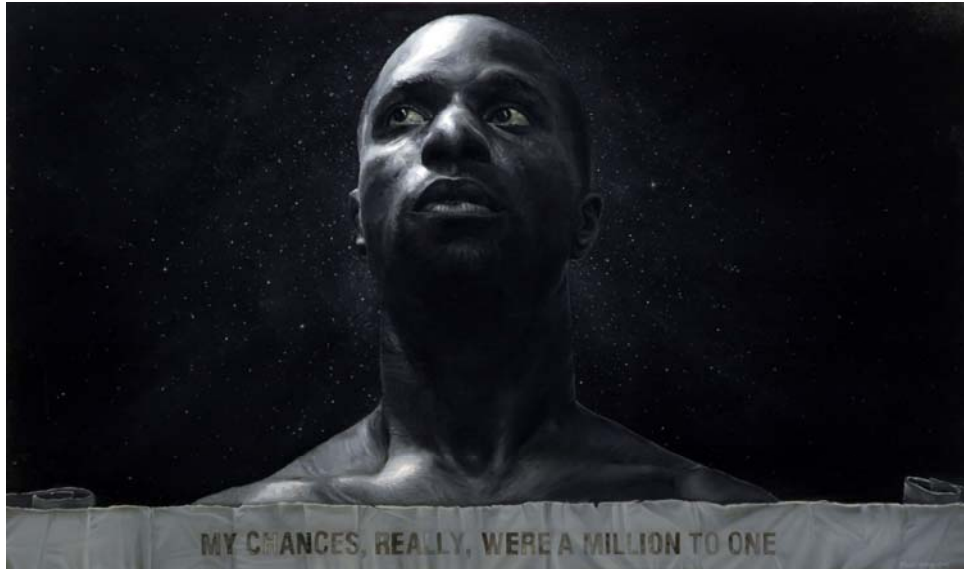


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Selected Press on Vincent Valdez

artillery

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One in a Million, 2007; Collection of the University of Houston Art Museum

Vincent Valdez

L.A. Studio Visit by Jack Chipman

In one of his first neon pieces, Bruce Nauman famously proclaimed “The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths.” An audacious assertion perhaps, but completed during a period of political turmoil, it challenged the conventional view of the artist’s role in society. Even today this puzzling neon sign invites us to investigate the meaning of words and to decide whether or not we believe what the statement says. It also makes public a private thought or conviction of the artist. Frequently, when an artist’s work is challenging or controversial it gets pigeonholed as political art.

Vincent Valdez, a young and talented Los Angeles painter, doesn’t automatically think of his work as “political” but rather as an extension of social realism. Fueled by the work of the controversial Mexican muralists Jose Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera, whose work was prominent in the U.S. during the 1930s but quickly fell out of favor with the rise of the New York School of Abstract painting after World War II. Artists of the Depression era with a social conscience like Ben Shahn are cited by Valdez as influences but he also appreciates the work of Paul Cadmus, a slightly later practitioner. Besides the social realists, Valdez has been inspired by comic books, video games and the current crop of so-called “lowbrow” artists. All of these influences are synthesized in his hyper-realistic paintings and drawings that expose a slice of LA life that many in the art world are not directly exposed to.

Because he was between studios, I met with Valdez at the cavernous studio/gallery of Bob Breen and Clare Graham in Highland Park, where a temporary work space had

yielded some new paintings. The 30 year old artist seemed demure – no one would mistake him for a rabble rouser – but he’s articulate and in possession of a confident demeanor. I asked straight out if he considered himself a political artist. “The issues I encounter in my environment socially and politically are definitely the things that interest and excite me. But I tend to think of my work more as freeze-frames from my own personal memory. For me, it’s all about the narrative...but narratives that are very much exaggerated.”

Valdez was born and raised in San Antonio. He graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2000, and after a brief spell as an up-and-comer in Texas, he moved to LA to work on a piece commissioned by musician Ry Cooder. Painted in remarkable detail on an old ice cream truck, the

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painstaking work chronicled the controversial (there's that word again) destruction of the Mexican-American neighborhood in Chavez Ravine to make way for Dodger Stadium.

His portraits of the Chicano community and the problems this segment of society deals with form the basis of his work. He uses family members and friends as models for his edgy and dreamily surreal narratives that occasionally respond to news making events such as the recent LAPD debacle in MacArthur Park. Most often, his powerful imagery is rooted in personal experience or prompted by the everyday challenges faced by the people he knows best. The recurring image of the boxer is representative of the combative yet vulnerable macho attitude required of young underprivileged males in our society.

Vincent Valdez's reputation has been rising steadily since his arrival in Los Angeles. Two larger-than-life Valdez paintings were part of "Los Angelenos/Chicano Painters of LA: Selections from the Cheech Marin Collection" on view recently at LACMA. He will be having his second solo show in 2009 at Western Project in Culver City. Other solo shows in 2009 will include the University of Texas in Arlington and Tulane University in New Orleans. He's very busy at the moment.

A key question was posed at the conclusion of my visit: "Does art have the power to change political opinion?" Valdez thought for a while, "I definitely think that protest art can bring public awareness to the many problems we face. The trick is to make whatever you do stick in people's minds."

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

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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 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 course - As 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 stalled - MOST 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 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

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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.

"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

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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.

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.

ARTSCENE

VINCENT VALDEZ

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

by Annie Buckley

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"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.

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

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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.'

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

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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?

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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LA WEEKLY

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.

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
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

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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 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."