

SAN DIEGO UNION/TRIBUNE

MADONNA RISES ON REMOTE HILL

Tijuana arch honors Mexico's patron saint

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A solitary, wind-swept hillside seems an unlikely setting for a towering artwork that represents so much to so many. Yet on this spot overlooking the dirt roads and small shacks at Tijuana's far eastern reaches, a San Diego artist has completed her most ambitious work: a 24-foot arch in the shape of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The silhouette is unmistakable: She is the Mexican Madonna, her figure traced by the interior of the arch, her deep turquoise robe studded with stars and framed with a corona of bright yellow rays. At the base is a rose; on top, a flaming heart.

Judith Nicolaidis, 58, a sculptor and ceramic artist, has been coming for 15 months to this remote corner of Tijuana, where migrants from across Mexico settle with little more than dreams for a new start. Nicolaidis, a longtime art professor at Southwestern College in Chula Vista, brought her own dream, to evoke female spirituality in a way that transcends cultural differences.

What has emerged is this metal-and-concrete arch covered with thousands of pieces of ceramic tile, some of them shaped like fish, hearts, notes of music, dots of light. Surrounding it are benches studded with purple cookie-cutter shapes of camels,

giraffes, elephants.

From across the small valley, it is hard to distinguish anything but an oddly shaped arch rising by a steep road on an undeveloped piece of land. But up close, the virgin is a formidable presence, covered with color, a frame for the rapidly changing landscape before her.

The idea might seem a bit mad: Coming out this far, building a piece so big, on a spot so far off the beaten path. But Nicolaidis said this is where the opportunity came up.

Tijuana "offers a lot of freedom to be creative," Nicolaidis said.

She is not the first to explore the city's possibilities. A few miles away, on a hilltop overlooking the city, a Catholic priest has erected a 75-foot fiberglass Jesus. Across town in a shantytown near the U.S. border, Tijuana artist Armando Munoz in 1989 built a 56-foot nude female figure called La Mona, the doll, and is building a giant mermaid south of Rosarito Beach.

A slender woman of 5 feet 4 inches, Nicolaidis is dwarfed by the figure that has taken over her life.

The challenges have been considerable. There is no running water. The site is hard to reach. Vandals have tried to break off pieces from the robe.

But others say they love this depiction of

Mexico's most revered female figure.

"She's pretty," said Adalberto Nunez Lopez, 14, stopping by the newly finished artwork while flying a handmade kite.

Adalberto and his friends didn't hesitate to name their favorite part, the deep red heart.

On a recent afternoon, Nicolaidis looked a bit like an explorer, shielding herself from the punishing sun with wide-brimmed hat and long-sleeved shirt, protected with blue jeans, knee pads, work boots and gloves.

"It's always kind of an adventure," she said. "You don't know what's going to happen."

A rooster crowed, a hawk soared, and trees rustled in the hot breeze. Not far away, a bulldozer rumbled, a man's voice called out, an ice cream vendor played a tune as his truck lumbered past a row of wood houses.

"Paulino, por favor," Nicolaidis commanded, asking an assistant to sweep away some loose cement beneath the freshly grouted benches.

Patron saint

The Virgin of Guadalupe is said to have appeared in a ball of light to an Indian named Juan Diego in central Mexico in 1531. She told him she was the Virgin Mary. She is now the patron saint of Mexico and her likeness appears almost anywhere: on the backs of silk shirts worn by young nortenos, on the walls of neighborhood markets, on statues hawked by vendors at the San Ysidro border crossing. People see her shape on the barks

of trees, in the ashes of fires, in the shapes of clouds.

It was not a vision that led Nicolaidis in May 2002 to this isolated spot off the Free Road to Tecate. But this is where she landed, through a combination of circumstances, at the edge of Maclovio Rojas, a community that has languished for years without running water, electricity and other services because of a protracted land dispute.

Nicolaidis is a member of the Border Art Workshop, a San Diego-based group that built a community arts center in Maclovio Rojas. With some students from Southwestern, she did a smaller ceramic piece, evoking fertility, which was set outside the Maclovio Rojas women's center.

Vandals threw rocks, breaking off parts of the statue, and she now can hardly bear to go see it. But she was already working on the new piece and not about to stop.

The idea for the Virgin of Guadalupe began as a 2-inch drawing and at one point was conceived as only half its actual size. As originally envisioned, the arch would have gone outside the women's center.

"I gave the drawing to the community, and they said, 'We really like it, but there's a lot of people who are not Catholic,' " she said. "I never thought of it as Catholic. To me it was female, spiritual, nurturant."

New location

So the piece was moved to a future cemetery

on the edge of Maclovio Rojas, where another Southwestern professor, Michael Schnorr, is planning a school and sculpture garden that would draw art students from both inside and outside the community.

A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts gave Nicolaidis \$3,200 -- just more than one-third of the cost for labor and materials. She has invested more than \$5,000 of her own money, hiring artist Armando Munoz, who has had experience with large concrete figures, to build the frame. She paid local laborers to work at her side.

Nicolaidis is, by her own admission, a bit New Age. To describe this piece, she speaks of gateways and passages and the female psyche.

"That's always been an interest of mine, the transformative experiences that we go through," she said.

Some ask why she doesn't fill in the figure, but they're missing the point. To pass through the arch is to experience the virgin's essence.

'That space is spirit'

"You are physically in her spiritual presence," Nicolaidis said. "What's in that space is spirit, not anything material."

Paulino Garcia Avalos, who lives nearby, happened along a few months ago looking for work and has been with Nicolaidis ever since. As he lay pieces of tile at the arch's base, he reminisced about visiting the Virgin

of Guadalupe's shrine outside Mexico City and suddenly feeling faint, he wasn't sure why.

Marco Antonio Cruz Franco, deported earlier this year from California, cracked jokes and broke into song as he scrubbed loose grout: "I am a king who has lost his crown."

Working in Mexico has taught Nicolaidis to have faith in the impossible.

"It's amazing how there's always something provided, how something works out," she said.

Volunteers have come from as far as Pennsylvania, as close as next door. With no running water in the area, neighbors have shared their water supply, brought by a hose that runs down the hillside.

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