

Chicano Art and Beyond: John Valadez and the Effects of Montage

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Abstract

The work of John Valadez, a major figure in the Chicano art movement, eludes traditional classification. Enhanced by his social-political concerns, his work extends from local (Chicano and Californian) to international. I argue that viewing his work simply as Chicano art is too limiting. While his early works generated strong messages about the challenges facing Mexican-Americans following the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, his more recent work, with its emphasis on montage, extends to address ideas of global importance. In creating works that can be understood universally, Valadez making us aware of our shared pleasures and anxieties.

Key words: Chicano Art, John Valadez, Latin America, California, Montage, Allegory

The transformation of the work of John Valadez over the years reflects not only the changes in the artist's outlook but also the cultural turn from the political urgency of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 70s to present-day events that concern not just the Latino populace but the global community. His early works forcefully advanced a socio-political statement about the status of the Chicano.¹ The later work, still retaining Chicano motifs, reveals the inner dimensions of the artist while bringing to light situations and conflicts that affect us all (both personally and politically). These recent works, equally the vision of a California artist and a Chicano, have international appeal.² This is not to say that his critical stance has disappeared, the focus has just shifted. In relation to the change in his current point of view, Valadez has clarified, "I wanted to make Chicano art. Now I am a Chicano who makes art."³

Despite the fact that scholars have frequently referred to the paintings, pastels, and murals of Valadez as photorealist or hyperrealist/superrealist, I emphasize that these works employ photorealist methods that extend the hyperrealist mode to a surreal or allegorical state due, at least in part, to one method in particular: montage.⁴ Using a technique of assembling separate images (some photographic, others drawn) into a whole, his intent is to create a new unity, an innovative super-reality. These works often begin from photos (taken by him or borrowed from others), found or historical images, and/or drawings which are then adjusted to have a new emphasis based on the vision of Valadez. The finished artworks, consequently, are more loaded with meaning than the initial sketches or photos themselves.

¹ A "Chicano" is a person of Mexican descent born in the United States. In regard to the origins of the term, "Chicano," Teresa Eckmann ("Chicano Artists and Neo-Mexicanists: [De] Constructions of National Identity," Research Paper Series No. 36 [Albuquerque: Latin American and Iberian Institute, UNM, 2000], 25), has noted, "Although the debate continues as to the exact historical origins of the term 'Chicano,' it originally was used by Anglos as a derogatory label and an insult, and was later reclaimed by a politicized Mexican-American community as a means of self-definition."

² Valadez was born in Los Angeles in 1951. For a biography on Valadez, see, for example, his official website: <http://www.johnvaladezart.com/biography.php>.

³ Valadez in Karen Davalos, "Valadez Interview," Interview for the Latino Art Survey, Nov 19, 2007, L.A. Xicano Oral Histories, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 315.

In order to give the artist more agency in the portrayal of himself and his works, a number of quotes from the artist, John Valadez, have been interspersed and he has been given the opportunity to read drafts and suggest changes.

⁴ Max Benavidez initially suggested that the works extend beyond photorealism to the surreal ("The Schizo-Ethnic View: John Valadez Paints as a Child of 'Schizo-Ethnicity'--Growing Up Mexican in an Anglo World and Dealing with The Rawness of the Streets," *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 1992). I am pushing this idea one step further in suggesting that the surreal or allegorical aspects are enhanced by the use of montage.

On photorealism and hyperrealism (superrealism), see for example, Louis K. Meisel and Linda Chase, *Photorealism at the Millennium*, (Harry N. Abrams, 2002); Jean-Claude Lebensztejn and Kate Cooper, "Photorealism, Kitsch and Venturi," *SubStance* 10.2 (1981): 75-104; Aron Vinegar, "Reluzenz: On Richard Estes," In *Heidegger and the Work of Art History*, eds. Amanda Boetzkes and Aron Vinegar, 2014, 249-267; and Johannes Völz, "The Index and Its Vicissitudes: Hyperrealism from Richard Estes to Andreas Gursky," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* (2007): 81-102.

On montage, see for example, Patrizia C. McBride, *The Chatter of the Visible: Montage and Narrative in Weimar Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 1; and Jennifer Valcke, "Montage in the Arts: A Reassessment," In *Avant-garde/Neo-avant-garde*, edited by Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).

As a major figure in the Chicano art movement (following the support of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement or *El Movimiento* by the National Farm Workers Association, in 1962⁵), Valadez aspired to create art that had a political dimension and elevated perceptions of marginalized Mexican-American individuals.⁶ From the beginning, Chicano artists sought to demonstrate pride in their heritage while empowering the community and affirming their cultural identity.⁷ Valadez was engaged in the movement in East Los Angeles (L.A.).⁸

While the content and style of Chicano artworks are wide-ranging, common themes have been emphasized including: past and current Latino or Latin American socio-political events, revolutionary leaders, or archetypal figures; Mexican religious icons or spiritual aspects; Chicano popular culture (e.g., *cholos*, lowriders, or tattoos); or ideas of reclaiming a lost indigenous Mesoamerican past. Albeit at times incorporating these themes, John Valadez chose an alternative and very individual route, focusing on specific people and places in local communities, eventually elevating the everyday to a symbolic level.

Growing up Mexican-American in the Los Angeles area has affected his vision of the world.⁹ Indeed, his multifarious viewpoints reveal the challenge of classifying his work. I argue that the label of “Chicano art” limits our awareness of the breadth of his work and diverts our attention from other important aspects, particularly his use of montage to manipulate the effect on the viewer. Essentially, Valadez is able to approach contexts through multiple perspectives due to his position as a local (Californian and Chicano) and international artist. While other artists have combined montage, local everyday scenes, and hyperrealism, I demonstrate that Valadez advances an individual form resulting from his background, methods, and connections.

Hyperrealism, Superrealism, Photorealism, Montage, and Photomontage

With the use of montage (the combining of images drawn, painted, or photographed to create a new arrangement), the meaning of the original photograph or image is changed due to the addition of fragments taken out of context. After WWI, Berlin Dadaists began using the term “photomontage” (a composite of photographs used in designing or assembling an artwork).¹⁰ Montage and photomontage could be used to suggest meaning in new ways through the juxtaposition of selected images.¹¹ For some artists, these methods were a means for making allegorical references.

