

Linda Vallejo
at Galerie Anais, Santa Monica, California / Plaza de la Raza, East Los Angeles
Preview by Nancy Kay Turner

“And the people bowed and prayed to the neon god they made”
- *“Sounds of Silence,” Simon & Garfunkel*

Linda Vallejo’s series, “The Electrics,” is comprised of jazzy, decidedly hallucinogenic portraits of political, artistic, and social activist icons - including Martin Luther King, Gandhi and Frieda Kahlo - along with portraits of the majestic California oak tree in the Southern California landscape. In this series, each face or tree is front and center in a square format. Each seems to be lit up from within – turned on and plugged in, somewhat reminiscent of Kirlian photography, which captures the human aura and electricity streaming out of tiny pores.

These vibrant neon portraits and landscapes are a heady visual brew, fusing multiple aesthetic precedents. In an artist’s statement Vallejo notes these myriad artistic influences. Included among them are the psychedelic posters of Peter Max with their undulating lines and highly saturated colors, the portraits of Andy Warhol and the frontal composition and pixilation of Chuck Close’s portraits. These eclectic “Electrics” also echo Piet Mondrian’s early figurative paintings of abstracted trees and Georgia O’Keefe’s early roiling landscape abstractions.

There is a tension between the underlying grid of the digitally manipulated, pixilated image and the liquid paint handling. These supercharged, superheated and supernatural images inhabit a spirit world reminiscent of the altered reality expressed in Carlos Castenada’s popular sixties novels about the Yaqui shaman Don Juan.

“Electric Hero: Malcom X” portrays the activist smiling (not scowling), and his visage is comprised of dazzling zigzag circuitry. Nevertheless, it is somewhat unnerving to see him (not to mention Kahlo, Picasso and the others) reduced to a glowing web of interconnecting energies floating in the clear sky. There is a coolness here, a detachment (the figure having been translated from a digital image) despite its being bathed in an emanating light.

Concurrent with the “Electrics” is a forty-year retrospective at Plaza de la Raza (East Los Angeles), celebrating its fortieth anniversary as well. Curated by Dr. Betty Ann Brown, this exhibit encompasses work from 1969 to 2009. Vallejo’s vast and diverse body of work includes prints, installations, sculptures, assemblage, drawings and paintings. Two of the earliest abstractions, both untitled works on paper from 1969, presage the current “Electrics” in their use of vibrant and pulsating colors. Indeed, a tiny new 6” x 6” acrylic on canvas painting, “Electric Pink Rose,” is a direct descendent of these two early works and suggests Vallejo’s return to pure abstraction.

Both shows demonstrate Vallejo’s relentless exploration and manipulation of materials while remaining true to her inner vision. There is a profound consistency here despite the diversity of materials and influences. Vallejo’s prodigious body of work, like the artist herself, is a force of nature.

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