

Vincent Valdez *Flashback*

February 11 – April 11, 2010
Russell Hill Rogers Gallery
Southwest School of Art & Craft
San Antonio, Texas

Vincent Valdez *Flashback* | 12.02.09

BY JOHN EWING

Flashback, in the lingo of moviemaking, refers to a scene in a film that is set in a time earlier than the main story; a sudden vivid memory of an event in the past.¹ Vincent Valdez chose the term *flashback* as the title for this exhibition to give a flavor of the rapid changes that have occurred in his life over the past decade. Since 1999 he has had ten solo exhibitions of his work and participated in over thirty group shows in the United States and abroad. This dynamic period has brought acclaim for the busy, young artist, and in 2005 the realization of significant projects uprooted Valdez from his native San Antonio to a new life in Los Angeles.

The movies assert their presence early and vigorously in any discussion of the work of Vincent Valdez, whose virtuosic approach to picture making has been shaped most profoundly by cinema. The artist tells a revealing anecdote of one of his first childhood outings to a movie house.

*When I was nine, my dad took the whole family to see **Platoon**. My mother said to all of us kids, "If you want to cover your eyes, that's okay." She promised us, "I can take you out if you need to leave." I was captivated by the images and looking around at the audience, sitting there all silent and watching, whether horrified or entertained.*

I was so excited by this idea that something could be so shocking you'd have to cover your eyes, so excited with anticipation. I knew I wanted to be able to accomplish this myself.²

If Valdez's early encounters with cinema stoked his desire to create dramatically compelling images, his enjoyment of comic books and video games (increasingly evolving toward and beyond the tropes of cinema) similarly infused his work with their particular forms and narratives. These influences were first on display at the ripe age of ten, when Valdez began a very public art career as a muralist on the Southside of San Antonio. Since then, the artist has developed a unique, highly personalized style of, in his own words, "hyperrealism, with a certain anxiety and obsessive technique in the mark-making."³ Primarily a painter, Valdez works in oils on canvas, or on paper using pastel, charcoal, and graphite. Recently, he expanded his practice to include "motion pictures" in video.

My work is almost always biographical and includes the realities of the world around me, but it's not photorealism. I want to engross the viewer in a world of my own making. Narrative, whether mine or invented, drives the imagery.⁴

Discussing Valdez's work in relation to cinema may seem unorthodox, but it's germane to both the artist's process and the way viewers receive his work. In his 2009 collaboration with guitarist/composer Ry Cooder, *El Chávez*

Ravine,⁵ Valdez painted the surface of an ice-cream truck with a historical narrative of Mexican-American displacement in a Los Angeles neighborhood. Circling the vehicle, the story unfolds in scenes, like a movie, and the roof is painted to look like a vintage movie poster. Notwithstanding that his own life has unreeled like a film over the last decade, the majority of Valdez's works are, in fact, horizontal, rectangular, and panoramic. One might even say that Valdez's art assumes the proportions of the silver screen itself, either the movies' standard 4:3 aspect ratio or, in Valdez's more recent large-scale works, the increasingly popular "wide screen" format.

"The motion picture specializes in presenting events. It shows changes in time... A motion picture in itself is an event: it looks different every moment, whereas there is no such temporal progress in a painting or sculpture," writes early film theorist Rudolf Arnheim, whose seminal *Film as Art* will serve in this essay to contextualize various elements at play in Valdez's work.⁶ "In film, the frame of the image consists of two vertical and two horizontal lines. Every vertical and horizontal line occurring in the shot, therefore, will be supported by these axes."⁷ Though arbitrarily technical in nature, these are the most unforgiving conditions to be imposed on any art form. Yet Valdez embraces them wholeheartedly in his pictorial world, accounting to a great extent for the sensation of the cinematic in his art.

