

Linda Vallejo
Make 'Em All Mexican 2010-2020
Artist Statement

An international background and point of view...

I was born in Boyle Heights and lived in East Los Angeles, just a stone's throw away from Self Help Graphics until I was three years old. I was very fortunate to have six great grandparents and several great uncles and aunts alive in those early years. My father Adam Vallejo was studying political science at UCLA and my mother Helen worked as a receptionist for a well-known doctor in the heart of the barrio. My family was born of industrious working class immigrants who believed in education. My father's family was blessed with several musicians, including my paternal grandfather Aniceto, as well as talented singers and dancers. His mother, Elvira and my maternal grandmother Quica both worked as maids for the Union Pacific Railroad. My great grandparents hailed from Mexico and Texas, migrating to work in the fields of California by the turn of the century.

When my father graduated from college he entered the Air Force as a commissioned officer and we moved to Germany. As a young girl I didn't understand the changes I would experience moving from one place to the next. Over the next ten years I lived in Arizona, Missouri, California, and Texas, finally finding myself in middle school in Montgomery, Alabama, in the mid 1960's. I personally believe that my experiences in Alabama during the fight for equality are the bedrock of my newest series, *Make 'Em All Mexican*.

During this time my high school, Sidney Lanier, integrated for the first time in history. I was surrounded by two thousand students, with only a handful representing other nationalities, and one hundred "Black" students. The tension was palpable and violence was eminent. The knowledge of myself as a person of color, standing outside the lines of fire, scorched me indelibly. I have memories of White and Colored bathroom stalls and fountains, of the tragic marches from Selma, of burning crosses and lynchings, and of the hopeful speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King. I began to realize that the world did not see me as I saw myself; that color was a defining point in how the world judges you and fixes your place in it.

In 1967 my family including my brother Tomás and sister Roseann moved to Madrid, Spain. I traveled throughout Europe studying art, architecture, and art history searching for my place in the world. As we traveled I fell in love with European history and culture, and the great classics. I wrote music, designed clothing, and painted searching for a personal language that could express universal equality, acceptance, and appreciation. I imagined an image that could open a dialogue of understanding among all peoples.

The art work that I created during these early years came from my experiences in El Museo del Prado, from El Greco's elongated and floating images of the pantheon of heaven, Goya's

gruesome portrayals of humanity's folly in pain and suffering, and an astounding collection of Hieronymus Bosch with his imagination filled landscapes of the glories of heaven and the humilities of hell. I visited ancient Roman sites falling in love with the ethereal gods and their mythologies, and the history of the great Western cultures. These experiences fed into my desire to create an image that could speak an international language to unite humanity in compassion and respect.

After graduating from high school and spending a year in Madrid studying lithography, I returned to the US to begin my MFA studies in printmaking at Cal State University, Long Beach. I returned to Los Angeles to be close to my family. Many of my grandparents were still alive and I had cousins living in Los Angeles and the surrounding areas. I found my way into a job with Sister Karen Bocalero and Self Help Graphic's Barrio Mobile Art studio immersing myself in "my own" classical culture, Mesoamerica. My lithographs and etchings focused on the spiritual, an element shared by all peoples regardless of race, creed, or color. It was at this time that I became deeply involved in Chicano Indigena and Native American ceremonial circles. Again, I found myself surrounded by misconceptions and misunderstandings based on color, class, and creed. My experiences in Indigena took me back to the deep South.

Now, after forty years of search and production I find that *Make 'Em All Mexican* accomplishes the task I set for myself so very long ago. By coaxing the viewer into a comfortable space where there is humor and laughter, stories surface about the divisions caused by our differences and the possibility of unity through our similarities.

My formative years were spent in far flung locations throughout the United States and Europe. During my artistic grounding, I became increasingly immersed in the Chicano/Latino/Mexican-American arts and the indigenous communities – experiences that have informed my cultural perspectives and, by extension, my art practice.

