My Kind of Joke

Karen Mary Davalos

Postmodern art is often characterized by appropriation, simulation, reproduction, and recombination. The ceaseless experimentation of postmodern artists has frequently resulted in humorous or satirical quotations of well-known images. Repetition and reconfiguration of an image creates new meanings outside of but not completely separate from the original. Jean Baudrillard argues that the cultural condition of postmodernism and its experience of the ubiquitous image transform how we think about simulation and duplication. The recirculation of the image fractures the notion of authenticity; in the process, the concept of originality collapses and becomes irrelevant. Images are no longer subservient to their original materiality and the authentic object. Postmodern art is not invested in autonomy.

Pulsing with a postmodern sense of humor, Linda Vallejo's provocative new series, *Make 'Em All Mexican*, playfully and satirically reappropriates Western civilization and American icons.[1] Vallejo does this by repainting as Mexican figures found in Norman Rockwell paintings, Disney animation, Hollywood movies, television sit-coms, classical European portraiture and sculpture, British and French monarchy, and the school primer, *Dick and Jane*. The artist makes them all Mexican by painting directly on vintage photographs and advertisements, fine art reproductions, mass-produced offset prints, and collectable figurines, changing their color and facial features using brown and black gouache or oil paint.

Vallejo's declaration, "I have to destroy the old image to make the new image," announces an aesthetic implication of the series and conceptually performs two postmodern acts. First, Vallejo defaces the work when she recasts white skin with brown paint and re-colors blond hair and blue eyes with black paint. Second, she takes the image (both its history and meaning) and changes it for her own purpose. This act of reappropriation produces charged political messages that disorient *and* empower

audiences. Her work paints our society and its national heritage as completely Mexican, thus, forcefully thrusting a Mexican and Chicano experience to the forefront of the American experience.[2]

Vallejo also poignantly visualizes and alters the organization of public space and time; though the Left might read the series as "a cultural and demographic *reconquista* … and the Right as alien encroachment," the work also humorously illuminates narrow understandings about race.[3] Even if the work is solely viewed as the visualization of anti-immigration nightmares, there is something much more for us here. *Make 'Em All Mexican* can be understood as the documentation of recent census data that shows that through birthrate Latinos continue to increase their demographic presence, currently at 50 million. While population shifts may produce exponential growth in anti-Mexican fears, restrictions on citizenship, the closing of national borders, and massive deportations, such actions cannot sustain a democracy. *Make 'Em All Mexican* serves as a snarky reminder that principles of social equality require a solution that does not compromise representation, and the series delivers this reminder by rhetorically and visually creating an abundance of representation for a group of people denied social space.

As an artist who consciously embraces an indigenist sensibility in her life and work, Vallejo's appropriation of appropriation is significant. Born in Los Angeles and raised by three generations of Mexican-heritage women, Vallejo developed a strong commitment to native spirituality. Her indigenist aesthetic informed four decades of landscape painting and three-dimensional altars for the earth. Given the context of her larger body of work, it is not surprising that Vallejo has reclaimed the act of taking something without permission; the primary method of cultural engagement used by settler colonialists who have been the major beneficiaries of appropriation throughout the Americas. By taking popular cultural icons for her own means, Vallejo jettisons the legacy of racial domination in the Americas. She steals, denies, and suppresses white representational power, and with a deliberately engaged brush stroke, she recodes the Western visual imaginary as brown.

Certainly, Vallejo's series is quietly disorienting. It invokes uncertainty and fiercely defies closure. As the series title announces, Mexicans are not simply the dominant public image, they are the *only* public face on this reimagined Western visual landscape. She forces viewers to ask: If the lack of representation resulted in Mexican and Chicano disenfranchisement as well as exclusion from and invisibility in public space, then what is gained by an abundance of representation, by complete representational dominance? And why does the visual abundance of Mexicans make us laugh? In the new society visualized in this series, Mexicans assume roles that were previously cast only for non-Mexicans. Vallejo offers an expansive social critique of how Chicanas and Chicanos might deal with their newfound power and authority by creating a fantasy of Mexican representational domination.

