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Los Angeles Times

Cheech Marin's Chicano art at LACMA



The Los Angeles County Museum of Art originally turned down his offer to display the art. But, no surprise, he persisted.

By Agustin Gurza, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

June 14, 2008

After more than seven years on the road, the Chicano art collection of Cheech Marin has finally come home. Its last stop is the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the hometown venue that initially turned down a show that toured nationally and drew large crowds as "Chicano Visions." A scaled-down version, titled "Los Angelenos/Chicano Painters of L.A.," opens Sunday at LACMA West. It features almost 50 paintings by some of the most influential members of the first generation of Chicano artists, including Patssi Valdez and three of the original members of Los Four -- Frank Romero, Carlos Almaraz and Gilbert "Magu" Lujan -- the collective featured in what is considered the country's first major Chicano art exhibition, shown at LACMA in 1974.

For Marin, who championed Chicano art as his personal crusade, it's not only a triumphal homecoming but a vindication for his campaign to place these artists squarely in the American mainstream. "With LACMA, it's been love-hate toward the Chicano community since the beginning," says Marin, best known as half of the comedy team of Cheech and Chong. "We've always been treated as the stepchildren. But I think that attitude is turning around now. . . . They can't ignore us anymore."

The museum's attempt to acknowledge Chicano art, spotty as it has been, predates even the earliest piece in this exhibition, Almaraz's surreal but now familiar depiction of an accident on a freeway overpass, "Sunset Crash" (1982). But exhibitions devoted to the field have been few and far between. That problem was meant to be resolved by LACMA's Latino Arts Initiative, launched in 2004. The initiative's first major show, "Phantom Sightings," currently on display, marked the first time LACMA has organized its own exhibition of contemporary Chicano art. ("Los Four" was organized by UC Irvine.)

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Marin meanwhile pursued his own parallel initiative, resulting today in two overlapping Chicano art shows, an embarrassment of riches. "There's almost a positive sense of disbelief that you would have two very different Chicano art exhibitions at the same time, not just in L.A., but at the same museum," says Chon Noriega, head of the LACMA initiative, a joint effort with UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, where he's also director. "But you realize there's a lot of space in between here that we haven't even begun to cover."

Noriega considers the shows complementary. "Phantom Sightings" focuses primarily on artists who came of age in the 1990s, some of whom don't even consider themselves Chicano. Their work is unbound by the constraints of ideology or canvas, and includes sculpture and mixed-media installations. By contrast, "Los Angelenos" features exclusively paintings, many by artists who came of age during the Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s. They are mostly figurative, saturated in color, depicting vivid portraits and scenes of daily barrio life, such as Wayne Alaniz Healy's bird's-eye perspective of "Beautiful Downtown Boyle Heights" (1993) or Margaret Garcia's sensual "Eziquiel's Party" (2000). Magu's hand-painted 1950 Chevrolet is on display in the central patio.

To round out the show, some pieces were borrowed from LACMA's own collection and from other private collectors, including actors Dennis Hopper and Nicolas Cage.

The newest work is by the show's youngest artist, **Vincent Valdez**, who portrays a phalanx of riot police during last year's May Day demonstrations. The menacing piece, "Nothin' to See Here, Keep on Movin'," was so fresh it was still wet when unpacked for hanging.

One measure of the show's influence was the response of the workers who hang the exhibitions. They've seen it all and don't usually bother to deliver their own reviews. "They all came to me and were very vocal and forthcoming with their enjoyment, and they're not always," says Howard Fox, LACMA's curator of contemporary art. "There's something very visual and retinal about the show -- it's both for the eye and for the mind's eye."

Critics have called Marin's collection limited -- by period (too '80s), by artists' age (too old), by size of work (too big), even by color (too red). He says the museum rebuffed him at first, saying it would rather not feature individual collections, but says new director Michael Govan enthusiastically backed the show.

Marin says he just collected what he liked. "I started going to galleries on the Westside of L.A., and that's when I discovered these Chicano painters," he says, seated in the LACMA gallery. "I knew enough to recognize great art, and I had the money to acquire it and the impetus to throw my celebrity behind getting it more exposure."

For Marin, fighting for Chicano art's rightful place was not unlike standing his ground as a child against schoolyard taunts. Richard Anthony Marin was 10 when his family moved from South-Central Los Angeles to the Valley suburbs of Granada Hills. One day, while waiting to play volleyball, one of his new white classmates called out, "Hey, Blackie, get to the back of the line."

"I just hit him as hard as I could," recalls the actor and comedian, a second-generation Mexican American and son of a LAPD officer. "I was a little kid, but I wasn't afraid of nobody."