It has taken a forty year artistic career to fuse an image that defines my multicultural experience of the world and my place in it. Like most of my contemporaries I was taught the finer points of the Western classics, art and architecture, but later found myself living and creating in a milieu where symbols of beauty and culture were manifest in a decidedly alternate circumstance. The intersection of these two disparate worlds led me to create what my gallerist has called "the work of a lifetime." My mentor, renowned artist Chuck Arnoldi, said; "Only you could do this work, Linda. It is truly unique."

Make 'Em All Mexican leads you down an ironic path to find yourself confronted by some of the most difficult questions of our time, "Do race, color, and class define our status in the world?" "Is it possible to be a part of and earnestly contribute to multiple cultures simultaneously?" "Does color and class define our understanding and appreciation of culture?"

To date I have produced over 50 *Make 'Em All Mexican* sculptures and handmade books from repurposed porcelain and plaster figurines, postcards, magazine pages, paintings, and posters found

in antique stores, yard sales, and estate sales. I literally take precious images of national and world culture and “make them Mexican” by painting directly on antiques.

Due to the nature of antique figurines the majority of the pieces completed to date are between 12” and 48” in height. I proposed to complete 25 (twenty-five) *Make ‘Em All Mexican* sculptures and mixed media works including one (1) six foot tall sculpture made from wood or fiberglass. *Make ‘Em All Mexican* images to date include a “brown” Elvis Presley, Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble, Marie Antoinette and Louis August, the Rose Parade Queen and her court, the Queen Mother, and a complete array of the Greek and Roman gods. The most recent of these figures are also decorated with tattoos to “bring them forward” to modern times.

Project Genesis

Several years ago, I made a series of trips that included a visit to China as well as to New York and several other major cities in the U.S. It is my custom to include museums and galleries in my itinerary to get a sense of what is happening in the national and international art scene. On these trips I noticed a growing trend from the mundane to the fantastic—sculpture made of pre-produced objects, wildly untamed images created from found objects put to fascinating new uses, photographic collages combining digital work and hand drawn forms, and images that juxtaposed seemingly contrary cultural symbols and icons.

In New York I encountered the work of Mexican artist Abraham Cruz-Villegas who used wire clothes hangers to create a lyrical floating white sculpture reminiscent of Alexander Calder. Photographer Wang Qing-Song re-purposed Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* using a staged photograph with Chinese models. Ana Mendieta’s solo exhibition at the Hirshhorn in Washington DC thoroughly moved me. I was fascinated by her ability to combine what appeared to be incongruent media to create an expressive whole.

After seeing these works and hundreds more, my thought and creative processes began to shift. I found myself ruminating, “I’m a person of the world. What would the world of contemporary images look like from my own personal Mexican-American, Chicano lens?” “How would I combine new media or juxtapose incongruous forms to create an image particular to myself and my heritage?”

In an effort to create a uniquely personal postmodern cultural image, I began taking notes about these ideas of crossing media and culture. I started collecting offbeat items that somehow spoke to me—newspapers, figurines, postcards, photographs—and then storing them in odd little cubby-holes. My goal was to place them into the cauldron of my creative mind to see what images would bubble up.

It occurred to me that I must be the quintessential post-modern American—a woman, Mexican, born of poor immigrant grandparents, raising highly educated children, essentially living the American dream. Yet even as a third generation American, like so many others, I remain

invisible in the cultural landscape. One day, as I was sitting in a restaurant with an artist friend, I found myself blurting out, “I’ve collected all these images, and I just wanna make ‘em all Mexican like me!”

This impassioned yearning came from a realization that visual representations of the American dream somehow did not include me, or my loved ones. It came to me that I had never seen the golden images of Americana with familiar faces—friendly faces, sure, but not familiar ones. I found myself furiously painting directly on antique photographs and figurines to deconstruct iconic images to create an America that included me. I began aimlessly browsing antique malls to find images that I could “call my own.

