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## ‘YOU WANT TO BE A MEXICAN, HERE YOU GO’: LINDA VALLEJO ON HER ‘BROWN OSCARS’

BY *Maximiliano Durón* POSTED 02/27/16 10:00 AM



Linda Vallejo, *MEAM: Brown Oscars*, from the series “For Your Consideration: Make ’Em All Mexican,” 2016, photograph, gouache, and water color on paper.

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For the past two years, no person of color has been nominated for an Academy Award in the four acting categories, and after this year’s nominees were announced last month, criticism poured in, not only against the Academy, for the nominations, but also against the film industry at large for its lack of diversity, both in front of and behind the camera.

Now the Los Angeles–based artist Linda Vallejo has entered the debate. Expanding on a series she started in 2010 called “[Make 'Em All Mexican](#)” in which she paints classic American figures (from Elvis to Marilyn Monroe) and artifacts (paintings by Norman Rockwell and Grant Wood) brown, Vallejo has turned her attention to the Oscars, painting images of winners and the statuette itself.

Earlier this week, I spoke via telephone with Vallejo (who, full disclosure, is an old friend) and [Chon Noriega](#), the director of the [Chicano Studies Research Center](#) at UCLA, who proposed the project to her, which is titled “For Your Consideration: Make 'Em All Mexican.”



Linda Vallejo's rendition of Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, *MEAM: Bernardo y Mateo*, 2016, photograph, gouache, and water color on paper.  
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*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

**ARTnews: How did you come up with the idea?**

Chon Noriega: It started actually when I was reading the *L.A. Times* the day they did the nominations. The whole front page was just a grid of all the major awards and the nominees, and about how it was all white. I just thought, How can we shift the perspective of the framework? And I thought of Linda's “Make 'Em All Mexican” series. It struck me that that could bring both a critical perspective and some humor that could really open up the discussion. What happened was that the first thing the press grabbed onto was they're all white. And then they thought about what's being left out and they thought: the opposite of white is black. And they framed the issue in such extreme terms that it failed to actually describe the situation.

Linda Vallejo: The backbone of “Make 'Em All Mexican” is to create a friendly door to walk through to begin talking about tough issues. I thought humor would have a longer shelf life. People are tired of the anger. So this way, it shows an intelligence, a sense of humor, an understanding of the issues from a totally different point of view.



Linda Vallejo's rendition of Audrey Hepburn, *MEAM: Aurora Hernandez*, 2016, photograph, gouache, and water color on paper. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER

**Can you expand on the idea of humor in these works, and why that is important?**

Noriega: Part of it is satire. In terms of the origins of “Make ’Em All Mexican,” Linda’s going out and gathering the artifacts of Americana. These are things that are so ubiquitous that they’re in everyone’s head—like Marilyn Monroe, or Norman Rockwell’s Thanksgiving dinner, or a Dick and Jane. They’ve been part of the foundation of our culture, no matter how trivial you may think they are. [This is] calling attention to the fact that not only do you see this everywhere but you accept the basic terms of what you’re seeing, which is that the foundation of American culture is white culture.

Vallejo: I can always tell when somebody has reached a point where the politics of color and class have shifted for them, when they laugh about the pieces. When you can have a sense of humor about situations, it means you’re in a place where you can maybe find a solution to things. I think that the laughter happens naturally for a lot of people when they look at this because they’re kind of in shock. Then it’s, “Oh, I could be a queen. I could be a movie star. I could be,” with the word *could* being a definitive here.

**Do you think it will have an affect on the entertainment industry in Hollywood?**

Noriega: I do think that there is a need to really shift the conversation in a way. The nominations were not a surprise. The outrage was not a surprise. The numbers haven’t really changed. But it certainly was an interruption of the general arc of publicity for the lead-up to the Oscars.

Vallejo: Through the humor again, people are beginning to educate themselves about what the situation really is and what’s really happening. I’ve found myself looking, more recently, at the credits in movies, looking for Latino names. So it sparks a curiosity and interest in what’s happening in the media rather than just a response that’s reactionary.