Marin, 61, says he got into fights almost daily over racial slurs until he transferred to a Catholic school and the name-calling stopped. Instead of cracking skulls he started cracking open books, pushed by an intellectual rivalry with his cousins back in Los Angeles. They quizzed one another in Latin and competed to prove who was smarter.

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Marin nurtured his own art appreciation by poring over art books in the library, studying the masters of classical painting. Those boyhood traits -- his love of art and his fighting spirit -- would serve him well later as a champion of Chicano art.

Marin, twice married, is dating Russian pianist Natasha Rubin. He lives in Malibu and continues to make films, appearing as the priest in the upcoming "The Perfect Game," about the 1957 Little League team from Monterrey, Mexico. And he continues to find thrills in art collecting, with a recent acquisition from up and comer Shizu Saldamando.

At times, he could be the proverbial bull in the china shop. He threatened to wage a public relations war against LACMA over what he saw as the museum's resistance to Chicano art. Art experts across the country, he says, rebuffed his contention that Chicanos constituted a legitimate school of American art. After all, what does a comedian who owns his own line of gourmet hot sauces know about fine art?

"You can argue all you want," Marin recalls responding, "but one day I'm going to put all these paintings up in one room, and you're going to see it."

"Los Angelenos/Chicano Painters of L.A.: Selections From the Cheech Marin Collection," through Nov. 2, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., L.A. (323) 857-6000 or www.lacma.org.

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Los Angeles Times

November 15, 2007

COVER STORY

Take a little trip and see

The lowrider gets some museum cred with a show at the Petersen Automotive.

-- Dan Neil, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

THE PETERSEN AUTOMOTIVE MUSEUM is not, it must be said, a very controversial place. With its mission to "explore and present the history of the automobile" in the most car-centric city in the world, it might as well be the Newcastle Museum of Coal. But with the new exhibit "La Vida Lowrider: Cruising the City of Angels," the Petersen drops a splendid argument in favor of openness and acceptance right in the middle of America's immigration debate.

Born of Mexican pride and defiance after World War II, lowriding -- a customizing trend in which cars are lowered onto their suspensions, reupholstered and extravagantly painted -- has become a quintessentially American tradition, embraced by African Americans as well as white kids. It's also become one of the country's sexiest cultural exports. Top-tier lowriders can sell to Japanese collectors for six figures; you can see teenagers wandering around Tokyo's Roppongi district in baggy jeans and Virgen de Guadalupe T-shirts. In design and graphics, lowriding style has become the Hispanic equivalent of manga.

The Petersen exhibit -- 21 cars, two motorcycles and a collection of raked, gold-plated custom bicycles -- offers a brisk summary of lowriding from its beginnings in East L.A., as a kind of automotive extension of zoot-suiting and *pachucos* fashion; through the '60s and '70s, when the low and slow (*bajito y suavecito*) style can be read as a reaction to white auto enthusiasts' hot rodding; to the present, when it is a multibillion-dollar hobby and industry with its own bible, *Lowrider Magazine*. Like hip-hop's profusion into the larger world of pop music, the lowriding aesthetic -- the iridescent "candy" paints, the filled seams and shaved door handles, the ground-hugging ride height -- has changed the dynamic of mainstream car design. The Chevy HHR, for example, is essentially a mass-market lowrider.

Much of the movement's history can be told in the story of a single car: Jesse Valadez's ecstatic "Gypsy Rose," (on our cover) a 1964 Chevy Impala strewn with 150 hand-painted Mexican roses across a field of candy-pink, red and white metallic paint. Valadez is a member of the Imperials Car Club, one of many close-knit groups whose members cruised Los Angeles streets in the late '60s and early '70s. At the time, lowriding clubs had fierce and sometimes violent rivalries, and the style of the car was associated with gang warfare (the term "lowrider" was actually coined by the police after the Watts riots of 1965). Valadez was among the first to attempt to bring connoisseurship to the hobby with the sumptuous, and expensive, paint scheme on his car.

But the streets were still not safe. In 1972, soon after Valadez finished his first "Gypsy Rose," a '63 Impala, it was destroyed on Whittier Boulevard by brick-throwing youths.

In the 1970s, the police in Los Angeles and other Southwestern cities began cracking down on lowriders, whether they were gang members or not. By 1979, Whittier Boulevard was closed to cruising. "Whittier was a good thing," Valadez told *Lowrider Magazine* in 1980. "But it got out of hand -- too much violence. The sheriffs didn't close the boulevard, the people did."

Meanwhile, Valadez had re-created "Gypsy Rose" (the exhibit's '64 Impala), and that car was destined to become famous. Shown bumping down the street in the opening credits of

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the Freddie Prinze sitcom "Chico and the Man," the "Gypsy Rose" was the first lowrider most white Anglo-Americans had ever seen. Lowriding's cultural assimilation had begun.