The *Make ‘Em All Mexican* series carries a strong electric charge. To some viewers, the images are hyper-political; for others, they are emotional portals to a past remembered and sometimes forgotten; and for another group, they are just down right hilarious. The series is definitely strange and unfamiliar. Recently on television sculptor Richard Serra stated that the work of the artist is not necessarily to create the unique, but rather “the unfamiliar.” I have re-created a familiar world to create a new unfamiliar image, one that is unfamiliar to everyone that’s not Mexican...

I believe that my proposal to create life-size *MEAM* sculptures will cement the impact of this work and ensure its inclusion in prominent exhibition venues where dialogues about these pressing and vital questions can inform our lives, viewpoints, and choices.

Make ‘Em All Mexican carries a strong electric charge...

To some viewers, the images are hyper-political; for others, they are emotional portals to a past remembered and sometimes forgotten; and for another group, they are just down right hilarious. The series is definitely strange and unfamiliar. Recently on television sculptor Richard Serra stated that the work of the artist is not necessarily to create the unique, but rather “the unfamiliar.” I have re-created a familiar world to create a new unfamiliar image, one that is unfamiliar to everyone that’s not Mexican...

Viewers begin by chuckling as images of a brown Marilyn Monroe, “Marielena La Fabulosa,” or brown Marie Antoinette and Louie Auguste in all their regal finery and end in a meaty dialogue about our experiences with the politics of color. My catch phrase is, “Laugh to keep from crying.” What would happen if Hollywood was built and governed by Mexicans? What if the world and all its grand historical kingdoms were ruled by Mexican royalty? At first a funny notion, but slowly disconcerting to many, even Mexicans....

Curators share that they look forward to exhibiting *Make ‘Em All Mexican* because of the conversation it evokes. During gallery talks the audience is filled with faces of joy and elation, disbelief and relief, fear and anger. In many cases younger viewers will make suggestions about what other important and famous figures could be “made brown.” People are a-lite with ideas

about how funny it is to make them “all” Mexican! “You should make Bush Mexican!” “How about the Arizona mayor and chief of police?” “Hey, what about the Three Stooges or John Wayne?” “I want to be Mexican too! Make me brown!”

At other times the conversation turns to personal stories of memory, loss and regret. Once a viewer looking at the images of the first presidents, “Our Founders I and II: Abraham and Mary Lincoln and George and Martha Washington,” outfitted in fine clothing with little dashes of Mexican insignia shared a very personal story of a mother that worked as a maquiladora who would save cloth remnants to make dresses and shirts for his brothers and sisters. The image of a country’s leadership dressed in delicately hand stitched clothing with dark brown skin brought forth a very personal story of love, sacrifice, and sorrow. I was astonished at the personal history that was shared.

Another individual reflected in tears of a very personal story of how they were celebrated as the “little princess” of their family born with light hair and skin but how over time as their skin and hair grew darker and darker they could feel the love of their family “ebbing away.”

An African American family spoke in hushed tones about “high yella and low black” and wondered if the struggle for class based on “shades of color” would ever change. A Chicano family that adopted a Chinese daughter lamented that she no longer wanted to be Chinese and was angry that she could not be “like the girls in the magazines.” The mother and father were at a loss to help her understand her place in the world. One highly placed individual actually acknowledged that the “light” members of his family do not speak to the “dark ones.”

Conversations have found their way into gay rights, the struggles of feminism, where anyone who has ever felt like an outsider can openly express their need to be considered a member of the whole and be heard for their feelings, thoughts, knowledge, and accomplishments.

As funny as it is, *Make ‘Em All Mexican* appears to be capable of opening doors to a shared reality in a modern world where color still governs possession and power. *Make ‘Em All Mexican* is only the start to a lengthy process but, change is possible, if we just laugh and work through it together.

