

Linda Vallejo: Charge of the Soul

*I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.*
--Walt Whitman

Conceptual painter, printmaker, installation and digital artist Linda Vallejo's overarching interest throughout the diverse stylistic and material phases of her career has been and remains the complex social dynamic surrounding individual and group identity. Her work has traced the progress of a narrative launched as an examination of her own heritage and the multivalent legacies of its influence on the sensibilities of her artistic and social consciousness.

The images in her 2008-10 *Electrics* series explore alternative states of perception and reality through the twin lenses of Mexican and Native American folk medicine and modern psychedelia. Blurring lines between digital art forms and conventional experiences of painting and sculpture, these vibrating, exuberant works also subvert the landscape/portrait depictive paradigm through the aspects of abstraction that enliven them. Besides her formal inquiries, in these works Vallejo is seen deconstructing the qualities of her ethnic and cultural background with a view toward articulating its presence in her studio work. In her breakthrough *Make 'Em All Mexican (MEAM)* series, she turned that perspective outward, and began putting these same questions to society more broadly.

MEAM has been Vallejo's primary focus in the years 2010-2016, during which time her deceptively simple idea manifested in sculptures, prints, books, paintings, modified Americana, Asian, and Latino collectibles, antiques and vernacular artifacts, and the Academy Awards. Through the candid, analog application of plain brown paint to genteel kitsch-steeped found objects, pop culture icons, and paradigms of art history, Vallejo achieves an exponentially complex feat. As the title suggests, "all she does" is to make people's skin a bit darker brown. Not much is really transformed about the original image per se -- other than absolutely everything -- and that's the point. Visually, it's quite subtle. Conceptually, it's a game-changing deconstruction of prevailing stereotypes of beauty, grace, power, and other systemic race-based cultural assumptions. It makes its point and once absorbed is impossible to forget.

Her subsequent *Brown Dot Project* is a direct outgrowth of *MEAM*, an ongoing painting-based series in which painstakingly collected demographic data is re-visualized in various threads referencing modes in art history from Channa Horwitz to Man Ray, early computer and clip art, and graphic design. Her meticulous abstract mandalas, pointillist graphings, helixes and mazes have increasingly begun coagulating into recognizable images emblematic of the data driving the piece -- such as the vehicles, industrial tools, and pop culture references he draw on. More recently still, the data comes to inflect details in luminous portraits, reminiscent in their eccentric solarized glow of her *Electrics*, but more classical and pensive in style.

And about the data upon which the Brown Dots are structured, presenting all manner of statistics regarding the Latino population and its participations in industrial, economic, cinematic, political, cultural, and military spheres of society. The results are by turns discouraging, infuriating, frustrating, and unexpected -- and every answer leads to only more questions. As with the endless hours spent dragging the river of thrift and antique and flea and estate sales for *MEAM*, Vallejo's research became its own nested obsession, its own subset of expertise, and she became an unintentionally expert-level statistician. "It's just math, I know," she says, "but it's never just math." It's also about the people behind the numbers. Bringing that to the fore is what the re-emergence of imagery in the work is about -- first symbols, then portraits.

From the *Electrics* through *MEAM* and *Brown Dots* and now in a revisitation of the instincts of the *Electrics*, Vallejo does not aestheticize or use humor in order to ameliorate difficult information, but rather to provide another way into thorny subjects. Because data can be beautiful even when it's telling you something is missing.

--Shana Nys Dambrot, Los Angeles 2016

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