

Linda Vallejo “Fierce Beauty” A Forty Year Retrospective

catalog interview by

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Risk and Reward: An Interview with Linda Vallejo

Driving up the narrow road that leads to Linda Vallejo’s home can be an unnerving experience for a first timer. The imposing residence, which crawls up the side of a treacherous Topanga Canyon hillside, springs into view on rounding the final curve. It’s a sublime part of the canyon; you’d be hard-pressed to imagine such tranquility can exist in Los Angeles County. But it does and Vallejo revels in it, considering the house a metaphor for a life well lived with her husband Ron Dillaway and their two strapping sons, Robert and Paul. Once inside, the home sheds its somewhat imposing manner and exudes eclectic warmth. Hanging on the walls is a collection of local and international artists, framed by spectacular canyon views.

Vallejo has constructed her idyllic existence in spite of often challenging times. It didn’t come easily. She has been able to balance the demands of raising a family, producing art, and running a business because of her uncommon vision, tenacity and passion.

Strong and dogged, Vallejo has resonance with American feminist artist Nancy Spero (1926-2009). Returning to the United States in the 1960s after living in Europe with her husband, painter Leon Golub (1922-2004), Spero created work in opposition to existing conventions of art-making. Because she was openly critical of Viet Nam war-mongering and social injustice, Spero received little critical attention until late in her career.

Like Spero, Vallejo’s work has defied the conventional aesthetic paths of her peers. Fiercely independent, she consciously avoided creating work derivative of the

moment. Instead, she dealt with her own dreams and fears. In doing so, she produced work that resisted easy categorization and sometimes proved daunting to critics and the general public alike.

“I would have done things differently,” the artist muses, “if I’d known what I know now about the art world. I think that early on I got put in a box. I’m now really conscious of universal ideas and themes.”

Vallejo’s work engages myriad mediums and her imagery often reflects contemporary global issues. Disciplined and prolific, she relishes taking creative risks--some popular, others not. Ultimately, eschewing fashion steeled her determination to create on her own terms. It also made for a journey filled with detours and adventure.

But then, that’s an independent artist’s lot.

The Interview

William Moreno: One of things that struck me about your life is its multidimensionality: artist, business owner, mother, wife, you ran a commercial gallery for a time, built you own home. You’ve been busy.

Linda Vallejo: Both sides of my family were from Texas and came to California looking for work. They ended up working in the fields. My mother picked peaches. My great grandmother lived in a tent, cooking and washing clothes. My story is not different from many other California families’ stories. Except that my great grandmother believed strongly in education and my father became an incredibly educated Chicano. He was an overachiever.

Does your father identify as Chicano?

He tired to at one point, but it was too *politica* (political) for him. He was, at various times, a diplomat, an Air Force Colonel, and an attorney. He is an overachiever of the first order.

When did you first start thinking about being an artist? I also understand you wanted to be a singer.

Well, when I was in kindergarten the teacher gave us finger paints. It was Easter and we had these big sheets of paper like eggs and I just went "Wow!" And Mrs. Johnson, my first grade teacher in East LA, would read us stories and have us draw illustrations for them. This was in the mid-1950s. Ever since then, reading and "the word" have been inspiring to me. I also sang into the choir and wrote music when we lived in Sacramento. I performed up until the age of 21.

You're a true Renaissance woman! When did you actually decide that art was going to be a serious avocation?

I was seven when I decided to be an artist and also have a spiritual core in my life for balance. I wanted to be married, have children, and travel. I'm a long-term planner.

That's pretty young to make those goals. You also have a business side to your life.

There is a back-story to that. When I was in graduate school, I would paint during the school year and spend the rest of the time working on the press and public relations. So I developed a right-brain/left-brain attitude. In 1975, I went to work at Self-Help Graphics on a silk-screening teaching grant. At the end of the grant period, they asked me to stay-but I had to renew the grant by myself. I discovered that I had learned to write in graduate school, so I did that for three years. Then I started writing other grants for Self-Help Graphics.

How do you manage the business and art sides? That's often a tricky and difficult balance for artists.