In the 1920s, Russian filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov used montage techniques to stimulate viewers (through film images rich in meaning) into thinking about complex or ideological matters.¹² After the encounter with Eisenstein in Taxco, 1931, the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros reversed Eisenstein’s theory of montage for use in a static mural where the spectator moved instead of the film images.¹³ A good example is the mural *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, 1939-40 in which Siqueiros used a system of polyangular perspective which combined multiple angles or views to create a dynamic spectator who “activated” the images as they changed position. In the case of Valadez’s

⁵ In 1972, the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA)—created by labor leaders César Chávez, Dolores Huerta and Larry Itliong—was renamed the United Farmworkers Union Organizing Committee (UFWOC).

⁶ A recent retrospective of his work, *Santa Ana Condition: John Valadez*, 2012, took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (MCASD). A catalog was published for this exhibition, Kathryn Kanjo, Cris Scorza, and John Valadez, *Santa Ana Condition: John Valadez* (San Diego, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2012).

⁷ Victor Zamudio-Taylor, “Inventing Tradition, Negotiation Modernism,” In *The Road to Aztlán: Art from a Mythic Homeland*, edited by Virginia M. Fields and Victor Zamudio-Taylor (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, University of California Press, 2001), 342-357, here 342.

⁸ Valadez eventually became a member of the Los Four group of muralists which initially included Carlos Almaraz, Gilbert “Magu” Sanchez Lujan, Roberto de la Rocha, and Frank Romero (the group later included Gronk, Judith Hernandez, Willie Herron, John Valadez, and others). See Max Benavidez, “Chicano Art: Culture, Myth, and Sensibility,” In *Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge*, edited by Cheech Marin, Max Benavidez, Constance Cortez, and Terecita Romo, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 2002), 10-21, here 18; and James Tartan, Carlos Almaraz, Gilbert Luján, Roberto de la Rocha, Frank Romero, Gronk, Judith Hernandez, Willie Herron, and John Valadez, *Los Four Murals of Aztlán: The Street Painters of East Los Angeles*, ([Los Angeles]: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2004), dvd.

⁹ “As a third-generation Angeleno, Valadez sees himself as a product of what he calls ‘schizo-ethnicity.’ As a Mexican growing up in an Anglo-dominated world, he learned to see everything from ‘two radically divergent points of view’—as if he were torn between two ways of being.” Max Benavidez, “Chicano Montage: Art and Cultural Crisis,” In *Distant Relations = Cercanías Distantes = Clann I GCéin: Chicano Irish Mexican Art and Critical Writing*, edited by Trisha Ziff, et al (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1995), 105-113, here 110.

¹⁰ Precursors working with a type of “montage” existed in photography from the nineteenth century. Jennifer Valcke, “Static Films and Moving Pictures: Montage in Avant-Grade Photography and Film,” Thesis (Ph.D.), University of Edinburgh, 2009, <http://hdl.handle.net/1842/4061>, 11; and Dawn Ades, *Photomontage*, (London; New York, N.Y.: Thames & Hudson, 1986).

¹¹ Photomontage has been used to present political ideologies, as in the works of John Heartfield. On John Heartfield, see for example, Andrés M. Zervigón, *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image: Photography, Persuasion, and the Rise of Avant-Garde Photomontage*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

¹² Film montage produces a rapid succession of images to illustrate an association of ideas.

¹³ Siqueiros was one of *Los Tres Grandes* (The Three Great) Mexican muralists.

work, the collapsing of “many views into one,”¹⁴ through reassembling images into a montage, created a new reality based on scenes initially captured with a still camera.

Photorealism and Hyperrealism (Superrealism)¹⁵ were art movements in which the works used photos as references. The earliest of the two, Photorealism, began in the United States in the late 1960s with an emphasis on exactness (using camera and photos).¹⁶ Hyperrealism, often defined as extreme realism resembling a high-resolution photograph, was a name given to a French art movement *Hyperréalisme* which came into existence by 1972 or 1973.¹⁷ While Photomontage influenced Hyperrealism, photos were often used only for reference in order to create a work that ultimately had an illusion of reality that exceeds the photograph. Generally, these works were more expressive or emotional than Photorealist works.¹⁸ Valadez’s work moves beyond photorealism to this form of hyperrealism that creates an imaginary scene based in reality: that is, a representation that couldn’t have existed in the physical world.

The Early Works

Valadez’s early portraits of people encountered on the streets of Los Angeles focus on the pride of everyday figures in an urban setting and often show drama and tension.¹⁹ In many of these artworks, the figures reveal themselves as Chicano through their dress;²⁰ while in other works, such as *White Roses*, 1984 (Fig. 1), the ethnicity of the figure is less obvious. In recalling the early works, Valadez noted that these large portraits were meant to provoke viewers and dare them to purchase such confrontational works.²¹



Figure 1. *White Roses*, 1984, pastel on paper, 59.5 x 41.75.” Courtesy John Valadez.

¹⁴ Valcke, “Static Films and Moving Pictures,” 9.

¹⁵ “Superrealism” is often used synonymously with “Hyperrealism.”

¹⁶ The term, “Photorealism” was coined by Louis K. Meisel in 1969.

¹⁷ Vinegar, “Reluzenz: On Richard Estes,” 250 and note 6.

¹⁸ See Brigitte Franzen and Susanne Neuburger, *Hyper Real*, (Köln: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010), 325.

¹⁹ Shifra Goldman, *John Valadez: A Decade of Dignity and Daring* (Santa Ana, CA: Rancho Santiago College, Art Gallery, 1990), 3.

²⁰ Kathryn Kanjo, “John Valadez’s Santa Ana Winds,” In *Santa Ana Condition: John Valadez*, 11-19, here 13.

²¹ Valadez in Davalos, “Valadez Interview,” 260.