At the same time, her devilish rhetorical move that makes them all Mexican does not presume rigid racial boundaries, because the artist has merely reshaped the forehead, nose, and chin, or darkened the skin, hair, and eyes. Racial coding, she reminds us, is only skin-deep. It relies on the dominant fiction about phenotype, and thus, a fiction of cultural authenticity and racial difference. The deconstructed and reconstructed images upend the myths that support the question: Are you Mexican? Likewise for its auxiliary statement: You don't look Mexican.

Recycling and Normativity

The artistic technique of repurposing and deconstruction permeates Linda Vallejo's work. As a master of recycling, Vallejo began as early as 1978 to reuse objects in new ways. Her found-object suite of sculptural forms made from tree limbs and her more recent recycling of Styrofoam into mixed-media works are two examples. The consistent strategy to reuse objects and images, including her own artwork, has become one of her hallmarks. Vallejo wreaks havoc on the modernist fascination with the original, and in this

postmodern spirit, she turns away from western notions of originality and authenticity. Certainly, some of this impulse—to undermine the sacralization of art—emerges from her indigenist sensibility that values human dignity over material accumulation. Nevertheless, Vallejo does not worship the Western aesthetic tradition but uses it as a source of inspiration and new meaning for contemporary experience.

[INSERT NEAR HERE Fig. 1 Make Them All Mexican II: Nor All Freed from Want]

The practice of recycling images and creating new meanings is found in *Make Them All Mexican II*, the artist book based on two Normal Rockwell paintings. This captivating diptych portrays a different yet familiar American tale (Figure 1). Using the commercially available and mass-produced images Rockwell painted during World War II, *Freedom from Want* (1943) and *Homecoming Marine* (1945), Vallejo's book depicts a Thanksgiving meal in a Mexican American household and the homecoming of a Chicano serviceman, respectively. The second image of the diptych, *Normal Homecoming* (2011), documents the simultaneous homecoming of thousands of Chicanos who served in World War II and who have yet to achieve media acknowledgement as Ken Burns' error so tragically reminds us.[4] What makes the images powerful is what she leaves untouched. During World War II, Rockwell created *Freedom from Want* as part of the series, Four Freedoms. He was inspired by Franklin Roosevelt's State of the Union Address speech in 1941 about the four essential human rights—Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom From Want and Freedom From Fear. To Rockwell, the four freedoms justified US involvement in World War II, and he feverishly spent approximately six months completing the series. After its publication in the *Saturday Evening Post*, millions of Americans requested reprints and eventually, the images were part of a marketing campaign to rally American purchases of US War Bonds. In selecting *Freedom From Want,* Vallejo marshals the collective sentiment of the series—the images' nostalgia for an idyllic time, American patriotism, and US global leadership. In her hands, however, this meaning is transformed into a nostalgia and memory that never existed within the collective conscious.

Reformulated and renamed, *Nor All Freed from Want*, Vallejo depicts a large and multi-generational Mexican American family gathered around a neatly set table of simple white china, humble water glasses, a dish of cranberry sauce, a tray of celery, a bowl of fruit, and a tureen of mashed potatoes. The image captures the moment when the matriarch of the family places a fat turkey on the table while the family chatters away; only one figure glances toward the viewer as if to signal the fantasy. During the 1940s, the majority of Mexican immigrants lived in rural communities and intimately knew hunger. We recognize the scene as middle class prosperity, which is linked to the nation's own self-image of good-fortune, and we recognize the meal as quintessentially American cuisine, not Mexican. Moreover, the day that is portrayed, Thanksgiving, is fundamental to American heritage. Vallejo does not add tamales, tacos, or chili to the white china plates and the surrounding scene of American plenty. By not submitting to cliché images of Mexican American food and family, she avoids stereotypes in her visual rendering of an unknown past.

