

Linda Vallejo: Brown Belongings

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Artist Statement

Linda Vallejo

Brown Belongings represents ten years of concentrated work on visualizing what it means to be a person of color in the United States. These works reflect what I call my “brown intellectual property”—the experiences, knowledge, and feelings I have gathered over more than four decades of study in Chicano/a and American indigenous communities.

Influences and Interests

I trace the root of my passion about the politics of color and class back to the mid-1960s, when my father—an officer in the Air Force—was relocated from Sacramento, California, to Montgomery, Alabama. I attended high school in an era defined by segregation, the Selma marches, and the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It was then that I began to realize that skin color was a defining factor in how the world judges you and fixes your place in it.

At my high school, the first in Montgomery to integrate, tensions were palpable and violence felt imminent as one hundred “black” students joined two thousand “white” ones. I was happy to leave this difficult environment behind when my family moved to Madrid, Spain, where I completed high school.

During the next few years I searched for my personal artistic expression and place in the world. I engrossed myself in art and architecture; I wrote music, designed clothing, and painted; and I delighted in family visits to ancient Roman sites and Europe’s great museums. I was in pursuit of a language that could express universal equality, acceptance, and appreciation.

In 1969 I returned to Los Angeles to obtain a bachelor’s degree from Whittier College, just half an hour from East Los Angeles, where I had been born and where most of my family still lived. I returned to Madrid to study lithography but then went back to LA, to earn a Master of Fine Arts in printmaking at California State University, Long Beach. While in grad school, I secured a job teaching printmaking to elementary school students at the Barrio Mobile Art Studio, which was run by Self Help Graphics & Art, a Chicano community-based arts organization just a stone’s throw from my early childhood home.

I soon immersed myself in my own classical culture—Mesoamerica. I traveled in Mexico to visit the great ceremonial sites and became deeply involved in Chicano/a and Native American ceremonial circles, which informed my cultural perspective and, by extension, my art practice. My artworks focused on spirituality, nature, and the beauty of womanhood—universal themes shared by all peoples regardless of race, creed, or color.

Together, my interest in indigenous mythology and symbols and my love of Western classics influenced my creative development; fusing them allowed me to define my art practice.

After creating several portfolios focused on spirituality and nature, and traveling a good deal more, I

developed an interest in images created from repurposed objects. In particular, my eye was drawn to art exhibited in *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, which opened at the New Museum in New York in 2007. The show's wildly untamed works, including ones that juxtaposed seemingly conflicting cultural imagery, described the present as an age of crumbling beliefs and broken icons. I was also captivated by Chinese artist Wang Qingsong's photo montage *Romantique* (2003), a remake of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* featuring Chinese models, and by the work of late Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, who combined seemingly incongruent media such as film, performance, sculpture, and photography to express a unified cultural and feminist vision.

Seeing these and many other works produced a shift in my creative process. I found myself ruminating, "What would artwork made of repurposed materials look like through my personal cultural lens?" I started collecting offbeat items—newspapers, figurines, postcards, photographs—and storing them in cubbyholes. My aim was to place them into the cauldron of my creative mind to see what would bubble up.

Make 'Em All Mexican

A period of introspection followed. I realized that while my Mexican great-grandparents had traveled to California with little but the shirts on their backs, my children and I had been able to pursue our professional dreams. So why did the American Dream seem out of reach for so many Latinos?

The crux of the matter, it seemed to me, was that visual representations of the American Dream did not include me, or my loved ones. I had never seen the golden images of Americana with familiar "brown" faces. Friendly faces, sure—but not familiar ones. The yearning for familiar faces sent me on a quest for images that I could call my own.

One day, while searching for materials to repurpose in a local antique mall, I spied a set of salt and pepper shakers shaped like two little pilgrims on their way to their Thanksgiving celebration. I said to myself, "I can paint them brown!" Before long, I blurted out, "I just wanna *make 'em all Mexican*—like me!" I began painting directly on antique photographs, porcelain and plaster figurines, postcards, and magazine pages to create an America that looked "brown" like me.

Since then, I have produced hundreds of *Make 'Em All Mexican* sculptures, handmade books, and paintings—among them an array of Greek and Roman gods, movie stars, cartoon characters, US presidents, and European royalty, all painted brown. These works coax viewers into a comfortable space, only to confront them with unfamiliar, and sometimes uncomfortable, scenarios. What would our world look like today if Hollywood had been built and governed by people of color? Or if illustrious historical kingdoms had been ruled by Mexican royalty?

By raising difficult questions about the relationship between color and class, these works elicit stories about the divisions based on the color of our skin. For some viewers, the works are hyper-political or just downright hilarious; for others, they are portals to deeply seated memories and a range of emotions. Many viewers have responded by sharing personal experiences, including disturbing ones.

On seeing the dark-skinned George and Martha Washington clad in delicately hand-stitched clothing with little dashes of Mexican insignia, one viewer recalled emotionally that his mother, a maquiladora worker, would save cloth remnants to make dresses and shirts for her children. Another individual reflected in tears that her family had initially celebrated her as a "little princess" because of her light

hair and skin, but that she felt their love “ebb away” as her hair and skin grew darker. One visitor acknowledged that the “light” members of his family did not speak to the “dark” ones.

