

Spectacular Brownness in the Twenty-First-Century Art of Linda Vallejo **Karen Mary Davalos**

Linda Vallejo has been thinking about the social and cultural meaning of the color brown for some time. In 2010, the artist began to reconceptualize notions associated with racial formation, pigmentation, and belonging in *Make 'Em All Mexican (MEAM)*, a provocative series in which she darkens skin, eyes, and hair in otherwise faithful replicas of familiar portraits and mass media representations of icons and celebrities. Within this series and beyond it, the artist's exploration of the color brown and its meaning has generated a range of imagery, styles, and media—from figurative works, geometric abstraction, pointillist designs, drawings, and two-dimensional, mixed-media images to repurposed objects, sculpture, and installation art.

In many ways, these works are a social engagement, enabling relational aesthetics as viewers respond to the oeuvre's provocations. Through *MEAM*, Vallejo deliberately seeks to elicit reflection and discussion. Having exhibited the series for nearly a decade, she has learned to anticipate visceral responses—snickers, heady laughter, even tears—and craves conversation with viewers. Her subsequent series, such as *The Brown Dot Project*, *Datos Sagrados*, and *Cultural Enigma*, are similarly dependent on the audience; they come to full expression when the viewer interprets, attaches meaning to, or asks questions about an image. In all of these series, it is Vallejo's use of the color brown that undergirds a collaborative, socially engaged practice.¹ Although she creates the works alone in her studio, they come into their full aesthetic flowering through audience response to her manipulation of the color brown.

At its core, *MEAM* recodes and rejects the quotidian visual gestures of white privilege, but the series is simultaneously a quest for inclusion and “an embrace of abjection as an aesthetic strategy,” one that destabilizes racial difference and “community” as coherent and unmediated.² The series plays with the politics of respectability by incorporating the contemptible or unworthy (the abject) as a tactic to rethink assumptions about Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Chicana individuals.³ Using a simple compositional strategy, Vallejo merely paints everyone Mexican, changing the color and sometimes the facial features of the repurposed images using brown and black gouache or oil. She defaces vintage photographs and advertisements, fine-art reproductions, collectable figurines, and mass-produced prints and statuettes by painting directly on them. She recasts white skin with brown paint and recolors blond hair and blue eyes using black or brown paint. Mona Lisa, Marilyn Monroe, and Fred Flintstone, among others, are painted brown. By disrupting viewers' perceptions of these images—and their historical and cultural associations—the series inevitably elicits emotional responses. Taken individually or as a whole, the repainted images challenge presumptions about race, beauty, belonging, and national identity, but they also pursue engagement with “negative affects—uncertainty, disgust, unbelonging,” as well as anxiety, contempt, and anger—to name a few responses that the series calls into existence in its critique of the social order.⁴

The Brown Dot Project, *Datos Sagrados*, and *Cultural Enigma* are series that function in the same context as *MEAM*. Each one extends Vallejo's exploration of the color brown and its meaning, and each maneuvers more closely toward social engagement, increasing the dynamic relation between artist and audience. This essay

¹ Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011). For Helguera, socially engaged art is an interdisciplinary arts practice that depends on the collaborative involvement of the artist-instigator and others; it emerges from the legacy of institutional critique, particularly of the art market, and the interrogation of “art for art's sake.” Since Vallejo insists that her work be for sale, she modifies Helguera's notion of socially engaged art by demonstrating that art, social transformation, and commerce need not be mutually exclusive.

² Leticia Alvarado, *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 10.

³ As of this writing, the term “Chicana” is widely contested and negotiated. Some feminists wish to enunciate their female gender and find the term's gender-blindness troubling. Yet the gender-binary terms “Chicana/o” and “Chicana@” can exclude intersex, transgender, and non-binary people. “Chicana” and, correspondingly, “Latina” are the best we have at the moment.