The same is done with *Normal Homecoming*, the second image in the book. The scene depicts men from work and boys after play or school who are listening to a seated young man, still in uniform, clearly home from the war front. With the title, Vallejo announces that this scene is the norm, the standard, or the yardstick by which all other homecomings are measured. Significantly, Vallejo's image does not show a Mexican flag or Chicano iconography hanging in the background of the cluttered garage. Additionally, the man standing above the marine does not wear on his forearm a tattoo for his *abuela* or the likeness of Guadalupe or a beloved *chola*. Vallejo's image does not require any embellishment beyond the new skin tones, hair, and facial features. If Chicanos have been made to represent the image of American patriotism, they cannot be situated as foreigners, the public enemy of the state, or the target of police profiles. Similar to the Spanish conquistadors who built their monuments on top of indigenous architecture, Vallejo

creates new meaning from images that have become the foundations of American heritage, stealing their sublime power and authority.

The somber tone of *Make 'Em All Mexican II*, the second book she produced in the series, resonates in several works, such as *Rose Parade* (2011; Plate ??), *Flags of All Nations* (2011; Plate ??), *Postmodern Toasties* (2011; Plate ??), *Debutante* (2011; Plate ??), *The Father of Our Country* (2011; Plate ?), and *Venus de Milo* (2011; Plate ?). This solemn sensation is created through the moment of recognition—the looking at historical magazine advertisements or historical figures—who originally did not look Mexican but were billed as the Common Man or named the Father of Our Country. Mexican Americans are familiar with the disorienting sensation caused by looking at figures who do not represent them. For instance, Chicana artist Yolanda M. López recalls that during her childhood in San Diego, California, she could not reconcile the grade school lesson that George Washington was the father of our country since he was not Mexican. She wondered too if the Mayflower brought over Mexican immigrants along with the European pilgrims.[5] These staples of American history cannot account for Mexican presence, cultural difference, or democracy's insistence on equal representation when non-Europeans are invisible in public space and absent from the national narrative of belonging. Vallejo resolves this conundrum by painting George Washington and Abe Lincoln brown (Plates ? and ?). And for the everyday man and woman, the nameless characters of mass media advertisements who also carry the weight of cultural authority, Vallejo re-colors the figures brown—and in various shades, such as burnt umber, red ochre, and Van Dyck Brown, to help us recognize differences in our skin color.

The Postmodern Chicana Pun

As the artist reveals, the series started as a joke. Linda Vallejo noticed, as many postmodern scholars have, that we are bombarded with images, but the messages are not

always coherent. The multiple perspectives, proliferation of images, and expected rapidity of observation create visual chaos. The artist formulated in her mind a playful question intended to simplify the morass: what would it look like if we were all Mexican? That is, if she specified the lens and created images from the point of view of one Chicana/Mexican American/*indigena*? The idea—just the idea alone—of making everyone Mexican made Vallejo burst into laughter. It tickled her to re-imagine every image, everything she had ever seen in museums, books, magazines, or on television and the movie screen, as brown, like her.

[INSERT NEAR HERE Fig. 2 HERE Make 'Em All Mexican: Dick and Jane]

Vallejo began her postmodern investigation with *Dick and Jane*, the book series written by Zerna Sharp and William S. Gray to improve the reading skills of children (Figure 2). Although the series' popularity decreased in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, it was widely popular for over forty years between the 1930s and 1970s. Vallejo leverages the unassuming and fortifying visual and narrative format of the series. The common European American name, Dick and Jane, as well as the mundane activities of the story are transformed into a symbol for all that is normal and expected. This normality is achieved through the consistent use of the simple present tense, basic sentence structure, and repetition. Everything that the two siblings do is timeless; the action happens all the time—or habitually, as a grammar school teacher would say—in the past, present, and future. "Eat fruit for breakfast." The simple present tense also announces the truth of a statement. In this case, Vallejo's little joke is a dramatic retelling of America's past, present, and future with Mexican characters at the center of the narrative—all the time and as sources of truth. Painting directly on six images from a vintage printing of the text, Vallejo recasts specific quotidian activities of the two siblings. The siblings are no longer Dick or Jane but unnamed Mexican American children. Borrowing a technique she developed in her series *Censored*, Vallejo has taken correction fluid to the names, allowing