Viewer responses have reached beyond color-related considerations, encompassing women’s and LGBTQ rights, and the struggles of anyone who has ever felt like an outsider. In that sense, *Make 'Em All Mexican* recognizes a shared sense of exclusion from power and access—while opening doors to a reimagined world of acceptance and equality.

The Brown Dot Project

After creating *Make 'Em All Mexican*—a series that is brazenly complex, gaudy, and over the top—I was still interested in “keepin’ it brown,” but I wanted to produce simpler images. I began this process by asking myself, “What would my brown image look like if I were a minimalist painter?” It would take four years of contemplation and experimentation before I could present my next portfolio of works.

I spent some time thinking about statistics, particularly with respect to census data. Latino Angelenos had been talking about their growing population, and how this growth should be accompanied by increased prosperity and influence. Building on themes addressed in *Make 'Em All Mexican*, my new series was to ask whether these growing numbers were actually changing our attitudes about color and class—and about our place in the American Dream.

The result was *The Brown Dot Project*, a set of “data pictographs” on gridded vellum in which dots in shades of brown represent statistics. The works reflect various types of data, including the Latino proportion of city and state populations, of professionals in the health, education, and other sectors, and of the US gross national product. The project has proven time-consuming and mentally strenuous: I first count the number of boxes in an area of gridded vellum and then dot the relevant proportion to represent a data set. For example, based on data that Latino Angelenos account for 48.3% of LA’s total population, I place 23,377 dots in an area containing 48,400 boxes—so as to cover 48.3% of the gridded area.

The brown dots appear in various patterns, a number of which resemble designs in indigenous weaving and ancient ceremonial sites. Others mirror computer-generated geometric shapes or are reminiscent of grid-oriented modernist works—such as those of Piet Mondrian, Chuck Close, Agnes Martin, and Charles Gaines.

In considering *The Brown Dot Project*, critic and curator Peter Frank suggested that I offer my art, “if not as a tool for change, then at least as an examination of the factors that necessitate such change, a passionate argument guided not only by reason, but by humor, craft, and beauty.”¹

Datos Sagrados

I continued to use data for my next series, *Datos Sagrados*. In contrast to *The Brown Dot Project*, however, these painted works on circular handmade paper are influenced by the golden ratio. They speak to the close relationship between mathematics, beauty, truth, and indigenous ceremony, in which mandalas are central to altar-making practices, *danza* choreography, and fundamental beliefs.

¹ Peter Frank, “ARTIDATA: ‘The Brown Dot Project’ as a Translative Process,” 2015, <https://maclaarte.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ARTIDATA-by-Peter-Frank.pdf>.

In describing *Datos Sagrados*, critic and curator Shana Nys Dambrot notes:

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.²

Cultural Enigma

My most recent series of works, *Cultural Enigma*, broadens the focus to address not only the politics of color and class, but also what we refer to as culture. These works ask whether culture exists and, if so, why it is important in our lives, how we present ourselves culturally, and what symbols and signs we choose to signify our cultural presence, if any.

I call these abstract paintings, which reference a variety of historical and contemporary source materials, “cultural Rorschach tests.” Viewers are invited to identify what they see in the images to reveal their cultural knowledge and perspective.

Cultural Enigma also includes figurative works on paper. The subjects are taken from and in homage to important US and European twentieth-century portrait painters, such as David Hockney, Alice Neel, and Philip Pearlstein, among others. These seated figures appear with no other cultural insignia other than their brown skin.

Brown Belongings

It has taken me forty years to develop an artistic practice that reflects my cultural experience of the world and my place in it. *Brown Belongings* presents the results: four “brown” portfolios—*Make 'Em All Mexican*, *The Brown Dot Project*, *Datos Sagrados*, and *Cultural Enigma*—all produced between 2010 and 2019. These series embody decades of study and gathered knowledge of what it means to live as a Latinx, Chicana, Indigena American.

The title *Brown Belongings* touches on many significant points for me. For one, it highlights that the artworks are autobiographical, that they “belong” to me. Yet it also refers to my search for a place to “belong,” a quest that began when, as a child and young adult, I traveled and studied throughout Europe, Mexico, and the United States. It was when I returned to Los Angeles and became involved in the Chicano/a and indigenous communities that I found my place—artistically, intellectually, and culturally.

The title further draws attention to the “belongings” I have collected on my journey—icons that represent the American cultural identity featured in *Make 'Em All Mexican*. In painting these objects brown, I become like a small child who paints her dolls so that they can be like her, so that they can belong with and to each other.

Finally, the title also speaks to “longing” as a part of “belonging.” Put simply, I long to find a visual language that will open a dialogue about how we see ourselves, how others see us, and how we can find joy and understanding in both our differences and our similarities.

² Shana Nys Dambrot, “Linda Vallejo: *Datos Sagrados*,” 2017, <https://lindavallejo.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Datos-Sagrados-2017—Shana-Dambrot-Critical-Essay.pdf>.