

Lupe Rodriguez

A Conversation With Our Cover Artist

By Luciana Ricciutelli

I first met Lupe Rodriguez at an exhibition of her work about a year and a half ago. Her presence at this exhibit was irrepressible. Radiant, Lupe beamed contentedly at her guests while cocking a wine glass in one hand and rocking an infant in a baby carriage with the other. That exhibit at the Koffler Gallery in September of 1985 marked the first time that Lupe made public what have been termed her "bull" paintings. The typical Rodriguez canvas, depicting the vibrant and sultry beauty of the Andalusian countryside, had been transformed by the presence of a bull — an unrestrained figure in the landscape which appears alternately menacing and vulnerable, aggressive and contemplative, blatantly sexual and placidly domestic. I was immediately captivated.

Lupe Rodriguez was born in La Linea, Spain on August 6, 1953. She immigrated to Canada with her family when she was eight years old. Surprisingly, Lupe's memories of growing up as an immigrant in Toronto are refreshingly positive, devoid of any anguish caused by cultural shock or racial prejudice:

Unlike what many immigrants say, I think it was to my advantage. I think it was great to be that little bit more exotic than the other kids in the class. You showed up with pierced ears and at the beginning you were weird and then everybody had their ears pierced. So you always had those little things that the other kids didn't have. And then you could speak another language. I always thought it was great to carry along other luggage. I have never felt discriminated against.

Lupe describes her family as atypical, explaining that, unlike many immigrant

families, there were no extreme restrictions placed upon her; her artistic talent was always encouraged. A creative sensibility seems, in fact, inherent to the Rodriguez family. Her father, Victor Rodriguez, was a chef until his death in 1981; her mother, Dora Rodriguez, made costumes for the Paula Moreno Dance Company and the National Ballet Company of Canada. Laughing, Lupe comments that her parents were like "yin and yang," each of them encouraging the growth of different parts of her personality and character:

My father passed on to us the determination of being immigrants. Even though he didn't want me to come home late at night and he didn't want me to move in with my boyfriend, he always encouraged my career. One of the biggest things that I miss about my father is that no one, no one in this world, gets as excited when I sell a painting. He thought it was dynamite that my work sold! I wish I had that now. I think that's being an immigrant. I think it's also being somebody's child, but it's more like being able to say, 'I've made it! I've made it here!'

Later, she tells me that friends have called it "the Rodriguez hustler instinct." She describes it as the "survival element," something innate to all immigrants: "you accomplish what your father never had the time to do."

Lupe moved away from home when she was nineteen years old. She comments that, while her father gave her "a hard time," her mother supported her independence, "maybe because it was what she couldn't do." She adds:

