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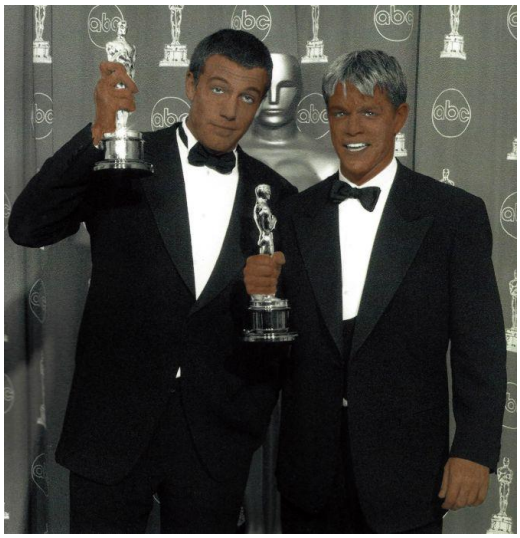
ENTERTAINMENT

Meet the artist who's turning all the white Oscar winners brown

Jorge Rivas, 2/20/16 11:01 AM

With the #OscarsSoWhite controversy still raging, artist Linda Vallejo is using humor to get people to think about how much Latinos and Latinas have been shut out of film's biggest awards.

The Chicana artist–known for works that investigate contemporary cultural and political issues–has taken photographs of white Oscar winners and turned the actors' skin a deep chocolate brown.



"It's kinda funny to see Matt Damon brown," Vallejo said in a telephone interview with Fusion. (She chose a dark chocolate brown color for Matt Damon's skin color because "if it wasn't dark enough he'd look like a Caucasian who got a good tan.")

In the series of six photographs that Vallejo calls *For Your Consideration: Make 'Em All Mexican* she identifies Ben Affleck and Matt Damon as Bernardo y Mateo. The *brownified* version of Audrey Hepburn becomes Aurora Hernandez. And Cate Blanchett becomes Catarina Blancarte.

Photograph titled "Bernardo y Mateo," 2016.

©Linda Vallejo, 2016 Courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

"To make a statement they have to be brown," said Vallejo, who has been browning iconic images of American culture in her *Make 'Em all Mexican* series since 2011.

The series of photographs were unveiled just a week before the Oscars, which air next Sunday. The awards show has been criticized this year because every single nominee in an acting category is white.

Vallejo says the absence of Latinos in the major acting categories this year represents a cultural blindness that ignores an overwhelming demographic change. California–where many movie studios are based–now has more Latinos than whites for the first time since the state was part of Mexico.

Artist Linda Vallejo presents Audrey Hepburn as 'Aurora Hernandez.'

The other obvious change movie studios seem to be ignoring is that Latinos love paying a lot of money to go see movies. In 2013, Latinos made up 17% of the population but accounted for 32% of frequent moviegoers, according to a study published by the Motion Picture Association of America. The study found Latinos are more likely than any other ethnic group to purchase movie tickets.

Of course, a devotion to whiteness at the Oscars is nothing new. Latinas have never won a Best Actress Oscar. They have had a tiny bit more success in the Supporting Actress category. In 1961, Puerto Rican Rita Moreno won the Best Supporting Actress award for her role in *West Side Story*. Then it took another 52 years before a Mexican-born actress, Lupita Nyong'o, to win the same award for her role in the film *12 Years a Slave*. (The actress recently told Fusion/Univision anchor Jorge Ramos that she is multicultural and has previously said she identifies as a "Mexi-Kenyan.")

Artist Linda Vallejo calls this work 'Marielena.'

The last time a Latino actor won an Oscar in best actor category was in 1950 when Puerto Rican actor José Ferrer won for his role in *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The best supporting actor category has seen a more recent winner; Benicio del Toro won an Oscar for his role in the 2000 film *Traffic*.

Recently, Latino filmmakers, all men, have been getting honored more for work behind the camera. In 2013 Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón won best director for his film *Gravity*. The following year in 2014 Alejandro González Iñárritu won for his film *Birdman*. Iñárritu is also nominated this year for his film *The Revenan*t. Added up, that's not much when you consider that nearly 3,000 Oscars have been handed out since the awards began in 1929.

Artist Linda Vallejo calls this piece 'Emilio.' "The Oscars represent the highest honors for those working in the cinematic arts," said Chon Noriega, professor of cinema and media studies at the University of California, Los Angeles and director of the Chicano Studies Research Center that will archive Vallejo's work. "As such, [the Oscars] also represent a culmination of numerous award ceremonies and extensive press coverage intended to reflect what is most valued in our society."

Latinos are more likely than any other ethnic group to purchase movie tickets. - MOTION PICTURE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

One irony about all of this is that the Oscar statue may actually have been modeled after Mexican actor Emilio "El Indio" Fernandez. The Academy says there's no proof this actually but some historians say that's up for debate. Vallejo said that she wanted her project to spur more dialogue about race and the Oscars.

"I hope people have conversations that lead to a shift of how we're looking at this issue," she told Fusion. "That's what an artist is supposed to do, visualize ideas, emotions and begin asking questions. I am asking, 'what if all the nominees were Mexican?' I mean, why not?"