⁴ Alvarado, *Abject Performances*, 4.

explores those movements as well as the vehicle—brown, a composite color made from a mixture of primary colors—that generates the engagement. Vallejo has purchased a variety of brown paints available on the market: burnt sienna, raw sienna, raw umber, burnt umber, yellow ochre, gold ochre, red ochre, sepia, and Vandyke brown. She has also combined these colors as a way of exploring the complexity and radiance of this complex and lustrous hue. For some viewers, these tones might call to mind *café con leche* (coffee with milk), a bar of milk chocolate, roasted coffee beans, iron-rich desert soil, nutmeg, or hazelnuts; others might associate them with the variations in skin color among their family members.

Vallejo's broad spectrum of brown supports the series' proposition that Mexicans come in a wide range of skin tones and that no single image encapsulates all Mexicans. In highlighting that Mexican Americans are not homogeneous, it also points to the diversity that is expressed across Latinx populations. Further, Vallejo's attention to the complexities of brown paint interrogates the ongoing fictions about various aspects of brown-skinned people collectively, such as their intellect (they are uneducated and slow), work ethic (they are either lazy welfare cheats or hard-working, depending on the economy's need for labor), sex drive (the women are insatiable, the men domineering), belonging (they are foreign and undocumented), and their character (they are all the same). In the face of these fabrications—which feed the normative narratives about whiteness, authority, and power—*MEAM* functions as agent provocateur, especially in view of the Trump administration's nativist and isolationist policies. These provocations extend across subsequent series and broaden the social dialogue with the viewer.

Transformative Brownness



While some viewers find *MEAM* unsettling, there is a certain transformative magic inherent in Vallejo's repainting of women who represent the Western European tradition. For instance, *La Victoria* (2014),⁵ created using the painting techniques and chromatic density popularized by lowrider artisans, conveys the sexual innuendo underlying much of the series (see Figure 1, *La Victoria*, 2014, from *Make 'Em All Mexican*, Acrylic and metal flake on repurposed composite figure, 40½ x 25½ x 20 in.) The marble sculpture from the second century BCE known as *Winged Victory of Samothrace* or *Nike of Samothrace* is central to Western notions of beauty, power, and femininity. It portrays action and triumph. In commemoration of a naval victory, Nike spreads her wings and faces the wind, her tunic flowing. The damaged sculpture may lack arms and a head, but the classical manner in which the body's outline is revealed under transparent or wet clothing—even the figure's belly button is clearly visible—produces a sensuous quality that is reinforced by the undulating marble and the theatrical position of the torso. Vallejo painted her forty-one-inch reproduction of the *Winged Victory* a luminous Chocolate Candy Brown. In its colored state, the sculpture calls attention to a history of Western representation that exoticizes and eroticizes non-white women.

Vallejo worked with a custom car painter to produce the mouth-watering milk chocolate color and gloss, a coat that makes the sculpture look good enough to eat. On its pedestal, the sculpture evokes childhood memories of large, milk chocolate Easter bunnies displayed in department stores—tempting but inaccessible. It is as if Victory were inviting the viewer to taste her body: "Lick me." This implied sexual transgression augments the abject

⁵ *La Victoria* was previously entitled *Brown Winged Victory*.

response to brown. Viewers may despise it *and* covet it. It also exposes the racial sexual hierarchy produced by patriarchy, empire building, and colonialism, under which brown female bodies are reviled, desired, and raped.⁶ In the *MEAM* series, however, Vallejo turns *La Victoria* into the agent of her own sexuality. The brown body announces and confronts the arousal it produces with an audacity that emerges from control over one's own body and sexuality. This delicious brownness is empowering, conceptually disrupting contemporary white racial primacy, patriarchy, and heterosexism. Through this reappropriation, Vallejo plays with time. The sculpture imagines a counterfactual present, one that might have arisen if brown women had been able to leverage their sexual authority and social autonomy as of the second century BCE.