In the first decades of the hobby, lowriders fixed up used cars that were cheap and plentiful, like the now-iconic Impala, which was one of the bestselling cars of all time. But the more money artisans poured into their cars, the less likely they were to take them cruising on the street. By the mid-'70s, "Gypsy Rose," as well as Joe Ray's groundbreaking 1971 Buick "Dressed to Kill," started showing up, and winning, at car shows.

Today, lowriding has its own calendar of competitions and most elite lowrider cars are barely ambulatory, only able to roll onto and off the show stage. Some, like Alejandro "Chino" Vega's 1979 Chevy Monte Carlo, the gorgeous "Orgullo Mexicano," can disassemble themselves, the hood, trunk and fenders levitating on struts and hydraulics. Others are like four-wheeled Fabergé eggs. For sheer provocation, the most remarkable car in the show is Amor Barut's glittering 1988 VW Jetta, the religion-themed "The Passion." Pinstriped panels in the paint contain leaves of a King James Bible (Jeremiah, Psalms), even inside the engine bay. The gullwing doors have large engraved crosses. The transaxle (the traverse transmission-drive unit) is painstakingly engraved like the breech of a vintage Beretta shotgun, the execution itself a sign of devotion.

"The artisanship and skill in some of these cars is as good as I have ever seen," says Dick Messer, the Petersen's director. "It's just unbelievable."

And in the back, a huge sound system integrated into a custom-molded fascia. The Lord is a homeboy.

Middle Americans visiting the museum might have a little trouble parsing the imagery of lowrider culture, in which murals of big-breasted hotties and crazed urban clowns reside on the same car with images of devotion.

For Angelenos, they will see their city's recent history reflected in the lowriders' murals and mirror-chrome wheels. It's not always pretty. In the 1950s, the Chicano enclave of Chavez Ravine was bulldozed to make way, ultimately, for Dodger Stadium. Ry Cooder's 2005 album "Chavez Ravine" tells the story of that lost community. And the musician commissioned lowriding legend Fernando Ruelas to build a lowrider ice-cream truck and Chicano artist Vincent Valdez to paint murals on it commemorating Chavez Ravine, including the heartbreaking scenes of the last, defiant evictions. The Petersen exhibit is the first time the vehicle has been shown.

Of the millions of Chevys, Buicks, Cadillacs, Lincolns and Cadillacs that rolled off assembly lines in the 1960s and '70s, almost all have gone to their rest -- compacted, melted down or left in open fields for the elements to disassemble. It's hard not to think of the cars in the Petersen as supremely lucky, not only to have survived but also to have been transformed into these passionate works of art.

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Los Angeles Times



Every picture tells a story in 'Ravine'

With a '53 truck as his canvas, artist Vincent Valdez set out to tell the story of Chavez Ravine. It was easier said than done.

By Lynell George
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

September 16, 2007

VINCENT VALDEZ thought it should be simple enough. The job: Retelling the nasty land-grab saga of Chavez Ravine, with all its vivid twists and turns, in all of its lurid hues. The story was shot through with themes that the young artist often revisited in his work: class and race, haves and have-nots, history and hearsay. The only significant twist in this project was that instead of using a standard canvas, he'd be layering the narrative onto a truck.

To be precise, it wasn't just any truck but a custom-built, lowrider ice cream truck -- a commission from Ry Cooder intended to help promote Cooder's 2005 album, "Chavez Ravine." It was to be, literally, a vehicle for keeping the story alive and vivid. A way not to forget.

Valdez has seen how easily the forgetting happens; how in the absence of hard facts there's an impulse to invent or embellish -- to fill in the gaps. Holes open up in the timeline and new stories rush in, overtaking the truth. For him, art's always been a way of guarding against erasure, setting the record straight.

Until the truck, he thought of the cycle -- erase/revise/restore -- as something removed from him. But recently he's had a close-up view of just how, and how quickly, history can rewrite itself.

His trajectory was white-hot when Cooder called. Valdez had made his first big splash in 2001 with a piece called "Kill the Pachuco Bastard!," a visually raucous painting reimagining the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles. The work became one of more talked about centerpieces of a touring exhibition called "Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge," and Valdez, then 22, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, followed up with a solo exhibition at the McNay Museum in his home town of San Antonio. "Stations," a series of large-scale, epic charcoal drawings that cast Christ as a boxer and the crucifixion

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as a boxing match, has been touring since its debut in 2004.

As for Valdez himself, well, he fell off the map. Conjecture abounded, he says, reeling off the reports: "The local newspapers wrote, 'The pressure was too much,' that I 'fled town.' People were saying I had a breakdown. . . . Others said I had so much success that I was ready for the big time and I went to Los Angeles."

