



# VINGENT VAALDEZ

THE STRANGEST FRUIT



Texas trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Brown bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hangin' from the pecan trees

Forgotten scene of the gallant South  
The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of desert rose sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh

Here is a fruit for the black birds to pluck  
For the rains to gather, for the droughts to suck  
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop

Adapted from the poem "Strange Fruit"  
By Abel Meeropol (aka Lewis Allan)  
Written in the mid to late 1930s



**ON THE INNER WEST SIDE OF SAN ANTONIO**, artist Vincent Valdez is completing renovations on an old firehouse, long forgotten by the city. Fire Station #15 is Valdez's new home and studio. The labor and love he has invested into the fabric of the building — a lapsed piece of civic infrastructure in a dominantly Chicano neighborhood — symbolize Valdez's deep commitment to his local community in San Antonio and his unwavering optimism and hopefulness for the future.

Valdez is an accomplished draftsman in many mediums. Almost exclusively figurative (with a few notable exceptions), Valdez's art is concerned with people and the social and political orders that define and confine them. His paintings, pastels and drawings demonstrate control and refined technique while also exuding a vitality and passion through a considered use of saturated colors and dramatic lighting. While distinguished for a skilled use of realism, his work to date stands as an example of how fine art can offer not only aesthetic beauty but also affect, passion and powerful social critique.

Growing up on the South Side of San Antonio, Valdez was acutely aware of the pressures of being Latino in the United States. From an early age, Valdez found a way through art to confront and critique these social issues — participating in local mural projects from the age of 10. In 1996, he enrolled in the Rhode Island School of Design. Over his time in Providence, Rhode Island, his practice



developed both in regards to his technical achievements in drawing and painting but also his desire to create an art that addressed the social issues that he has encountered in his life while speaking to broader themes of social oppression. A notable work from Valdez's thesis portfolio was *Kill the Pachuco Bastard!* (2000), a large-scale, oil on canvas work depicting the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles. While documenting the historic racial tensions between Latinos and Americans of European descent that are sometimes overlooked in the United States, Valdez's intention was to address the conflation and profiling of race with clothing and fashion — an issue that persists to this day in the specter of the case of the killing of Trayvon Martin.

In the years after RISD, he began to work between Los Angeles and Texas. Alongside his ongoing work in figurative drawing and painting, he returned to some of the experiences of his youth in community mural work, developing responsive and collaborative works with local communities. His most substantial project from that time, *El Chavez Ravine* (2005–2007) commissioned by Ry Cooder, was a response to the story of The Chavez Ravine, a Mexican American neighborhood that was forcibly displaced through the use of eminent domain

and condemnation for the construction of Dodger Stadium in 1959. Beginning in 1951, families' homes were acquired under the 1949 Housing Act with the promise to construct a public housing project titled "Elysian Heights". Some members of the community refused to accept the city's offer for their homes, and a nearly decade-long stand-off ensued until all were either removed by force or relented and accepted the city's offer. "Elysian Heights" was never constructed. The work features a vintage 1953 Chevy ice cream truck on which Valdez painted a mural of the history of the Chavez Ravine community. The work is notable for its creative reinterpretation of the medium of the public mural and Valdez's application of well-honed skills in realistic depiction.



A recurring subject in Valdez's work is his brother Daniel. Daniel, who is a history teacher and basketball trainer and coach in San Antonio, has been cast by Vincent in a wide range of social roles — almost as a form of brotherly role-play. The depictions of Daniel explore the proscription models of masculinity experienced in both Latino and American society. In Valdez's words:

Originally I began depicting my brother as a way to mask a self-portrait. I was never interested in depicting my own face. He was close to me. He somewhat resembled me, but most importantly, although we were connected through blood, he was so damn opposite of me. In many cases he already was or was becoming the fictional characters that I was portraying him as. He almost became a personal camera for me. I would send him



into these fictitious worlds like a robot drone is now sent into battlefields to scope things out and observe. Recognizable for his distinctive face and prominent Adam's apple, Daniel appears in portrait work such as *Any Day Now, I Shall Be Released* (2003) as well as the new series *The Strangest Fruit* (2013). *Any Day Now ...* is part of *Made Men*, a larger series of four large, pastel drawings. The series depicts four archetypal male roles in Latino society — a Christ-like figure for religion or the clergy, a soldier, a boxer, and his brother Daniel cast

as a "modern homeboy." The series is also notable for Valdez's controlled use of symbolism. The four large-scale, facial portraits appear at first to be four men in various states of agony, exhaustion, fear, and ecstasy. In the far background of each composition, Valdez has, however, included a different form of light that rings the head of the figures almost as halos — stars, stadium lights, flares, and street lamps offer keys to the figures' identities.