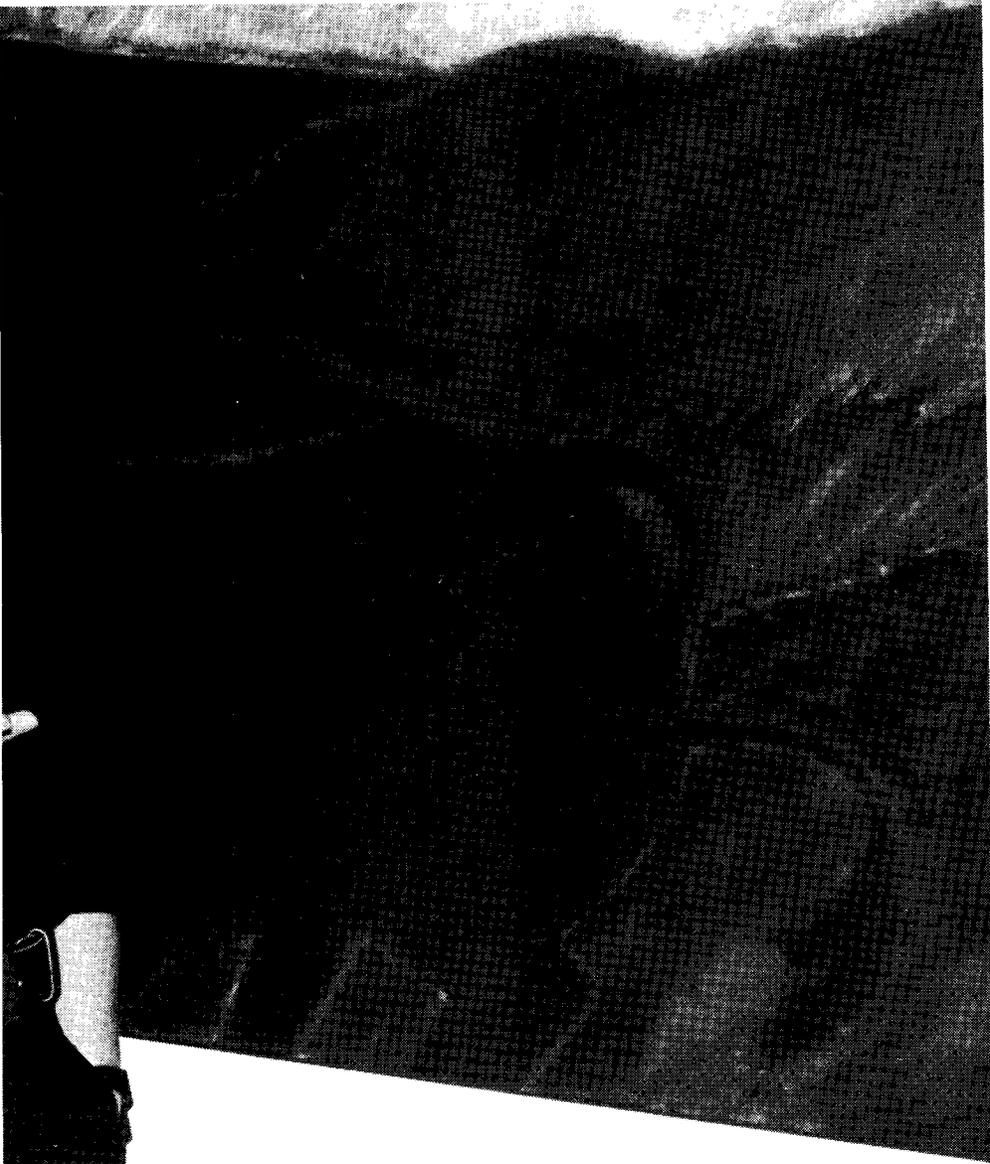
Where my father was driven to accomplishment, my mother, even to this day, always provides incredible support. As



I grew up, if I came home with any kind of insecurity... for example, if someone at school didn't like my dress, she would simply laugh and say they were just jealous. I believed it. I think it was quite an important thing to do. She gave me confidence that, no matter what, I was alright just being myself.

In some ways the immigrant experience can be perceived as being somewhat like the experience of the artist: both are attempting to express themselves in another language — the immigrant literally in the language of the country s/he has chosen to live in; the artist metaphorically through the medium of her/his art. Both require a certain kind of strength and stamina in order to be able to translate that unknown into something tangible. Lupe agrees that what Canada uniquely can offer is not only the impetus to draw the best from one's character in confronting the chal-

Photo: Cath Devlin



Photograph by Toronto Image Works

lence, but more importantly, freedom of expression:

You don't have much choice when you are born in a place where you have everybody else to contend with who already has an image of what your father was all about and what role you should therefore follow. Really, when you come here it's from scratch.

Lupe also feels that the "survival element" that drives most immigrants carries over into the artistic world as well: "As an artist you also come from nothing and have to build from scratch. You have no security."

In 1982, after the death of her father, Lupe returned "home." Although summer holidays in Spain had been for Lupe almost an annual event since the age of sixteen, this particular trip was to be quite different. "I went back because I really wanted to find out what it was like. I did

not want to go back as a tourist, I just wanted to live among the Spaniards."

Lupe and her husband, Danny Cushing (whom she married in 1980), set up house for six months in Casares, a picturesque mountain village near the Mediterranean coast. Not far from the town of Lupe's birth, Casares is untouched by the twentieth century and thus served as an idyllically rustic backdrop from which she could begin her exploration and absorption of Andalucian imagery: "That really did it. It was *the* trip for me." It was during that trip, Lupe feels, that she re-established her heritage as a Spaniard; it resulted in the first, most critically important show of her career, "Andalucia Revisited" (Robert McLaughlin Gallery, September 1984). Lupe returned to Toronto with a deeply personal portrait of her "home." Her paintings depict the lush valleys, pristine beaches and languid hill-

sides of a sunny, sultry Spain. Her unrestrained use of brilliant greens, smoldering reds and vivid blues captures Spain's bold vibrancy and pulsating rhythms:

I grew up with the idea that colour was the way you expressed yourself, whether it was through dressing or whether it was the way you decorated your house. Spain is a country of extremes. It's colours that conflict with each other. Most of the artists I admire — Matisse, Picasso, Cezanne and Van Gogh — all these artists worked in the Mediterranean and they all have a rich palette. I think it's no coincidence that I like the artists who lived there because it's not only the art, but it's the lifestyle they led and I identify with that lifestyle.