In all these large portraits, the subjects look directly out of the work, confronting the viewer and challenging us to see them as individuals.²² With a height of nearly five feet, *White Roses* portrays a bold woman slightly larger than life-sized.²³ In terms of gender representation, the artist has chosen to use the seductive features of her body to draw us closer. The thin fabric of her dress sensually reveals her body underneath, but her serious demeanor is not meant to entice the viewer. Although wearing a delicate feminine gown with white roses on the hip and bodice, her expression is harsh—with a furrowed brow and penetrating dark eyes—and intimidating. She is not presented as a weak, seductive, or stereotypical female, but rather she stands strong, defiant, and empowered; consequently, rather than simply being objectified, she has been given agency in her portrayal.²⁴

Through this type of portrait, Valadez portrays the uniqueness of the individual. This intense focus on one specific person is accentuated by the fact that he erased the context and enhanced specific elements that separate the subject from other figures in the street. In *White Roses*, we see a naturalistic portrait of a woman whose temperament or tension may be evident in her expression, even as her pride is apparent in her stance. While seemingly photorealist, the lack of a background in this work indicates an artistic choice and, consequently, reveals manipulation beyond the unaltered state of a photograph. Isolated from location and personal circumstances, the context of each figure is only apparent in their countenance, body, clothing, or accessories. In leaving out the background, in essence decontextualizing the figure, these early works are much more than photorealist representations that draw attention to minute details. These large portraits use the particular features (e.g., the tightened muscles in her face or the stretched fabric of her dress) to accentuate other characteristics of the individual (in this case, a woman who defies the oversimplified feminine cliché).²⁵

In contrast to the stationary figure in *White Roses*, a horizontal pastel from the same year, 1984, entices the onlooker with a scene in action. The title, *Getting Them Out of the Car* (Fig. 2), draws attention to the three injured bodies that have just been taken, or are falling, from the blue convertible car (at left, a woman being held by a kneeling man; in the center, a bloody male tumbling from the car; and, farther to the right, a man lying on the pavement obscured by a figure in yellow pants).²⁶ Valadez has noted that “the motive and inspiration was the random and newer use of firearms...for settling disputes among the self-destructive. I was attempting to transcend, I suppose, the obvious impact of car shootings within the community of East Los [Angeles].”²⁷



Figure 2. *Getting Them Out of the Car*, 1984, pastel on paper, 50 x 100.”
Cheech Marin collection. Courtesy John Valadez.

²² Goldman, John Valadez: *A Decade of Dignity and Daring*, 4.

²³ Drawn with soft pastel, the two horizontal sheets of paper form a vertical image.

As Rita González, curator at the Center for Art of the Americas, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), has observed, “Valadez’s hyperrealistic and larger-than-life renderings of barrio realities were part of a ‘picturing us’ strategy, a move to make grandiose and visible that which had not been allowed an ‘official’ aesthetic consideration” (“Post-Chicano,” *Poliester* [Mexico City] Spring-Summer [1999]: 40-47, here 40).

²⁴ On agency and empowerment, see Kabeer, Naila. “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment.” *Development and Change* 30.3 (1999): 435-464.

²⁵ Gary D. Keller, Mary Erickson, Pat Villeneuve, Melanie Magisos, and Craig Smith, *Chicano Art for Our Millennium: Collected Works from the Arizona State University Community* (Tempe, Ariz: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 2004), 32.

²⁶ In considering the equality of women’s agency, it is important to note that one of the three victims is a woman; that is, the woman is not delegated, in this case, a minor role. She is treated as an equal to the other two injured males. The difference between works such as this one and other works that use gender relations in a more manipulative manner (such as the car show series) should be kept in mind.

²⁷ Valadez, email correspondence, August 17, 2013.

The lowrider car, a 1963 convertible Chevy Impala, is not obviously “decked out” or customized; even so, the chassis is placed low to the ground.²⁸ Three of the figures remaining inside the car look down at the male falling out the door who has a Christ-like serene countenance, a red bandana tied around his head, and thin mustache. This man is dressed in white with blood stains on his sleeveless t-shirt. The distinctive shirt and bandana may indicate that he is a *cholo*.²⁹

If the viewer is immediately drawn to the Chicano references (such as the car and possibly the man tumbling from it), one can look further and see other ethnic elements and figures introduced; for example, a black man hesitantly approaches the open door of the car with a concerned air and the “ghost” of a young Asian man floats unearthly above the car.³⁰ As noted by Kathryn Kanjo, *Getting Them Out of the Car* combines “an integrated tableau of racially diverse characters.”³¹

The line between the velvety black night and the light early morning sky divides the image into two parts: the incident with the car; and the state of conditions at the beach.³² In daylight walking on the sand, a young man hiding something in his left hand (conceivably concealing a weapon) moves toward two others who are engaged in a tussle. The head of one man has been covered by a green coat or cloth—probably by the man in blue jeans and sneakers who is trying to trip him. In the action overall, the group resembles the musical *West Side Story* with its melodramatic poses and theatrical street fight scenes with choreographed movements.³³ In transcending the expected and keeping some aspects hidden from our view, tension is heightened.

Through the multiple actions, a narrative is suggested but the story is left open-ended. The painting is filled with vignettes that appear as snapshots or rapid glimpses into an escalating encounter. On the sand, not far from the waves breaking on the beach, a young male in blue jeans is gutting a fish. Three other large fish lie lifeless on the sand. Would the bloody fish allegorically relate to the harm done to the wounded figures taken from the car (especially since one fish is in the process of being gutted)? As Valadez has noted, “I was trying to comment on...the senselessness of human violence. That’s why I took it all the way to the ocean.” In consideration of “the way we slaughter fish. Are we going to eat that thing or is it just hunting?”³⁴

Recognizing that this work is not only a photorealist representation focused on exactness but a montage of composite scenes, the nature of our reading changes and we no longer expect the work to merely mimic reality. Montage creates this improbable scene in which the yellow radiating points of the urban mosaic pavement are embedded in the sand of the beach. The car and beach are placed in a space circumscribed by the mosaic flooring. Los Angeles critic Josh Kun has suggested that this work “said as much about struggle for everyday Chicano survival as it has about the border between the barrio and the beach and the failed promises of L.A. Sunshine.”³⁵ For Kun, this is not just any beach but specifically the coast of southern California and the violence related to territory; a liminal space where issues collide.