Critical Commentary

- William Moreno, former director of Mexican Museum, San Francisco, and curator, states, “The focus of Vallejo’s newest suite of works titled *Make ‘Em All Mexican*, is anything but subtle. Conceptually-informed, poignant and ironic, she melds populist cultural conventions and racial politics into an edgy brew, adroitly tapping into that nebulous space between anger and laughter.”
- Armando Duron, Chicano art collector, states, “The pieces have a whimsical quality about them, one that allows those who choose to view them exclusively through the lens of whimsy a way to continue laughing. Vallejo has used satire and wit to make her point. She has not

constricted the works within a purely political prism. Indeed, they exude pathos and irony, commentary and comedy, parody and ridicule. Vallejo shows us how much room there is for all these points to converge within just one image. Viewers will find the other paths that make sense to them. But you will gain a much deeper understanding of the work if you do not over think it.”

“Vallejo has used satire and wit to make her point. She has not constricted the works within a purely political prism. Indeed, they exude pathos and irony, commentary and comedy, parody and ridicule. Vallejo shows us how much room there is for all these points to converge within just one image. Viewers will find the other paths that make sense to them. But you will gain a much deeper understanding of the work if you do not over think it.”

- Karen Mary Davalos, Professor and Chair Chicana/Chicano Studies Department, Loyola Marymount University, states, “Linda Vallejo has produced a provocative new series that re-appropriates Western and American icons. Using widely recognized images, such as Hollywood celebrities, Norman Rockwell paintings, Victorian figurines, classical European portraiture, and the school primer, *Dick and Jane*, Vallejo repaints the figures as Mexicans. From one perspective, Vallejo creates the fear of every anti-immigration activist and recolors the world with brown skin and black hair and eyes. Announcing the deeper implications of the series, Vallejo declares, “I have to destroy the old image to make the new image,” conceptually performing two critical acts. First, Vallejo defaces the work that she recolors, and second, she takes the image (and its history, power, and meaning) and changes it for her own purpose.”

“Vallejo re-appropriates Western and American icons recreating the fear of every anti-immigration activist and recoloring the world with brown skin and black hair and eyes. Vallejo performs two critical acts, first she defaces the work that she recolors, and second, she takes the image (and its history, power, and meaning) and changes it for her own purpose.”

- George Lawson, George Lawson Gallery, “As *MEAM* gets past the joke, which is essentially a fulcrum, and into the incredibly long lever that is Vallejo’s imagination, the seemingly inexhaustible variations on the theme manifest themselves as a pliant language and a tool for examining the function of art in our culture. Vallejo asks questions about the source of an image’s power, and the role images play in securing and perpetuating social hierarchies.”
- William Moreno, former director of Mexican Museum, San Francisco, “The focus of Vallejo’s newest suite of works titled *Make ‘Em All Mexican*, is anything but subtle. Conceptually-informed, poignant and ironic, she melds populist cultural conventions and racial politics into an edgy brew, adroitly tapping into that nebulous space between anger and laughter.”
- Gordon Fuglie, Director, Central California Museum Association, “Amidst the roiling national debate about American identity, veteran California Latina artist Vallejo creates a realm in which US popular culture is overlain with a Mexican-American sensibility. Gleefully raiding the world of classic commercial images of middle class WASP life, Vallejo gives common American icons a new savor or flavor.”
- Marlena Donohue, Editor, *Ltd. Magazine*, Los Angeles, “Vallejo’s collisions of race can seem obvious, a bit rehashed, and raising what we’d like to think are passé ’70s concepts: The discomfort they create, and our initial response to dismiss them as old news is part of her point. First, their almost vaudeville ubiquity here only points out the absence of such faces in

actual images that culture uses every day, Secondly, subtle things drive home just how deep race still runs. The exaggerated clichés here seem deliberate, designed to remind us that however much myriad identities/realities are marketed both in academia and consumer culture as the new ‘post race’ norm, the ideology of racial dominance continues.”