Composed Brownness

In the series that follow *MEAM*, the artist alters the conceptual project and the relationship to time, thereby heightening social engagement. If *MEAM* rests upon the destruction of the “old image to make the new image,” then *The Brown Dot Project* is its complement.⁷ *MEAM* retouches the past to open up an alternate present—and, by extension, possible futures; in contrast, *The Brown Dot Project* interprets the present to open up avenues for imagining the future. Informed by recent statistics about Latinx residents in the United States, the works in the latter series include painstakingly made geometric designs and figures composed of single brown dots in selected squares of gridded vellum. Although the images resemble dot matrix or other technological compositions, Vallejo does not use computer-generated sketches.

She works by hand. In each grid, the proportion of dotted squares corresponds to the percentage cited in the title



of the work. In *Chicago 28.9%* (2015), for instance, 13,988 dots cover 28.9% of the 48,400 squares, representing Chicago's Latinx population. (Figure 2, *Chicago 28.9%*, 2015, from *The Brown Dot Project*, archival marker, vellum, 24 x 24 in.) The abstract forms in this series resemble patterns in Mesoamerican and Southwestern weaving, blending expectations about so-called tradition with contemporary enumerations.

As Vallejo points out in her artist statement, she feels as if she were “counting one Latino at a time, brown dot by brown dot.”⁸ This physical labor and the titles of the works pronounce the empirical facts of Latinx experience. In this way, *The Brown Dot Project* illustrates the Latinx *presence* in the population, in the labor force, and among the poor, to name a few demographic contexts in which such objective realities are registered.

As noted, *MEAM* rewrites the past and thus imagines a different present, whereas *The Brown Dot Project* interprets the present to inspire thinking about the future. Each strategy leverages temporal conversations, and the differences between the series illuminate Vallejo's ability to extend her conceptual project. In *MEAM*, for example, Vallejo recolors the *Father of Our Country* (2011) and re-dresses and repaints *Our Founders: George and Martha Washington*. (see Figures 2, *Our Founders: George and Martha Washington*, 2011, from *Make 'Em All Mexican*, Acrylic and handmade clothing on repurposed porcelain and cloth figures, 18 x 6 x 6 in.) Had the Washingtons been of Mexican heritage, the United States may not have annexed the northern territories of Mexico in 1848, at the close of the Mexican War; Mexico might have won, or perhaps the two nations would have united as one. If so, we would not be clamoring for a wall at the southern border in the twenty-first century. By repainting the icons of European American domination, the artist evaporates US racial hierarchy and the

⁶ María Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 744.

⁷ Linda Vallejo quoted in Karen Mary Davalos, “My Kind of Joke,” in *Linda Vallejo: Make 'Em All Mexican*, ed. Tiffany Ana López, curator: Karen Mary Davalos (Los Angeles: Avenue 50 Studio, 2011), 1.

⁸ Linda Vallejo, “Artist Statement,” in this volume (see page TK).

structures and processes that support it: the history of African slavery, indigenous genocide, and the disenfranchisement of Mexicans and Mexican Americans.⁹