In order to create a cohesive setting, over a dozen images have been collected and arranged. It is a complicated undertaking to assemble individual photos and drawings and make them look as if they were part of a whole.³⁶ Even more challenging is his choice of soft pastel as the medium with which to depict this hyperrealist image. In using a

²⁸ “A lowrider is any vehicle—car, truck, or bike—that has been customized by its owner to ride lower on its wheels than factory models. The term also refers to the people who create, own, and drive the cars. On both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and throughout the Southwest, lowriders and their cars—known as *carritos*, *carruchas*, or *ranflas*—are an important expression of Mexican-American identity.” Joanna Griffin, “Lowriders,” In *Mexico and the United States*, edited by Lee Stacy (Marshall Cavendish Corp, 2002), 477. In car culture, lowrider cars, often with elaborate paint jobs with graphics, cruise the streets driving slowly.

²⁹ *Cholo* refers to a Mexican-American male—perhaps a gang member or just a lowrider—who typically dresses in chinos (khaki pants) and a white “wifebeater” sleeveless t-shirt, wears a red bandana around the forehead, and may have a hairnet or shaved head (if hard-core) (Rafaela Castro, *Chicano Folklore: A Guide to the Folktales, Traditions, Rituals and Religious Practices of Mexican Americans* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 21).

³⁰ Davalos refers to him as an angel (“Valadez Interview,” 152).

³¹ Kanjo, “John Valadez’s Santa Ana Winds,” 16.

³² Extending from night to day, the work could suggest the passing of time and, perhaps, the consequences of actions.

Valadez works with pastels in layers. For the dark side, Valadez covered the blank sheet of paper in rich black pastel everywhere except where the figures would be placed and then worked the figures and objects with an undercoat of green or blue (the use of this type of “underpainting” is characteristic of traditional oil painting techniques especially during the Renaissance). John Valadez discussed his technique during an inspiring pastel demonstration, *John Valadez: Master of Montage*, at UNCA, March 4, 2014.

³³ In *West Side Story*, the two teenage street gangs—the Jets (Anglo-American) and the Sharks (Puerto Rican)—fight for urban space.

³⁴ Valadez in Davalos, “Valadez Interview,” 451.

³⁵ Kun, “The New Chicano Movement,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 2005.

³⁶ Email correspondence with John Valadez, September 22, 2012.

montage of figures, settings, and grounds, Valadez wanted to unify disparate parts through the use of perspective, light, color, and shadow.³⁷ Be that as it may, a surprising yet delightful effect is the sketchy drawing technique used adjacent to the highly modeled three-dimensional figures and objects. Valadez isn't overly concerned about extending the photorealist effects to every inch of the paper. For example, in this work, we see items litter the ground—such as bottles—that, as translucent or intangible images, add a surreal, unusual, or unexpected aspect that would be missing if everything was rendered in a strictly photorealist style.

This piece references multiple eras and cultures revealing a hybrid perspective and creating a personal symbolism. For instance, draped over the car is a Mexican serape (a blanket or shawl often fringed, worn especially by men). On the ground, the green, gold, and mauve tile pattern radiates in geometric shapes reminiscent of Renaissance terrazzo marble floors as well as the design of a mosaic in the local community (the pavement outside the downtown Los Angeles restaurant, Clifton Cafeteria) or the Aztec Calendar Stone, referencing the Aztec sun god.³⁸ In *Getting Them Out of the Car*, Valadez combines Chicano, Californian, Mexican, Renaissance, and Aztec elements allowing the work a wider, more complex, meaning and addressing both localized and broader symbols of cultures and periods.³⁹

Outstretched arms recur in the three fallen figures who take on an almost religious sense as martyrs (reminiscent of Christ on the cross, the deposition, or the descent from the cross). Additionally, a figure with arms extended has risen above the convertible car and hovers ghostlike, and a boy leaning backward in a chair imitates the gesture. As Valadez noted, "The child in the chair became the ambiguous meaning of the entire piece. The question he is facing was the transcendent moment of the work."⁴⁰ Although duplicating the actions that he sees, "the boy is detached and unaffected by the car shooting or the fighting."⁴¹ He may be the linchpin to the mystery; as someone who doesn't fit in the scene, the "odd man out." In imitating the gestures of the adults around him, the youth may represent the face of the future; that is, in essence, he seems to question whether this violent cycle will carry forward or if things can change for the better.

In regard to the boy in the chair, the sunshine alongside the darkness, or the beach scene merged with the city mosaic, Valadez has noted that he juxtaposes incongruous elements within the narrative in order to create "the effect where something is not quite right, something is funky, or bothersome."⁴² In this way, Valadez is addressing aspects of *rasquache* as described by Tomas Ybarra-Frausto in the *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* (CARA) exhibition catalog: "To be *rasquache* is to posit a bawdy, spunky consciousness, to seek to subvert and turn ruling paradigms upside down. It is a witty, irreverent, and impertinent posture that recodes and moves outside established boundaries."⁴³ The *rasquache* elements in this work show a non-conformist attitude through the resistance to the norm by shifting away from what is expected. In doing so, the narrative is subverted and the work is opened to a wider variety of possible meanings allowing for an enhanced allegorical reading.

This is one of his earliest works to employ allegory and a sense of ambiguity in order to speak to a wide-ranging multicultural audience and suggest complexities of interactions—whether about territory, urban developments, encounters, or violence. Valadez was attempting to make the work "universal, primal, and limited to man's dealings with each other."⁴⁴ Through the use of montage, Valadez allows the work to extend beyond specific ideas to address larger human issues symbolically. The work is rich with suggestion that, in analysis, reveals more than meets the eye.