That was the only shred of truth -- the L.A. part. As for the rest, "They turned into all these little urban myths," he says on a recent August afternoon, standing in the very spot where he has spent much of the last 18 months. Not club crawling, lunching or networking but in a bare-bones 1,700-square-foot live/work studio in Boyle Heights not more than 5 feet away from the very thing that actually lured him to Los Angeles -- that truck, that all-consuming ice cream truck: El Chavez Ravine.

Veering off courseAS Cooder envisioned it, the truck would chronicle the battle over Chavez Ravine, a hard-scrabble, mostly Mexican American, working-class neighborhood that was plowed away to make room for the sleek, state-of-art stadium that the Brooklyn Dodgers would come to call home. The evolution of the neighborhood, from 1949 to present day, would unspool along the panels of the truck. It seemed straightforward enough, Valdez says. "I told Ry six, eight months tops."

Now, nearly two years later, the truck still sits. Lurks really. And though Valdez says that he -- as of just a few weeks ago, "at 12:57 a.m., Sunday, Aug. 5th" to be exact -- is finally finished, the truck sits in his studio's center space; his few personal belongings remain pushed to the margins where he lives: a crate of LPs, a turntable, a laptop, a trumpet case and a few scattered books -- mostly photography and history.

Valdez would be the first to admit that he might have taken a wrong turn and disappeared into his creation. "I had no idea what I was in for," he says, arms folded, eyeing the crouching machine. Traced along its sloping doors, its curved fenders, is a winding, deeply rutted dirt road, a few wooden houses rising from it. There's a view of a 1940s downtown, then a sleepy neighborhood waking up, and later, faces familiar from the Chavez Ravine battle -- then-Dodgers President Walter O'Malley, former LAPD Chief William H. Parker. This day in the life of a neighborhood, a time-tripping panorama spanning 1949 to 1959, looks almost like an intricate tattoo, but in the glowing, concentrated hues of a Los Angeles sky in summer -- blood orange, violets, lipstick reds -- all of it done in oil paints on metal applied meticulously by brush, painted and repainted, layer upon layer.

Valdez points out tire tracks here, a disrupted house plant there, "all my little obsessions," which he knows, over time, became bigger and bigger. But each stroke, each erasure, each layer turned folly into actuality. He's still haunted by it, having dreams.

"Some mornings, I would walk down these stairs and I couldn't look at the thing. You know those stereotypical stories of the crazed, dramatic artists who are just a little bit nutty? Well, some of those are true," he says. "I was locked up here for hours. . . always just me in here with the truck. And I would find myself talking to this thing. I'd come down the stairs and I'd grunt at it. I would literally say, 'I just don't want to see you right now.'"

"I'd turn my back to it. It was like a partner. It was really wacky when you step outside and realize, 'Am I talking to this thing?' But worse, he admits, would be the imagined answer, "when even the grill opens up and says, 'Finish me. Finish me.' "

Hopelessly stalledMOST days and most nights, Valdez could be found crouched on the concrete floor, a wooden cart pulled close, cluttered with tubes of oil paint, brushes and

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rags that also now look like a Los Angeles sunrise. He could spend half a day staring at a wheel well or a front fender, making corrections or additions. Or painting out another panel until it was once again a gray patch that resembled the primer. "I didn't want it just to be a timeline. I didn't want it to look hokey." About six months ago, the truck still felt too vague, not balanced. It was a patchwork of intricate details, but some areas still felt empty or not sharply enough expressed, as if he had begun to lose steam on the other side. Cooder tried a gentle prod: "I'm not getting any younger Vincent. . . ." To which Valdez responded, "And Ry, I'm getting older, man. This thing is making me *old*."

Cooder admits, "Well, I started to think we almost lost Vincent there."

For all this time, the truck has been the first thing Valdez glimpses in the morning, the last thing he takes in at night. "I wish I had logged the exact hours," he says, as if that might clarify the journey.

Cooder well knows there is a fine line between perfection and obsession. It took *him* three years and many wandering miles down creative side roads to finish telling Chavez Ravine's story. And really -- has he? He was more than halfway through the album when he started to imagine something starkly different from the standard-issue promotional music video, something that was unusual but, most important, lasting. "I knew people wouldn't want to go back and *read* history," he says. He needed a format that would convey the sweep of the story -- something in the tradition of Mexican murals, but mobile. "Problem with a wall is you can't own it, buildings get torn down." But finally, he says, "I began to see it."