As certain pieces in *Flashback* attest, the cities of San Antonio and Los Angeles figure prominently in the life and work of Valdez. Los Angeles, of course, is synonymous with the movies. But interestingly enough, San Antonio has its own significant place in the history of cinema — Gaston Méliès, brother of the world’s first celebrity film director, Georges Méliès, opened the Star Film Ranch studio in San Antonio in 1910. San Antonio was the birthplace of Joan Crawford (née Lucille Fay LeSueur in 1905) and the final home of silent-film great Pola Negri.

When I think of Los Angeles and the movies, a favorite novel comes to mind: Nathaniel West’s *The Day of the Locust*. In West’s 1939 book, a talented young painter, Tod Hackett, is discovered in an East Coast art school and brought to Hollywood to sketch film sets—at night, he plans his epic masterwork, *The Burning of Los Angeles*.⁸ For Tod, the city is exciting, dangerous, and as randomly assorted as the painter’s restless and reckless neighbors, the motley denizens of the San Bernardino Arms. Reviewing Valdez’s earlier work for this essay recalled the novel in tangible ways. His massive triptych painting of Los Angeles, *Burn, Baby Burn* (2009), depicts the city at night from the vantage point of Valdez’s Lincoln Heights studio, with the ziggurat-like City Hall in the center of the central panel. To the far right, a raging fire consumes what would be Dodger Stadium, constructed on top of the razed neighborhood of Chávez Ravine. Like the

movie-premiere riot that climaxes *The Day of the Locust*, Valdez’s own “burning of Los Angeles” makes multilayered use of a scene of violence. In Los Angeles, fire is both real and symbolic — heat and the sensation of burning describe destruction as well as the creative dynamism of the city.

“Coming from San Antonio, seeing those blackened hills on fire freaked me out. It was an apocalyptic feeling, and scary driving through them at night with the sky glowing,” says Valdez. “But fire is also transformative, a life force that regenerates... 250,000 acres destroyed and already the green is growing back.”⁹

Sensitive to the built environment, too, Valdez captures the street-level feel of the city, as well as its parallel, fantastical existence in the imaginations of moviegoers. “L.A. is La La Land, the city of dreams, Hollywood. I was immediately excited by the buzz, the politics, the people, the freshness — a young artist coming up — it felt like a good time to be in L.A.,” says Valdez, who describes his first impressions of Los Angeles as now feeling “nostalgic.”¹⁰ In fact, it could be argued that depicting Los Angeles at night is already bracketing it within the frame of cinema, given the universally recognizable landscape of L.A. at night, shimmering with streetlamps and the occasional klieg light searching the chocolate sky. Or, as Tod Hackett describes the scene: “the reflection of [L.A.’s] lights, which hung in the sky above it like a batik parasol.”¹¹

With *Flashback*, Valdez further develops these strains of realism and metaphor. *Wish you Were Here*, a large diptych, depicts “long shots” of the skylines of Los Angeles and San Antonio. Superimposed above these views are uncanny additions — a bikini-clad beauty reclining over L.A. and stylized roses hovering over San Antonio. In filmic terms, “superimposition is a simple way of showing the abstract substance of these scenes; that is, their meaning and mood rather than merely the events.”¹² *Wish You Were Here* plays in several registers, given the role of the cities as bookends in Valdez’s flashback. The phrase “wish you were here” may be read as a trite, plastic note on a postcard from Tinseltown. Just as the characters in West’s novel speak of Hollywood “pictures,” Valdez creates pictures that speak of Los Angeles, its glittering highs and corrupt lows. But read on a personal level, “wish you were here” could also be a heartfelt statement of homesickness, a love letter to the artist’s family and hometown.

Likewise, the superimpositions signify an overlay of the experience and relevance of each city in the life of the artist: L.A. as superficial, hedonistic, and heading for a fall (like West’s fictional characters or the recent, very real economic crash). And S.A., by contrast, represented as home and safety — friends, food, and family — the opposite of restless and reckless — roses as symbols of the Virgin Mary, goodness and grandmothers.

