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Brown washing

Linda Vallejo turns the tables on cultural appropriation for The Getty's citywide tribute to Latin American influence on Los Angeles

By Christina Campodonico

You could call bG Gallery's recent exhibition a star-studded affair. It includes artistic appearances by Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, Oscar winner Audrey Hepburn and even the storied burger-hoisting mascot for Bob's Big Boy ... but with one noticeable change to their iconic complexions: They've all been painted a dark shade of brown.

"Not much is really transformed about the original image per se — other than absolutely everything," writes art critic Shana Nys Dambrot in the catalog for "Keepin' It Brown." The exhibition is one of dozens throughout Southern California participating in The Getty's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, a series of programming that explores the deep cultural connections between Latin America and Los Angeles.

"Visually, it's quite subtle," writes Dambrot. "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."

This indelible artwork is the brainchild of Los Angeles artist Linda Vallejo — a third-generation Californian, Angeleno and player in the Chicano arts community — whose artistic practice has attracted attention recently for its challenging treatment of race and ethnicity.

In the wake of the #OscarsSoWhite scandal of 2016 that shutout several promising minority actors, directors and writers from Academy Award nominations, the *Los Angeles Times* profiled Vallejo's work, writing about images that the artist repurposed in response

"I've had people say, 'Why do you make them so dark?'" says Vallejo during our conversation. "I always try to come back with a joke because it bursts the bubble. ... I say, 'I like them short and dark.'"

Another comeback she uses: "I don't want them to look like white people that

When asked how she selects the images or objects she wants to repurpose, Vallejo says that the pieces have already been chosen for her.

"I didn't choose them — somebody else did. I just found them," says Vallejo. "If you walk around antique malls, you're really getting a historical snapshot of the inside of peoples' homes and how they lived, and the icons that were important to them in their lives. I'm not really choosing these images as much as those images have been chosen by other people, and I'm hoping I'm making them contemporary."

Vallejo's latest body of work, "The Brown Dot Project," on view concurrently with pieces from the "Make 'Em All Mexican" and "Brown Oscars" series, seeks to show a modern snapshot of the United States' Latinx population.

Using 2010 census data, Vallejo has painstakingly applied hundreds of thousands of brown dots (each representing Latinxs in various segments of society) to architectural graph paper, creating intricate abstract and formal images, among them a lattice of amoebic forms illustrating the percentage of Latinx construction workers nationally, a ladder showing the percentage of Latinx firefighters nationally, and an easel illustrating the percentage of Latinx artists nationally. "It's an elegant solution to interesting questions about Latino data," says Vallejo.

"I hope the questions and answers begin to change people's perceptions and attitudes towards Latino culture, towards Chicano culture, towards Latinos in a city where many of us were born."

— Linda Vallejo

to #OscarsSoWhite — including a photograph of an Oscar-toting Cate Blanchett recast as a chocolate brown "Catarina Blancarte."

There's also her "Make 'Em All Mexican" series. The mixed-media collection features figurines and kitsch objects that Vallejo picked up from antique markets, painted brown and renamed with Latinx monikers. In that series, a brown bust of Elvis becomes "El Vis." A bronzed statuette of Monroe becomes "Marielena Viva." And Big Boy gets a new nickname — "Muchachote" — along with his darkened skin.

just came back from the Bahamas."

Yet the inspiration for all of these pieces came when Vallejo uncovered a vintage copy from the illustrated grammar school primer series "Dick and Jane."

"When I looked at the images, of course they're blonde and have red hair and blue eyes and very fair skin. It just dawned on me, 'Oh my God, I could paint them brown, I can make them brown' and the slogan became I just want to 'Make 'Em All Mexican,' like me," says Vallejo. "Let's just turn history on its head. From there I just went insane and bought \$3,000 worth of antiques."

"The brown dots correlate directly to the data that's being presented."