The task was to get others to see it too. First, he contacted the Ruelas brothers -- Julio, Fernando and Ernie -- master car builders out of South Los Angeles and founders of the venerable Dukes Car Club, to ask if they knew how to go about finding an old Good Humor truck, something familiar to a neighborhood. But there were none stashed away, so the Ruelas began piecing one together using a 1953 Chevrolet five-window, half-ton truck as the foundation. Next, Cooder set about finding an artist who could render what he was after. "Not what you usually see with car painting. None of these cartoons, silly drawings," says Cooder. "A highly narrative oil painting -- but on metal."

Another artist, Ruben Ortiz Torres, pointed Cooder to Valdez, who, in spring 2005, was finishing the pieces for "Stations" and took three months to return the call. He knew nothing of the Chavez Ravine incident and couldn't fathom what an ice cream truck had to do with it, but he was intrigued: "I really couldn't visualize it at first," Valdez says. "But he hooked me with the story and his ideas."

As he approached the Chavez Ravine project, there was the pressure to "get it right," particularly because he was an outsider. For three months, he disappeared into research -- watched documentaries, read documents Cooder had sent him, listened to music of that era. He bought a ticket for a Dodgers game and sat in the "*cholo* seats," to soak up stories. He attended Chavez Ravine family reunions, talked to families. He wandered the patches of what was left of the old neighborhood. He let Los Angeles -- its culture and its stories, past and present -- seep in, little by little.

There were no specific models for the project in terms of scope or medium, but there were precedents. This notion of a lowrider conveying a story is not as way out as it seems. "Lowriders have long been used, in a way, as a canvas to tell the stories of the barrio," says Denise Sandoval, professor of Chicana/o Studies at Cal State Northridge, curator of the upcoming show, "La Vida Lowrider: Cruising the City of Angels," which opens at the Petersen Automotive Museum on Oct. 27 and will feature Valdez's truck.

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"Lowriding, in essence, is performative. Cruising allows people to not only express themselves but transcend the limits of the barrio culture in Los Angeles." It also ties into a tradition of street aesthetics in Los Angeles that blend tattoos, car painting and wall murals to pass on ancient myth, history or neighborhood legend, sometimes all at the same time. But, says Ortiz, "Vincent, he's a different story. He comes from a different place. He understands narrative painting from the '30s. I can see a lot of American art in his work and to a certain degree Mexican muralism and illustration. But what he's doing is a fresco -- working on the contours of a car -- in oil. This was big. Ambitious."

Down the rabbit hole WHEN the Ruelas brothers wheeled the truck, a primed and ready canvas, into Valdez's studio, reality set in: "I literally just sat in front of it for about a solid month and a half," the painter says. "Two months. Then, I would just *very* timidly apply color." Just settling on the paint itself was more problematic than he had imagined. "I asked a lot of car guys in San Antonio and here. I talked to the Dukes. To other artists who have done custom work on cars -- Magu and other people who knew how [artist] Mister Cartoon had done his vehicles." Mister Cartoon, the graffiti artist turned street-art impresario, had even done an ice cream truck, though one of a considerably different flavor.

Most everyone recommended airbrush, "but that's not my work." Neither was acrylic. He considered car paint, but it dries instantly and he couldn't blend. "I sat here and thought: 'Can I do this? Really?' "

That was a more open-ended question than even Valdez realized. He went down the rabbit hole. The release of the album came and went. The anniversary of the album did too. And Valdez kept working, adding details -- painting fonts to match old documents, even precisely mimicking their hue. "It had to feel like the colors of the album. It had to feel like a Dukes car, and it had to be my work. And I was at such a crossroads with my work." In retrospect, Valdez says, it wasn't any one thing that tripped him up, or some spell the truck was working on him. It was something much more prosaic but necessary: his own evolution. "I've always had this tug of war with my work. Not just the subject, but the process. You see the fight in it."

If anything was working its spell on him it was the story that he was retelling about the city, the persistence of an embattled community. "It's been a complete awakening as far as my work ethic goes," says Valdez, who has now decided to make a go of it in L.A. "Everybody learns to hustle here. And I don't mean a street-hustle mentality. I mean like people working to make it," he says.

It wasn't simply the city's burgeoning art scene -- the proliferating galleries, new cutting-edge work, the artists' migration. "There's an energy to this city, both politically and socially. Everything seems magnified. It's been a real awakening for me," says Valdez. "Growing up, I've been in tune with my political views, but here I see them acted out -- the student walkouts, the protests over the South-Central farm. And that energy has made me see my work, and the purpose of it, in a whole new light. It's sort of like a punch in the stomach."

That's been enough to make him throw himself into the ring, to make a life here. He's found a place in Boyle Heights and a gallery in Culver City -- Western Project. His solo show, which just opened, is up through Oct. 27. He's even playing trumpet in a band, Ollin.

But soon now, Valdez knows, he'll wake up and this truck won't be "the first thing that I see when I start my day and it won't be the last thing I see when I end my day, and that's going to be tough." It will soon be moving to the Petersen for the October show, and Cooder hopes to find it a long-term museum home.

