asks you to lock the gate on your way out. She delights in the delicate nest of the hummingbird, but also is fascinated with the coarse raven's nest with strands of barbed wire woven into its fabric. Linda had a hands-on involvement in all the stages of building her adobe house and studio. She has the hardy, self-reliant quality of the frontier woman.

But primarily, she is an artist with a deep personal involvement with her own environment. Through her art, she initiates us into some of the dark mysteries of the natural world to which most of us are only marginally connected:

"People who come here remark, 'This is a different world. So close to the highway but so different.' I feel that basically, I have created the world that I want to live in. Let the creatures do what they want to do. And every window I have built looks at nature. I don't feel the great hubbub of modern civilization."