Lupe's art is, on the one hand, a celebration of her heritage and, on the other, a poignant and intimate expression of a soul caught between two worlds.

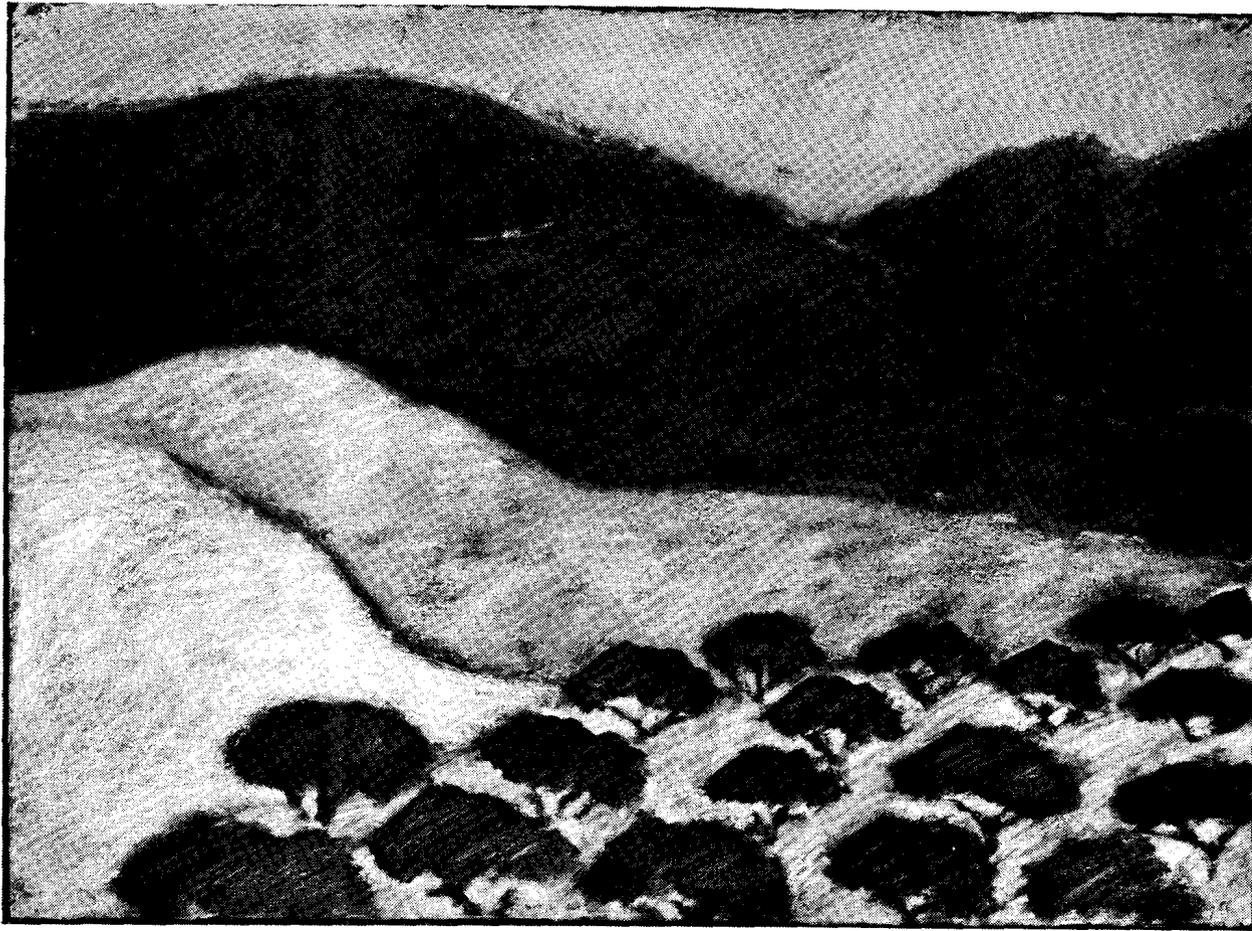
What is so intriguing about Lupe's work is that, despite the fact that she was raised in Canada, there is no trace of anything distinctly *Canadian* in her art. The landscape is always unmistakably Mediterranean:

It happens very often that when we paint, it is not the experience of what we see around us but what we dream. I am very happy here, but I really do love the Mediterranean for all it offers — not only in terms of the beauty visually, but the lifestyle is just superb. Canada to me is much more like the nuts and bolts of my life. I find it a lot easier to function here. Things are much better organized. Canada complements a part of me that I like and then Spain takes care of the other.

