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AZTLAN

A JOURNAL OF CHICANO STUDIES

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Artist's Communiqué

Make 'Em All Mexican

Linda Vallejo

My early years were spent traveling and studying in far-flung locations throughout the United States and Europe. During my artistic grounding, I became increasingly immersed in Chicano art and indigenous communities—experiences that have informed my cultural perspectives and, by extension, my art practice. It has taken my entire artistic career to fuse an image that defines my multicultural experience of the world and my place in it.

I was born in Boyle Heights and lived in East Los Angeles, just a stone's throw away from Self Help Graphics & Art, until I was three years old. I was very fortunate to have six great-grandparents and a large extended family in those early years. My father, Adam Vallejo, was studying political science at the University of California, Los Angeles, and my mother, Helen, worked for a prominent doctor on First Street. My father's family was blessed with several musicians, including my paternal grandfather, Aniceto, as well as talented singers and dancers. My great-grandparents hailed from Mexico and Texas, having migrating to work in the fields of California in the first decades of the twentieth century.

After my father graduated from college he entered the US Air Force as a commissioned officer and we moved to Germany, just outside Munich. As a young girl I didn't understand the changes I would experience in moving from one place to another. Over the next ten years I lived in Arizona, Missouri, Texas, and Sacramento, California, where we stayed for seven years. In the mid-1960s I found myself in Montgomery, Alabama, where my high school was integrated for the first time in its history. The tension was palpable, and violence seemed imminent. The knowledge of myself as a person of color, standing outside the lines of fire, scorched me indelibly. I have memories of "white" and "colored" bathroom stalls and fountains, of the tragic marches from Selma, of burning crosses and lynchings, and

of the hopeful speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King. I began to realize that the world did not see me as I saw myself, that color was a defining point in how the world judges us and fixes our place in it. I believe that these experiences during the fight for integration and equality are the bedrock of my newest series, *Make 'Em All Mexican*.

In 1967 my family moved to Madrid, where I graduated from high school. I traveled, studying art, architecture, and art history. As I traveled I fell in love with European history and culture, and with the classics. I wrote music, designed clothing, and painted, searching for a language that could express universal equality and acceptance. I imagined an image that could open a dialogue of understanding among all peoples.

The artwork I created during these years came from my experiences in El Museo Nacional del Prado, where I studied El Greco's elongated and floating images of the pantheon of heaven, Goya's gruesome portrayals of humanity's folly in pain and suffering, and an astounding collection of Bosch, with his imagination-filled landscapes of the glories of heaven and the humiliations of hell. I visited ancient Roman sites, falling in love with the ethereal gods and their mythologies and with the history of the great Western cultures. These experiences fed my desire to create an image that could speak a language of compassion and respect.

In 1975 I returned to Los Angeles to begin my master of fine arts studies in printmaking at California State University, Long Beach. I also returned to be close to my family. Two of my grandparents were still alive, and I had several cousins living in Los Angeles and the surrounding areas.

LINDA VALLEJO is a Los Angeles-based artist who investigates contemporary cultural and political issues through her work. Solo exhibitions of works from the *Make 'Em All Mexican* series have been presented at the Soto Clemente Velez Cultural Center in New York in 2014, the George Lawson Gallery and the University Art Gallery of New Mexico State University in 2013, and at *Arte Americas* in collaboration with the Fresno Art Museum and the Robert and Frances Fullerton Museum of Art at California State University, San Bernardino in 2012. In 2014 Vallejo received the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs COLA Individual Artist Fellowship. She has exhibited at the National Museum of Mexican Art, Los Angeles Craft and Folk Art Museum, Museum of Modern Art New York, San Antonio Museum, and Mexico City Modern Art Museum. She was included in two exhibitions associated with the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA 1945–1980 initiative: *Mapping Another LA: The Chicano Art Movement*, at the UCLA Fowler Museum; and *Doin' It in Public: Art and Feminism at the Woman's Building*, at the Otis College of Art and Design Ben Maltz Gallery. Her work is in the permanent collections of the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, the Carnegie Art Museum in Oxnard, California, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the California Multicultural and Ethnic Archives at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the Chicano Studies Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles. Vallejo is represented by the George Lawson Gallery in San Francisco.

It was then that I found my way into a job with Sister Karen Bocalero as a printmaking teacher for Self Help Graphics's Barrio Mobile Art Studio, immersing myself in "my own" classical culture, Mesoamerica. I became involved in the burgeoning Chicano arts community as well as in Chicano *indígena* and Native American ceremonial circles. Again, I found myself surrounded by stories of cultural misconceptions based on color, class, and creed. My experiences in *indígena* led me to create fantastic realism landscapes focused on spiritual awakening. As the years passed I continued to travel, study, and paint. A few years ago I made trips to China, New York, and several other major US cities. It is my custom to include museums and galleries on my itinerary to get a sense of what is happening in the national and international art scene. On these trips I noticed a growing trend from the mundane to the fantastic—sculpture made of pre-produced objects, wildly untamed images created from found objects put to fascinating new uses, photographic collages combining digital work and hand-drawn forms, and images that juxtaposed seemingly contrary cultural symbols and icons.

