

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.

"It's just math," Vallejo says again, "but again, it's never just math."

When last we left our heroine, she was on the verge of something wonderful she had only begun to sense. With the evolution of the *Brown Dot project* into the *Datos Sagrados* works, Linda Vallejo transforms the project into something beyond narrative, beyond meta-narrative even, and into the realm of the universal. By taking a simple mathematical process that connects to her own experience, Vallejo has generated a rarefied language of mark-making that is only brown paint on paper, and yet comprises a wealth of holistic meaning from the deeply personal to the political, spiritual, philosophical, and psychological. This is not kind of thing one expects from a Minimalist.

Vallejo's is at heart an ordinary formula, just a way to approach available data. For example, in "62% of US Latinos are bilingual" somehow, in some image or pattern, 62% of the paper surface must be painted. While "30% of US Population will be Latino in 2050" is a number story representing growth, its shapes cover a mere 30% of the surface; whereas "66% of US Unauthorized Latino Immigrants have lived in the US for at least a decade" covers a full two-thirds. The math, one soon sees, always has a story to tell. In the case of *Datos Sagrados*, it's a story that transcends the census to visually embody a whole other kind of mathematics -- ancient, classical, energetic, sacred.

While they contain the same type of information as the foregoing *Brown Dot* pieces, the division of space is something very different. Made with gouache on circular handmade paper, these new patterns immediately, powerfully display a universal, cyclical, divine kind of math, familiar to students of da Vinci, Michelangelo, crop circles, the Fibonacci Sequence, the Golden Mean, architectural schematics, Eastern mandalas; evoking styles of the Maya, Aztec, Native American, Islamic, Northern European, Asian, and Ottoman arts. Sacred geometry is the structure of the universe; beauty is a virtue before God. "It could not be more simple," she says, "but now we are having a conversation about everything."

--Shana Nys Dambrot, Los Angeles 2016

SND is an art critic and curator based in Los Angeles. She is the LA Editor for Whitehot Magazine, Contributing Editor to Art Ltd., and a contributor to KCET's Artbound, Flaunt, Huffington Post, The Creators Project, Fabrik, VS. Magazine, Palm Springs Life, and Porter & Sail.