Developing Allegorical and Affective Situations

In his works that follow, Valadez began to explore other methods for creating symbolism and encouraging the reaction or igniting the curiosity of the viewer. The situation in *Pool Party* (Fig. 3), an oil painting from 1987, seems initially to be distinctly different from *Getting Them Out of the Car*. At first glance, the painting appears to depict a relaxed scene.

³⁷ Valadez in Davalos, "Valadez Interview," 149-150.

³⁸ Valadez, email correspondence, August 17, 2013.

For the Aztec Calendar Stone, *La piedra del sol*, and the Aztec sun god, Ollin, see http://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/obsidian_mirror/aztec_calendar_stone.html (accessed August 1, 2015).

³⁹ Amalia Mesa-Bains. "Spiritual Geographies," In *The Road to Aztlan: Art from a Mythic Homeland*, edited by Virginia M. Fields and Victor Zamudio-Taylor (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; University of California Press, 2001), 332-341, here 334, 339.

⁴⁰ Email correspondence with John Valadez, August 17, 2013.

⁴¹ George Dexter, Jr., October 19, 2014.

⁴² Email correspondence with Valadez, September 22, 2012.

⁴³ Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," In *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation: An Interpretive Exhibition of the Chicano Art Movement, 1965-1985* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, 1990), 155.

Note that *rasquache* can be spelled *rasquachi* or *rascuache* and can also suggest the use of materials in a way that is imaginative and resourceful (Castro, *Chicano Folklore*, 198-199).

⁴⁴ Email correspondence with Valadez, August 17, 2013.

Two young women are enjoying a casual sunny day in the backyard of a suburban California home. Valadez captured the essence of southern California through a middle-class setting complete with a built-in concrete pool.⁴⁵

The painting is large—almost six by nine feet—making the central young woman (wearing yellow short shorts and a small shirt revealing her midriff) more or less actual size. She holds a water hose and looks us directly in the eye while the young girl off to the side concentrates on soaping up the dog. Both acts are physical and vaguely alluring; we can almost feel the water squirting from the pressure of her thumb and the soap squishing through the fingertips. The size of the image, the involvement of the viewer, and the convincing illusion of space allow the spectator to become part of the work.



Figure 3. *Pool Party*, 1987, 69 x 107," oil on canvas. Cheech Marin collection. Courtesy John Valadez.

Even though the scene appears solid from a distance, as the viewer approaches the work, the individual impressionistic brushstrokes become apparent; for example, a detail of the soapy dog is composed as a tachist abstraction of free brushstrokes. Combining well modeled form with thick rapid brushwork is a distinct aspect of the work of Valadez. The photorealist composition of the figures blends with the more painterly reflections apparent in the pool. The ability to combine such tight control (showing mastery of technique) with loose brushwork indicates the work of an innovative and extremely skilled artist. In fact, the less sharp areas draw attention to the highly rendered bodies of the two girls as if our focus is on them.

Strong reflections are common in Photorealist works. Consider, for example, the work of the American Richard Estes and his incorporation of reflective surfaces. As noted by Vinegar, Estes "always keeps a sharp depth of field throughout his paintings, which allows all details their equal weighting, without any imposed hierarchy." In opposition to Estes's work, Valadez's reflections in the pool are more reminiscent of the stylized and rough textured abstraction in the California swimming pool images of the well-known artist David Hockney from the 1960s. Estes, like Valadez, used multiple photos of each location, yet his interest is "to capture the infinitely complex nature of the city, in which everything is potentially meaningful."⁴⁶ Valadez, on the other hand, directs the viewer's gaze through the well-defined and sharply delineated elements which are highlighted by the painterly attention to the surface of the canvas in other areas.

⁴⁵ Valadez in Davalos, "Valadez Interview," 444-445.

⁴⁶ Aron Vinegar, "Reluzenz: On Richard Estes," 259.

In *Pool Party*, the sensuality of the bodies is enhanced by the glistening pool water and the sense of the hot sun on skin. The photorealist style emphasizes the flesh of the women and their scant clothing; ultimately, this was done for more than simply erotic appeal. The bodies are used, along with the rich spontaneous brushwork, to construct a convincing suburban scene that will entice the viewer. Reflections of the two chairs in the pool water and the dog washing on the sidewalk aid in creating a tangible and visually inviting space. The woman with the hose seems to be squinting at the bright sun and smiling out at us. And yet, does her smile seem to be fading? Are we looking at a moment of imminent change? An instance when, in the heat of the afternoon, her emotions begin to rise?

At the top of the dark hillside not far behind the girls, a fire burns red across the canvas. The hill ablaze brings back memories of the recent Los Angeles hillside wildfires. Even so, rather than relating to an actual event, the disconcerting appearance of the fire may be more symbolic.⁴⁷ The undercurrent has been noted by Catherine Bonte:

Tranquility that seems at first to bathe the very ordinary family scene of *Pool Party*, soon gives way to a feeling of unease. Everything is meticulously detailed; the attitudes, the expression of the young woman blinded by the sun looking at us with narrowed eyes, the shorts a little tight at the waist, the reflections of the chairs in the pool water, the soap foam...Every detail is scrupulously noted. At the same time the situation seems implausible, how can one ignore the threat of fire which burns the entire hill? The tragedy is imminent and we are helpless spectators.⁴⁸

Things are on the verge of going out of control. It isn't clear whether the two women seem unaware of their predicament or have just turned their back on danger. Valadez has suggested that this setup reflects the typical Los Angeles mindset. In a big city, locals frequently become accustomed or even indifferent to once-terrifying events.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, while this work may portray life in a megalopolis, it isn't necessary to be from a sprawling region or a large city to understand that people are often mentally distanced from tragedy (whether numbed by the violence and horror of news images or distracted by events in their own life). In setup and effect, this work communicates to a wide audience, leaving us with a sense that looming disaster is moving closer to invading daily life.