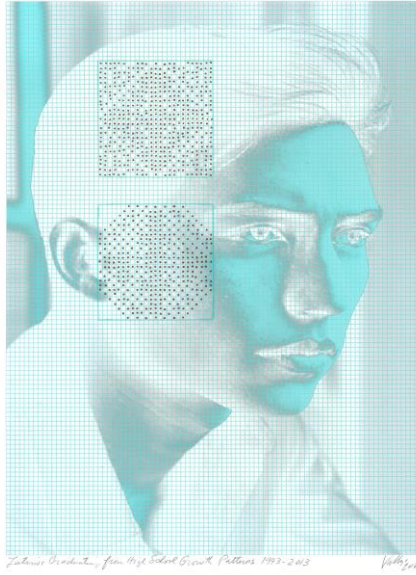


For *The Brown Dot Project*, Vallejo deepens the temporal strategy: she dives into the present to open up the future. As the artist notes in her statement on the series, “The Los Angeles Latino community is always talking about Latino numbers and how the population is growing by leaps and bounds. The consensus is that the growing numbers should equal growing prosperity and influence.”¹⁰ The series parses the data on the Latinx proportion of urban populations (in Chicago, Hollywood, Miami, New York, and San Francisco), among occupations (lawyers, doctors, architects, and construction workers), and among homeowners, as well as statistics on Latinx sexual and reproductive health (HIV status, teen pregnancy, and victims of sex trafficking) and education levels (high school diploma and associate’s and bachelor’s degree). By directing viewers to the facts on these issues, Vallejo stirs questions about the future. In one work, *Latino High School Graduation Rates Growth Pattern (1993–2013)* (2016), the top grid area features many more brown dots than the bottom one, implying stalled integration into US democracy. (see Figure 3, *Latino High School Graduation Rates Growth Pattern (1993–2013)*, 2016; from *The Brown Dot Project*, Colored pencil, archival marker, and pigment print on paper, 11 x 8½ in.) If education is the US pathway to opportunity, what does the future hold for Latinx individuals? Will they secure greater access to white-collar professions, political representation, and health care as their proportional representations in society grows?

One of the most potent provocations about the future emerges from the dozen works titled *LA 48.3% (2015)*, which variously reconfigure the Latinx proportion of the total population of Los Angeles in 2015. By probing the data twelve times, Vallejo suggests that LA’s Latinx population—which is on the cusp of becoming the demographic majority in Los Angeles—has at its disposal a panoply of launch pads from which to move into the future.

⁹ I propose that under Mexican rule, the fictive Mexico-US nation would not have favored slavery and Indian displacement and replacement. Mexico was not devoid of the institution of slavery, but it handled differently the notions of race, racial mixing, and emancipation, abolishing slavery four decades before the United States did so. Unlike the United States, Mexico opted for cultural erasure and appropriation of its indigenous peoples, but not territorial displacement.

¹⁰ Linda Vallejo, “Artist Statement: The Brown Dot Project,” Linda Vallejo, n.d., accessed September 23, 2018, <https://lindavallejo.com/artworks/paintings/the-brown-dot-project/>.



Through this deliberate repetition, she implores viewers to focus on the facts, “brown dot by brown dot,” and asks: now what? At the same time, these works put the brakes on utopian fantasies. Rather than invest in the rhetoric of inclusion and multiculturalism, the series disrupts a romantic understanding of the present and therefore of what lies ahead. For example, Vallejo observes that *35% of US Latinos Voted for Trump (2017)* and that Latinx youths are hampered by real material problems, as highlighted in *Latino Children Living in Poverty 49% (2014) (2016)*.

Introspective Brownness

While *Make 'Em All Mexican* and *The Brown Dot Project* both bring into sharp focus our blind spots and assumptions about race and gender, and thus propose difficult conversations, *Datos Sagrados* uses balanced designs to inspire internal reflection about similar intersecting subjects. With this series, the artist pivots away from a provocative tone. Although the works in *Datos Sagrados* also illustrate the statistics cited in their titles, they draw the viewer into a more intimate space through their composition and material form.



Datos Sagrados comprises abstract geometric patterns painted on circular handmade paper. In each work, brown paint covers the proportion of the space that corresponds to the percentage in the title, such as *50% of US Latinos Self-Identify as White (2017)*, *65% of US Latinos Are US Native-Born (2017)*, and *52% of US Latinos Self-Identify as Mestizo (2017)*. (see Figure 4, *65% of US Latinos Are US Native-Born, 2017*, from *Datos Sagrados*, Gouache on handmade paper, 12 x 12 in.) Unlike the patterns in *The Brown Dot Project*, the organic shapes in this series feel spiritual. They draw the viewer close for measured study; they invite the eye to wander over designs, to recognize the symmetry, and to relish in the aesthetic choices of the artist. Several images are similar to mandalas, some bear a resemblance to flowers, crystals, or shells, and others call to mind overlapping shapes in Venn diagrams. Overall, these designs are oddly familiar, like monochromatic

kaleidoscopes—energetic and soothing at once. The rich brown hues inspire private dialogue. The series allows personal introspection to eclipse the incantations of an ostensibly coherent community, a strategy at odds with the discourse of Chicano politics.¹¹