Ironically, Lupe refers to Spain again and again as "home." She shrugs: "There is in me two homes. Many immigrants cut themselves off, but I'll always have this affair with the country. It's never out of my system. I'd like to live in Madrid, work there, and find out what the art community is doing there. I'd like to take my kids back, too, so they have a real rich understanding of what it's like." When she does return, Lupe adds, she feels replenished, rediscovering, each time, a part of herself: "I don't want to sound negative about Canada because I really like Canada, too. It's just that there are parts of me that come alive when I'm in Spain, things that are dormant here. It's a different country, a different culture."

As a woman of Mediterranean origin, she feels that her needs were different:

I'm very emotional and very direct. I don't like the idea that if you're angry,



Lupe Rodriguez
Camino Logroño, 1986
 mixed media on rag paper
 Courtesy: Leo Kamen Gallery
 Photo: Toronto Image Works

you don't scream. Sometimes I blow my top, sometimes I speak out of turn, and sometimes I act a little more aggressive than I should. I think that's another culture coming through. Another Mediterranean aspect that comes in, is that in Spain the relationship between men and women is like David and Goliath, where the men are Goliath and the women are David. The woman may be a lot smaller, but somehow she's got all the power in a quiet way. In a way you bring that strength as a part of you over and Canada gives you the opportunity to apply it.

On a deeper level, however, is that not an aspect of feminist consciousness? Lupe smiles:

In an unconscious way, I think I have always thought about feminism. It's something I've done without realizing it. I think it's reflected in who I chose to marry. I was never attracted to Latin men. Subconsciously, as a feminist, I ran away from it. Danny was very different. He doesn't fit the mold. I think you subconsciously choose your path in terms of who you live with. I've never really thought about myself as a feminist artist, though, because my images are not so obvious and they apply to

many things. I don't go out of my way to talk about women's issues — although they are definitely in my work. I mean, making a bull a symbol for myself says a lot, doesn't it?

Nevertheless, part of Lupe's sense of feminism is also a rejoicing in her womanhood: "I like the charm, the charisma that goes with being a woman socially. But that doesn't mean that I'm submitting myself to the role of the helpless woman. It means I'm having fun! I think you can be all that and still stand on your own two legs as a woman. I like looking good. It gives me confidence. It just feels right."