“San Antonio will always be home to me,” says Valdez. “That’s where my roots are, my relationships. But coming to L.A. as an outsider has helped me develop as an artist.”¹³ Indeed, if Valdez’s early work in San Antonio focused on family and community, the work coming out of his “Los Angeles period” clearly foregrounds place: the city as subject. Consequently, the physical details of place have taken on a more complicated identity in his work, eschewing “hyperrealism” for a rendering of forms that is less exact but more mature. As Arnheim notes, “... in order to get a full impression it is not necessary for it to be complete in the naturalistic sense. All kinds of things may be left out which would be present in real life, so long as what is shown contains the essentials.”¹⁴

In this regard, what we are witnessing with Valdez is not only a transformation of a life but a shift in artistic practice. Perhaps his latest works, the dual videos of Los Angeles and San Antonio, show this best. Similar to the panorama of Los Angeles depicted in the painting *Burn, Baby Burn*, the L.A. video, entitled *Burn*, presents the same Lincoln Heights view of the city, but instead of fire engulfing Dodger Stadium, fireworks explode above it. The fireworks appear in the same quadrant of the image as the fire — middle lower-right corner, near the edge — but indicate celebration rather than conflagration. References to fire as an element of destruction, dynamism, fear, and fascination are intertwined in both works, but they are only a small portion of the total, “wide screen” view of Los Angeles.

During the 22-minute *Burn*, the faces and torsos of fifty Angelenos from various backgrounds slowly fade in and out as faint superimpositions looming above the skyline. While the sounds of the city unfold — dogs barking, the boom of fireworks — these faces are called up like specters, hanging in the thick, nighttime air, only to be consumed/subsumed into not only the geography but the idea of the city. This depiction of Los Angeles seems to suggest that, come fire or fireworks, life in the city goes on in the individual lives of its residents, aided by both resilience and denial. Similarly, the painting *Boom*, a close-up of a firework burst against a black sky, operates as a metonym for Los Angeles and its dynamism. “The close-up not only helps the artist give an enlargement of something which would not be obvious as a mere detail of a long shot... but it also takes some characteristic feature out of the whole,” notes Arnheim.¹⁵ Writ large on a 64-x-64-inch canvas, the firework detail begs for a zoom out from the teasing close-up to reveal the wider scene. By contrast, the equally large canvas entitled *Globe* is purely symbolic; the image does not operate as a detail from a larger scene. Hovering in space, it is comprehensive of everything — the ultimate long shot — yet directly relatable to only an exclusive handful of astronauts. For the rest of us, Earth is a cinematic construct.

I first used the idea of the boxer in 2000 — the fighter began to stand for surviving as a human being... beaten down and getting

*back up. To me that’s what survival is; that’s what a true warrior is. It’s constantly facing these challenges and obstacles and not letting fear get in the way.*¹⁶

For Valdez, “each work is a relationship”¹⁷ and, to varying degrees, represents the conflicts of relationship or the solitary struggle. Whether fighting for glory, love, or justice, the figures depicted in his epic-sized works are often loners or underdogs left to fend for themselves. In their triumph, or simply survival, we see an intensified (hyperreal) version of our own humanity. When not referencing figures and conflicts from his own life experience, Valdez has returned again and again to iconic arenas of struggle — war and boxing. Like the young artist in *The Day of the Locust*, Valdez eyes his subjects with a serious regard: “He would not satirize them as Hogarth or Daumier might, nor would he pity them. He would paint their fury with respect...”¹⁸

Boxers have been popular and enduring subject matter in art, from Thomas Eakins’s bare-knuckled youths, to George Bellows’s *Dempsey and Firpo* knockout punch, to George Dyer, former boxer and lover/muse/model to Francis Bacon. In the vernacular of popular culture, the boxer’s story is a quintessential American story. Consequently, it is a mainstay of American cinema, too, from *Kid Galahad* and *Golden Boy* of the 1930s to the more recent *Rocky* (and its five sequels).