I have an active mind, so sitting in the studio all day thinking of my paintings can get a bit boring. So I thought, "I won't make any money here. Where can I make money? Where can I have a life? I can't paint for twelve hours a day, maybe four to six." So I started a business.

And it was a successful one, a business that helped you build a home here. Aside from the grant business, you were a pioneer as the owner of a commercial art gallery in downtown Los Angeles.

I don't think I've been more depressed than when I owned the gallery. And I don't think I've ever been more broke in my life. It was nearly eight years of pure torture.

Being an entrepreneur can be tough. When was this?

That was from about 1989 to 1996.

Where were you exactly?

I was on Fourth Street in downtown LA. I had a 2,000 square foot studio. The gallery was originally called Galeria Nueva. I started it with a partner. We were in business for about a year and a half. After that time, I told him I wanted to start my own gallery, which I called Galeria de las Americas. Later, I moved it to Santa Monica.

How was the gallery business?

Basically you are choosing artists, pricing art, then selling it. I think I was one of the first Chicana artists in the country who had a gallery. One of the jobs I took on was to find and encourage Chicano collectors and interest them in collecting Chicano art. I'm proud to say that some of those individuals are still collecting art today. It's a lot of work to own a gallery. It's not difficult work, but lots of details to take care of and public relations.

Did you feel it was a successful venture?

Well, the gallery was covered by several major publications, in both reviews and general coverage. We were included in *ArtNews* in the US, Japan and Europe. I carried thirty artists and gave myself a show every year and a half. That was part of my desire to do the gallery. At that time, the Chicano community was rife with group shows where you could show one or two pieces. I was producing twenty-five to thirty-five pieces a year and needed one woman exhibitions. But all of the sales from *my* shows went back into

the gallery. My family didn't get any of it. There were months when I didn't have grocery money. My husband Ron sacrificed a lot.

But he must have been very supportive of your endeavors.

We've been married 32 years. He's supportive of *me* as a person and partner, not necessarily of my "endeavors." It was difficult for him to be supportive of what I was trying to accomplish and do for *other* artists, especially when the artists themselves didn't really understand the sacrifices I had to make. I have a lot of respect for dealers and gallerists because I know what they do. I know what they go without for the love of art.

What about the artists?

Most artists are not capable of reaching into the business world. Their world is about their art and ideas.

So you had thirty artists in your gallery. Were they all Chicano and Latino?

I had Cubans, Central Americans, South Americans, Chicanos, everybody. That's why I called it Galeria Las Americas. I got a lot of flak for that. People wanted me to open a Chicano gallery. But there was just so much good Latin American work in LA. And I got great converge for it.

Did the public support your work?

Well, I had about forty-five active collectors. Moving some of those people from buying posters to investing in original works of art was an accomplishment. I wrote a lot of articles about the art to help educate people. Yet, I don't really feel I got the kind of support I would have liked.

The art business is very challenging. How did you feel being associated with the Chicano art movement at the time?

I learned a lot about myself and my Mexican heritage, being a woman of color in the United States. After living in Europe and really loving antiquities and architecture, and then discovering the pyramids in México--it was really an expansion of who I was and am today. It was a great to explore the glory of México and its history. As a woman whose grandparents were Mexican and parents were Mexican-American--or Latino in today's categorizations--it was an important time.

And yet you look at all of this with an American perspective.

You can go almost anywhere in the world and people will peg you as an American.

There's good and bad in that. I once had Parisian ask me why Americans dress like they are going camping.

Funny. But freedom here is almost unmatched. I love being an American. In spite of all the challenges of being a woman of color, I still feel I can do what I wish.

Getting back to the Chicano movement and its influence on you...

Well, it led to the introduction to Self-Help Graphics, which is an important center for the Chicano community. Many talented artists have made extraordinary works at Self-Help. But as someone who grew up all over the world, it can seem a bit insular. My inspiration comes from many cultures. It's less about the Chicano community and more about my own life experiences and influences. I need to be true to myself. In the 1970s, it was still a growing movement and finding its way and it moved in multiculturalism. They had to stay close to the community to keep it strong. I wanted to create something unique and that meant using multiple influences. I really enjoy younger Chicano artists' exploration of media and performance; maybe I should have been born twenty years later. I guess I like pushing the limits

At what point did you decide to close the gallery business?