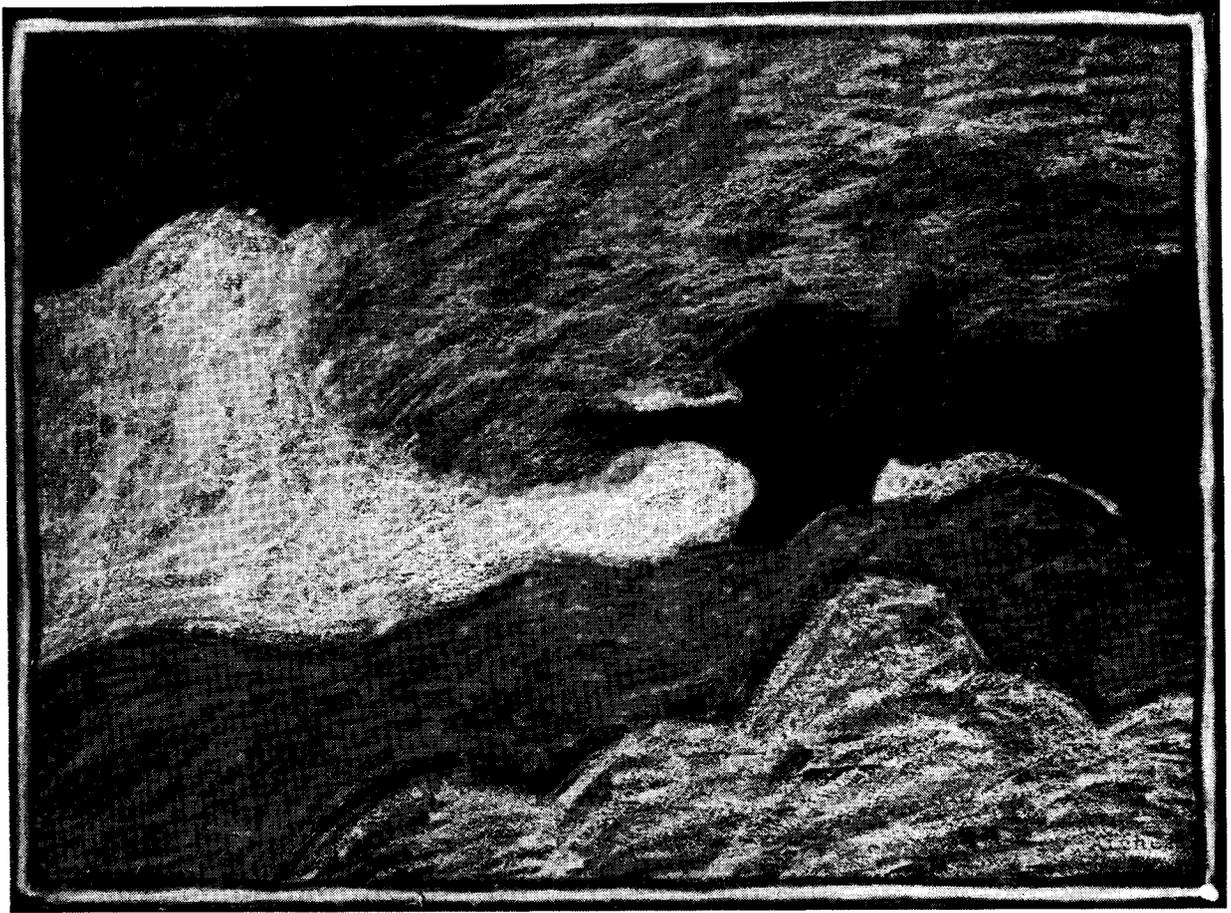
Lupe laughingly brushes aside as nonsense any questions about the difficulty of reconciling her career as an artist with the demands of a family: "My family is very, very important to me. I don't want to be painting twenty-four hours a day and I don't want to be taking care of or being with my children twenty-four hours a day. But I do need a home life so that I can paint. My life just happens to be that I'm married and have two kids. My work is very autobiographical in an indirect fashion."

Lupe's landscapes work on a variety of different and interweaving levels. While the Spanish landscape is the metaphorical

background of her experience, the actual content and form of the paintings reflect her inner landscape or experience. After the birth of her first son, Lupe began consciously to search for something she could introduce into the landscape that would symbolize the change in her life: the image of the hare/rabbit became that extra presence:

Sebastian was born in 1984 and I wanted to continue doing my work. I looked at the Mediterranean series of paintings and they didn't make sense anymore. I had come back from Spain, had the child, and gone through quite a big change. I wanted to acknowledge that in the work, so I thought I had to put some kind of animation in the pieces to tell the story of this new role I was playing. I decided on the hare/rabbit because the hare/rabbit is a sort of female symbol of fertility and reproduction. There was also something very gentle about it, which is how I felt at the time. I had a show at McMaster University in 1985 [where the paintings with the hare were first shown] and the reaction to the hare was so negative that I really resented it. People didn't read what I was trying to say. I had seen the hare as a much stronger image. So I

Lupe Rodriguez
Varanillo Loco, 1987
mixed media on rag paper
Courtesy: Leo Kamen Gallery
Photo: Toronto Image Works



went back and searched for an animal that told the story. I wanted to say that I was strong, yet I was vulnerable: I didn't think the hare had it. I didn't think it told about the new confidence. Yet, I had to paint the hare to find the bull.

It was towards the end of her second pregnancy that the image of the bull began to appear in Lupe's landscapes, at first paired with the hare, then later as a solitary figure: "I became pregnant six months after Sebastian was born and I was really shocked at how hard it was. Besides the fact that physically it's really demanding, socially it was terrible. I had people saying to me, 'How? Why? What's going to happen to your work?' Emotionally, I was very vulnerable, so I didn't know how to answer them."

