

Culture as Color Wheel

William Moreno

The color brown doesn't appear on a typical color wheel.

For artists and designers—not to mention primary and secondary school students—the color wheel is a time-honored and indispensable creative tool. Purportedly invented by Isaac Newton and modeled after the spectral scale, such wheels generally display primary and secondary colors. Brown can be an amalgam of these: red, yellow, or blue mixed with a dab or more of the respective complementary color, and perhaps black. Over time, various brown hues have found approval and integration in a multitude of settings—from the umber applied to cave walls in Neolithic times, to the Vandyke brown popularized in seventeenth-century European painting, to contemporary shades used in commercial and residential contexts, often to foster a warm, woody atmosphere.¹

The same cannot be said of the color brown in the context of human skin.

Scientists hypothesize that our skin color reflects our ancestors' proximity to the equator—the closer to the equator, the darker the hue. Brown skin is commonly described as dark as coal, mahogany, mud, dirt, smoke, coffee, bronze, and chocolate. The imagery and usage are extensive, ranging from comforting, romantic notions to weaponized, derogatory, and racist inferences, particularly in politicized notions of invaders, outsiders, or burdens.

It follows that skin color and its cultural permutations serves as fertile ground for artists. In 2012, artist Angélica Dass began photographing her Brazilian family members to build one of the first databases of skin hues, a “chromatic inventory” entitled *Humanae*. Dass describes this work in progress as an attempt to draw attention to “our true color, rather than the untrue colors of red, yellow, black, and white.”² Ultimately, this project will yield a skin color catalog that matches Pantone shades.

In the 1993 Whitney Biennial, artist Byron Kim exhibited *Synecdoche*, an ongoing project then composed of 204 panels measuring eight by ten inches—a common photographic portrait size. The panels, which have since more than doubled in number, showcase the skin tones of strangers, friends, fellow artists, and the artist himself. The installation represents a personal exploration of racial identity and its political dimensions. The National Gallery of Art acquired the work in 2009.³

Linda Vallejo's work also has a propensity to compel introspection about skin color, sometimes with propositions that are positively “in your face.” Starting around 2011, with the series *Make 'Em All Mexican*, Vallejo began to stun viewers with a kind of colorizing graffiti—a vandalizing of cultural sacred cows. By exposing viewers to a manifestation of what might have been—had prominent and influential figures had brown skin—she leaves them little choice but to ponder what could be. Vallejo succeeds in turning both appropriated

¹ Robert L. Feller and Ruth M. Johnston-Feller, “Vandyke Brown: Cassel Earth, Cologne Earth,” in *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, vol. 3, ed. Elisabeth West FitzHugh (2012; reprint, Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1997), 162–163.

² Margaret Rhodes, “Artist Wants to Map Every Single Human Skin Tone on Earth,” *Fast Company*, March 14, 2014, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3027693/whats-your-pantone-color-consult-this-incredible-spectrum-of-human-skin-tones>.

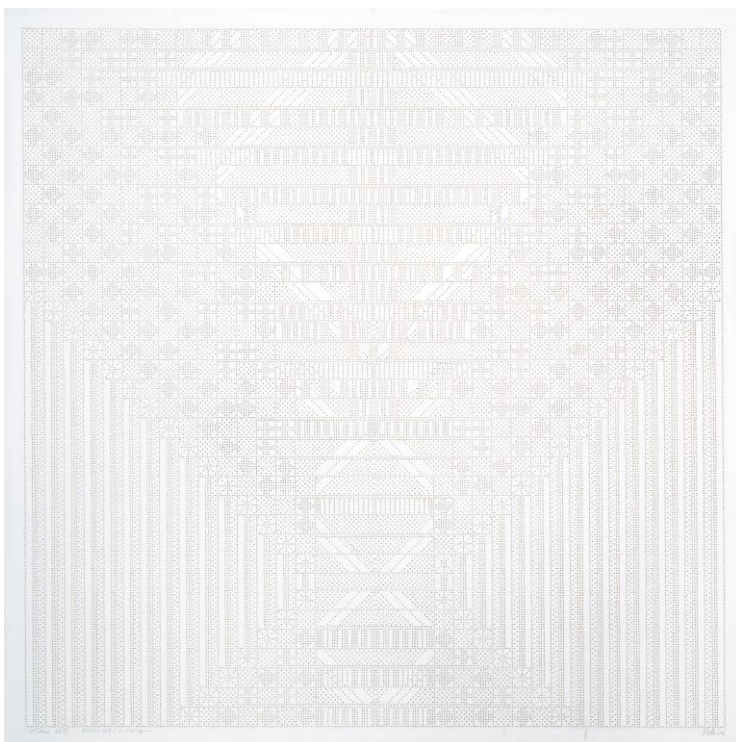
³ Peggy McGlone, “Contemporary Artist Uses Skin Color for Abstract Portrait on Race and Identity at National Gallery,” *Washington Post*, January 12, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/01/12/contemporary-artist-uses-skin-color-for-abstract-portrait-on-race-and-identity-for-national-gallery/?utm_term=.4a94f4e569d0; National Gallery of Art, “*Synecdoche*: 1991–Present,” n.d., <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.142289.html#overview>.

