LINDA VALLEJO
"Objects of Opulence"

Objects of Opulence will appropriate culture and history from the nascent age of great wealth and influence in the US and symbolically return it to the "brown" Latino/x essential workers who helped to build and continue to support the growth of American business and wealth.

Objects of Opulence examines and interprets the politics of color, class, culture, and power through the themes of wealth and power, cultural identity and awareness, and pop culture.

Objects of Opulence will include a life-size Victorian dining room set painted in milk-chocolate brown surrounded by objects of opulence from the gilded age to ask: How are Latinos seen, how do we see ourselves, and what are our contributions? Statistics will inspire "brown" data-based 2-D works and sculpture. I will appropriate and alter antique as well as pop objects to invite viewers to consider the politics of color and class in a space where history and data interact with pop culture.

Project Genesis – *Make' Em All Mexican* and *The Brown Dot Project*

Since 2010 I have produced hundreds of sculptures, paintings, and works on paper entitled "Make 'Em All Mexican." I purchase pricey antiques (plaster and porcelain figures, magazines, and postcards) and paint their skin brown. There is a "brown" Elvis Presley, Fred Flintstone & Barney Rubble, Marie Antoinette & Louis Auguste, the Rose Parade Queen, Queen Mother, Greek and Roman gods. This process has become an obsession and I continue to hunt through antique malls for more images to repurpose.

In 2015 I produced "The Brown Dot Project," a series of "data pictographs," images on gridded architectural vellum where brown dots represented actual data. The works portrayed various data sets including US Latino populations; professional numbers in health, education, and business sectors; and Latino contribution to the US Gross National Product. The brown dots resemble designs in ancient weaving and architecture; others mirror computer-generated images or are reminiscent of grid-oriented works by Piet Mondrian, Chuck Close, Agnes Martin, and Charles Gaines.

The process is time consuming, beginning with the study and gathering of relevant data; the creation of a formula to present data in 2-D works, counting the boxes in an area of gridded vellum and then dotting the percentage of squares to represent a data set. Some of these "data-pictographs" contained over thirty thousand hand placed dots.

This study led me to research Mexican-Americas in the mid to late 19th Century. Books that influenced the development of this plan include, "Foreigners in Their Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans," edited by David J. Weber and "Traqueros: Mexican Railroad Workers in the United States 1870-1930," by Jeffrey Marcos Garcilazo.

Research Findings

The phrase "Gilded Age" satirized an era of serious social problems masked by a thin gold gilding. During the late 19th century this era saw rapid economic growth, especially in the Northern and Western US. The era saw an influx of European and Mexican immigrants, as well as new Mexican American citizens with the annexation of Texas.

While American families of European ancestry built large fortunes from coal and steel industries, the Gilded Age was also an era of abject poverty and inequality, as millions of immigrants—many from impoverished regions—poured into the United States, including Mexican and Mexican Americans living in Texas and the Southwest.

At the end of Mexican American War in 1848, US citizenship was given to 65,000 Mexicans living in the Southwest. Much like Chinese immigrants, these new Mexican Americans were relegated to the worst-paying jobs under the worst working conditions as peóns (manual laborers on the railroads and mines), vaqueros (cattle herders), and cartmen (transporting food and supplies).

Railroads were the major growth industry employing 70,000 – 100,000 Mexican and Mexican American workers annually. Immigration from Europe and Mexico led to the growth of the West, with the building of the railroads, farming, ranching, and mining.

The dominant issues of the political landscape were prohibition, education, and ethnic or racial groups, and tariffs and money supply. Political machines took control of urban politics and in business, powerful nationwide trusts formed. Where did this leave the immigrant working class in the history of building our nation?

Origination and Details

From 2010-2020 I produced a suite of works entitled **Brown Belongings** representing over three hundred works that visualized what it means to be a person of color in the United States. These works reflected what I call my "brown intellectual property"—the experiences, knowledge, and insights I have gathered over more than four decades of study and work in the Latino/x, Chicano/x and American indigenous communities.

An exhibition of these works hosted by L.A. Plaza de Cultura y Artes in Los Angeles include 125 work accompanied by a 140-page catalog with three critical essays and accompanied by a series of educational panels and discussions.

In 2020 I turned my study to early US history surrounding the "Gilded Age" and the formation of the first American corporations, the building of the great families and their wealth, and the contribution of immigrants during this period of American history. Questions guiding this study and the proposed project include; Where were Latinos in the Victorian "Gilded Age"? What was their place in the building of our nation? Are Latinos part of the fabric of American culture?

I am working to complete an installation depicting a Victorian dining room in all its opulence and finery replete with objects of power, wealth, and status. Every object will be painted in high gloss milk chocolate colored enamel paint. The room will include antique dining room table, chairs, clock and candelabra, fireplace, crystal and china, and floral arrangements with specially designed brown polka-dot wallpaper.

The dining room chairs will be upholstered with polka-dot painted fabric. The walls will be polka-dot brown and the room will be decorated with geometric data-based paintings on paper and canvas, data-based sculptures. Data represented will focus on the US Latino position during the "Gilded Age,' as well as 2020 US, US Latino Gross National Product data, and statistics gathered from the Pew Charitable Trust Latino Initiative.

Recently I have produced machetes in the form of "brown Victorian" dioramas based of this project as well as data-based sculptures. These pieces will find their way into the full installation. Finally, selected viewers will be invited to sit at the table and eat editable chocolate sculpture, which could include an American flag lollypop, a Mickey Mouse figurine, or a "Marilyn" torso.

Why Milk Chocolate?

Over the past decade, during countless panels and discussions regarding this work I have been asked, "Why do you make them so dark?" In early works I used varying types of brown to illustrate that Latinos come in "all shades." But, the politics of color and class, exist everywhere, even within Latino communities, both working and middle-class. Many viewers, Latino and non-Latino objected to the depiction of very dark skin. After years of trial and error I found the "acceptable" color of "milk chocolate." This story illustrates the realities of access for dark skinned individuals of all cultures and classes in American society.