

LINDA VALLEJO

ARTIST STATEMENT

“A Forty Year Art Career”

My work consolidates multiple influences gained from a lifetime of study and travel throughout Europe, the United States and Mexico to create images that investigate contemporary Latin American cultural, social, and political issues. During my artistic grounding, I immersed myself in the Chicano art and indigenous communities—experiences that added to my multifaceted perspective and, by extension, my art practice. It has taken a forty-year artistic career to fuse this diverse arena of influences to create images that discuss and define the Latin American presence and influence in the United States.

I was born and lived the first three years of my life in Boyle Heights, one of the oldest neighborhoods of Los Angeles. My great grandparents settled here after they migrated from Mexico and Texas to work in the fields of California in the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1951, my father graduated from UCLA and entered the US Air Force as a commissioned officer when we moved to Germany. Over the next ten years I lived in Arizona, Missouri, Texas, and Sacramento, California. In the mid-1960s I found myself in Montgomery, Alabama, where my high school was integrated for the first time in its history. The tension was palpable, and violence seemed imminent. The knowledge of myself as a person of color, standing outside the lines of fire, scorched me indelibly. I have memories of “white” and “colored” bathroom stalls and fountains, of the tragic marches from Selma, of burning crosses and lynching, and of the hopeful speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King. I began to realize that the world did not see me as I saw myself, that color was a defining point in how the world judges us and fixes our place in it. I believe that these experiences during the fight for integration and equality are the bedrock of my newest series, *Make 'Em All Mexican* (2011-2016).

In 1967 my family moved to Madrid, where I graduated from high school and traveled, studying art and architecture. I was deeply influenced by European classical history and culture. I wrote lyrics and music, designed clothing, performed and painted. I visited El Museo Nacional del Prado studying El Greco's elongated and floating images, Goya's gruesome portrayals of humanity's pain and suffering, and an astounding collection of Bosch, with his imagination-filled landscapes of heaven and hell. I also visited ancient Roman sites learning about the gods and their mythologies. After completing lithography studies at the University of Madrid, I returned to Los Angeles in 1975 to complete my MFA in printmaking at California State University, Long Beach. It was then that I was hired by Sister Karen Bocalero, founder of Self Help Graphics, to be a silkscreen teacher for the SHG Barrio Mobile Art Studio receiving an individual artist-in-residence grant from the California Arts Council from 1975-1978. I studied Mesoamerican and Chicano culture and began an involvement in the burgeoning Chicano arts

community and Chicano Indígena and Native American ceremonial community that would last for decades.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s I studied Maya and Azteca dance with the Flores de Aztlan Danza Troupe. Las Flores performed throughout California at cultural centers, universities, and in traditional Native American and Chicano ceremonies including *Fiesta de Maiz* and *Día de Los Muertos* (Los Angeles and Sacramento, CA), and *Chicano Park Day* (San Diego, CA). Over the next thirty years I served as a community volunteer for the Native American Religious Society at the California Rehabilitation Center, Norco, and supported traditional indigenous ceremony in California, Arizona, and South Dakota. These experiences in Indígena led me to create a portfolio of earth-based sculpture called *Tree People* (1980-1990), focusing on a “metamorphic” relationship with nature. These sculptures were made of found tree fragment scavenged from the Los Angeles urban center, handmade paper, and mixed media.

While completing my MFA and during my teaching tenure at Self Help Graphics I developed working relationships with several community-based arts and culture organization and was included in exhibitions throughout Southern California and the Southwest including the Social and Public Arts Resource Center (SPARC), Venice, CA; Galería de la Raza/Studio 24, San Francisco, CA; The Woman’s Building, Los Angeles, CA; Galería Posada, Sacramento, CA; and The Mexican Museum, San Francisco, CA. I was also awarded the California Community Foundation Brody Emerging Artist Fellowship and the Brody Arts Fund Fellow, in recognition of artistic merit and community involvement.

From 1990-1997 I owned and operated Galería Las Americas, representing over thirty Chicano and Latin American artists. The gallery presented over fifty exhibitions and was reviewed in *ArtNews*, *Los Angeles Times*, *LA Opinion Magazine*, *MAS Magazine*, *LA Weekly*, *Art Business News*, among others. This experience taught me a great deal about the inner workings of the art market. During this time I produced a large group of works on paper and canvas entitled *Woman of Love and Integrity*. Fueled by my involvement in the Chicano Indigenous community and my new position as mother, these images combined indigenous symbols with feminine identity as a symbol of the earth, its nurturing and protective nature, and its strength and longevity. In addition, I created a large series of Gouache on paper works entitled *The Death of Urban Humanity* (1993). The gallery was located in a rooftop space in downtown Los Angeles and after years of working with a view of the urban landscape, these were images that invaded my tranquil earth-based works with images of the devastation of the urban center and the destruction of nature. These works influenced my move into installation and use of repurposed materials in the years to come.