viewers to enter this new world order without interruption from the original characters' racial identity. The whiting out of text as postmodern aesthetic strategy, however, brings Dick and Jane's whiteness into view, marking the previously unmarked racial character of the figures.

Vallejo also reorders the book, selecting the scenes when the children are at play or the breakfast table. We see them at inward moments, absorbed in thought or action, and in one scene, they are focused on each other as the girl enjoys the swing with her brother's help. Vallejo's book closes with an image of the girl riding a scooter past her friends and brother, and the last line announces, "Each one had a ride." With this declarative statement, the work conveys a new society of equal access and opportunity. Grammatically, each one receives the action of the verb, making us all recipients of Vallejo's generosity and equity. The book jacket also suggests the empowerment of all. Two copies of *Wild Poppies* (2006), Vallejo's beautiful still-life painting of a bouquet of wild flowers, complete the book, reaffirming the lighthearted and optimistic contents.

Even when the work supplies a pithy message, Vallejo's reconstructions are guaranteed to make us laugh, and several pieces in the series do. For example, from her frame of reference, the title character of the 1960s TV sit-com Gilligan's Island has a goatee, and he looks strangely familiar in the book, *Las Estrellas del Television* (2011; Plate ?). It is as if Gilligan should have been Mexican. Or that he was Mexican passing for white. The two other books, *Marielena* (2011; Plate ?) and *El Vis* (2011; Plate ?), include images that produce the same response—they teasingly convince us that Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley were Mexican from birth. On Marilyn Monroe the dark, brown hair and skin becomes her, and Elvis Presley is an impressively handsome Chicano rock 'n roller.
[INSERT NEAR HERE Fig. 3 Los Carros]

Her humorous impulse is also recorded in the deconstruction of image and text. Vallejo not only revisions race but also the slick advertising campaigns meant to elicit

pleasure, desire, and commerce. *Los Carros* (2011) is a large folio based on ads for new cars and railroad travel (Figure 3). Originally portraying middle class leisure and success, Vallejo mocks the media strategy by stripping the advertisements of their double meaning. Sexual innuendo is pushed forward when Vallejo covers most of the text with white correction fluid. The text appeals directly to sexual encounters as in this rewritten car ad:

> "Your pride will perk up … One look at those low, know you're bound… Quick respond to your touch. Going to be looked at, good-looker. Don't be surprised, hear a soft whistle of approval, low, straining-at-the-bit beauty that makes people sit up and take notice; something to be admired, too. Quick-sprinting power, reassuring way keeps its poise, sudden dips and curves…. Make it a point to stop what he's selling is high on pride, extra cost."

The text accompanies an image of a helicopter flying past a beautiful Mexican woman who is driving her new red car. The couple waves to each other as they head to their rendezvous point, as an inset illustrates them greeting each other with open arms. These lovers know what they want, and they see it from a great distance.

[INSERT NEAR HERE Fig. 4: Holding Up the World]

If the viewer wants more than a chuckle and seeks a hard-and-firm punch line, then take a look at *Holding Up the World* (2011), the appropriated candy bowl (Figure 4). This collectible porcelain item with three boys holding a bowl on their backs is pretentious, gaudy, and loud in any color. Vallejo's mixed media sculpture adds candy to the bowl, furthering its silliness. The brush of brown paint and a dollop of sugar bring a composition of high snobbery to its knees.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