These imaginative techniques make the works of Valadez more than just photorealist recreations of specific moments and, particularly in this work, the event is more than it appears to be (i.e., more than just a simple dog washing). His introduction of allegory through the use of montage (e.g., with the addition of the raging fire alongside an everyday scene) makes the work transcend simply a work based on photos to make it both symbolic and surreal, even disconcerting. The artist and scholar, Amalia Mesa-Bains, has discussed how meaning is made in these works, "In the allegorical mode, Valadez presents to us not closed symbols but a permeable, shifting text which calls for and accommodates the viewer's participation. In the truest sense of the storyteller, Valadez's allegory provides multiple temporal realities."⁵⁰ In *Pool Party*, Valadez doesn't clarify whether the fire is imagined or real. The ambiguity creates tension in the viewer, leaving us feeling uneasy or anxious. In this way, the introduction of allegory and montage add a dark undercurrent to a scene that at first seemed to be nonthreatening and ordinary.

Palpable Depictions of Car Shows

In the late 1990s, Valadez began the *Car Show* series. Car shows are, for some of us, exciting affairs with pristine cars, attractive girls (often hired for the event⁵¹), and spectators with cameras in hand. *Car Show*, 2001, (Fig. 4) takes place on a clear, crisp day. It is a tight scene; eight figures are packed into a small space between two or three vehicles with hoods raised to reveal the immaculate and powerful engines. Even so, the cars are not the focus; they are only partially shown behind the main subject: the interaction of the figures.⁵²

⁴⁷ For José Clemente Orozco, another of the three great Mexican muralists, fire was used symbolically (i.e., as something, like knowledge, went up in flames). For Valadez, fire could simply represent the heat of the day or he could be suggesting that there is more underlying this apparently simple scene (whether emotional, allegorical, or physical).

⁴⁸ Catherine Bonte, "John Valadez en résidence au musée d'Aquitaine," 2010. Association des Amis du Musée d'Aquitaine. http://www.amis-musee-aquitaine.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=86&Itemid=4&47923c92b697931fe13609b53f59e783=1046016b2ebf3431f2610e047376cc58%3B (accessed June 17, 2015).

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

⁴⁹ "The fire is maybe a mile away and you don't feel threatened by it." Valadez in Davalos, "Valadez Interview," 149-150.

⁵⁰ Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Chicano Bodily Aesthetics," In *Body/Culture: Chicano Figuration*, edited by Elizabeth Parich (Rohnert Park: Sonoma State University, 1990), 6-13, here 11.

⁵¹ Professional models were available at car shows to pose with visitors for photos. Other than known models, amateur women hoping to launch their modeling career would pose enticingly by the cars in hope of being discovered. Ben Chappell, *Lowrider Space: Aesthetics and Politics of Mexican American Custom Cars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 114-118.

⁵² These works often combine photos from a variety of car shows; thus, the figures are montaged.

In this scene, the attention to detail makes the scene appear three-dimensional, plausible, and alluring. High contrast reflections in the shiny and immaculate cars enrich an otherwise ordinary scene and set the scene logically. The addition of strong shadows integrates the individual figures which were montaged from numerous sources to create one solid location. In contrast to the highly detailed sections, some of the sketchy elements, such as trophies, are not finished in a photorealist style.⁵³ “Some areas are more articulated than others so that the viewer might focus on the principals over the minutiae.”⁵⁴ The unfinished elements work much like the blurred or abstract brushstrokes in other works to lead our focus to the main features painted in forms highly rendered—the vehicles, the public, and the workers at the event.



Figure 4. *Car Show*, 2001, oil on canvas, 76 x 96.25," Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Courtesy John Valadez.

A bald male, surrounded by beautiful girls, squints one eye as he films the vehicles and women with his camcorder. Several figures stand with their backs to the viewer. A girl in the bright shorts stretches out her leg while the kneeling man in front of her intensely stares from behind his Ray-Bans. Her pose, in the tight short shorts, is awkward and arousing. Valadez often displays the sensuality of women's bodies found in the original car show, but, as noted earlier, he uses these sensory elements to direct our attention to a specific region of the work.⁵⁵ In this case, we note that the male in the dark sunglasses, who initially seemed to be looking directly at her skintight hot pants, is actually looking around her at Valadez (and, thus in the work, at us, the viewer). As a *cholo*, this man didn't want to be photographed.⁵⁶ All these figures were getting ready to pose for a group shot and the female is just about to put her leg over the *cholo*'s shoulder.⁵⁷ In pulling elements together, yet leaving the connections loose, Valadez allows ambiguity in the work and creates intrigue and conflict in the viewer.

⁵³ This effect has been discussed earlier in relation to *Getting Them Out of the Car*.

⁵⁴ Email correspondence with Valadez, September 22, 2012.

⁵⁵ The models often posed enticingly and were erotically dressed. On reconsidering essentializing interpretations of Latina sexuality, gender, or lowrider culture, see Ana María Juárez and Stella Beatriz Kerl, "What is the Right (White) Way to be Sexual? Reconceptualizing Latina Sexuality," *Aztlán* (2003), 7-37; and Chappell, *Lowrider Space*.

⁵⁶ Valadez in Davalos, "Valadez Interview," 520.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 459. Being a group shot would "help explain all the grooming taking place." George Dexter, October 19, 2014.

Valadez uses gender relations to get the spectator to think about their interpretation of the situation. He has noted that car shows can be seen as a “flirtation ritual of youth.”⁵⁸ In this way, *Car Show* plays with the expectations of the viewer. When he entices the viewer through representations of skimpily dressed women and desirous males, he offers us an inside reading, a glimpse of the event through his eyes. Sometimes, as in this work, he allows us to misinterpret the action. In these works, a glamorous or seductive pose can be used for commenting on, or bringing attention to, other matters. One may consider that the incident is simply one contrived to attract the male gaze, but complications of the scene suggest otherwise.



Figure 5. *Chevy Twins*, 2006, pastel on paper, 50 x 76." Courtesy John Valadez.

These car show paintings were created to include the viewer. This is particularly the case for another work, *Chevy Twins*, 2006 (Fig. 5). The title refers to the two girls leaning on the Chevy convertible who could almost be “twins” (both wearing red short-sleeve tunics and skin-tight black spandex pants). The young women have, for some unknown reason, just turned quickly to look in our direction; their hair still in motion. Their gaze directly at the viewer physically engages us and draws us into the event.