For much of his adult career, Valdez's work has been celebrated for its skilled use of realism to create metaphorical critiques of social and political structures. His approach to realism changed, however, in 2009 when his best friend Combat Medic John Holt Jr died while on active duty with the US Army in Iraq. Eight weeks previously he had completed *Untitled (Head)* (2009) during a period of artistic drought in Los Angeles. In Valdez's words:

I made this self-portrait in September of 2009 in LA. The summer was scorching, and I used to lay on the studio concrete floor during the day to try and cool down. Things were very strange during that time. I seemed somewhat creatively disconnected, which was something that was entirely foreign to me. The only works that kept me going during those few months were a small series of these graphic ink drawings.

The day after I created the self-portrait, I made this first initial drawing of John and emailed him an image of it. He gladly responded "damn, I'm good looking!," and that was the last that I heard from him.

About 8 weeks later, I found out about John. I found myself back on the studio floor while staring at the ceiling. I remember glancing to my side, and I was eye level on the floor with the self-portrait, and it was a bizarre moment of nothing else existing, except me and my reflection.

The drawing wasn't originally intended to be so intense. The intensity is in what it became. Valdez spent the next two years painting *John* (2012) and a body of commemorative works (*Excerpts for John* (2012)) in drawing, painting and video documenting the homecoming, funeral and burial of John. For Valdez, his distinctive metaphorical style was not direct enough to address his own personal loss nor that of the countless families across the United States who have lost loved ones during their service in the armed forces. This sense of communal solidarity amidst such tragic loss is captured poignantly in a diptych of pastel drawings, each depicting a fallen soldier, reminiscent of Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War* (1810–1820) — *I'm Your Brutha* (2010) and *From a Different Mutha'* (2010).

Since completing *Excerpts for John*, Valdez has been reconciling his metaphorical style with a sense of urgency to address real events and the historical, social, and political issues of his time. *The Strangest Fruit* is Valdez's newest body of work since this artistic turn. The series of large-scale, oil on canvas works depicts contemporary Latinos in the supposed throes of a death by hanging. The works are Valdez's response to the subaltern history of the



lynching of Latinos in the United States with a specific focus on the experience of Latinos in the state of Texas. For the compositions, Valdez began with historic photographs documenting the lynching of African Americans, and he invited close friends and acquaintances in his community in San Antonio into his studio to sit for the works. He positioned the sitters in the poses of the figures in the photographs, using ropes to achieve a realistic sense of the contortion and tension in a human body as it hangs.

Slightly larger than life-size, the figures float, decontextualized, on a white background. The ropes that bind them are not depicted, and the composition becomes an ambiguous scene between hanging and ascension. Occurring over a period of nearly one hundred years between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, these lynchings are often overlooked by mainstream society, media and history in the United States. The events were recorded, however, in local community leaflets and in folk ballads (*corridos*). Here, Valdez presents a special installation of these new works as an attempt to reconcile his style of metaphorical realism with the histories of these lynchings and the ongoing struggles and injustices experienced by contemporary Latinos.

At the far end of the gallery, Valdez presents an adapted version of the poem "Strange Fruit" by Abel Meeropol (aka Lewis Allan) written and performed in the mid-to-late 1930s as a protest song that exposed racism and the lynching of African Americans in the United States. The song captured the popular imagination through recordings by singers such as Billie Holiday. The text stands as a transcribed *corrido* that inscribes the history of Latino lynching onto the wall of the gallery. The last line "...here is a strange and bitter crop" echoes amongst the pained and contorted figures, presenting them as subjective evidence of ongoing social and cultural oppression.

lan Alden Russell

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*My sincerest gratitude to my fiancé Adriana Corral, to my studio assistants Mark Olivares and Zeque Pena and to all of the faces who contributed their time and support in this series. The completion of this project would not have been possible without you.*

**Vincent Valdez**

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# VINCENT VALDEZ

Any Day Now, I Shall Be Released, 2003, pastel on paper, 60 x 42", Private Collection.

El Chavez Ravine, 2005–2007, oil on canvas, 42 x 65", Dimensions variable. Photograph by Peggy Tenson. Courtesy of the San Antonio Museum of Art. Courtesy of Ry Cooder.

John, 2012, oil on canvas, 42 x 65", Courtesy the artist.

COVER IMAGE (Detail) Untitled, from The Strangest Fruit, 2013, oil on canvas, 55 x 92", DESIGN: Malcolm Great Designers

Untitled (Head), 2009, graphic ink on paper, 33 x 32", Courtesy the artist.