Movie prize fighters have always cut stronger figures in black and white. As Arnheim writes, “If the art of giving the illusion of the reality of stuffs rouses great admiration... the effect is more uncannily exciting when it is obtained without the aid of color.”¹⁹ In the 1950 black-and-white film *Right Cross*, Ricardo Montalban plays Johnny Montez, a Mexican-American middleweight champ whose prejudice-induced inferiority complex threatens a budding romance with the promoter’s blonde-haired daughter. Thirty years later, another black-and-white boxing pic, the much darker *Raging Bull*, stars Robert De Niro playing the real-life Jake LaMotta. With their inherent narratives of conflict and struggle (and penchant for black and white), it is no coincidence that boxing pics have been a recurring place to address issues of racial and social difference in American culture, whether the lead characters are Mexican American, Italian American, Irish American, or African American (i.e., James Earl Jones in *The Great White Hope*).

Valdez continues this venerable tradition of black-and-white boxers with *Simpler Times*, a triptych oil-on-canvas work depicting three boxers posing in the familiar stance of prize-fight advertisements. In fact, these renderings are based on actual promotional photographs; Valdez has made an informal study of boxers from earlier times whose names and records have since fallen into obscurity. In one panel, a Mexican-American boxer sports a full, luxurious head of hair, perfectly combed. The waistband

of his silk shorts carries the word *MAÑANA*. Valdez has said that he immediately responded to the ironies in this image, the boxer’s “roughed-up knuckles and immaculate hair,”²⁰ which, along with the waistband mantra, become the aspirational talismans of a contender.

Flanking the three boxers is the diptych work *Times ain’t like they used to be*. These “writings in the sky” act like a Greek chorus, grounding the fighters’ brave/crazy hopefulness in the struggles of everyday reality. Placed against a backdrop of sunlit clouds, the phrases “Simpler Times” and “Times ain’t like they used to be” read like movie titles, wincing with intimations of the country’s current economic crisis, runaway debt, and two wars abroad.

Ultimately, Valdez views the boxer as a symbol of empowerment. “Fighting is something that’s very primitive — standing up and fighting as a metaphor for pride and the willingness to fight for love, fight for what you believe in, what you cherish, fighting for your identity and the right to be,” says the artist.²¹ In *Grandparents*, Valdez’s diptych portraits of his maternal and paternal grandparents, he embodies this fighting spirit closer to home, in figures he considers as brave and enduring as boxers in the ring. Depicted in a size and grandeur equal to the boxers, the two couples regard the viewer with a graceful strength that defies the ravages of time. Yet, we can imagine their murmuring, like others of their generation and perhaps with some resignation, “times ain’t what they used to be.”

*...when you’ve been stripped of all that you know, when you’ve been shunned by all of your friends and family and, in the very end, you’re left with nothing but your heart and your mind and your soul, what is your reaction?*²²

Like Goya and Manet before him, Vincent Valdez depicts war as a condition that elicits and reveals the extremes of humanity (a potential that cinema has also long exploited). The artist’s grandfather is a World War II veteran, his father served in Vietnam, and a close childhood friend served in Iraq as a medic. All have shared stories with Valdez of war, and the personal sacrifices it requires. Though the subject of war is intensely personal for the artist, it also satisfies his appetite and talent for capturing men *in extremis*. The mural-size oil-on-canvas work *Man Down!* suggests not only the horrors of war but also the rush of adrenaline in combat that sharpens the senses.

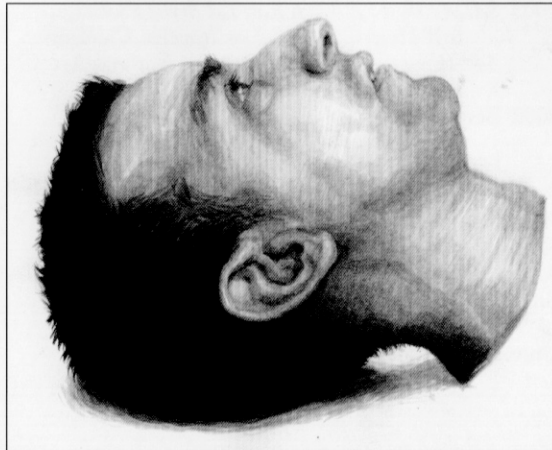
For today’s generation of young men, Valdez included, this rush can be simulated to an astonishing degree through the playing of video games. Exploring this world of war simulacra, *Man Down!* references the widely popular *Call of Duty* series, first released in 2003, which revolutionized gaming with its first-person-perspective play, giving gamers the sensation of holding and firing weapons and engaging directly in warfare scenarios. Installments I–III of the video game simulated WWII scenarios in the European and Pacific theaters, while version IV (released in 2007) and subsequent versions have simulated modern warfare scenarios.