The bull thus becomes a dominant image in the landscape. Most often, it is a lone figure haunting the landscape — suggestive on one level of the artist's sense of alienation and isolation and, on another, of a need for solitude and individualism. At a recent exhibit, Lupe explained her use of the bull imagery:

I have used the image of the bull as a means of exploring the inherent contradictions of mankind's nature. The bull

can be viewed as symbol for both the expression and suppression of man's instincts: although it is the wild beast who attacks when provoked, the same animal can also be subjected and molded in the bull ring. The bull can be strong, stubborn and determined — as well as tender and graceful. These contrasting characteristics, in conjunction with the cultural and historical significance of the animal, is what motivates me to paint it.

What one immediately notices about the bulls in Lupe's landscapes is that they have been *demasculated* — something Lupe confirms she did quite intentionally. Does this animal, who symbolizes strength, sexuality, endurance, and who has been dominated, tamed and curtailed by mankind, thus become an emphatic and powerful symbol for the subjugation of women throughout history? "I think that's how it all started. The bull imagery can be quite vulnerable when you look at it historically and socially. I liked the idea that it wasn't male and it wasn't female, in a way." On a deeper level then, the bull is not merely demasculated, but "desexed," and can thus also be seen as emblematic of a spirit not restricted to social roles imposed by society through claims of bio-

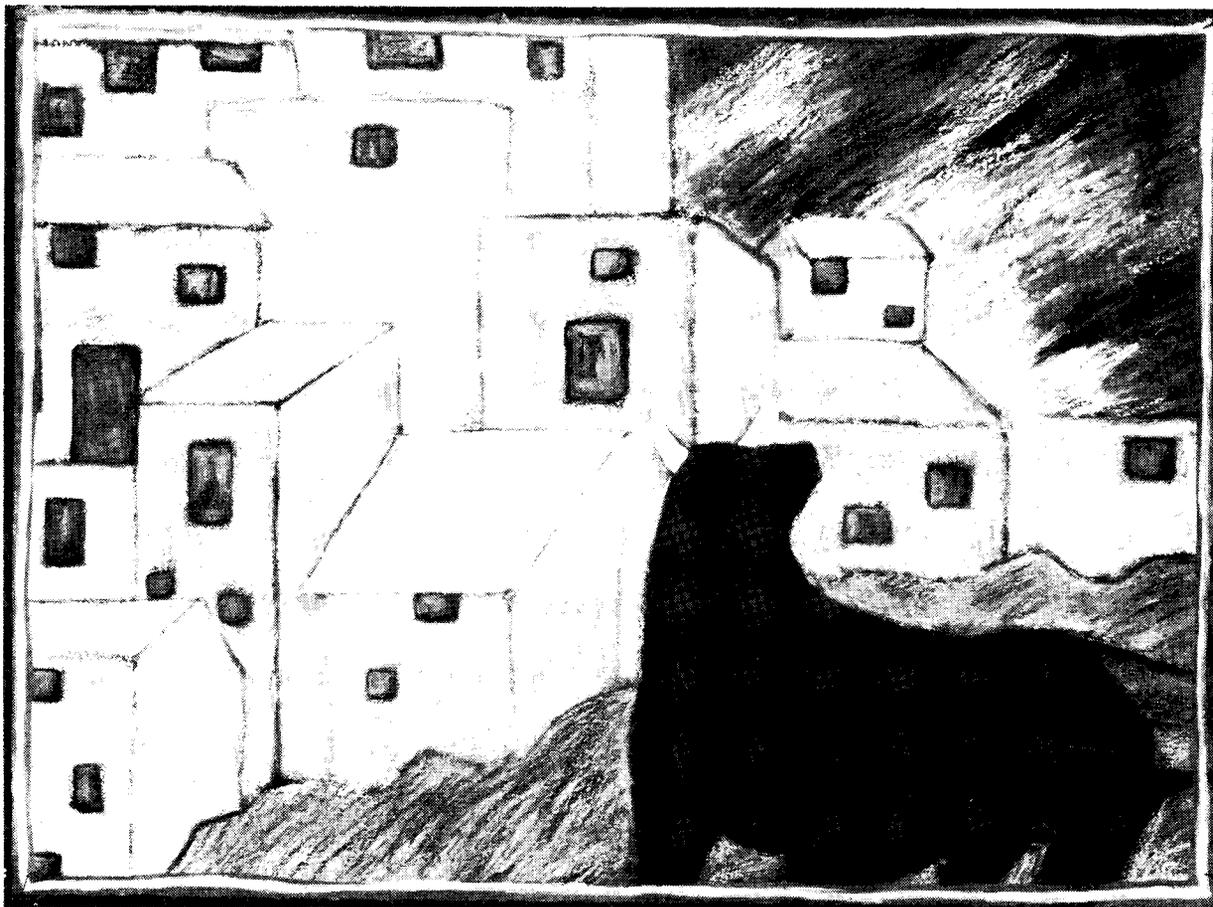
logical predetermination. It is androgynous, revelling in its role in nature, without being restricted by it.

