

Linda Vallejo “Fierce Beauty” A Forty Year Retrospective

catalog essay by

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WALKING THE ROAD: THE ART & ARTISTRY OF LINDA VALLEJO

For over 25 years, multimedia artist and painter Linda Vallejo has walked the paths of earth consciousness, ceremony, and spirituality. In doing so, she has been one of the few Chicana artists who have laid the foundations that inspire an entire community of emerging Chicana artists to work in similar traditions. The *Xicana* Feminist artist collective *En Lak Ech*, and the prolific network of *Xicana* and women artists of color, *Mujeres de Maiz* regard Linda in high esteem founded in 1997, regards Vallejo in high esteem. She represents an *elder*, a trail blazer and mother mentor who came before them, one who has walked the *Red Road* as a method of community activism, environmental politics, eco-feminism, and ceremonialism. As changing demographics in the United States and increasingly critical global dynamics have become center focus for emerging American artists in the millennium, Vallejo’s work now appears more relevant than ever. Perhaps her work was before its time.

The Western canon of art history may not consider a female artist of color at mid-career as an *elder*. Nevertheless, it is from such alternative paradigm that this essay attempts to contextualize her contributions to the Chicana/o art tradition. Moreover, while Vallejo’s artistry and vision can be interpreted through a diversity of critical approaches, it is to her gifts to the community of *Xicana Feminista artistas* that I dedicate this commentary.

Much of the early iconographic language in Chicana/o art was driven by political struggle, self-representation, and a reinterpreted cultural identity via vernacular sources

inherent in Chicano/Latino communities and homes. This seminal and groundbreaking visual language later became somewhat formulaic. As a result, many mainstream interpreters defined artists by this categorization. However, not all Chicana/o artists worked within this formula. Often, because their work did not neatly fit the category, such artists were excluded from exhibitions and the discourse that accompanied the exhibits. As a result, a number of Chicana/o artists fell off the radar and were relegated to the borderlands of the field. Throughout her career, Vallejo has felt a part of this borderland space--in spite of the fact that she has been recognized locally, nationally, and internationally.

Linda Vallejo emerged as a painter in the late 1970s and has been included in a number of Chicana/o themed exhibitions, including *Lo del Corazon: Heartbeat of a Culture* (1987), *Hispanic Art on Paper* (1989), *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* (1990), and *East of the River: Chicano Art Collectors Anonymous* (2000). In her artist statement for *Chicana Voices and Visions*--an early Chicana art exhibition curated by Shifra Goldman in 1983--Vallejo refers to her artworks *Beneath the Skin* and *Crossroads* as symbolic representations of self knowledge and her "entry into the Chicano community." Like many first generation Chicana/o artists, Vallejo is a third generation Mexican American, whose parents, Adam and Helen Vallejo, were born in the United States to parents who immigrated to this country from Mexico. In Vallejo's case, her maternal grandparents were from Guadalajara, Jalisco, and Texas, and her paternal grandparents were from Coahuila in Northern Mexico and Texas. However, by the time the artist was born, much of her family had settled in Los Angeles.

Vallejo was born in Boyle Heights, east of downtown Los Angeles. As a result of her father's career in the U. S Air Force, she spent her childhood and teenage years traveling throughout Europe and the southern United States. These were not typical experiences for Chicano youths growing up in the post WWII era. Nonetheless, they are

in many ways connected to Vallejo's artistic path. The young artist was truly a child of the 1960s: the Civil Rights Movement, the rise of feminism as a political trajectory, the struggle against the Vietnam war, the Hippie counterculture, and the environmental movement all informed her sensibilities as a young woman and, later, as a female artist of color.

In 1973, Vallejo returned to the Los Angeles area to go to college and complete her fine arts education at Whittier College. She went on to receive an MFA degree at California State University at Long Beach State in 1978. Vallejo's 1977 decision to work as an art instructor for the East Los Angeles cultural art center, Self Help Graphics led to a turning point in her career. At this time, Self Help Graphics was expanding their annual *Dia de los Muertos* festival into a large-scale community event, with art workshops for children, a walking procession down Avenida Cesar Chavez (then known as Brooklyn Avenue) to Evergreen Cemetery, where the community held both Indigenous and Catholic ceremonies. This was also the time during which the practices of community activism and a native-based visual iconography that some have termed *Neo Indigenismo*, became significant currents in Chicano/a political activism and art. Influenced by Lakota and Tongva ceremonial traditions as well as a Mesoamerican cosmological paradigm, today this type of political/spiritual activism in the Chicana/o community is more commonly known as the *Red Road*.

I believe Vallejo's life experiences and spiritual sensibilities coalesced at this important juncture when not only her art, but also her spiritual life became immersed in the *Red Road*, Sweat Lodge circles, indigenous *danza* and both ancient and contemporary indigenous philosophy, spiritual practice and community. While a number of Chicana/o artists also became immersed in these practices, most did not. (More often, the core activists of Chicano indigenous communities were not artists.)

The remarkable trajectory of Vallejo's production over the past twenty years begins with the *Tree People* sculptures; continues to the painting suite, *Los Cielos*; to the environmental installation, *Prayer for the Earth*; and finally to her current series of Native and Mexican-based psychedelic paintings, *The Electrics*. It can be said that Vallejo has decidedly walked her own path, deepening her practice in Native American/Mexican ceremony, and producing art grounded in both her ceremonial practice and her commitment to global relationships, the environment, and the natural world.

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