

At 81, ceramic artist Dora De



SHOW CAPTION

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By **EMILY YOUNG**

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For almost six decades, Los Angeles ceramic artist Dora De Larios has been creating one-of-a-kind vessels, sculptures and monumental architectural installations embellished with fanciful flora, fauna and mythological characters. Now, at 81, despite a second battle with cancer and nine rounds of chemotherapy last year, De Larios is busier than ever — completing new commissions and collaborating on an elegantly understated line of artisanal tableware.

"I loved clay from the first time I touched it. I still love it," she recalls of her Dorsey High School days. "There's still so much to learn. It keeps me charged up. When I was sick, I'd come to the studio, sometimes for only two or three hours. It saved my life by taking me outside of myself."

In 1957, after studying with renowned potters Vivika and Otto Heino, she graduated from USC with a major in ceramics and a minor in sculpture and joined a seminal movement in Los Angeles that had begun exploring clay as fine art rather than mere functional object. Along the way, the indefatigable Latina known for speaking her mind and dropping the occasional f-bomb won scores of loyal fans.

"Dora wasn't like [midcentury ceramist] Peter Voulkos, who was working in the prevailing abstract style of the broader art world. She was influenced by her Mexican background and her travels. Her work is very personal," says art historian Elaine Levin, who curated a De Larios retrospective at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in 2009. "She quietly followed her own style and still does."

FOR THE RECORD

A previous version of this post said that among Dora De Larios' acquaintances was Alvin Ailey. She met Judith Jamison, a dancer and choreographer for Alvin Ailey's dance company.

Tops on the artist's current to-do list is a multifaceted commission for the five-star Four Seasons Lanai at Manele Bay in Hawaii. Recommended by art consultant Evalyn Daniel-Putnam of Daniel Fine Art Services in Laguna Beach, De Larios was hired by TAL Studio of Las Vegas to come up with four 3-by-15-foot ceramic triptychs for the design firm's renovation of the hotel.

Last summer, between chemotherapy treatments and with help from five part-time assistants, De Larios spent long hours in her Venice Boulevard studio — without air conditioning — painstakingly cutting, shaping and piecing together the massive ceramic bas-relief panels. "I wasn't thinking about cancer. I was thinking only about the work," she says. (She is now in remission.)

Each 750-pound triptych depicts vivid scenes of the ocean, hula dancers, fishermen or rowers and was later cast in FiberStone, a lightweight material by Stone Yard in San Diego. Series of the resulting 120-pound panels will line the hotel corridors. Still to come are two large figural sculptures for the hotel courtyard.

De Larios has also found time for Irving Place Studio, a collection of hand-thrown and slab-built dinnerware she launched with daughter Sabrina Judge and son-in-law Aaron Glascock in 2012. "The goal was to have a new generation be aware of my mom's work," Judge says. "But where my mom's work is highly decorative, these dishes are very quiet. The only design element is the shape and the simple way we're glazing them."

Named after De Larios' previous studio on Irving Place in Culver City, the line started with bowls and plates thrown by production potter Doug Van Sickle and has expanded to include small vases, covered jars, serving platters, mortars and pestles. While the dishes are used in a few restaurants, they are also sold at the high-end

boutiques Lost & Found, OK and Jenni Kayne. Prices run from \$35 for drinking bowls to \$550 for limited-edition pieces.

"The tableware is a new adventure. It's Sabrina and Aaron's aesthetic with my technical input and support," says De Larios, who formulated the signature green and blue glazes. Perhaps inevitably, De Larios' penchant for ornamentation has inspired Irving Place Studio's first-ever pieces with decorative and hand-carved vases and three hand-stamped trays, all due out this spring.

Meanwhile, De Larios' work continues to attract new admirers. Ron Gralnik and his fiancée, Lizabeth Clancy, bought a house in Redondo Beach that, to them, included four ceramic pieces of noteworthy provenance dating to the 1960s and '70s: a tree of life sculpture built into the entrance façade and, in the living room, enchanting sculptures of a boar, a samurai and a reclining woman.

"The place was in horrible condition, but when I saw this beautiful tree of life at the front door, I said, 'I already love this house,'" Clancy says. With a little help from the couple, the couple traced the artwork back to De Larios and commissioned her to design an ocean-themed ceramic mural for their kitchen.

Being discovered by another audience seems only to energize De Larios more. "I love that people still want my work for their homes or public spaces. It's never boring in my studio. I don't ever intend to quit until I keel over."

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De Larios has led a charmed life, one filled with famous people and only-in-L.A. experiences. De Larios, born to Mexican immigrants in 1933, decided to become an artist at age 6, when her family visited a Mexico City museum and she gazed on a spectacular Aztec stone calendar.

After studying art in college, De Larios married architect Bernard Judge (they divorced in 1989) and later shared a studio with several artists, including actor Gilbert Roland's wife, Guillermina "Gia" Roland. "Through Gia, I met Nina Simone, Carmen McRae, Odetta" and Judith Jamison of Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, says De Larios. "I had no idea how important they were, so I was not overwhelmed by their fame."

In 1959, De Larios was commissioned to make a ceramic piece for a Case Study House. The piece was too large to fit in her kiln, so pioneering ceramist Peter Voulkos fired it for her at his Glendale studio.

Her big break came the same year when her stylized pots and sculptures sold out in a show at Gump's in San Francisco. "Then I started sending them stuff on consignment," she says. "The receipts showed pieces had been shipped to Finland, Sweden and Japan."

When she was 30, De Larios and Judge returned from a 13-month trip around the world, looking for a place to live. They wound up at the Schindler House, with architect Rudolph Schindler's widow, Pauline, as their landlord. "Even then, people came from all over to see the house," De Larios says. "I'd wake up, and people were pressing their noses against our windows. One day an architect from England walked in while I was sitting on the toilet!"

At the suggestion of Susan Peterson, one of De Larios' former teachers, ceramics manufacturer Interpace hired her to design architectural tile. She supervised tile colors, textures and glazes for landmark murals such as the 90-foot-tall installation at Disney World Contemporary Resort.

In the early 1970s, Marlon Brando called on Judge to build a runway on the actor's private island, so De Larios and daughter Sabrina, who was conceived at the Schindler House, headed to Tahiti. "Brando met us when we arrived and asked if he could get us anything to eat or drink," De Larios says. "I was holding a copy of Time magazine with him on the cover. It was surreal."

During Jimmy Carter's presidency, she was one of 14 American potters selected to design dinnerware for the White House. She also made a mural that L.A. presented as a gift to its sister city, Nagoya, Japan.

In 2011, De Larios' work was part of "Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation" at the Autry National Center, "Common Ground" at the American Museum of Ceramic Art and two of the Getty's "Pacific Standard Time" exhibitions on L.A. art from 1945 to 1980.

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Where to see some Dora De Larios sculptures and murals

Though much of Dora De Larios' artwork is in private hands, some of it can be viewed at these public spaces throughout Southern California:

Montage Laguna Beach, 30801 South Coast Highway, Laguna Beach: "Life Force," a 6-by-30-foot exterior mural (glazed porcelain), 2003

Westin Bonaventure Hotel, 404 S. Figueroa St., Los Angeles: "Koi Goddesses," three 6-by-4-foot lobby sculptures (glazed and unglazed porcelain, unglazed stoneware, concrete, copper, gold leaf), 1997

Carlson Park, 4233 Motor Ave., Culver City: "Tree of Life," an 11-foot-tall three-sided sculpture (brass, cement), 1997

Villa-Park Community Center, 363 E. Villa St., Pasadena: "Homage to Quetzalcoatl," a 36-by-20-foot exterior mural (brass, cement), 1992

Bamboo Plaza, 988 N. Hill St., Los Angeles: "The Elements," a 10-by 20-foot gateway mural (brass), 1989

Hilton Anaheim, 777 W. Convention Way, Anaheim: "The World According to Dora," a 7-by-40-foot lobby mural (porcelain, gold leaf, wood), 1984

Compton Library, 240 W. Compton Blvd., Compton: an untitled 8-by-40-foot exterior mural (glazed stoneware), 1973

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