As I have been suggesting, the series is a phantom recording and rejection of the quotidian gestures of white racial primacy. Reaching into her childhood and selecting popular culture and its dominant subject, the European American, Vallejo offers political satire against a visual history that cannot account for American diversity or Mexican presence in the nation. This critical aesthetic is forcefully depicted in the restaged 1940s and 1950s magazine advertisements for cars, motor oil, beer, and hard liquor—to name a few. Vallejo is drawn to the mundane visual representations of belonging in order to tell another story about Mexican Americans. However, this reformulation is unlike the re-coloration of Hollywood celebrities and historical figures because the characters in the magazine advertisements are intentionally unknown or nameless people. As noted above, the common man and woman are strategically familiar and desired. Whereas the original ads presumed a gazing racial whiteness, Vallejo's work constructs brownness, a viewpoint to match her own perspective.

[INSERT NEAR HERE Fig. 5 Makes No Difference Who You Are]

Elsewhere the creative process lead Vallejo to recolor Native Americans and African Americans, but the majority of her visual project transforms whiteness into brownness. Though the artist does engage various ways of looking at race, she also subverts the crass corporate model of multiculturalism. *Make 'Em All Mexican* does not pretend to achieve equitable visual space. Indeed, the book, *Makes No Difference Who You Are* (2011), critically captures the Disney Corporation's deceptively simple and flawed recognition of American difference, while it also reminds us of the racialized notion of beauty and womanhood (Figure 5).[6] The Disney solution is to portray in succession a diversity of fairytale princesses, each distinguished by their blond, jet-black, brunette, or red hair. With this simple approach, the corporate model ignores the differential power relations of racial groups and imagines the melting pot as frozen; the various groups are like items on a store shelf, each innocently and equally waiting their turn at representational space. Rather than accept this flawed view of multiculturalism, Vallejo paints Snow White, Cinderella, Tinker

Bell, Belle, and Ariel as Mexican princesses. “Snow Brown” is placed on the first page of the book, and she dances around Mexican dwarfs as if signaling her release from the quota system of multicultural representation.

Yet, Vallejo’s dark humor—pun intended—is not finished, and the book’s final page depicts the Mexican Evil Queen, the stepmother of Snow Brown. This folio reminds us that Mexicans have their own sources of cruelty and jealously, just as they have princesses, elegant daughters and protective and *silent* fairies. The giclée reproduction of Vallejo’s painting, *Electric Oak* (2009), is a fitting bookend to this fantasy world. The image is electrical, and it points to the charged consciousness that Chicano and Chicana imagery must record the full spectrum of our experience, not only the positive or celebratory ones. The works stage contradictory and critical images in which brownness is represented through diverse experiences—but “diversity” is not to be mistaken as a code word for racial difference. Rather it is our moral and ethical diversity—the good, the bad, and the ugly—that Vallejo portrays.

Spectacular Brownness

[INSERT NEAR HERE Fig. 6 *Rose Parade*]

In addition to the quotidian and daily images that we see on a regular basis, Vallejo also tackles the spectacle as a site of racial critique. *Rose Parade* (2011) captures the parade and pageantry of the Tournament of Roses, the annual New Year’s Day celebration that takes place in Pasadena, California, and which follows a segment of Route 66, the historical thoroughfare of America’s car culture and leisure class (Figure 6). The spectacular event has become an American tradition, and throughout the country millions of viewers watch on television the broadcast of the parade. Using vintage publications of the Tournament of Roses, Vallejo re-colors the Queen of the Tournament and her court, although the major technique in this book is a blotting out of the words and names to

unhinge individuals from their ancestors. The advertisement that leads the book's composition implies that it also critically narrates the connection between beauty, consumption, and patriarchy. "Supreme Beauty with Maximum Protection" refers to the rose-scented car wax, and the magazine ad sets up the familiar social arrangement of patriarchy that equates women with the automobile and implies both are naturally possessed and protected by men. This book, as well as the folio, *Los Carros*, visualizes racial and gender constructions, helping us recognize that neither is natural or just-so.