After seeing these works and hundreds more, my thoughts and creative processes began to shift. I found myself ruminating, "What would repurposed art images look like if I created them from my own personal Chicano-*indígena* lens?"

Now, after forty years of search and artistic production, I find that Make 'Em All Mexican accomplishes the task I set for myself so very long ago. By coaxing the viewer into a comfortable space where there is humor and laughter, the images allow stories to surface about the divisions caused by our differences and the possibility of unity through our similarities. Personally, Make 'Em All Mexican helps me to "laugh to keep from crying." In this new series of works I repurpose iconic images of national and world culture and "make them Mexican" by painting them brown. When viewers first see Make 'Em All Mexican they begin by chuckling over images of a brown Marilyn Monroe (*Marielena: La Fabulosa*, reproduced on the front cover), or a brown Marie Antoinette and Louis Auguste in all their regal finery, and end in a meaty dialogue about their experiences with the politics of color. What would happen if Hollywood were built and governed by Mexicans? What if the world and all its grand historical kingdoms were ruled by Mexican royalty? It's at first a funny notion, but slowly becomes disconcerting to many, even to Mexicans . . .

Make 'Em All Mexican leads you down an ironic path where you find yourself confronted by some of the most difficult questions of our time: "Do

race, color, and class define our status in the world?” “Do color and class define our understanding and appreciation of culture?”

For some viewers, the images are hyperpolitical; for others, they are emotional portals to a past remembered and sometimes forgotten; and for still another group, they are just hilarious. Curators look forward to exhibiting this work because of the explosive conversations it evokes. During gallery talks the faces in the audience show joy and elation, disbelief and relief, fear and anger. In many cases younger viewers will make suggestions about what other important and famous figures could be “made brown.” People are alight with ideas about how funny it is to make them “all” Mexican. “Hey, what about the Three Stooges or John Wayne?” “I want to be Mexican too! Make me brown!”

At other times the conversation turns to stories of memory and loss. One viewer commented on *Dick and Jane*, a handmade book made from a repurposed third-grade primer showing little blond blue-eyed children transformed into brown-faced Mexicans. He shared, “When I first glimpsed *Dick and Jane* my immediate reaction was ‘not only do I get it’ but that ‘they got me.’ Images came rushing back like ghosts from a childhood nightmare that I didn’t know I held within.” *Dick and Jane* gave him a chance to reflect on his past and to “realize that the future is never a lost cause.” I was astonished at the personal memories and feelings that he shared.

A woman reflected in tears on a very personal story of how she had been celebrated as the “little princess” of her family, born with light hair and skin, but how over time as her skin and hair grew darker and darker she could feel the love of her family “ebbing away.”

An African American family spoke in hushed tones about “high yella and low black” and wondered if the struggle for class based on “shades of color” would ever change. A Chicano family who had adopted a Chinese daughter lamented that she no longer wanted to be Chinese; the girl was angry that she could not be “like the girls in the magazines,” and the mother and father were at a loss to help her understand her place in the world. Another highly placed individual actually acknowledged that the “light” members of his family do not speak to the “dark ones.”

Conversations have found their way into gay rights and the struggles of feminism, where anyone who has ever felt like an outsider can openly express the need to be considered a member of the whole and to be heard and respected for his or her feelings, thoughts, knowledge, and accomplishments.

As funny as it is, the Make 'Em All Mexican series appears to open doors to a shared reality in a modern world where color still governs access and power. Make 'Em All Mexican is only the start of a lengthy process, but change is possible if we just laugh and work through it together.



Dick and Jane (panel 1), 2010. From the Make 'Em All Mexican series. Repurposed book pages, pigment print of original painting, gouache, and Wite-Out, 8 x 5 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Dick and Jane (panel 2), 2010. From the Make 'Em All Mexican series. Repurposed book pages, pigment print of original painting, gouache, and Wite-Out, 8 x 5 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Dick and Jane (panel 3), 2010. From the Make 'Em All Mexican series. Repurposed book pages, pigment print of original painting, gouache, and Wite-Out, 8 x 5 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Nor All Freed from Want (panel 1), 2012. From the Make 'Em All Mexican series. Repurposed posters, original silk-screen print, gouache, and Wite-Out, 10 x 8 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



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Nor All Freed from Want (panel 2), 2012. From the Make 'Em All Mexican series. Repurposed posters, original silk-screen print, gouache, and Wite-Out, 10 × 10 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