Vincent's "version" references a combat scene in Iraq, with aerial views of Baghdad seen from the fuselage of a Black Hawk helicopter. Multiple views of reality — satellite, Google Earth, Vincent's imagination — have been layered to create an immersive experience, not of war but of a war game. Consequently, viewers of Valdez's painting may have similar sensations of vertigo and a rushing sensation of forward movement, while imagining dropping down onto palm trees and the chaos of rooftops.

At the opposite extreme is the quiet and sober stillness of *I'm Your Brutha, from a Different Mutha*. This large pastel-on-paper diptych freezes two stills from the aftermath of war: two soldiers lie supine on the ground, one injured, bleeding, perhaps dead; the other lying comfortably, relaxed, gazing skyward (or is it death mimicking the living?). Unlike the sunbathing figure reclining above Los Angeles in *Wish You Were Here*, Valdez identifies deeply with the two soldiers in these images, modeled as both are after his brother, Daniel, who has served as model for numerous of Valdez's boxers and soldiers throughout the past decade. As in a classical frieze, the two soldiers are placed in dialogue by their positioning opposite each other. Potential narratives rise up in the ambiguous space between: Are the soldiers comrades or combatants? Did one soldier injure the other? Is the tracer fire above illuminating the same sky, in the same era, in the same conflict? Valdez's title reduces any of these questions to a footnote, emphasizing

instead the soldiers' common humanity that is betrayed by war.

Identification, then, is the chief objective of Valdez's art. Whether viewers are enticed by its cinematic appeal, the vibrant colors or stark black and white, the immersive depiction of space and place, the meticulous rendering of figures in a hyperreal intensification of emotion, all of these elements skillfully draw viewers into an identification with deeply human subjects that resonate somewhere in each of us. "In the storytelling, the more honesty the better... in the end, when I'm not around and the work is, hopefully, people will have an idea of the experiences that I went through and the experiences we all went through as a society during our time," says Valdez. "That's what I would like to live on."²³



[Endnotes]

¹ *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

² Vincent Valdez, telephone conversation with the author, October 23, 2009.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *El Chávez Ravine* was exhibited September 12, 2008, through January 11, 2009, at Mesa Contemporary Arts in Mesa, Arizona, and March 14 through August 2, 2009, at the San Antonio Museum of Art.

⁶ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art as Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 181.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸ Nathaniel West, *The Day of the Locust*, from *Nathaniel West: Novels & Other Writings* (1939; repr., Library Classics of the United States: New York, 1997).

⁹ Vincent Valdez, telephone conversation with the author, October 23, 2009.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ West, 357.

¹² Arnheim, 121.

¹³ Vincent Valdez, telephone conversation with the author, October 23, 2009.

¹⁴ Arnheim, 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁶ *Vincent Valdez: The Art of Boxing*, Director Ray Santisteban, Nantes Films, 2006.

¹⁷ Vincent Valdez, telephone conversation with the author, October 23, 2009.

¹⁸ West, 337.

¹⁹ Arnheim, 71.

²⁰ Vincent Valdez, telephone conversation with the author, October 23, 2009.

²¹ *American Latino television, Season 4* (2005–06), episode 402.

²² *Vincent Valdez: The Art of Boxing*, Director Ray Santisteban, Nantes Films, 2006.

²³ *American Latino television, Season 4* (2005–06), episode 402.



I'm Your Brutha, from a Different Mutba, 2009, pastel on paper, 42 x 88 inches each [diptych]