In the end, Vallejo hopes that her work does not just offer insights into the Latinx experience, but also invites viewers to ask questions, explore and build bridges between cultures.

"I hope that they enter into this world with a laugh, that they feel welcomed into this world of difficult questions by my sense of humor and the beauty of the image," says Vallejo. "But I hope the questions and answers begin to change people's perceptions and attitudes towards Latino culture, towards Chicano culture, towards Latinos in a city where many of us were born."

She believes Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA offers an ideal platform for just that. "Latinos get to learn about Chicanos,

Chicanos get to learn about Latinos and the whole community gets to see the breadth, the type of work, the statements that are being made by Latinos in Los Angeles," she says. "I think it's really a wonderful time to be able to see how complex and how very beautiful and how meaningful Latino statements can be, and I'm hoping that Los Angeles will learn to love its Latino population in a new way." ■

"Keepin' it Brown" is on view through Oct. 8 at bG Gallery, Bergamot Station G8A, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica. Join Vallejo and art critic Shana Nys Dambrot for an artist walkthrough at 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 1, at the gallery. Call (310) 906-4211 or visit santamonica.bgartdealings.com.

Woman as Landscape

Carolyn Castaño's narrative portraits speak to the Latin American experience in L.A.



"Heroine (After Policarpa Salavarrieta Jose Maria Espinosa)" is from Castaño's series "Mujeres Que Crean," depicting women impacted by internal conflict in Colombia

By Eva Recinos

As she peeled away their plastic wrappings and dusted off each piece, Carolyn Castaño realized she hadn't seen some of her artwork in years.

"There's a kind of self-amnesia about what I made," she says. "I haven't looked at them because of space issues in my studio. Bringing them out has been an eye opener — sort of like falling in love again."

Over the course of her two-decade career, the Los Angeles-based artist has

displayed many of her pieces in galleries close to home and around the world, but a survey of her work hasn't come to fruition until now: "Carolyn Castaño: A Female Topography, 2001-2017," opening Saturday, at Loyola Marymount University's Laband Art Gallery.

The exhibit coincides with a growing regional focus on Latinx and Chicana art. Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA — the Getty's \$16-million initiative exploring

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COVER STORY

(Continued from page 13)

the artistic connections between Los Angeles and Latin America — launched last week and continues through early next year, with special exhibits and programming across more than 70 Southern California cultural institutions.

Although Castaño's retrospective exists separately from this group of shows, her work aligns with the zeitgeist of this cultural moment in Los Angeles. Many of her pieces reflect on cultural identity, public image and personal history in relation to Latin America and her own Colombian-American heritage.

The bright colors and piercing lines of her "La Nueva Onda" series explores "the way style and fashion can be like a political act," says Castaño. Paying homage to signage and storefronts, the pieces capture individual personalities while referencing fashion styles and expressions.

"Narco Venus" highlights the stories of men and women involved in the drug trade. The focus is mostly on the women: the ones who help transport drugs; the girlfriends or wives of major male figures in the narco world. The series points to the way in which Castaño often imbues her pieces with narra-

tive, or lets the story directly inform her piece.

"I'm interested in narratives, storytelling, I'm interested in the kind of background, the stories of these different women from the 'Narcos' series," says Castaño, who conducted workshops with women impacted by narco drug wars during a 2015 artist residency in Medellín, Colombia. "The stories of the women are what gives the figures that are represented really the meat, the content, the depth."

But there's a personal angle to her work as well: "Tropical Baby, Self Portrait" portrays the artist framed in bright patterns and flowers.

"It's really important for an artwork like that — this amazing, very graphic, very stylized image — to be very visible," says Laband Gallery Director and Curator Karen Rapp. "So that is the image that will be circulated on campus. It's really important, I think, to have a woman of color much larger than life and really visible because it doesn't happen often enough."

Many of the artist's works are captivating just in photos, but Rapp encourages visitors to see them in real life. Some are extremely textural — layered with rhinestones and "literally gobs of feathers," as Rapp excitedly explains — and their

vibrancy can't fully come through in images.

