

Electric Ladyland: Linda Vallejo's Digital Vision

essay by Peter Frank

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Linda Vallejo's "The Electrics" comprises a sequence of images, painted and drawn, that capitalizes on the relationship between two visual tropes, one a mainstay of the 1960s and '70s, the other ubiquitous in these times. On her Website (appropriately enough), Vallejo describes the "Electrics" series as "Images fusing Hippie Psychedelia[sic], spiritual vision search, and digital imagery." In this regard, the artist is not simply conflating the aesthetics – the *popular* aesthetics – of a half-century ago with those of the current era, but highlighting the actual continuity between the two.

Whether by accident or by design, a "psychedelic look" results from the merest distortion of computer imagery as it is now available to us. The fracturing of images into pixels, the halation provided by various digital filters, the pulsing radiance of monitor colors, and many other factors lend an irreality to even the most banal of on-screen pictures, an irreality that even our prolonged exposure to television images could not anticipate. Already attuned to enhanced conditions of perception in her artistic practice, Vallejo picked up readily and deeply on this peculiar, if ubiquitous, digital quality.

Like most of her generation, Vallejo had been exposed to "hippie psychedelia" in her childhood (and to its psychoactive sources soon enough thereafter); its blend of spiritual ethos with revelatory aesthetic, appealing enough universally, clearly held Vallejo in particular thrall as a budding artist, not least given her general spiritual inclination. As a result, a certain immanence has inflected Vallejo's work almost from the start, an immanence that infers the artist – and by association her audience – has access to a special kind or level of vision.

In "The Electrics" this immanence becomes the central pictorial factor. Contours become febrile, colors breathe and roil, the palette is at once hot and icy, and the subject matter seems infused with a deist charge, a sense that everything is infused with an ineffable force. In these paintings and drawings, in a sense, Vallejo depicts things as if laying them bared to their molecules. Human icons of recent social and cultural history disappear into their own pixelated vibrations; natural phenomena, living or not, seem to dissolve – elementalize, you might say – into their atomic thrum. Indeed, it no longer matters whether something, be it a tree or a mountain, is a "living," much less sentient, entity; its energy is equivalent to, and resonant with, that of everything else around it.

In painting the world this way, Vallejo effects a kind of universal democratization, a Whitmanesque celebration of everything equally – the kind of equanimous elevation her human subjects, themselves all visionaries and freedom fighters, would have endorsed. Such an ethos was codified in the era of struggle and rebellion that marked the transition from modernist to post-modernist context; but, as it subsequently informed the methods and principles of the idealists who brought cybernetics to the masses, it endures to this day in the visual language and methodology of computer and Internet alike. The hallucinatory images comprising "The Electrics" remind us that, on some level, our computers are inducing acid flashbacks – the good kind.

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