While twins were often incorporated into photos of “hot” cars in *Low Rider Magazine*, they were usually in skimpy bikinis and presented in much more erotic poses.⁵⁹ In terms of gender representation, Valadez has toned down the objectification of women generally included in *Low Rider Magazine* from glamorous, sexy, and buxom pair to simply a sensual and, perhaps, more innocuous set of twins. The image is provocative, but the girls’ demeanor is charmingly pleasant, rather than tantalizing or arousing.

This particular car show took place at a *Low Rider Magazine* exhibition in Las Vegas;⁶⁰ even so, Valadez wanting “to ground the work in the community familiar,” changed the background to depict East L.A. (in reference to the beginnings

⁵⁸ Valadez in Davalos, “Valadez Interview,” 129.

⁵⁹ Unfortunately, there has been little scholarly documentation of the role of women (whether spectators, relations, or partners) in car culture other than the models or participants. See Denise Michelle Sandoval, “Cruising through Low Rider Culture,” In *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture & Chicana/o Sexualities*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 179-196; and Karen Lumsden, “Gendered Performances in a Male-Dominated Subculture: ‘Girl Racers,’ Car Modification and the Quest for Masculinity,” *Sociological Research Online*, 15 (3) 6, 2010, <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/15/3/6.html>.

⁶⁰ From the first publication in 1977, *Low Rider Magazine* included female models with the lowrider cars. However, when they began to include sexy models in bikinis in provocative poses in 1979, there was criticism from both male and female

of Chicano Movement).⁶¹ Both cars in the foreground are convertible lowriders. A 1949 Chevy Fleetline Deluxe with the hood popped up and wide white-wall tires is parked beside a Chevy Impala (as in *Getting Them Out of the Car*). Neither of the mid-century American cars are clearly “tricked-out” or custom (i.e., neither have a custom sun visor, fender skirt, nor custom paint job). Since the body of each car is understated, the lowrider (or Chicano) aspects may not be immediately apparent to the casual viewer.

Manipulating the scene through his unique brand of montage, Valadez aligned the vehicles in closer proximity to each other than would be normal at a car show. The nearness or cramped space adds to the tension and immediacy of the moment (enhancing the sense of crowdedness). Slightly elevating one side of the car on the left creates a dynamic space balanced by the vertical force of the two girls. Creating a scene from multiple images that suggest the illusion of wholeness, yet retain qualities of awkwardness or haphazardness, are characteristic of his work.

Even though car shows have often been considered gendered as masculine, in the near distance, we see a small family—the mother has turned toward the father who has his hand on the son’s shoulder—suggesting that it isn’t just an event that appealed to men. Further away, numerous other people are apparent; for instance, off to the left is a group of young men congregating.⁶² The mass of car enthusiasts present (although barely perceptible) and the numerous cars and trucks in the background are suggested but are not a prominent part of the work.

In contrast to the early portraits that were meant to make the viewer uncomfortable, these allegorical works transport the viewer into the world of Valadez in order to experience the event through his eyes. Even though many of the figures have their back to us in *Car Show*, our curiosity overtakes us, especially as one male has fixed his eyes on us. In *Chevy Twins*, the “twins” connect with us through their glance in our direction and make us feel acknowledged and part of the crowd. Consequently, these works move beyond being Chicano events to suggest situations or encounters common to a shared multicultural community. In this way, the works are inclusive, drawing in the audience not only through the manipulated arrangement of objects in space but also the perceived visual connection to figures in the work.

A Recent Innovative and Powerful Mural

Valadez has created murals in United States (both in California and Texas) as well as in France. In the most recent mural, *Convertible Operas/Cinema Deudeuche* (Fig. 6), we see the extent of the transformation from his early work.



Figure 6. *Convertible Operas/Cinema Deudeuche*, 2014, Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux, France, 26' 3" x 14' 9." Courtesy John Valadez.

readers. Even though debates followed, the magazine did not remove the images of racially-dressed models from the magazine (Chappell, *Lowrider Space*, 109-113, and Sandoval, “Cruising through Low Rider Culture,” 186-194).

⁶¹ Valadez, email correspondence, June 11, 2013.

⁶² The use of atmospheric perspective, in which the objects farther away are lighter and less in focus, accentuates the depth of the space and increases the illusion of space.

Completed for the opening of the exhibition, *Chicano Dream*, June 26, 2014, and raised on the facade of the Musée d'Aquitaine in Bordeaux, France, Valadez created a monumental triptych during a six-week residence at the museum.⁶³ For this exhibition of Chicano art, seventy works from the private collection of Cheech Marin were supplemented by works on loan from private collectors and artists.

Combining earlier motifs of cars and beach scenes, the subject of this work seems, at first glance, light and ludic. Reminiscent of scenes in the *Car Show* series, two American convertibles are parked on the sand along the coast on either side of a French car with a sunroof. At the far right, a couple jumps into the bright yellow 1949 Chevy GK Styleline Deluxe. It is a nice day and the young people appear to be having fun. In the rusty blue Citroën 2CV, a male swings a girl up into the air.⁶⁴ With these two figures, Valadez pays homage to the photographer Garry Winogrand (referencing a playful photo from Coney Island, 1952).⁶⁵

As the couple rushes into the yellow Chevy, we have a sense overall of an idealized scene of summer pleasures at the beach. The rapid movement of the young man splits into a Futurist motion blur; in other words, he is shown twice in overlapping depictions. The girl's short white dress flies in the wind sensually revealing her buttocks. The sensuality of the two couples is apparent in the physical contact of skin on skin.

Looking closer, a more serious and darker side is revealed. Two men standing in the front seat of the two-tone 1956 Pontiac Star Chief wear hospital masks.⁶⁶ One of the men has thrown a bottle with some of the yellow liquid spilling out—appearing as a Molotov cocktail on fire—at the yellow Chevy. An unshaven man in the back seat shouts angrily and gestures wildly toward the Chevy while the beautiful brunette seated on the car trunk in leather pants gazes at these three potentially violent men with glowing approval.

