

## ***Linda Vallejo: Brown Belongings***

### **Curatorial Statement**

**“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 you and fixes your place in it.” – Linda Vallejo**

### **Exhibition and Public Programs at LA Plaza**

Los Angeles-based Chicana artist Linda Vallejo’s career spans forty years, during which she has worked across a variety of media—including screenprinting, painting, drawing, and sculpture—and has been featured in numerous exhibitions and publications. For nearly a decade, Vallejo has explored the vast and varied meanings of the color brown. Through several recent series and subseries of artworks, including *Make ‘Em All Mexican*, *The Brown Oscars*, *The Brown Dot Project*, *Datos Sagrados*, and *Cultural Enigma*, Vallejo asks crucial questions about race and representation for the Latinx community: “How do race, color, and class define our status in the world? How do they affect our understanding and appreciation of culture? How do images and data shape our attitudes about color and class? Who owns culture and ideas, and what does it mean to claim or re-appropriate culture?” Approaching these difficult and often divisive subjects with humor, playfulness, and curiosity, the artist invites viewers into what she calls a “comfortable space where . . . stories surface about the divisions caused by our differences and the possibility of unity through our similarities.”

For its first solo exhibition helmed by a woman and staged simultaneously in all its temporary exhibition galleries, LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes will exhibit selections from these series and subseries (described in greater detail below) alongside new works by Vallejo, using her art to explore the possibilities and potential of brownness. *Linda Vallejo: Brown Belongings* will examine how race and color, as expressed through images and data, affect our perception and experience of culture. At the same time, it asks how embracing brownness can allow us to creatively question, deflect, and resist stereotypes of and assumptions about Latinx people.

Data and imagery—two key sources through which we make sense of the world around us—are often presented as neutral, but are defined by the cultures in which they are created. By reframing imagery and data in empowering ways, Vallejo encourages us consider and question the “facts” we have received, leading to a better understanding and appreciation of ourselves and our communities. In keeping with its mission of celebrating and cultivating an appreciation for the enduring and evolving influence of Mexican, Mexican-American, and Latino culture, LA Plaza presents the work of this important Chicana artist with the aim of addressing the lived experiences of the Latinx community and creating dialogue about its past, present, and future.

Together with works from the four series and subseries described below, LA Plaza will display new work by Vallejo, including pieces from her recent *Cultural Enigma* series and new *Brown*

*Dot Project* pieces. The newly commissioned works will combine modern data with imagery of the early Mexican and Mexican American experience in Los Angeles to complement the history presented in its permanent exhibitions, *LA Starts Here!* and *Calle Principal: Mi México en Los Angeles*.

Works from different series will be combined in thematic groupings throughout LA Plaza's galleries, allowing the visitor to grasp ideas that resonate across Vallejo's body of work. Interactive elements will invite visitors to reflect and share aspects of their own identities. A series of public programs, including artist talks, documentary screenings, and even a chocolate tasting, will invite visitors to engage directly with the exhibition themes.

### ***Make 'Em All Mexican***



*La Victoria*, 2014, acrylic, metal flake, repurposed composite plastic; *Mexican Gothic*, 2014, acrylic, aluminum sublimation print; *Little Boy Brown Celebrating El Dia de Los Muertos*, 2012, acrylic, repurposed plaster, solid silver leaf

In *Make 'Em All Mexican*, Vallejo repurposes imagery from the worlds of art and popular culture (including figures commonly collected by Latinx people), changing the color of well-known figures to brown. The resulting sculptures and paintings, featuring everything from a brown Marilyn Monroe (or “Marielena La Fabulosa”) to a brown Marie Antoinette, use a mixture of humor and provocation to catch viewers' attention and start important conversations about representation. The Latinx community often receives messages that reinforce western beauty ideals and devalue brownness. Vallejo's work asks why brown figures are not as celebrated or commemorated as their white counterparts, and then actively celebrates and commemorates

them. By taking back imagery that has excluded people of color, *Make 'Em All Mexican* turns the tables on traditionally acceptable art and makes it more relatable to a broader audience.

Vallejo challenges viewers of all backgrounds to critically consider what aesthetics are held up as worthy and why. This kind of critical thinking—and the dialogue it creates—is key to advancing mutual respect among diverse communities. As Vallejo notes, “As funny as it is, *Make 'Em All Mexican* appears to be capable of opening doors to a shared reality in a modern world where color still governs possession and power. *Make 'Em All Mexican* is only the start to a lengthy process but, change is possible, if we just laugh and work through it together.”