"Pictures do not do it justice. Anything with this collage and this texture, it really makes a difference to see these in person. It will be a powerful moment to get up close and look at all these little embellishments she's added to her canvas or to the paper."

For Angelenos, seeing the pieces in person can also be a means of exploring the recent art history of the city. Over the years chronicled in this exhibition, Castaño has shifted the art community in L.A. a bit and evolve.

"There's works that I've made that were part of a moment with a whole group of people, and some of [those pieces] aren't here for different reasons, and some of them are," says Castaño. "I'm excited to re-introduce that work to people who didn't experience it back then, and to see how it works in the public space now in 2017." ■

"Carolyn Castaño: A Female Topography, 2001-2017" opens with an artist's reception from 3 to 6 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 23, and remains on view through Dec. 10 at LMU's Laband Gallery, 1 LMU Drive, Westchester. Call (310) 338-2880 or visit cfa.lmu.edu/labandgallery/ for more information.

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Session fee: \$25 Fee for all three sessions: \$60

Tryouts

Saturday, October 7 @ CCMS	9:30am to 11:30am
Saturday, October 7 @ CCMS	1:00pm to 3:00pm
Sunday, October 8 @ CCMS	1:00pm to 3:00pm

Tryout fee: \$30 Arrive 30 minutes early for registration

Makeup Tryout

Monday, October 9 @ CCMS 6:30pm to 8:00pm

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PACIFIC STANDARD TIME: LA/LA - RELATED EXHIBITS

Olga de Amaral
@ *Latin American Masters*
Through Oct. 10

A veteran master of mixed media, Colombian artist Olga de Amaral transforms textiles into sculpture with the aid of gesso, fiber and precious metals.

Bergamot Station E-2, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 829-4455; latinamericanmasters.com

"Tracking Magulandia," "Domestic," & "Recent Work"
@ *Craig Krull Gallery*
Through Oct. 14

These coinciding exhibitions showcase the work of "Los Four" Chicano arts collective alum Gilbert "Magu" Luján, fellow "Los Four" member and his wife/muse Elsa Flores Almaraz, and recent pieces by ceramist and sculptor Dora De Larios.

Bergamot Station B-3, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 828-6410; craigkrullgallery.com

"I Come from Everywhere and Everywhere I Go" / "Yo Vengo de Todas Partes y Hacia Todas Partes Voy"
@ *Lois Lambert Gallery*

Through Nov. 4
Cuban artists Alejandro Gómez Cangas, Maykel Linares, Darwin Estacio Martinez, Luis Rodriguez Noa (NOA), Adislen Reyes Pino and Eduardo Rubén for "a celebration without borders," inspired by and named after the words of poet and revolutionary José Martí.

Bergamot Station E-3, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 829-6990; loislambertgallery.com

"Talking to Action: Art, Pedagogy and Activism in the Americas"
@ *Ben Maltz Gallery*

Through Dec. 10
Otis College of Art and Design invites viewers to think about social art practices in this exhibition and bilingual publication that considers the transformative role environment and community has on the practice

of contemporary art.
9045 Lincoln Blvd., Westchester, (310) 665-6800; otis.edu

"HOPE" @ ESMAO

Through Jan. 28
HOPE engages Cuban artists' history and influence in the world of video art while also meditating on how the medium has helped filmmakers grapple with the contradictions of their country.
208 Main St., El Segundo, (424) 277-1020; esmao.org

"Cuba Is" @ Annenberg Space for Photography

Through March 4
More than 120 photos make for a lush exploration of Cuban culture on the fringes. Subcultures like the brash, punk Frisks and the urban fashion of Chongas in Miami are just a few of the show's focal points.
2000 Avenue of the Stars, Century City, (213) 403-4000; annenberg-photospace.org

Visit pacificstandardtime.org for a full list of participating exhibitions and program updates.