Well, Ron looked at me one day and said, "How long are we going to do this?" And I realized we both had had enough. Ultimately my marriage and children came first. That is really the most important thing: relationships.

So what did you take away from that experience?

I learned how galleries sacrifice, how difficult it can be to work with artists and how difficult it is to make sales. I also learned a lot of how *not* to be in debt. At that point, I was spending \$75,000 to \$100,000 a year to keep the gallery open and I left the business after eight years in debt about \$45,000. I thought that was pretty good. I sold off my personal collection to pay that debt.

Would you consider opening a gallery again?

No. I might consider a silent partnership of some sort.

Where do you find inspiration for your work?

I enjoy looking at art, going to galleries and museums, and "psychoanalyzing" the work, figuring out where the artist's head is and how the image in front of me became the message of what is in their head. I also love antiquities and reading biographies of how artist lived. Television, movies, the media--I take it all in. It's like a beautiful soup that comes together and bubbles into an idea. And then I get the idea and wonder how that might look as an image. So the idea sits in my head--sometimes for a minute or sometimes for a year--then I go to the drawing board and make it happen.

Are there any particular artists who inspire you?

Picasso is my god.

He's certainly an icon to many. What is it about his work or life that appeals to you?

He was prolific and went through a series of phases and styles. He was immersed in the idea of being an artist and constantly in that mode. When he was at the beach, he'd

draw in the sand. When I was a little girl living in Spain, I saw him on a Spanish talk show and he made a strong impression on me. He is the artist's artist. I hope to collect some of his work.

There has been a tone of indigenous spirituality in your work. Tell me about that.

I didn't go into the spirituality to influence my work; I did it to gain an understanding of the world and my life and self-discovery on a very private and personal level. It did "trickle" into my work—but it took a long time for that to happen.

I worked in the California prisons for fifteen years and believe me, there was a lot of material there. Yet I didn't use those experiences immediately; it took quite a bit of time for that to gestate. Then one day it came pouring out. When 9/11 hit people started painting American flags and it was popular with the public. I didn't do that. It was a grave situation with feelings that could not be understood right away. It took me two years to develop my first 9/11 image.

So it takes time.

It's like making that soup I mentioned earlier. That's how the *Los Cielos* series came about: I looked up at the sky and wondered if I could paint them. And eventually, I did.

What about the installation works, Prayer for the Earth, for example, or the altars?

In the 1980s, I was producing the earth-based sculptures with handmade paper and tree fragments. I produced about one hundred of them in my Third Street Studio (in downtown Los Angeles.) I made those images with a lot of forethought. I was experimenting with a new medium and sticking them on wood, which was a bit of incongruous. I sat with them for fifteen years and couldn't show or sell them. I was about to burn them but a friend stopped me. Then, out of the blue, I was invited by the Carnegie Art Museum to do an exhibit and they gave me a room where I combined those sculptures with my paintings. That was the beginning of a *Prayer for the Earth*. It was all uncalculated and unplanned.

What was the public response?

I received good responses and realized the installation had become a populist way of sharing my spiritual investigations. It has been shown many times, so it resonates with people.

The series you call The Electrics, do have some of that spiritual sensibility?

Yes, they're also part of the "soup" metaphor I use. I was painting a series of oak trees that were very romantic in a surrealistic mode. I tried painting one by full blue-grey moonlight, but that progressed into reds and oranges and then I pixilated them. I just allowed the process to take hold and find a new voice.

How did the figure get put back into the picture?

I was part of a group show at Chimaya Gallery and they gave me a small canvas to work with. So I started to work in this new style.

Are you happy with that direction?

I love it. I'm electrifying everything and I'm excited about it – but I want to take it a step further.

What about your work and accomplishments in relationship to the world at large?

I feel pretty unique, to look the way I do in the United States today and to have accomplished what I have as an artist.

Being a Latina is cogent to my life. But sitting here I just feel like Linda the painter – almost without gender. It's about ideas.