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As we circle the finished truck, he points out the newest additions -- ghost figures, more tire tracks, graffiti here, all those obsessive details. "It's an ongoing story. It happens to all of us, whatever you want to call it -- urban renewal, gentrification. It affects me, it affects all of us," he says. "The piece, it's political. Sure it's cultural, if you want to label it specifically, but I think beyond that, it's an American theme. That's America regardless of era." We make our way to the hood of the truck, the end of the story. The stadium glows in full color, hot-lighted, stands filled. And there Valdez has painted himself in next to Cooder. They sit side by side in the cholo seats, taking in a night game. He didn't get lost -- his footprints are there, an indelible sign. His X marks the spot.

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ARTSCENE

VINCENT VALDEZ

September 15 - October 27, 2007 at [Western Project](#), Culver City

by Annie Buckley



"Winner," 2006, oil on canvas, 42 x 80".



"Death of the Prize Fighter," 2006, charcoal on paper, 32 x 84".



"Head," 2006.

Any good Western capitalist will affirm that big success is a goal worth fighting for, yet those who 'make it' often acknowledge what cultures around the world--from Native American tribes to Tibetan Buddhists--have recognized for centuries, namely, that achievement is its own unique form of suffering.

"Winner's Circle," a new exhibition by Vincent Valdez, takes the simultaneity of glory and loss as its primary subject. The exhibition consists of new paintings, the majority of which feature the larger than life visage of a singular young man who is ostensibly at the height of his success.

The sheer physicality of each subject's fight for victory is made apparent in their faces, and while the boxing shorts and wrapped hands on the one full figure in the exhibition locate the subjects as boxers, both the identity of the subjects and the implication of struggle expands beyond the metaphor of the ring. These are fighters; that much is clear. But the free will each has exercised to arrive at this particular moment of glory is questioned by the vagaries of their environment and the surprisingly tentative and eerily incandescent look in their eyes. They gaze into some imagined distance as if uncertain of exactly how they arrived at this particular star-struck fate.

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In previous works, including colossal charcoal drawings narrating a boxing match (“Stations”, 2004) and a series of paintings about the infamous Zoot Suit riots in Los Angeles, Valdez has addressed the paradox of masculinity in an increasingly complex global culture by positing it in relationship to historical narrative. But while Valdez’s previous portrayals of powerful if uncertain young men were hinged to narrative and history via cinematic structure, these new paintings are achingly devoid of context. The subjects are framed in a haze of darkness with little more than a half-hearted spray of light--fireworks, flashbulbs, stars--to mark the occasion of their success. But rather than limit the scope of these works, the absence of context serves to root them in the present, referencing themes of the victor as wide ranging as the American “war on terror,” contemporary spiritual quests, and gang initiation rituals. Thus Valdez’s subjects take on the shadowy aspect of warriors that is typically absent, or perhaps most often misrepresented in the popular media. Be they young soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, kids warring in the nation’s urban centers, or teens battling drugs, depression, and suicide, Valdez manages to portray resiliency and vulnerability.

Friends and band-mates of the artist serve as models, but rather than portraiture, Valdez’s subjects are stand-ins for a blossoming archetype. From prize fighters to soldiers, the image is of young men exuberantly pumped and efficiently primed for battle by a larger structure, then left behind at the end of the fight. The style of his paintings, by turns expressive and detailed, serves up adulation and exposure in equal measure. Details such as the magnification of downy hair on a fighter’s ear, or the red and yellow reflection of fireworks on another’s eyelashes elevate the subject to the status of icon. But Valdez’s masterful use of color and texture emphasizes not celebrity nor glory, but the very earth-bound and humane experience of emotion. Fear, shame, wonder, and joy emanate from faces as queasily beautifully as the deep shades of vibrant color, reminiscent of grapes and bruises, nightfall and overripe cherries, that shape them.

The resource for an earlier set of Valdez’s paintings, etiquette books from the fifties, offers a different perspective from which to view the works in “Winner’s Circle.” Even though rigid roles for girls have not exactly been negated, boys are still not *really* supposed to cry. Sure, there has been some shift from the fifties, but what “Winner’s Circle” seems to point to is that there is a wealth of emotions swirling around in these young men, and that encouraging or allowing their expression sooner could ease some of this struggle, both individually and globally. In speaking about “Winner’s Circle” Valdez references personal, political, and communal struggles. Positing the central question of the exhibition, he asks, “What does it take to win nowadays? And is it even worth the effort?” His subjects respond like some new brand of Everyman--no briefcase-toting Willy Lomans here. These are hardscrabble youths on the brink, and their dazed rapture in this moment of victory represents an acute awareness of the transitory nature of winning, indeed of life. It’s as if someone whispered into each oversized ear, ‘the applause won’t last for long.’