### ***The Brown Oscars***



*Emilio 'El Indio' Fernandez and Aurora Hernandez, 2016, gouache, photographic print, water color paper*

As Hollywood grapples with its longstanding exclusion of women and people of color from positions of power, Vallejo re-imagines its history as one of inclusion. In a subseries of *Make 'Em All Mexican*, the artist casts famous actors, actresses, and even the Oscar statuette itself in shades of brown. *The Brown Oscars* is a satire of Hollywood’s racial politics, calling out the lack of visible representation for Latinx people as well as the longstanding practice of casting white people in Latinx roles. Works in this subseries ask viewers to imagine themselves in positions of power; as role models on the silver screen. Vallejo deftly points out how few Mexicans and Mexican Americans are as lauded as white players in the industry. As Los

Angeles' premiere Mexican and Mexican American cultural center, Vallejo's exhibition at LA Plaza is uniquely positioned to reach the very audience that has the power to affect change around representation in entertainment.

### ***The Brown Dot Project***



*Los Angeles 48.3%*, 2015, archival marker, vellum; *East Los Angeles 96.7%*, 2015, archival marker, vellum

Expanding on the ideas she first explored in *Make 'Em All Mexican*, Vallejo mines a different source of information that influences how the Latinx community understands itself and is understood by others: demographic data. In *The Brown Dot Project*, the artist turns statistics about Latinx people into brown dots on grids. In some cases, the dots take on patterns reminiscent of Mesoamerican and Indigenous art, as well as abstract art; in others, Vallejo uses the dots to create figures and portraits. What emerges is a complicated, challenging, yet collective portrait of Latinx life in the United States: neighborhoods, cities, professions, and lived experiences take shape on paper. Vallejo creatively interprets datasets—information frequently distorted depending on the motive of whoever is using said data—and presents it through her own lens. As the Latinx population in the United States continues to grow, Vallejo asks how and whether these numbers translate into changing attitudes about race. As white anxieties about waning influence translate into increasingly harsh policies directed at restricting the lives and mobility of Latinx people, these questions take on a heightened urgency.

## ***Datos Sagrados***



*65% of U.S. Latinos are Native Born*, 2017, gouache on handmade paper; *64% of U.S. Latinos are Mexican*, 2017, gouache on handmade paper

*Datos Sagrados*, a subseries of *The Brown Dot Project*, merges Vallejo's ideas about statistics with the spiritual focus of earlier works not included in this exhibition. Rather than working with dots on grids, Vallejo experiments with expressing statistics in blocked forms, creating a sacred geometry of population data. Incorporating ancient patterns such as the Fibonacci sequence, the forms that emerge in this subseries elicit an instinctive reaction to the visual grace of the pieces before prompting further thought about the data behind the patterns. The data and forms combine to create artwork that is both aesthetically pleasing and illuminating, broadening visitors' understanding of themselves and their communities.

### **Artist's Statement and CV**

My work consolidates multiple influences gained from a lifetime of study and travel throughout Europe, the United States, and Mexico to create images that investigate contemporary Latin American cultural, social, and political issues. During my artistic grounding, I immersed myself in the Chicana/o and indigenous communities—experiences that added to my multifaceted perspective and, by extension, my art practice. It has taken a forty-year artistic career to fuse these diverse influences to create images that discuss and define the Latin American presence and influence in the United States.

I was born and lived the first three years of my life in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles. My great-grandparents settled here after they migrated from Mexico and Texas to work in the fields of

California in the first decades of the 20th century. In 1951, my father graduated from UCLA and entered the US Air Force as a commissioned officer when we moved to Germany. Over the next ten years I lived in Arizona, Missouri, Texas, and Sacramento, CA. In the mid-1960s, I found myself in Montgomery, Alabama, where my high school was integrated for the first time in its history and I became aware that I was a person of color. I have memories of “white” and “colored” bathroom stalls and fountains, of the tragic marches from Selma, of burning crosses and lynching, and of the hopeful speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I began to realize that the world did not see me as I saw myself, and 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 *Make 'Em All Mexican* (2011-2016).

In 1967, my family moved to Madrid, where I graduated from high school and traveled, studying art and architecture. I was deeply influenced by European classical history and culture. After completing lithography studies at the University of Madrid, I returned to Los Angeles in 1975 to complete my MFA in printmaking at California State University, Long Beach. It was then that I was hired by Sister Karen Bocalero, founder of Self Help Graphics, to be a silkscreen teacher for the SHG Barrio Mobile Art Studio in Los Angeles. I received an individual artist-in-residence grant from the California Arts Council from 1975-1978. I studied Mesoamerican and Chicana/o culture and began an involvement in the burgeoning Chicana/o arts community and Chicana/o Indígena and Native American ceremonial community that has lasted for decades.