And what messages do you want to convey with your work?

That really varies. I'm a quintessential postmodern woman: no pedigree, a woman of color, I come from poverty, all the bells and whistles. And I have access to all kinds of imagery and ideas: political, spiritual, pop and more.

Your work has gone through several transitions.

My philosophy is that if you are true to who you are, where you have been, then the work will change as your personality changes. It can't be stagnant or based on past thinking. The work will transform as the individual transforms. So my art reflects where I am at any given time. What I'm living today seems an International, eclectic experience.

You're a global woman.

Thanks. I was in Germany when I was three after all and am now coming full circle.

Who buys your work?

People who like me and my art buy my work. I'm hopeful that with this next body of work I'll be considered for some important collections.

So that brings us to this idea of success as an artist. How do you define that for yourself?

I'm already a success. It's a matter of levels maybe. But in terms of art and loving and seeing it in galleries and museums and really loving the process of making art – I'm already there. I get to live as an artist. The rest of it is the *accoutrements* of success. I have a strong foundation and feel like a successful human being.

What has been your biggest triumph?

Reinventing my work, especially the multiple media works. Also the new works that I called *The Electrics*. I created the first one in three weeks—and it was a major departure from what I had done in the past. Jose Lozano, an artist I respect, was stunned when he saw them. So that for me is the *piece de resistance*--that I can shift themes and media and produce quality work.

They are beautiful and they seem labor-intensive. I imagine they meld Chuck Close and Gustav Klimt, with a Pop reference or on acid.

Yes. With a bit of Peter Max and hippie reference. If you really study art, then it percolates and coagulates and, with confidence, it just rolls out. *The Electrics* have been coming along for a while. But they are laborious to create and very, very detailed.

They are certainly a leap from the assemblage and more sculptural work you were doing just previous to this new work.

Yes. But I'm working like mad on them.

So, cutting to the chase, are sales of your works of critical importance to you? Do you consider them a measure of success?

Certainly. The more you make from sales, the more you can invest in your career. The left hand gives to the right hand. You need to invest in your work for materials and framing and shipping. I'm not afraid of money. It's a tool. I have sold a lot of work in the past, so it's important.

So it's not the end all or be all.

No, that would be a show at the Hirshhorn Museum. Dead or alive.

Well, dead artists seem to have an easier time of it sometimes! Have there been any major disappointments along the way?

Aside from not being born male, no.

That seems a bit facetious. You've had a very successful life. So what does that mean?

Well, men seem to have an easier time of it. Not always, but it doesn't hurt. But the point is there are still barriers out there. I often made a joke that if we got a group of Latina women together, we could help rewrite art history.

Well, there is no denying the art power structure.

And women of color are still at the bottom of that structure. But people who know me and my work appreciate what I've done and created.

Have you seen any progress since the 1960s, for example?

Yes. For Latinos it's better. I think many Chicanos were very insular then; they may have painted themselves into a corner. I think they become trapped by the Chicano label. I was born in Boyle Heights and you can't get more Chicano than that. But if you didn't go outside the conventional Chicano circle, the imagery and themes can get redundant. Lots of artists involved in the history of the Chicano movement wanted to create a "collective" with a singular purpose. And they did a good job of it. But the nucleus lacked tentacles to the outside. (When you do reach outside, you start producing images like I did early on. That can be threatening to some people.) Anyway, that early thinking translated to collectors, who wanted a certain kind of imagery from Chicano artists. But, at least now I can now go to museum and see some Latinos represented.

So you think that is changing?

Yes. Younger artists like Germs for example. Their images have a more global influence. What I'm seeing now is this incredible hybrid; it's a kind of postmodern Chicanoismo.

The advent of the internet certainly plays a role.

Yes, it does. For me, art is very personal. I never became an artist because of a political movement. I've been an artist all my life, since a very young age.

So what drives you to paint?

I have to paint--I'm not sure why--but I do know that if I don't paint for a few days, I go into a depression.

What would you like people to walk away with when they view your work?

I put out questions about life, beauty and balance. These are personal to me. I don't provide answers but I hope that people find them.