What is more, barely hidden in the sky over the blue Citroën, Valadez painted a conflict taking place over the coast.⁶⁷ In a recent online interview with French critic, Camille Carrau, Valadez noted that “this mural mixes the universe of the car and the feeling of anger. It arises from an older work that I completed on car shows and custom cars. For this work, I collected images of the situation in Ukraine, Crimea, and on the Arab Spring.”⁶⁸ In the clouds above the 2CV, an explosion projects a decapitated head (or skull) flying toward us as a number of figures flee. The windblown stratus and stratocumulus clouds take on a foreboding or ominous significance.

The bright yellow exterior gloss paint of the Chevy is quite shiny (especially in comparison to the rundown Citroën). As the girl hops into the car, one of her black stiletto high heels is echoed distinctly in the car reflection. Curiously, below her foot, the sand and rocks are reflected but not the cars on the beach; that is, a mirror image of the Citroën and the Pontiac should be visible in the yellow Chevy reflection, but is not. Valadez seems to have eliminated the reflection of the other cars and introduced innovative montage elements in order to add another dimension to the work.

According to Catherine Bonte, if we look closely we can see on this 1949 Chevy GK Styleline Deluxe “where the painter represents the reflection of pebbles and debris lying around on the beach, mingling with the real elements of other images, those victims of the Mexican Revolution; the elongated forms are actually the dead corpses.”⁶⁹ In deviating from Bonte, I would suggest that the dead bodies are not distinct enough to identify as Mexican corpses; indeed, given the comments by the artist, they would suggest death in a variety of troubled international situations, including the more recent threats in the Ukraine.

This mural shows the power of this new phase in the work of Valadez. While his previous work had emphasized the life of Chicanos in the world or questioned methods of violence in Los Angeles, these later works address regional and global issues and reveal his profound concern for world events. Through a combination of earlier themes (cars, sun, and beaches) with underlying darker present-day political issues in *Convertible Operas/Cinema Deudeuche*, Valadez is able to lure a diverse audience into a seemingly benign and paradisaal scene which we slowly realize is laden with danger and brutality.

⁶³ This mural was created for the fiftieth anniversary of the twin cities, Bordeaux and Los Angeles.

⁶⁴ The 2CV was produced by Citroën, the French manufacturer, between 1948 and 1990. “Deudeuche” in the mural title refers to this French car, the 2CV; “deux-chevaux” or “two-horse” should have been shortened to “deuche,” but French drivers preferred “deudeuche.”

⁶⁵ See Bonte, “John Valadez in residence at the Musée d'Aquitaine.”

⁶⁶ The 1956 Pontiac Star Chief Catalina on the left was a typical American car used in old films.

⁶⁷ “When the composition increases in scale we have an opportunity to intensify the message and allegory. I am commenting on global conflicts using L.A. car culture as the platform or staging.” Valadez, email communication July 14, 2014.

⁶⁸ Camille Carrau, « [John Valadez au musée d'Aquitaine: Chicano et fier de l'être](http://www.bordeaux7.com/bordeaux-sorties/55-sorties/11294-residence-expo), » <http://www.bordeaux7.com/bordeaux-sorties/55-sorties/11294-residence-expo> (accessed August 12, 2015).

⁶⁹ “Arab Spring is a media term for the revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests (both non-violent and violent), riots, and civil wars in the Arab world that began on 18 December 2010.” Jane Harrigan, *The Political Economy of Arab Food Sovereignty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 6.

⁶⁹ Bonte, “John Valadez en résidence au musée d'Aquitaine.”

The Effects of Montage

During the 1970s and early 80s, Valadez was intent on making art that elevated perceptions of the Chicano. His work from this period made viewers aware of the sitter, often challenging the viewer with bold images designed to make us feel uneasy. Understandably, his early works focused on Chicano needs during a period of resistance and change following a demand for civil rights. In the interactions of groups in a range of multicultural events, Chicanos, once pushed to the margins, are a recognizable and prominent part.⁷⁰

In the works that followed, individual or even personal issues represented allegorically have risen to the forefront. As noted, Valadez's hyperrealist technique carries us into his world where we are confronted by the figures, situations, and environments that stimulate the senses and evoke our emotions. The scenes encountered often give us more than we expect. In these works, the everyday is thrown off balance by strange, ominous, or absurd elements. As Benavidez noted, "With paintings that depict the carnage of urban violence and the utter isolation of suburban entrapment, he continues to use intense realistic imagery 'because I want to draw people in,' he says. And with a look of mock, fiendish glee, he adds: 'Then, once they really see what they're looking at, they're repelled.'"⁷¹ His works are, in this way, individual and hard to forget. From the early allegorical images to the recent mural, the experience of the viewer becomes more and more important to the artist. His works, still thought-provoking, have transformed, becoming more symbolic and often multifaceted. The events that ignite these works have often touched us all.

In his article of 1986, Valadez had noted the dilemma of viewing the world through two (often opposing) perspectives: being of Mexican descent, born and raised in the United States.⁷² The difficulty of classifying his work—international, Californian, or Chicano—relates to such dilemmas. While incorporating Chicano motifs in these hyperrealist images, his focus is on representing the everyday, often with surreal, unexpected, or allegorical undercurrents. Through an analysis of his use of montage, I maintain that a view of Valadez's artwork as solely Chicano is too limiting. It is necessary to acknowledge the changes in his emphasis, attitude, and work over the years. Even though many of the images retain references specific to Chicano issues, his more recent work extends not only to capture ideas universally important but also to impress on us the urgency or compassion that he feels is required. Creating works that extend beyond standard photorealism or hyperrealism to surreal or inexplicable allegories through the use of montage and artistic manipulation, Valadez takes a step toward uniting cultures by making us aware of our shared pleasures and anxieties.

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⁷⁰ Valadez, "John Valadez." *Imagine: International Chicano Poetry Journal* (Boston, Mass.) 3, no. 1-2 (Summer-Winter 1986): 186-192, here 192.

⁷¹ Max Benavidez, "The Schizo-Ethnic View."

⁷² Ibid.

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