Linda Vallejo's rendition of Paul Muni, *MEAM: Pablo Mundial*, 2016, photograph, gouache, and water color on paper. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER

Noriega: Some of the pieces are also drawing attention to the fact that while there's been very little representation of Mexican American characters in Hollywood, a good number of those have been played by white actors who then went on to win Academy Awards. And sometimes these are the first of one of a small number of films that are predominantly about Mexican American characters. It's not like blackface and brownface from the 1920s. It's happening today. The industry has not changed. The gold standard is still that a white British actor can play anyone in the world. But it doesn't work back the other way. You're not going to have Jimmy Smits cast to play Prince Charles.

Vallejo: I think it's kind of interesting the way a fine-art object can pinpoint a specific conversation.

Noriega: Yeah, the art angle's really quite critical to the effect of the project. I think one of the first things you saw happening in terms of the industry's backlash against the complaints—with Charlotte Rampling and Michael Caine and the Coen Brothers—is that it was really people falling back on the position of the artists having the right to make their own selection. So I think it was really important to have an artist respond to that.

Vallejo: Yeah, it's art talking about art.

### **How did you go about choosing the Oscar winners to include?**

Vallejo: For "Make 'Em All Mexican," there's always been a sort of arbitrary aspect to it. We had to find photographs that can actually print at a certain size and that translate in a certain way. The quality of the image was one of the most important elements. We ended up making them all black and white because it was the easiest way to make a stronger statement of them being brown. The Paul Muni piece changed everything. Because he played a Mexican, it created the double entendre that put another aspect to the way you look at the work. There he was playing a Mexican. OK, you

want to be a Mexican, here you go. So there is an element of arbitrariness in the selection in some cases and in some cases it's right on, in terms of the double entendre.



The diptych, *MEAM: Oscar & Emilio 'El Indio' Fernández*, shows the Oscar statuette and the model who might have served as its inspiration.

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**Some people think the Oscar statue is based on the Mexican actor and director Emilio Fernández, whom you have included alongside the trophy in a work [pictured above]. The Academy has officially stated that there's no model for the statue. Do you think there's been an attempt to white-wash the very statue they're giving out?**

Noriega: The absolute certainty with which they say there's no model for the statue sounds more like liability than history. That said, it's pretty hard to say you've actually found the smoking gun [to confirm that]. For our purposes it was really important to just pull back from that question of verifying and to just acknowledge, like a lot of things about Hollywood, the legend's more important than the fact.

Vallejo: The urban legend already existed and we just drew attention to it.

Noriega: I think the other thing, with the piece that Linda did, is that it's really hard to look at that image with Emilio Fernández at that time and the shape of the statuette and not see that they're almost exactly alike.





Linda Vallejo's rendition of Cate Blanchett, *MEAM: Catarina Blancarte*, 2016, photograph, gouache, and water color on paper. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER

**I have to ask. Why did you choose to paint them such a dark shade of brown?**

Vallejo: If I paint it too light, they just look like Caucasians that went to the Bahamas and got a tan. They have to be specifically brown to be brown.

Noriega: At another point, you also said, "That's what they think we look like. Of course, we're all colors."

Vallejo: The first thing I always come back to is my joke to get out of it: "I like them short and dark. What are you going do?" It has to be dark and it has to appear brown. I use two shades when I paint them brown. I use a Burnt Sienna and a Van Dyke Brown, and these are a Van Dyke Brown.

**Is there anything you'd like to add?**

Vallejo: The whole "Make 'Em All Mexican" series came about with me asking a very simple question: "If I produced an art object made of repurposed materials from my cultural point of view, what would that look like?" That question was at the forefront of my artistic process for a good four to five years before I saw the first object, the Dick and Jane, and realized I could just paint them brown. These works are very autobiographical. I think they're the most personal work I've ever created. I'm the little brown girl.