Testing Brownness

Like *Datos Sagrados*, *Cultural Enigma* moves toward the spiritual through Vallejo’s use of coloration. These two series radiate with the iridescent qualities of brown, and the works are luminous. In *Cultural Enigma*, however, the artist alters her approach by contrasting brown with blue to create a solarized glow. She produces this luminescence in two ways: by applying multiple layers of gouache that extend to the edge of the handmade paper, and by bringing out the contrast between the brown shades and the delicate blue lines that form the abstract patterns on the surface. The rich brown gradations generate a hypnotic quality that is reinforced by the simple designs. The compositions and the coloration function together to evoke the quality of filtered light or a brightly lit stained-glass window. The symbols, patterns, and designs that appear in light blue feel timeless, as though they were windows carved within an ancient stone temple. Vallejo has captured the quality of sunlight,

¹¹ There is no single, comprehensive Chicano politics. “Chicano politics” refers to the rhetoric of the Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s, which relied on the notion of a cohesive community.

which further advances her larger project. All the abovementioned series are intended to shed light on our assumptions about color, race, and belonging; with *Cultural Enigma*, the artist literally produced the luminescent quality, as if to draw attention to her pedagogy.

The artist is not disclosing the source material for the abstract designs in *Cultural Enigma*. She does not wish to influence the viewers' responses to her "cultural Rorschach test." Vallejo's approach is indeed akin to that of psychologists who assess cognition, personalities, and emotional states based on their patients' perceptions of symmetrical inkblots; she, too, invites viewers to interpret designs and "free-associate." She asks, "What do you see? Does the image remind you of anything?"¹² By encouraging viewer participation in this simple task—a conversation around what is seen and why—the series transcends the limits of geometric abstraction. It depends on the viewer's participation for its full expression. In that sense, this conceptual art project also inhabits the realm of social engagement.

The *Cultural Enigma* series is not only reliant on participation, but also rooted in it, having arisen from conversations with people. Vallejo asked her friends, family, and colleagues to imagine a cultural symbol that they could wear on a hat. She posed this question to a variety of people, and while the investigation would not meet social science standards for rigor or sample size, the artist found that few could reply to her question. We are cultural enigmas to ourselves. These findings and the dialogue itself inspired *Cultural Enigma*. Just like the series' aims, its origins thus established it squarely within socially engaged art.



In fact, Vallejo creates patterns that are nothing like the symmetrical inkblots of the Rorschach tests to which she alludes. Nor are the designs random shapes or symbols. Instead, they are familiar geometric combinations and their proportions are well known among proponents of sacred geometry, a theory that the universe was created intentionally, according to a geometric plan. The natural world abounds in similar patterns, such as the spiral of a nautilus or the hexagonal cells of a beehive. Vallejo may be inspired by sacred geometries, but the works exhibit a greater complexity. The spiral form in *Untitled* (2019), for instance, extends lines both to the right and to the left, as if the spiral were opening and closing, unfurling and furling. (see Figure 5, *50% of US Latinos Self-Identify as White*, 2017, From *Datos Sagrados*, Gouache on handmade paper, 12 x 12 in.) The vanishing blue lines also suggest the thread is fading and the spiral dissolving. Some works in the

series recall the kaleidoscopic designs of *Datos Sagrados*, and they inspire the same internal reflection. In many of the works, the luminous glow of the blue shapes creates a quality that is as dynamic as it is still, further underscoring Vallejo's observations that we are here, but that we are not aware of our culture. This paradox pushes against the aim of Chicano politics—inclusion, integration, and pronouncement—and thereby refocuses our possibilities.