It is the cover of *Rose Parade*, however, that drives another and equally compelling message. A duplication of a digitally manipulated image of the sixteenth-century portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe caps the book. Instead of the muted tones of the original image, Vallejo has electrified the religious portrait by inverting or polarizing the iconographic painting. In this new world order, the Tournament of Roses becomes a celebration for Guadalupe, a public offering to the patron saint, or queen, of the Americas. Vallejo collapses December twelfth, the official feast day of Guadalupe, with the New Year's Day parade, and as the images of the parade remind us, she locates it on the roadway that signals Americana. The roses found growing on Tepeyac, the hill on which Guadalupe appeared in 1531 to a poor indigenous man baptized as Juan Diego, are now used to decorate the floats of this magnificent public festival for a Chicana, the modern Guadalupe. In short, the repurposing of the images transforms temporal and spatial distinctions.

Alternative

One of the major aesthetic processes of the series is the rewriting of the past. Vallejo's approach should not be confused with new interpretations of history, referred to as revisionist history, or the interdisciplinary methods that bring new information to light. Her work visualizes another past, an alternative history, which Vallejo appropriately stages in book format: a work of multiple pages bound together for publication and circulation and a source of knowledge both in popular and academic circles. Significantly, she follows

the dominant format of books from the ancient world. First, these folios are sequentially designed, so that sheets are joined at the ends and the book folds like an accordion (Plate ???). This format allows the viewer to read or see the complete folio at once, moving from right to left across the entire length of the monograph. It is an aesthetic style that makes the books sculptural. Second, the books are similar to the Aztec codices. Vallejo's works are largely pictorial narratives rather than textual, although some books combine visual and textual styles. Aesthetically and stylistically linked to ancient civilizations, the books in the series are conceptually anchored in the force and authority of classical antiquity, an aesthetic strategy that lends greater power to Vallejo's alternative histories of the Americas.

[INSERT Figure 7 The Queen near here]

Alternative histories are most powerfully articulated in the books, sculpture, and singular portraits of real figures, such as the Queen of England and Prince Philip, Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, former presidents of the United States, famous performers, or elite European women of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and nineteenth centuries. In an interview, the artist reveals that the images of British royalty as Mexican erase the history of colonial occupation and racial genocide in the Americas (Figure 7). It is as if the colonization of the Americas never happened, and without British colonial rule on the eastern seaboard, French and Spanish colonial domination in North America also evaporates (Plate ? [Marie Antoinette]). The reconstructed images rescue time and space from an oppressive history, and this new world order lacks the genocide of indigenous people through disease, warfare and displacement. I suggest that the re-colored portraits of living people indicate that *Make 'Em All Mexican* is anti-white but it is not against white people, only the power, greed, and cruelty created in the name of whiteness.

The invention of an alterative history is the same creative strategy used in *Atomik Aztec* (2005) by speculative fiction writer Shesshu Foster; in the video performances, *Indig/urrito* (1992) by visual artist Noa Bustamonte; and *El Naftazteca: Cyber Aztec TV for*

2000 AD (1995), by Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes. Alternative fiction is also the plot line of the 2004 film, *A Day Without a Mexican*, although Sergio Arau's comedy imagines the opposite of Vallejo's universe*.* The twist is important, because Vallejo's alternative history alleviates social anxiety by reducing oppression, whereas Arau's fiction produces collective angst as it draws into the spotlight a national economy that relies on the cheap labor of Mexicans. Vallejo has not visually reproduced Jean-Paul Sartre's reading of Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* by imagining the destruction of white people. She has instead proposed another past and future. As Fred Wilson declares about his work in museum collections, Vallejo's series is an effort "to root out … denial" and thereby to begin "a healing process" of the collective human psyche.[7]

[INSERT NEAR HERE FIG. 8 I AM MONA LISA]