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SAN ANTONIO'S HOME PAGE FROM THE *Express-News* AND *KENS5*

***So Whatcha Doin'?* Vincent Valdez**

Web Posted: 02/03/2007 07:30 PM CST

San Antonio Express-News

Vincent Valdez is very busy these days.

Since moving to Los Angeles a little over a year ago, the artist known for his compelling images of urban youth and banged-up boxers has been working nonstop on a series of projects, chief among them a mural on a 1953 Chevy ice cream truck that tells the story of Chavez Ravine, the Mexican American neighborhood bulldozed to make way for Dodger Stadium.

"I'm painting it in oils," says the 29-year-old San Antonio native. "It begins on the driver's side fender, and you walk all the way around the car, and it ends on the passenger's side fender. So it's the entire story narrated through the use of imagery about what happened before Dodger Stadium."

Guitarist Ry Cooder owns the truck. Valdez also recently completed the illustrations for a booklet that will accompany Cooder's upcoming release "My Name is Buddy."

Amid this flurry of activity, Valdez worked on a limited-edition Nike shoe, a tribute to the Mexican fighter Kid Azteca. He also plays trumpet in the pachuco/world/punk fusion combo Ollin. The band is releasing its new album, "San Patricios" — with cover art by Valdez, of course — on St. Patrick's Day.

Now, it's back to the drawing board for Valdez. He is gearing up for a pair of shows in Houston and San Antonio with mentor and friend Alex Rubio.

What are you working on?

I'm working on the truck. I'm starting the first drawings for the show at the University of Houston in March. That's at the O'Kane Gallery. I'm also prepping for the show at the (Museo) Alameda with Alex. That show will be called "'Pride of the Southside' y 'En El Mero Weso.'" The show opens in the summer at the new museum in Market Square. It's a collaborative show. He's depicting his neighborhood, and I'm depicting my neighborhood. But it's really beyond that. It's more about memories of a lot of the history we have together.

Where have you been?

In Boyle Heights, Los Angeles. I've literally just been locked in (my studio). If I'm not here, I'm back home visiting. This is probably the nicest studio I've had in my entire career. It used to be an old taxi service station, so the taxis would drive straight into my door, the overhead door, fill up and get maintenance, and drive out the back and head downtown back in the '40s. But it's got beautiful lighting and got a loft upstairs and kitchen. And it's right in Boyle Heights, which reminds me a lot of home but just bigger and dirtier.

What are you reading?

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How about what am I watching? (Laughs) I've read a couple of books, actually, but I can't even think of them. I will say one — "Philip Guston: Retrospective." "The People of Paper" by Salvador Plascencia. I received it as a gift from Ry's agent. He thought I'd like it because it's real visual, and he was right. I loved it. It's rare that I can sit down and just read a book straight through, but that one I did.

Seen anything good?

I just saw "Hearts and Minds." That blew me away. (Peter Davis) won the Academy Award for best documentary, real controversial and it's all about the winning of the hearts and minds of the people in Vietnam. And then I'm not going to say I saw "Apocalypto" and actually liked it. (Laughs) I actually enjoyed it. I thought it was a good action movie. I just watched "Throne of Blood" last night. It's Akira Kurosawa.

What's on your iPod/turntable/ radio/CD player?

I recently got a bunch of Freddy Fender stuff. Who else? Oh, Devotchka. They're really good. I don't really ever follow bands at all, but this band, I actually went to San Francisco to go see them. When I heard the stuff, it was really strange mariachi/circusy/Russian/polka, and then also rockabilly. I had first heard them on a soundtrack, then I looked them up. I was convinced they were all from Russia somewhere, but they're from Colorado. I've been collecting a bunch of old stuff like Artie Shaw and Harry James, like old '40s instrumental stuff.

What's the last great meal you had?

My mom made me a giant plate of fideo and carnita and two tortillas with cheese and our home tea. She makes that for me, that same plate, every time I arrive and every time that I leave.

What are you looking forward to?

Finishing the truck. Getting my Cougar out of the shop. It was my mom's first car. It's a '67 Cougar. I'm having it re-done in San Antonio. I'll give you one more. Finishing the truck, driving the Cougar, and being home for the summer.

What are you excited about?

The movie "300," turning 30 and seeing if this is the year that Alex Rubio finally cuts his hair.