Lupe insists, however, that there is much more to her work than just the bull: "I also use the tree a lot — the olive tree, the almond tree and the cypress. In every painting there are trees: sometimes hunched together, sometimes marching like armies, sometimes isolated. What I do to a tree is personified almost as much as what I do to the bull. The tree, after all, is a symbol of life."

What is so seductive about Lupe's work is that the paintings are intensely alive — an active and positive affirmation of life and nature's regenerative principle. Curiously, they stand in stark contrast to what might be seen as the typically Canadian landscape (which is frequently stark and solitary, depicting man's struggle for survival in a beautiful yet harsh environment):

There is something about a Mediterranean landscape that is very intimate. You never feel in the Mediterranean, no matter where you are, unprotected. You do in Canadian landscapes. In the Mediterranean there is a sheltering quality. Nature takes care of you, protects you, mostly because of the

Lupe Rodriguez
Transitional Series #5, 1987
 mixed media on rag paper
 Courtesy: Leo Kamen Gallery
 Photo: Toronto Image Works



weather. The Mediterranean climate is inviting. Snow, however, can be quite threatening. I like my paintings to feel like you could walk into them and they would protect you, nourish you somehow.

The painting chosen for the cover of this issue of *Canadian Woman Studies* is called "Paseo." The word "paseo" in Spanish means "stroll." It refers to the leisurely early evening walk that is still very much a tradition in Spain:

Paseo was done right after Liam [Lupe's second son] was born. I painted the animal in solitude on the horizon. For one thing, solitude was very much how I felt — the alienation — and it wasn't because I didn't receive support from my family or husband: it's that whole realization that you are born alone and you die alone. A vulnerable stage is like that. It was also that I craved solitude. I had no time to paint. I was suddenly at everybody else's disposal. That was what I wanted to paint. This animal, all alone, with all this landscape surrounding it. The horizon line dominates and that line is the artistic symbol for meditation. This is the feeling I wanted to convey. Not so much what I had, but what I was search-

ing for.

Lupe adds that a friend recently commented on that fact that she no longer painted "interiors." At the time, she replied that because she was "confined" in her life [by the demands of motherhood], she felt the need to paint the outside world: "I guess I had to get out of the house somehow." Ironically, "Paseo" is an "interior" in that it reflects Lupe's inner experience of her life at a very sensitive time. "Paseo" is, in fact, an example of the capacity women have to experience life on multiple levels: there is never the merely black-and-white, but instead an innate awareness of life's infinite complexities: "I don't like to work purely on one level. "Paseo" is two-fold in that it depicts the negative aspects of being alone and the positive aspects of wanting to be alone. The piece has all these beautiful horizon lines [which suggest peaceful contemplation], yet in the foreground there are sharp blades of grass, ending in sharp points, which is not very inviting, sort of swampy-like. So you do have both worlds." It speaks of an innocence transformed by experience. For Lupe, it is the experience of her father's death, of marriage, and of motherhood. The landscapes are no longer

representative of an idyllic, almost nostalgic dream of what was, but are now a more rooted perception of reality — the reality of an immigrant who has combined the best of her past with her growth in the present, of the artist who has not simply broken from tradition, but transformed and transcended it through the process of her art:

When I do a work of art, I try to bring out as much as I can, not only about myself, but about my relationship with others or the way others have affected me. The bull is not always me anymore, but somehow it is me, in that people tell me their stories and I have absorbed them so that they work their way through me. As an artist, I feel I have to go beyond the merely two-dimensional aspect of the canvas — you have to create a three-dimensional world. Because that's how we exist: as really complex human beings.