When Vallejo repaints classic European portraiture, such as Leonardo Di Vinci's *Gineuri de Benci* (1474-1478) and *Mona Lisa* (1503-1519), she also creates an alternative history. Vallejo selects the most recognizable portrait, *Mona Lisa*, and three others from the National Art Gallery in Washington, D.C., which ties Di Vinci's classical image to those collected or housed by Andrew Mellon, the financier and premier donor of the country's art museum. *I am Mona Lisa* (2011) is a visual challenge to aesthetic distinction, especially the western image of female beauty (Figure 8). The book enacts a provocative criticism of racialized notions of beauty, a visual aesthetic echoed in the book cover, a reproduction of a painting from Vallejo's series, *Los Cielos*, and its embodiment of beauty in the natural world.

I am Mona Lisa also creates this optical illusion. The viewer has the sense of looking simultaneously at two images—the original and the Mexican one. This doubling is created by the original's iconographic status—the more powerful the image or the more recognizable the image, the greater the chance of seeing double while gazing at the reconstructed, Mexican one. It is a disorienting effect and one that comes, not surprisingly, with an alternative history since our sense of time is deeply embedded in our sense of belonging. In this moment, the viewer who sees herself (or himself) in the original image

may experience another form of disorientation. This disequilibrium emerges from a tension between otherness and intimacy as viewers recognize themselves; the result is a sense of closeness to the work but also a distancing effect as viewers stare at a stranger, a foreigner, the Other.

I want to note that Vallejo saw her grandmother in the image of the Queen Mother, enacting the doubling or optical illusion to which I refer. Vallejo marveled in the moment when she "found her." Although her grandmother lived a humble life in the United States and Mexico the artist's memory of her grandmother is bound with the image of a courageous and elegant woman who leads and commands from a throne. Vallejo's personal attachment to the image also suggests that the series is largely autobiographical, as she selects images that tormented her childhood because she could never approximate the white notion of beauty or happiness. In this way, the series becomes an alternative autobiographical memory that sets Vallejo free from childhood nightmares and desires. Notably, it does the same for others, as Armando Durón candidly admits.

Disorientation

Clearly the series is disorienting for multiple reasons and for which Vallejo provides little closure. When there is no direction for racism's target, does the hate and self-loathing also disappear? Is there no triumph or social struggle when Chicanos no longer require liberation? Or to put it more sarcastically, are we still chanting "Chicano Power!" when we have no reason to rally? How do Chicanos possess and make use of demographic power? What is the result of a singular racial heritage? If we understand brownness, or even the more specific ethnic or cultural subject—Chicanismo—as it is relationally defined and constituted in the social world, then what happens when all people are brown? Does Chicano identity cease to exist? *Make 'Em All Mexican* brings into sharp focus our blind spots, assumptions, and myths about belonging, culture, power, and race.

Make 'Em All Mexican requires looking beyond the surface of whiteness and brownness, and by implication blackness and other racial color codes. What beneath our skin makes us Mexican? As reductive thinking—some list of attributes, such as Spanish-language, Spanish-surname, extended families, or Catholicism—has not allowed for Chicana and Chicano difference, I am suspect to assume that any list would accomplish more than a reinforcement of the cliché or the stereotype. Vallejo certainly refuses the cliché by visually rejecting it in the moment that she makes everyone Mexican.

Yet the critical undertone of the work also requires a disidentification with the singular image of the nation, whiteness, and Eurocentricism and its grip on representational practices in the media, the arts, and domestic space. Vallejo painted everyone to look Mexican, and thereby, opposes the American Dream of becoming white. The Mexican gaze rejects the dominant view and reconstructs itself through images and icons that have been used for white racial primacy. The cultural logic of the series depends on the contradictory relations between the dominant identification as white and the one Vallejo provides as brown.