— *Elda Silva*

San Antonio Express-News publish date Feb. 4, 2007

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LAWEEKLY

LA People 2006
Battle of Chavez Ravine

Vincent Valdez

By DANIEL HERNANDEZ

Wednesday, April 19, 2006 - 3:00 pm

His *Kill the Pachuco Bastard!* is one of the most recognizable and stunning works of recent contemporary Chicano art, a lucid, violent painting depicting the L.A. Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. But Vincent Valdez, a 28-year-old artist, is not from L.A. He's from "San Anto" — San Antonio. And he just moved here.

In a way, Valdez's move to a live-work studio in Boyle Heights with girlfriend Shizu Saldamando, an emerging young artist as well, is the completion of a circle begun with his 2001 painting that has traveled the country as part of Cheech Marin's Chicano art collection. Valdez arrived in September to work on a commission from songwriter Ry Cooder that explores another turning point in the history of Latino L.A.: the eviction of residents from Chavez Ravine, which opened the way for the construction of Dodger Stadium. Both artists requested details of the piece not be divulged, but this viewer can say the work in progress promises to surpass anything Valdez has given us before, technically and thematically.

"Now I'm back to depicting this actual event in early Los Angeles . . . All of my work in between those two, in between that Zoot Suit piece and this [piece], everything has been based on the same elements, this angle of social American history, whether it's inner city or, on a grander scale, of what society is and how society functions," Valdez said. "It was perfect timing, I've always had in the back of my mind that I knew I was going to wind up out here."

This fall Valdez makes his L.A. solo debut at Western Project in Culver City.

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Los Angeles Times

POP MUSIC REVIEW

October 2, 2007

Ry Cooder is an amigo to Chicano music

By Agustin Gurza, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer



Photo: Rick Loomis / Los Angeles Times

Ry Cooder performing at Pico Rivera nightclub A Mi Hacienda.

The guitar legend plays a spirited set with Ollin at A Mi Hacienda in Pico Rivera.

You've got to hand it to Ry Cooder. When he embraces a new musical culture, he doesn't care where the adventure takes him. A decade ago, he traveled to Havana, where he stumbled upon the Buena Vista Social Club -- and got slapped with a hefty fine for violating the U.S. embargo of Cuba.

On Sunday, the acclaimed American guitarist found himself in a place where white men rarely tread -- a Pico Rivera nightclub called A Mi Hacienda. It's normally a hot spot for banda and norteño music, one that's patronized primarily by Mexicans.

Cooder came to showcase some of the vintage Chicano music featured on his recent album, "Chavez Ravine," in which he set to music the social history behind the bulldozing of barrios where Dodger Stadium now stands. He appeared along with one of his guests on that album, Little Willie G., former lead singer of Thee Midneters and a legendary figure in the so-called Eastside sound, a Latinized blend of rock, R&B and doo-wop made for cruising and close-dancing.

The two *veteranos* were backed by a noteworthy band from Boyle Heights named Ollin, which does its own Chicano fusion with a rich world music palette. Cooder's connection to the band is through Ollin trumpet player Vincent Valdez, an artist he commissioned to depict

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scenes from Chavez Ravine on the sides of a customized ice cream truck that was provided by members of the historic Duke's So. Cal. car club.

Duke's sponsored Sunday's show as a free tribute to its late cofounder, Julio Ruelas. An armada of lowrider cars paraded along Whittier Boulevard outside the cavernous club.

Wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a fedora, Cooder stood out in the all-Chicano crowd, towering over most fans. But if he was uncomfortable, he didn't show it. The eclectic world-music maven has a knack for making himself part of the family.

Scott Rodarte, who heads Ollin with his twin brother, Randy, said before the show that he used to resent Cooder for "stealing" the story of Chavez Ravine, which had been dramatized earlier by the Chicano theater troupe Culture Clash in a 2003 play at the Mark Taper Forum, for which Ollin had done the music.

Eventually, though, Rodarte reconsidered his "unfounded grudge" against someone he now considers a fellow musical explorer.

"Once you talk to the person and see where his heart is, it doesn't matter where he's from," said guitarist Rodarte, 37. "He loves good music that speaks right from the soul, and he really cares about untold stories."

In a brief set, the dynamic 10-piece band focused mostly on Willie G.'s Midniter hits from the 1960s, spiked with Cooder's measured but effective slide-guitar licks. The audience of old-time lowriders did not seem especially impressed with the guest star's presence, though many got up to dance, a compliment in itself.

The turnout, short of a full house, underscored Cooder's failure to spark wider interest in the Chicano sound as he has with other roots music, especially the Cuban *son* through Buena Vista and even norteño music in his work with Tex-Mex accordion ace Flaco Jimenez.

But by joining Ollin on Sunday, Cooder turned a spotlight on a struggling indie band that's part of the new generation of Chicano music, one with a vision of the future instead of the past.

"I love these guys," he said as he left the stage. "They're righteous, authentic young people who know how to make this music live a little, rather than see it covered up."