

Linda Vallejo's Cultural Transfigurations

DomLombardi

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Linda Vallejo:

Make 'Em All Mexican

The Clemente Soto Velez Cultural and Educational Center

Color has impact. It can repel or attract, program our opinions, set moods, even control traffic. In some ways color effects us based on our individual experiences and environment, yet there remains a systemic interpretation, prejudice or preconception about color that concerned artist Linda Vallejo addresses in her series *Make 'Em All Mexican*. By employing the color brown to change the ethnicity of mostly American Icons that appear here in the form of dozens of sculptures and figurines, a few paintings and a number of photographs, prints and postcards, Vallejo subconsciously moves racial stereotyping of Latinos to our collective front and center.

(Actually, while I am at it, I must point out that in labeling the Icons 'American' I expose myself as North American- centric -- my apologies to South and Central Americans.) To be more specific, Vallejo focuses largely on the Icons of the United States of America. Superman becomes "Super- Hombre," Elvis becomes "El Vis," Minnie and Mickey become *Miguel and Maria* as Vallejo turns -- with paints, glazes, and washes -- their skin color to brown.

Walking through the exhibition, I am immediately reminded of the photographs of Dulce Pinzón. Pinzón's series *The Real Story of the Superheroes*, which features Mexican immigrants dressed in full costume such as Spiderman, Batman, and Catwoman (seen below) as they provide services as window washer, limo driver, and nanny respectively, shows these workers as heroes who often take less pay and work longer hours so they can send as much money as possible to their families back home. Vallejo also sees that economic, ethnic and cultural divide. Her hope is to shake things up, making those unaware or unwilling to embrace and accept Latinos, or more specifically, Mexican American peoples as unthreatening, intelligent and gifted equals.



But first, Vallejo must seduce us, get us to look at her art and absorb the meaning behind it. She accomplishes this with humor, albeit somewhat confrontational, and it works. *Little Frenchies* (2011), a variety of repurposed porcelain figurines with acrylic painted brown flesh, show the leisurely aristocracy in various banal social activities. Without the use of a specific or individual iconic personality, Vallejo manages our mindset readying us for more critical realities.

Next comes tried and true 'Americana' in the form of a Norman Rockwell figurine: "Mi Niña" (2012 [left]), a repurposed porcelain figurine shows a young tucking in for bed, her three little dolls all with the addition of painted brown faces. A simple moment of happiness made sociopolitical.

Next, Vallejo adds stereotypical Mexican garb to the traditional clothing of *Our Founders I* (2011 [shown at top]) in the form of a colorful vest for George and a tricolored slip for Martha. Here, President and Mrs. Washington, with their brown faces and hands and their accents of 'south-of-the-border' costuming, reveal an unrealistic or unwarranted fear that the ever-increasing influx of immigrants to the U.S. means a total change in the 'American Way'.



Adding even more cultural reference to another iconic form is "Little Boy Brown Celebrates El Dia de Los Muertos" (2012). In this instance, a modern-day statuary of Thomas Gainsborough's "The Blue Boy" (1770) sports a face split down the middle, painted in brown on one side and white skull on the other half, an obvious reference to the highly celebrated Mexican holiday The Day of the Dead.

Even the oversized hat the figure holds in his right hand is festively painted and sombrero-like. In the context of the exhibition, "Little Brown Boy" seems very different than the aforementioned *Our Founders I*, as it is more of a statement about a vast cultural divide that can, at times, be most intimidating unless we put aside our preset symbols and learned interpretations and open our minds to something new.

Finally, Vallejo addresses a variety of forms of modern entertainment such as film, music and TV. She reorients our thinking about sex appeal and beauty with a quadtych of painted aluminum sublimation Warhol-esque prints titled *Marielena 1-4* (2014); the power of sensationalism and song in the painted, repurposed antique postcards *Los Beatles* (2014); and comedy and slapstick in the painted, repurposed photograph "Los Tres Chiflados" (2014). With all these, and other works such as "Fred and Barney" (2012) and the previously mentioned "El Vis," Vallejo sets up for all to see, a stage where we can understand and deal with how are immediate surroundings colors our thinking. - D. Dominick Lombardi



Works shown in this article:

Linda Vallejo, *Our Founders I* (2011), acrylic, repurposed porcelain and cloth dolls with custom handmade clothing, 18" X 4" each (costumes created in collaboration with artist Gloria Newton)

Dulce Pinzón, *MINERVA VALENCIA from Puebla works as a nanny in New York, She sends 400 dollars a week, Superheroes Series* (2004-2009)

Linda Vallejo, *Mi Niña* (2012), re-purposed porcelain figurine and acrylic, 6" X 6" X 4"

Linda Vallejo, *Little Boy Brown Celebrating El Dia de Los Muertos* (2012),^[L]_[SEP] Re-purposed plaster figurine, acrylic, and solid silver leaf^[L]_[SEP], 17" x 7" x 5"

Mr. Lombardi (<http://www.ddlombardi.com/>) is an artist with representation at the Kim Foster Gallery in New York, a writer with *The Huffington Post*, *ARTslant*, and *d'ART*, and an independent curator.