When Lupe returned to Spain in the summer of 1986 with her two small children, it was a very different experience for her:

Danny and I returned to Spain after having done what everyone dreams of doing — travelling as a couple and living there for an extended period of

time. Going back with two children, you realize that it's something that can never be repeated. So I decided I'd better hurry up and do all the things I had always wanted to do, because pretty soon the chances to do so were disappearing. It never really dawned on me before that time is passing away.

The consciousness of time is something that Lupe feels everyone approaching mid-life (she is now thirty-three) must eventually come to terms with. It is a topic that she has explored and discussed with the friends and people close to her, ultimately translating it into her recent work.

My new show, "Decisions-Transitions," [Leo Kamen Gallery, May 1987] applies to me and to the people I know. The paintings of 1986 have taken on a whole new personality. The solitary animal has extended beyond itself to human confrontation. The paintings are dotted with passageways — exits and entrances — marking time and decisions, while the animals confront, explore, move away from and move closer to each other.

Confident and self-assured, Lupe explains:

I've gone through my transition. After having my children, I've regained myself and I'm working again in this new role I've already accepted. I think when you get close to thirty, it's a time when you're confronting life. Whereas before you could say, in the future I have lots of time, now you're aware you don't have it anymore. I've talked to a lot of people about it and they all seem to feel that, if they don't make a move now, they never will. What I want to talk about is the pressure to do that. That's big. That divides territories and it really divides friendships. All these issues combined have made me do paintings that are more about the passing of time and decision-making. They are also about how people communicate and do not communicate; how they avoid each other and go different routes; how they are pressured by their peers and the roles we have as human animals.

This exploration of relationships in Lupe's art is evident in the fact that the bulls in the landscapes are no longer solitary figures: "I no longer crave to be alone because I now I can be alone. My kids are older and I have help with them. I am no longer trapped in the constant mother role which I was for awhile. I also have more financial freedom because my work is selling. And we all know that helps a lot!"

The depiction of relationships in her

recent work is also marked by distinctly sexual overtones. The bulls in the landscapes are often engaged in a kind of sexual foreplay, attracted and repelled by each other at the same time. Lupe smiles and says:

I'm big on talk about sex lately. Suddenly, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" makes sense to me — the whole issue of female sexuality at its prime. Sex, to me, is the ultimate act. Once you take that step sexually, everything changes. And it's such a hard step to take because you know the consequences will always be different from the day before. I did a few paintings where the animals are smelling each other and the one in the foreground is almost mounting the one in the background. The one in the background is getting ready, but it's not quite happening yet. This is the point of transition. We don't know if it's going to happen. I just thought this was a very good analogy for everything we do in life. We're always hesitating and once we take that step there's no looking back. And it takes a lot of guts to do that.

Is it a rediscovery of her own sexuality, a recognition of herself as a passionate, involved and enriched human being after the experience of motherhood? "It's phenomenal," Lupe grins, "you regain yourself with all this added ammunition, with this confidence! It's like you suddenly know what you want and you can still be a sexual being." She muses: "Even though you do get older, you just feel so much better about life, because every moment is rich and the work becomes richer with time. My work is so much stronger now than what I did five years ago."

This interview has taken place at Lupe's recently-acquired studio. Her canvasses hang on the walls. She is wearing black pants, a black sweater, and a wide black belt with a bronze elephant-head buckle, cinched around her waist. Her feet are in bright red boots and a red ribbon is wrapped around her thick, black hair. She is striking. She exudes an intensity, a vitality and a smoldering sensuality that is the trademark of her art.

Eyes piercing, nostrils flaring, lips widening into a brilliant smile... Lupe Rodriguez is ready to charge!

WAITING

Despite progress and new ways of thinking about many things women still must spend too much time waiting.

They wait
for husbands
for children
for quitting time
for workmen
for messengers
for death
and for
the potatoes to boil.

They wait in
maternity clothes
sit in
waiting rooms
get on
waiting lists.

In the waiting room
it is difficult to
occupy the children
they read Donald Duck
and shuffle
their feet.
Behind the door is
the unpredictable
the unruly
the unbounded
the unforeseen.

The man in
the white
gown
who only does
it once
in a while
maybe something
about odd and
even days of the month
you must not
say it outright.

He turns many
away
it costs three
hundred kroner
if he is willing.

You are nauseous
and eat
licorice while
you wait.

Life is
narrowest in the middle
at about
fifty
it expands again
the grand-
mothers say.

By Tove Ditlevsen
Translated from the Danish by
Cynthia Norris Graae