

*Mujer Chingona*¹

Michelle L. Lopez

While pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree, I took my share of traditional art and art history classes, all of which were taught from a Eurocentric perspective. It wasn't until I began taking courses in Chicana Studies that I realized that my exposure to and awareness of Chicana artists was limited. As I learned about artists who looked like me, a new world opened up.

During this time, I was fortunate to meet and befriend Margaret “Quica” Alarcón, a Chicana artist whose work I came to admire. Margaret was a longtime member of Mujeres de Maíz (MdM), an arts organization run by and for women of color. It was invigorating for me to see how these women had created space to show, publish, and perform their work, and how they had embraced the queer and trans communities from their inception, defying traditional Chicana patriarchy. I wanted to become involved right away, and MdM welcomed me with open arms.



In 2012, I curated the annual MdM exhibition, which took place at Corazón del Pueblo in Boyle Heights, California. It was during this period that Linda Vallejo and I had our first conversation. She had submitted a piece from her *Make 'Em All Mexican* series, a work entitled *Pretty Little Doll* (2012) (see Figure TK1, *Pretty Little Doll*, 2012, From *Make 'Em All Mexican*, Acrylic on repurposed photograph, 16 x 12 in.) Due to a logistical mix-up, the work never actually made it onto the wall, but I remember it very well—because it left me in awe.

I had never seen anything like *Pretty Little Doll*. As a child, I used to watch old movies alone on Saturday and Sunday mornings, while my mother slept. Back then, the number of television channels was limited. Often, old Shirley Temple films were the only alternative to sports. I watched this little white girl with curly hair sing and dance weekend after weekend, but I couldn't identify with her. Nothing about her said that I could be like her. Linda's version of Shirley Temple didn't make me think I could be like her, but rather, that she could be like me. Seeing her as Mexican gave me what I can only describe as a sense of empowerment.

Linda's work has also left lasting impressions on veteran MdM members. In 2009, the MdM zine, *La Sagrada*, featured a painting from Linda's *Electrics* series. The work—*Electric Oak: Full Moon in Daylight* (2008) (see Figure TK2, *Electric Oak: Full Moon in Daylight*, 2008, From *The Electrics*, Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in.) —is a vibrant portrait of a tree, a symbol that functions as an archetypal element in various traditions and cultures. The colors in the painting give the appearance that electricity is coursing through the branches, the roots, and the sky, lending the work an almost hallucinogenic appearance. From a spiritual perspective, this electrical charge represents the universal energy that runs through and connects everything that exists in the universe. Linda describes her *Electrics* series as a combination of hippie psychedelia, digital imagery, and a host of other influences, among them Andy Warhol, Gustav Klimt, Huichol yarn art, and indigenous beadwork.² Her ability to combine subtle references to both indigenous spirituality and universal cultural signifiers challenges the mainstream art world's tendency to discourage the integration of spirituality. At the same time, this approach allows her to appeal to a broad audience—including MdM members, for whom spirituality plays a key role. From my perspective, spirituality is among the most appealing aspects of Chicana artwork in general.

¹ Mexican slang for an influential, empowered woman.

² Linda Vallejo, interview by the author, Los Angeles, Calif., September 23, 2018; Linda Vallejo, “*The Electrics*: Artist Statement,” n.d., <https://lindavallejo.com/artworks/paintings/the-electrics/page/2/>.

Linda's support for MdM extends back more than two decades. She has participated in exhibitions and zines, and, more recently, by serving on our advisory board. Her community engagement reaches back even further, to the 1970s. MdM co-founder Felicia "Fe" Montes recounts childhood memories of Linda—such as seeing her at the Day of the Dead exhibitions at Self Help Graphics & Art (SHG), a renowned community arts center in Boyle Heights. Linda was one of the original members of SHG's Barrio Mobile Art Studio, which offered multicultural workshops to schoolchildren until the mid-1980s. In 1989, she started her own gallery, Galería Las Américas, which Felicia would visit with her mother. In retrospect, Felicia observes that by representing Chicana artists and exhibiting their work back then, the gallery was "ahead of its time."³



At *Mujeres de Maíz*, we value the fact that Linda provides support and advice not only at the organizational and community levels, but also at the individual one. Like my MdM peers, I have been able to learn and benefit from her guidance, such as by completing her A to Z Grantwriting course, yet I also know I can always turn to her for help in personal matters. Her palpable drive, determination, and strength are inspiring qualities, as is her ability to balance her art practice, entrepreneurship, spirituality, relationships, and family. To us, Linda is not only an artist, but also a pioneer, mentor, and friend. Along with her community engagement, Linda's art practice has nurtured our ability to identify and see ourselves, and to connect to the universal energy. It leaves me wondering what is next, where her next series will take us. I, for one, am looking forward to the journey.

Bio

Michelle L. Lopez earned a master's in art history and a Master of Fine Arts from California State University, Los Angeles. In 2014 she joined the university's Department of Chicana(o) and Latina(o) Studies as a lecturer. She is an educator, artist, curator, grant writer, community organizer, and mom. Her research focuses on pre-Columbian and contemporary cultural studies and forms of activism. She serves as the finance director of *Mujeres de Maíz*, an arts organization run for and by women of color, and works with the community arts center Self Help Graphics & Art in Boyle Heights, California. In 2018, she co-curated the exhibition *Entre Tinta y Lucha: 45 Years of Self Help Graphics & Art* at the Cal State LA Fine Arts Gallery.

³ Felicia "Fe" Montes, interview by author, Los Angeles, Calif., September 16, 2018; Self Help Graphics & Art, "History," n.d., <https://www.selfhelpgraphics.com/history>; Eva Zetterman, "Curatorial Strategies on the Art Scene during the Feminist Movement: Los Angeles in the 1970s," in *Curating Differently: Feminisms, Exhibitions and Curatorial Spaces*, ed. Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 12–13.