Images from *Woman of Love and Integrity* accompanied by personal interviews were featured in feminist publications focusing on women artists including *Gathering Medicine*, published by Art in General, New York (1993), *Book of Women*, published by International Women’s Project

(1999), and *Strong Hearts, Inspired Minds: 21 Artists Who are Mothers Tell Their Stories*, published by Rowanberry Books, Portland, Oregon. I was also received the City of Los Angeles *Latinas Making History Award* (1991) and UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center *Artist Award* (1999).

I was also included in the national publication, *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art: 2002*, published by Bi-Lingual Press, Arizona State University, which stated, "Vallejo's significant impact originates in her distinctive ability to reconcile diverse influences of indigenous pre-Hispanic culture with a well-grounded art historical exposure. For a population of Chicanos increasingly situated in the cityscapes of America, Vallejo's work is an expansive statement on the real threats challenging her community."

During 1996 - 2000 I created *Los Cielos*, a series of over 100 paintings with giant, luminous skies, and broad landscapes to express humanity's intrinsic connection to nature. These works were influenced by my travels to see Turner's monumental and emotional skies; Mark Rothko's horizon lines and soft edges; O'Keefe's sensual landscapes; as well as my continued studies in indigenous philosophy and symbolism. In 2000 a solo exhibition of *Los Cielos* was presented at The Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC). Leah Ollman in *The Los Angeles Times* stated in *Celebrating Life Forces*, "Vallejo's paintings are generated by her deeply felt connection to exactly those fundamental life forces – birth, nature, spirit." *Los Cielos* was accompanied by a publication with essays by Sybil Venegas, professor, East Los Angeles College; Armando Durón, collector of Chicano art; and Reina Prado, educator and curator. The *Los Cielos* series was also presented at the University of Judaism Marjorie Herman Platt Gallery, and *Nuestra Gente Magazine* and *Latin Style Magazine* featured major articles.

In 2001 my personal historical papers, as well as those of Galería Las Americas, were accepted by the University of California, Santa Barbara, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives (CEMA). In 2002 my work was included in *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art: 2002*, published by Bi-Lingual Press, Hispanic Research Center, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, and in *A to Z of American Women in the Visual Arts*, published by Facts on File, Cynthia A. Johnson, Barnard Coll. Lib., New York.

In 2003, my first political/ecological installation was presented at Tropico Nopal Artspace focusing on the reconciliation of opposites: the beauty and tranquility of nature with urban violence and carnage. *HOPE, In the Midst of War, Death and Destruction* combined works on paper reminiscent of Goya's *Desastres* with by a central mixed media photographic montage of tragic images of war dead surrounded by the four elements of nature, earth water, fire and air as symbols of "hope."

This was followed in 2004 with an installation which combined my early *Tree People* sculpture with the *Los Cielos* paintings to create *A Prayer for the Earth Eco Installation* at The Carnegie

Art Museum in Oxnard, California. This installation was anchored by a central “altar” of manipulated photographs with images of pollution, indigenous peoples in ceremony; and an assemblage with objects symbolizing Earth, Water, Fire and Air with the goal of asking questions about our collective environmental responsibility. *A Prayer* was influenced by my travels in seeing the works of Ana Mendieta and her use of nature and natural materials combined with photography; Lee Bontecou’s nature-inspired, mixed media “crystalline” sculptural forms; the sensual power of Georgia O’Keeffe’s landscapes; and my continued study of indigenous philosophy and symbolism. Solo exhibitions of *A Prayer for the Earth Eco Installation* were presented in several regional cultural spaces, galleries, and museums.

Since the early days when I worked with Self Help Graphics I served as a gallery director and grantwriter. I have owned *A to Z Grantwriting* consulting business since 1985 and served as grantwriting consultant for many Southern California cultural and arts organizations. From 2001 – 2003 I traveled to teach the *A to Z Grantwriting Workshop* in China, New York, and several major US cities. During these trips I visited museums and galleries to get a sense of what is happening in the national and international art scene. I was deeply inspired by sculpture made of pre-produced and found objects, and images that juxtaposed seemingly contrary cultural symbols and icons. After seeing hundreds of works my creative process began to shift. I found myself ruminating, “What would repurposed images look like if I created them from my own personal Chicano Indigena cultural lens?”

I spent the next several years searching for this image while creating multi-media works using repurposed materials including *Postmodern Trash*, sculpture using recyclable materials focusing on the impact of technology and pollution on nature; and *Censored*, mixed media ‘front-page’ newspaper collages focused on contemporary cultural, social, and political issues.

From 2004 -2009 these works were included in exhibitions in several Chicano cultural centers, recognized galleries, and museums including the National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago, Ill; Arizona State University Museum of Anthropology, Tempe, AZ; Zimmer Children’s Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Los Angeles Natural History Museum and Craft and Folk Art Museum; and Frazier Museum, Louisville, Kentucky. I also continued my relationship with Self Help Graphics by completing two limited edition silkscreen prints with the SHG Atelier Print Program. In 2005 I was awarded the Durfee Foundation Individual Artist Grant, Los Angeles, CA.

Simultaneously I painted acrylic and oil on canvas works called *The Electrics* (2008-2010). *The Electrics* were a fusion of my experiences in the golden days of Hippie-Dome and Psychedelia, the magical, hallucinatory quality of indigenous Native American and Mexican ceremonial tradition, and decades spent at the computer manipulating digital imagery. Peter Frank, art critic for *LA Weekly*, *Village Voice*, and *SoHo Weekly News* stated, “*The Electrics* contours become febrile, colors breathe and roil, the palette is at once hot and icy, and the

subject matter seems infused with a deist charge, a sense that everything is infused with an ineffable force.”

In 2010 *Fierce Beauty: The Artwork of Linda Vallejo*, a forty-year retrospective curated by Dr. Betty Ann Brown, art historian and professor Cal State University, Northridge, was presented at Plaza de la Raza Boathouse Gallery, Los Angeles, CA. The exhibition included over 125 works (1969-2010), lectures and panels, and a full color publication with essays by Dr. Betty Ann Brown, Dr. Karen Mary Davalos, Loyola Marymount University Chicano/a Studies Department Chair; Ann Landi, contributing editor of *ARTnews* and *The Wall Street Journal*; Patricia Correia, owner of Correia Projects; Peter Frank, art critic, *Huffington Post*; William Moreno, art critic and curator; and Armando Durón, Los Angeles-based Chicano art collector.

During the same year I was also included in *L.A. Rising: SoCal Artists Before 1980*, published by The California-International Arts Foundation’s New Encyclopedia written and edited by Lyn Kienholz and overseen by Joan Weinstein, Associate Director, Getty Foundation, and in 2011 I was included in two exhibitions associated with Getty Foundation’s Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA 1945–1980 initiative: *Mapping Another LA: The Chicano Art Movement*, UCLA Fowler Museum; and *Doin’ It in Public: Art and Feminism at the Woman’s Building*, Otis College of Art and Design Ben Maltz Gallery. In 2014 I received the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs COLA Individual Artist Fellowship.

Finally in 2011, all of these experiences and influences converged to create images that discuss and define the Latin American presence and influence in the United States. I began a series entitled *Make ‘Em All Mexican (MEAM)* which confronts the viewer with one of the most important questions of our time, “How does race, color, and class define our status in the world?” In this series I repurpose pricey antiques and literally paint them brown. MEAM images include a “brown” Marilyn Monroe (Marielena) Elvis Presley (El Vis), Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble, Super Man (Super Hombre), the Queen Mother, politicians, the Greek gods, and an array of movie stars surrounding the 2016 Oscar Awards ceremony featured in the LA Times Calendar section (2/16). For some viewers, the images are hyper-political; for others, they are emotional portals to a past remembered and sometimes forgotten; and for still another group, they are just hilarious. Conversations have found their way into gay rights and the struggles of feminism, where anyone who has ever felt like an outsider can openly express the need to be considered a member of the whole and to be heard and respected for his/her feelings, knowledge, and accomplishments.

In 2015-2016 I continued “keepin’ it brown” with a series entitled *The Brown Dot Project (TBDP)* where I translate national Latino population and workforce data into geometric forms and pop images on architectural vellum and pigment-printed grid paper using brown dots. Images recall Native American and Mesoamerican blankets and weavings, as well as grid-oriented modernists Mondrian, Chuck Close, Agnes Martin, and Charles Gaines.

I describe *The Brown Dot Project* as an elegant solution to a series of complex questions about simple facts, that is, data about Latino life in the United States. I am literally counting one Latino at a time, brown dot by brown dot! The process is exhaustive, and often exhausting, taking several hours to design and complete. I find myself studying a variety of sets of data, including topics such as the number of Latinos in any given city or state, the national number of Latino executives, the number of Latinos involved in the American Civil war. The amount and kinds of data are inexhaustible. I am literally counting one Latino at a time, brown dot by brown dot.

Between 2015-2016 over thirty national exhibitions, publications and special projects featuring "Make 'Em All Mexican" and "The Brown Dot Project" were presented in Chicano cultural centers, galleries, and museums including solo exhibitions at Texas A&M University (2016), UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, Los Angeles CA, Lancaster Museum of Art and History in Lancaster, CA (2015), Soto Clemente Velez Cultural Center, NY (2014), Gallery of New Mexico State University (2013), and Arte Americas in collaboration with the Fresno Art Museum and California State University, San Bernardino, Fullerton Museum (2012). In 2016 *Make 'Em All Mexican* was also featured on the cover of the LA Times Calendar Section in the article "In her series 'Make 'Em All Mexican,' artist Linda Vallejo imagines #OscarsSoBrown" by Carolina A. Miranda.