images and their titles into alternative histories. A case in point: *American Gothic* (1930) is rechristened *Mexican Gothic* (Figure TK1, *Mexican Gothic*, 2014, aluminum print, acrylic, 40 x 30 in.).



The series can be controversial among viewers of all backgrounds. It can elicit debate about what constitutes the “right” shades of paint and trepidation that artworks may be too dark or not representative of the full complement of skin tones. Some of this “color anxiety” is rooted in insecurity about class and social standing. It is not unusual for people to perceive lighter-skinned individuals to be at the top of the social pyramid, with others following—the darker the skin tone, the lower the social status. The very composition of Latin American and US elites and media appears to substantiate this perception. Vallejo’s objective is to invite viewers to question—without resolution.

Moving beyond overt cultural castigations, Vallejo experiments with digital encryptions—or so it seems—with *The Brown Dot Project*. Here she turns to the realm of data-driven figuration to generate abstracted imagery. Her technique is a bit of a ruse. At once intriguing and daunting, these resplendent designs are deceptive: upon closer inspection, patterns that initially may have looked laser-printed reveal themselves to be composed of fastidiously hand-stippled brown dots. The approach moves beyond the color question, casting a much wider social and demographic net to transmit a call for increased inclusivity. The Zen-like quality of some of these works—such as *Miami 66%* (2016)—is both meditative and provocative (see Figure TK2, *Miami 66%*, 2016, Archival marker on gridded vellum, 36 x 36 in.) Viewers are induced to make sense of a demographic narrative that they otherwise may not have noticed or sought out, particularly in the form of data points on a spreadsheet.



Cultural Enigma (Symbols and Signs) is Vallejo’s most recent engagement with race and culture—and her most ambitious. Awash in delicate hues of rust and brown, these works on handmade paper are emblazoned with mysterious markings (see Figure TK3, *Untitled*, 2019, From *Cultural Enigma (Symbols and Signs)*, Gouache on handmade paper, 16.75 x 12 in.) The artist offers them as what she calls “cultural Rorschach tests,” a variation on the inkblots used in psychology. But it is unclear what these markings are: Hieroglyphics? Native American symbols? Hybrids? This series offers no data, no identifiable memes; the viewer is left to interpret, to unlock meaning. Perhaps most discernible is what *Cultural Enigma* is essentially about—its “aboutness,” to use the term employed by philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto. The works in this series allow for a deeper look at the meaning of culture and color in our lives, in a way that may cause alarm or instill a desire to transform.

In that sense, this series shares its aboutness with Vallejo’s earlier series, *Make ‘Em All Mexican*, *The Brown Dot Project*, and *Datos Sagrados*.



So what are viewers to make of this latter-day parsing of culture and color? Some might carry out a formal analysis—of the patterns, textures, colors, and tones in Vallejo’s work—to initiate deeper discussion. Yet like the color wheel, which can be used to compose a boundless range of hues, the works invite experimentation and personal projection. Vallejo proffers no straightforward answers or reconciliations, nor does she take a position. Her accomplishment is the successful integration of artistic elements into a treatise on current affairs, one that doesn’t prognosticate or suggest a preferred outcome.

That responsibility is left to the viewer.

Bio

William Moreno is a Los Angeles native and a private art advisor, dealer, curator, and writer. He was founding executive director of the Claremont Museum of Art in Los Angeles County and also served as executive director of the Mexican Museum in San Francisco. He was previously the director of a contemporary art gallery in Silicon Valley.

Moreno has been a featured speaker at the Commonwealth Club and the American Institute of Architects and appeared on PBS-KCET’s series *California’s Gold*, hosted by Huell Howser, as well as other television and radio shows. He regularly participates in panel discussions on contemporary art topics, has served on grant panels for the City of Los Angeles Individual Artist Fellowships, the National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures Fund for the Arts, the California Community Foundation Mid-Career Artist Fellows, and as a portfolio reviewer for PhotoAlliance and the Los Angeles Art Association. He has curated a number of independent exhibitions, including at the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, the Vincent Price Museum, and the George Billis Gallery.

He is an advisory board committee member for the California Association of Museums and served as board chair of Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE).