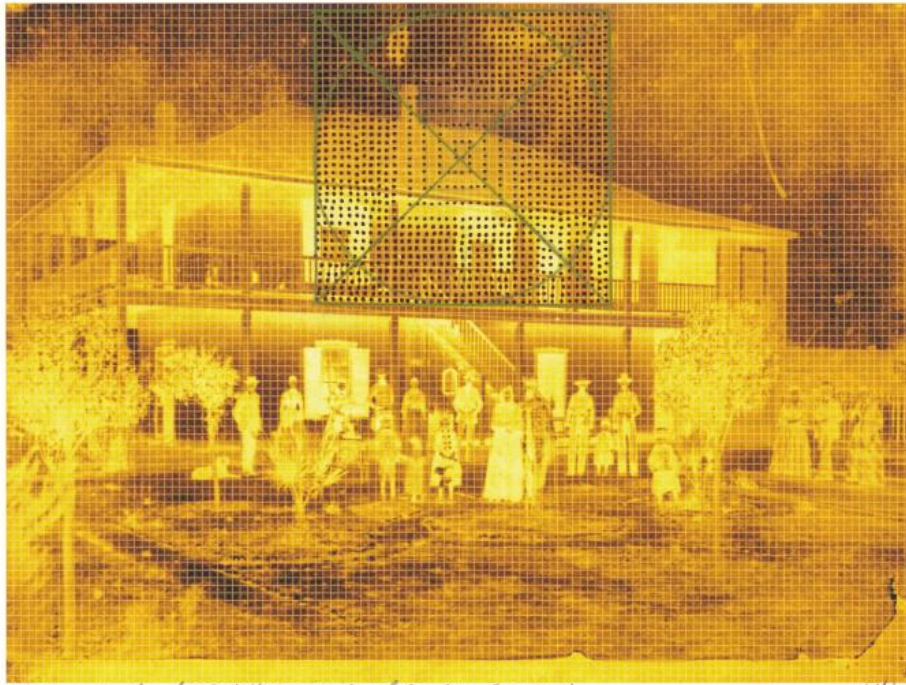


# art and cake

A Contemporary Art Magazine with a Focus on the Los Angeles Art Scene

AUGUST 14, 2019

## Linda Vallejo at LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes



*91.2% of Los Angeles' Eastside Community is Latin 2018 (1521/1382)*  
 Linda Vallejo, *The Brown Dot Project Adobes: 91.2% of Los Angeles' Eastside is Latino*

## Rethinking Brownness: Brown Belongings by Linda Vallejo

**LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, Los Angeles through January 13, 2020**

**Written by David S. Rubin**

Linda Vallejo has spent much of the past decade investigating the deeply personal subject of what it means to be a brown-skinned American. With daily media coverage of current controversies over the citizenship question on the 2020 Census, Latin American migrant children living in inhumane concentration camps, and the tenuousness of the future of DACA, Vallejo's research project couldn't be any timelier. Her findings, which are presented in the form of more than 125 paintings, drawings, and sculptures, should elicit more questions than answers, which is exactly the artist's stated intention.

Although nonlinear and non-chronological in presentation, the exhibition is devoted to five themes (and some subthemes) that reveal the range and depth of Vallejo's inquiry. She began the project with the series *Make 'Em All Mexican*, for which she altered found and mostly kitschy historical or cultural representations of white people by painting their skin and blond hair or blue eyes (where applicable) in different shades of brown. The generic question asked is simply, "What if?" What if the likes of George and Martha Washington, the woman behind the Mona Lisa smile, the familiar couple in Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, or media icons such as Elvis Presley and Bob's Big Boy had had brown skin? Would this have changed the course of history? Would our perceptions and assumptions about what it is to be Mexican, Mexican American, Latinx, Chicanx, or Indigenx be different than they are today?

Vallejo approached the next two thematic groupings like a statistician, cleverly translating quantifiable data into visual imagery as opposed to numbers. For *The Brown Dot Project*, she did her own census taking, recording the percentages of Latinx populations in such areas as housing, occupations, and education level by painting tiny brown dots into grid modules. Some take the form of indigenous textile designs, while others are organized into configurations referring to the topic or superimposed over postcards featuring related imagery. In the subsequent series *Datos Sagrados* (Sacred Data), Vallejo opted for a more visceral approach, with data concerning immigration presented as brown patterns painted on white handmade paper to form circular abstract mandalas.

In the final series, *Cultural Enigma*, Vallejo adds to the mix dialogues about revisionist history and what it is simply to be human, to be part of the global population. One group is comprised of portraits of anonymous brown-skinned figures dressed in shimmering light blue clothing. With their poses and features appropriated from compositions by well-known Caucasian artists, the images call attention to the dearth of representation of artists of color in art history books and curricula. A second series, which Vallejo views as "abstract Rorschach tests," encourages viewers to find their own meanings in iridescent blue abstract symbols that float against luminous fields rendered in various shades of brown.

In the end, this comprehensive survey should provoke thoughtful reflection on some of the most pressing issues of our time. It also demonstrates how small mundane objects can be transformed to pack a remarkably mighty punch.