Over the next thirty years, I served as a community volunteer for the Native American Religious Society at the California Rehabilitation Center, Norco, and supported traditional indigenous ceremony in California, Arizona, and South Dakota. These experiences led me to create a portfolio of earth-based sculpture made of found tree fragments, handmade paper, and mixed media called *Tree People* (1980-1990), focusing on a “metamorphic” relationship with nature.

While completing my MFA, and during my teaching tenure at Self Help Graphics, I developed working relationships with several community-based arts and cultural organizations and was included in exhibitions throughout Southern California and the Southwest. In 1985, I was awarded the California Community Foundation Brody Emerging Artist Fellowship and the Brody Arts Fund Fellow, in recognition of artistic merit and community involvement.

From 1990-1997 I owned and operated Galería Las Americas, representing more than thirty Chicana/o and Latin American artists. The gallery presented more than fifty exhibitions and was reviewed in *ArtNews*, *Los Angeles Times*, *MAS Magazine*, *LA Weekly*, and *Art Business News*, among others. During this time, I produced a large group of works on paper and canvas entitled *Woman of Love and Integrity*. Fueled by my involvement in the Chicana/o Indigenous community and my new position as mother, these images combined indigenous symbols with

feminine identity as a symbol of the earth, its nurturing and protective nature, and its strength and longevity. In addition, I created a large series of gouache on paper works entitled *The Death of Urban Humanity* (1993). These works influenced my move into installation and use of repurposed materials in the years to come.

Images from *Woman of Love and Integrity* accompanied by personal interviews were featured in feminist publications focusing on women artists. I also received the City of Los Angeles Latinas Making History Award (1991) and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Artist Award (1999).

From 1996 to 2000, I created *Los Cielos*, a series of more than 100 paintings with giant, luminous skies, and broad landscapes to express humanity's intrinsic connection to nature, which had a solo exhibition in 2000 at The Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), Los Angeles. Leah Ollman of *The Los Angeles Times* stated, "Vallejo's paintings are generated by her deeply felt connection to exactly those fundamental life forces—birth, nature, spirit." *Los Cielos* was accompanied by a publication with essays by Sybil Venegas, professor, East Los Angeles College; Armando Durón, collector of Chicana/o art; and Reina Prado, educator and curator.

In 2001, my personal historical papers, as well as those of Galería Las Americas, were collected by the University of California, Santa Barbara, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives (CEMA). In 2002, my work was included in *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art: 2002*, published by Bi-Lingual Press.

In 2003, my first political/ecological installation was presented at Tropico de Nopal Gallery Art-Space, Los Angeles. This installation focused on the reconciliation of opposites: the beauty and tranquility of nature with urban violence and carnage. *Hope in the Midst of War, Death, and Destruction* combined a central montage of images of war dead with the four elements (earth, water, fire and air) representing symbols of "hope." This was followed in 2004 with an installation that paired my early *Tree People* sculpture with the *Los Cielos* paintings to create *A Prayer for the Earth Eco Installation* at The Carnegie Art Museum in Oxnard, California. This installation was anchored by a central "altar" of manipulated photographs with images of pollution; indigenous peoples in ceremony; and an assemblage with objects symbolizing Earth, Water, Fire, and Air. It was presented with the goal of asking questions about our collective environmental responsibility.

Since my early days of working with Self Help Graphics, I have owned my own consulting business, *A to Z Grantwriting*, and served as a grant writing consultant for many Southern California cultural and arts organizations. From 2001 to 2003, I traveled to teach the *A to Z Grantwriting Workshop* in China, New York, and several other major US cities. During these trips, I visited museums and galleries where I was deeply inspired by sculpture made of prefabricated and found objects, as well as images that juxtaposed seemingly contradictory cultural symbols and icons. After seeing hundreds of works, my creative process began to

shift. I found myself ruminating, “What would re-purposed images look like if I created them from my own personal Chicana/o Indígena cultural lens?”

I spent the next several years searching for this image while creating multimedia works using repurposed materials. These included *Postmodern Trash*, sculpture using recyclable materials that examined the impact of technology and pollution on nature; and *Censored*, mixed-media collages focused on contemporary cultural, social, and political issues.