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[INSERT NEAR HERE Fig. 9 Mother and Prince Philip]

As I finalized the design of the exhibition, I realized that I had wanted to create a visual setting that would convey the over-the-top quality of Vallejo's series. I had dreamed of fancy museum cases that would encase the artist's books as if they were relics of the past and old-fashioned curio cabinets to present the figurines. My hope had been to duplicate the exhibition techniques of the first anthropology museums in order to support an interpretation of found artifacts and exotic treasures from an alternative past. Getting deadly serious, I had forgotten that the series is also playful, tongue-in-cheek, and mischievous. I was pulled back into the series' humor by the diptych based on portraits of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip cast on porcelain plates. The collectible plates are the type of items sold via late-night broadcast television commercials, the ones with cheesy

sets, dog-eared hosts, and useless bric-a-brac, or through the Internet. I know them from my experiences with insomnia and boredom. Collectible plates circulate as commerce, which may be ironic and somehow beneath the Queen's dignity, but Vallejo redeems them when she paints them Mexican. Vallejo wittingly reminds us that ironic appreciation can emerge from the kitsch, a style Mexicans and Chicanos have perfected and known as rasquache aesthetic (Figure 9). The plated images are a perfect pun on an archaic obsession with British royalty. If Mexicans are the central figures of this antiquated fascination, then they also enjoy the last laugh from their perch. And that is my kind of joke.

[A]cknowledgment: Linda Vallejo is a prolific iconoclast, and I am honored she allowed me to interview her for two projects. For one project, the Latino Art Survey, an initiative of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, she shared over ten hours of her time for a life history interview in which I learned about her childhood in the deep South, her adolescence in Europe, and her spiritual life. It was an experience that profoundly changed me. Her latest series, *Make 'Em All Mexican,* did the same. I wish to thank those kind readers who commented on an earlier version of this essay: Ann Marie Leimer, David G. Stanton, and my parents, Mary Catherine Davalos and Ruben M. Davalos. I also am grateful to the audience's feedback and enthusiasm at the 38th Annual Meeting of the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies and to Armando Durón for the lively conversation about Linda Vallejo's work. Editor and dramaturge Tiffany Ana López has the keenest eye and mind, and she made this essay stronger. Her contribution to this collaboration has guaranteed its success, and her gentle guidance in the face of my weaknesses has made me a better person. Finally, I am grateful to my parents who taught me to be totally and completely Mexican, to my children for embracing their multiple identities, and to my husband, David, for empowering the Mexican children in his classroom.

[1] This essay is based on the exhibition, "Make 'Em All Mexican" which premiered at Avenue 50 Studio in Highland Park, California, May 14 through June 5, 2011.

[2] Although "Mexican" can refer to nationality, it is used here to refer to Mexican-heritage people living in the United States. This reference is clarified by the artist's selection of images—none are from Asia or Africa. The repertoire that she identifies is from Western visual heritage that has been invoked as American cultural history.

[3] Coco Fusco, "My Kind of Conversation," *The Things You See When You Don't Have a Grenade! Daniel J. Martinez,* with essays by David Levi Strauss, Coco Fusco, Mary Jane Jacob, Susan Otto, Victor Zamudio-Taylor, and Roberto Bedoya, Santa Monica: Smart Art Press, 1996, 19. Since Daniel J. Martinez and Linda Vallejo share a biting conceptual aesthetic, my title riffs off of Fusco's reading of his work.

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[4] Ken Burns' 2007 documentary, *The War*, grossly ignored Mexican Americans contributions to World War II, and attempts to correct his biased or poor research were unsatisfactory. Since 1999, Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez of the University of Texas, Austin, has spearheaded the U.S. Latino and Latina World War II Oral History Project. She has collected over 650 interviews with men and women who participated in World War II.
[5] Yolanda M. López, interview by author, March 22-23, 2007. The author's two-day interview with López was conducted in Los Angeles, California, and the transcript is housed at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Library and Archive.
[6] The book title is from the song, "When You Wish Upon a Star," which further supports my reading of the series as both racial and gender analysis.
[7] Henry M. Sayre, "1990-2005: In the Clutches of Time," *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, edited by Amelia Jones, Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 111.