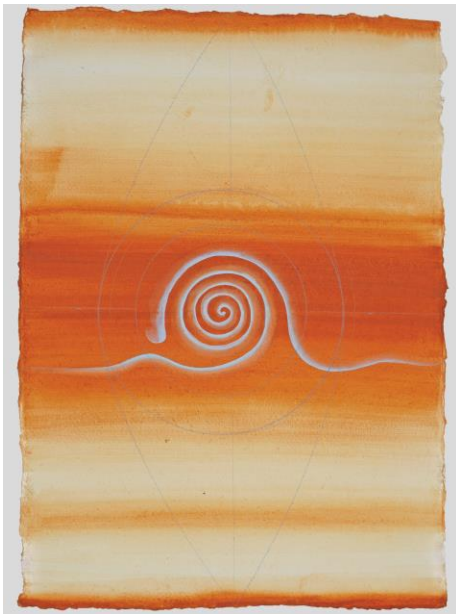
Call to Action

Some might associate Vallejo's quest for a cultural symbol with "processes of cultural objectification wherein culture is linked and defined in relation to material objects, expressions, and traditions that can be contained, studied, or exhibited."¹³ Far from essentializing or excluding, her focus on cultural objectification records awareness and propels conversation for the future. Similarly, *Cultural Enigma* and the earlier series deliberately go beyond a reliance on surface-level markers for culture. The artist appreciates the urgency of the moment and

¹² Linda Vallejo, interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, September 13, 2018.

¹³ Arlene Dávila, "Culture," in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, eds. Deborah R. Vargas, Nancy Raquel Mirabal, and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 41.

recognizes another paradox of Latinx visibility: we are everywhere, yet we remain politically and culturally invisible due to limited access to justice and political voice. She employs new cultural symbols as a personal pedagogy, one that points to the constructed nature of culture and its strategic application for political purposes. (see Figure 6, *Untitled*, 2019, From *Cultural Enigma (Symbols and Signs)*; Gouache on handmade paper, 16¾ x 22 in.)



Vallejo's attention to the outward expression of culture—the color of one's skin, eyes, and hair, or the color brown itself—enables internal and collective dialog. By repainting well-known images in *MEAM*, she directly confronts the notion of race as normative, unmediated, biologically determined, and static. Her subsequent series turn to empirical information or material expressions of culture so as to inspire or demand conversation about assimilation, culture loss, and solidarity. Viewers are implicated in her use of contemporary statistics and her seemingly universal designs rendered in rich hues of brown, as found in *Datos Sagrados* and *Cultural Enigma*. By juxtaposing dynamic designs with references to misrecognition of brown people as abject or lamentable beings, these series support an internal dialog. How do brown people survive exclusion and hate? What is the source of their beauty? What is the source of brown rejection? It is as if each series were forcing viewers to consider the consequences of building walls, deporting adults who have made their lives in the United States, detaining children without their families, and increasingly enforcing obscure residency rules in order to deport legally integrated Latinx residents. What future will you create?

Bio

Karen Mary Davalos, professor and chair of Chicano and Latino Studies at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, has published widely on Chicana art, spirituality, and museums. She has written two books on Chicana museums, *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (University of New Mexico Press, 2001) and *The Mexican Museum of San Francisco Papers, 1971–2006* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2010), for which she won the International Latino Book Awards silver prize for best reference book in English. For her book *Yolanda M. López* (UCLA CSRC Press, 2008), she received two book awards: the 2010 Honorable Mention from the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies and the 2009 Honorable Mention from International Book Awards. Her most recent book, *Chicana/o Remix: Art and Errata since the Sixties* (NYU Press, 2017), is informed by life history interviews with eighteen artists, a decade of ethnographic research in southern California, and archival research examining fifty years of Chicana art in Los Angeles. From 2015 to 2018, she served as president of the board of directors at Self Help Graphics & Art, the legacy arts organization in East Los Angeles. In 2012, she received the President's Award for Art and Activism from the Women's Caucus for Art. In 2017, from the University of Minnesota, she launched an ambitious initiative, "Mexican American Art since 1848," which will produce a co-authored, multi-volume book and a searchable online digital platform linking art collections and related documentation from libraries, archives, and museums across the United States.