From 2004 to 2009, these works were included in exhibitions at several Chicana/o cultural centers, galleries, and museums. I also continued my relationship with Self Help Graphics by completing two limited edition silkscreen prints with the SHG Atelier Print Program. In 2005, I was awarded the Durfee Foundation Individual Artist Grant. Simultaneously, I painted acrylic and oil on canvas works called *The Electrics* (2008-2010). *The Electrics* were a fusion of my experiences in the golden days of hippie-dom and psychedelia; the magical, hallucinatory quality of indigenous Native American and Mexican ceremonial tradition; and decades spent at the computer manipulating digital imagery.

In 2010, *Fierce Beauty: The Artwork of Linda Vallejo*, a forty-year retrospective curated by Dr. Betty Ann Brown (art historian and professor at California State University, Northridge) was presented at the Plaza de la Raza Boathouse Gallery, Los Angeles. The exhibition included more than 125 works (1969-2010), lectures, and panels, and a full-color publication with essays by renowned scholars, curators, and art critics.

In 2011, I 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, Los Angeles. In 2014, I received the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs (COLA) Individual Artist Fellowship.

Finally, in 2011, all these experiences and influences converged, and I began to create images that discuss and define the Latin American presence and influence in the United States. I began a series entitled *Make ‘Em All Mexican* (MEAM), which confronts the viewer with one of the most important questions of our time: “How do race, color, and class define our status in the world?” In this series, I repurpose pricey antiques and literally paint them brown. MEAM images include a “brown” Marilyn Monroe (*Marielena: La Fabulosa*), Elvis Presley (*El Vis*), Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble, Superman (*Super Hombre*), the Queen Mother, politicians, the Greek gods, and an array of movie stars that make up a subseries called *The Brown Oscars*. 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.

In 2015-2016, I continued “keepin’ it brown” with a series entitled *The Brown Dot Project* (TBDP). I translated national Latinx population and workforce data into geometric forms and



pop images on architectural grid paper using brown dots. Images recall Native American and Mesoamerican blankets and weavings, as well as grid-oriented modernists Mondrian, Chuck Close, Agnes Martin, and Charles Gaines.

I describe *The Brown Dot Project* as an elegant solution to a series of complex questions about simple facts—that is, data about Latino life in the United States. I find myself studying a variety of sets of data, including topics such as the number of Latinos in any given city or state, the national number of Latino executives, the number of Latinos involved in the American Civil War. The amount and kinds of data are inexhaustible. I am literally counting one Latino at a time, brown dot by brown dot.

From 2012 to 2017, these works were shown at Texas A&M University Reynolds Gallery, College Station, TX; Bert Green Fine Art, Chicago; Salt Fine Art, Laguna Beach, CA; UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, Los Angeles; Lancaster Museum of Art and History, Lancaster, CA; the Clemente Soto Véllez Cultural & Educational Center, New York; George Lawson Gallery, Los Angeles; the University Art Gallery of New Mexico State University; and at Arte Americas, Fresno, CA. In 2018, exhibitions of these series will be presented at the Kean University Karl & Helen Burger Gallery, Union, NJ; and the Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA.

*Make 'Em All Mexican* was recently featured on the cover of the *Los Angeles Times* Calendar section in an article entitled, "In her series 'Make 'Em All Mexican,' artist Linda Vallejo imagines #OscarsSoBrown" by Carolina A. Miranda. In 2017, my "Keepin' It Brown" exhibition was the featured *Artillery Magazine* Pick of the Week.

I was featured in multiple exhibitions connected to the Getty Foundation's 2017 *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA* initiative. These included *Descendants and Dissonance: Cultural Iconography in Contemporary Los Angeles*, Salt Fine Art Gallery, Laguna Beach, CA; *Deconstructing Liberty: A Destiny Manifested*, Muzeo Museum & Cultural Center, Anaheim, CA; *El Día de Los Muertos: Past, Present, and Future*, Self Help Graphics, Los Angeles, CA; *Keepin' It Brown*, bG Gallery, Santa Monica, CA; and *LA/Landscapes: Real and Imagined*, Studio Channel Islands, Camarillo, CA.

My work is held in the permanent collections of the East Los Angeles College Vincent Price Museum, Los Angeles; the National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago; the Carnegie Art Museum, Oxnard, CA; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the University of California, Santa Barbara California Multicultural and Ethnic Archives; and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. I live in Topanga Canyon, California, with my husband, Ron Dillaway. My son Robert is a lawyer in Southern California, while my son Paul is a doctor practicing in Arizona.