



JUST A  
DREAM...

# Vincent Valdez

MASS MoCA



**"I think it is safe to say that my work resonates like an alarm that rings nonstop in my head. I must depict what I witness. This is my call to action, to get up and speak up."**

**— VINCENT VALDEZ**



Vincent Valdez studio, Los Angeles, 2024. Photo by Rich Nielsen and Robert LeBlanc

# Let it be the dream it used to be: Vincent Valdez's America<sup>1</sup>

Vincent Valdez bears witness to the world around him, chronicling America at the margins, writing the stories few have dared to write. Valdez aims to counter Gore Vidal's notion that "We are the United States of Amnesia. We learn nothing because we remember nothing."<sup>2</sup> In *Just a Dream...*, the artist's first museum survey, Valdez urges us to look unflinchingly at the triumph and tragedy of our deeply complex country. His work recalls Susan Sontag's statement: "Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, we cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer; they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing...Don't forget."<sup>3</sup>

Even as a child, Valdez understood his responsibility to see for a world that frequently remains blind. As early as nine years old, he was working alongside adult artists in San Antonio, TX, to fill the city with sociopolitical murals. His uncompromising vision has remained steadfast since, evidenced when he states: "I am alarmed by the denial of history. I will continue to create counter-images to impede the social amnesia that includes our fateful desire to repeat it. I offer this work as a report — my visual testimony about a struggle for transformation, hope, love, and survival in twenty-first century America."<sup>4</sup>

Valdez's mission has resulted in more than two decades of work addressing topics as varied as America itself: boxing, erasure, politics, greed, and both the failings and

achievements of society. Works dating even further back fill two flat files with childhood drawings and photographs showing the artist's creativity from an early age. Valdez often works in series — many of which are united here for the first time — allowing the exhibition to unfold like the chapters in a book. Throughout *Just a Dream...* Valdez presents topics we would rather avoid with the same care as those we want to embrace. His career is not built out of pure pessimism; rather, he needs us to see the past, present, and future as unfiltered. This is how we make America tolerable and compassionate, again, even if it feels like just a dream...

Perhaps June Jordan says it best: "As I think about anyone or anything — whether history or literature or my father or political organizations or a poem or a film — as I seek to evaluate the potentiality, the life-supportive commitment/possibilities of anyone or anything, the decisive question is, always, where is the love? The energies that flow from hatred, from negative and hateful habits and attitudes and dogma, do not promise something good, something I would choose to cherish, to honor with my own life...it is always the love that will carry action into positive new places..."<sup>5</sup>

**Denise Markonish**  
*Co-Curator*

# EARLY WORK

***Kill the Pachuco Bastard! (2001)*** references the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots in which American servicemen collided with young Mexican Americans in downtown Los Angeles. Just a year before, the War Production Board released regulations on wool conservation during World War II. The Zoot Suit was a popular style of dress among Latino, African American, and Filipino youths. Featuring wide-cut pants in signature pinstriped patterns, it was declared unpatriotic by authorities. American military personnel saw the Zoot Suit-wearing Latinos, or Pachucos, and began attacking them on the streets and in public venues for being anti-American. The largest conflict took place on June 3, when even off-duty Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers joined in. No one was killed, but hundreds were injured and arrested. It took until 2023 for the city to publicly apologize for the race riots. On June 16, 1943, Eleanor Roosevelt stated: "The question goes deeper than just suits. It is a racial protest. I have been worried for a long time about the Mexican racial situation. It is a problem with roots going a long way back, and we do not always face these problems as we should."<sup>6</sup> Roosevelt's statement was met with outrage and claims that she was a communist for addressing racial discord.

*Kill the Pachuco Bastard!*,  
2001. Oil on canvas. Photo:  
Elon Schoenholz







***El Chavez Ravine (2005–7)*** Until the 1950s, the communities of La Loma, Bishop and Palo Verde, situated within the Chavez Ravine, were home to Los Angeles' largest Latinx community, when the city abdicated the land by eminent domain and ultimately built Dodger Stadium. The land grab brought with it the promise of the Elysian Hills Housing Development, which was abandoned by the city in 1958. The construction of Dodger Stadium buried the community, and from 1951 to 1961 the rightful landowners fought to save their homes, to no avail. In 2004, musician Ry Cooder brought Valdez to Los Angeles to depict this story. Across every surface of a 1953 Good Humor ice cream truck restored by the godfathers of lowriding, The Duke's Car Club, Valdez painted Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley, former LAPD chief William H. Parker, J. Edgar Hoover, and the displaced families.

Vincent Valdez and Ry Cooder, *El Chavez Ravine*, 2005–7. Oil on 1953 Chevy Good Humor ice cream truck. Photo: LACMA © Museum Associates/LACMA



***Excerpts for John and Home (2012)*** take their inspiration from 2nd Lt. John R. Holt Jr. who was Valdez's childhood best friend in San Antonio. After serving as a combat medic in Iraq, John lost a battle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 2009. The small paintings in the series show the unfolding sequence of a military funeral procession. The flag-draped coffin is the only clear image, while everything else dissolves in a haze. These drawings are about absence, about the shrouding of not just the casket but the brutal realities of war and its long-term aftermaths within American society. The accompanying video, *Home*, also shows John's flag-draped coffin, slowly gliding through the streets like a lowrider returning home. Additionally, the work counters the political ban on photographing flag-draped military coffins, which was overturned in 2009.

LEFT: *Excerpts for John* (detail from 6 panels), 2012. Oil on canvas. Photos: Peter Molick

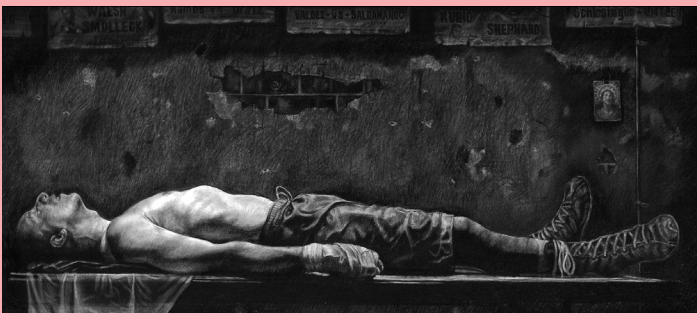
RIGHT: *Home* (film still), 2012 HD video: color, sound TRT: 9:16 min Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Museum purchase through the Frank K. Ribelin Endowment, 2019.37 Director: Vincent Valdez Videographer: Jim Mendiola Editor: Faith Radle

# BOXING

**Stations (2001–4)** chronicles the moment a young boxer begins his life's quest, glimpsing his hopes and dreams and, potentially, the end of his reality. The works (all but three of which are gathered here) reference the Stations of the Cross, a Catholic tradition of depicting the crucifixion. For Valdez, boxing symbolizes the struggle for resilience, perseverance, and survival. *Stations: The Strongest Man in the World is He Who Walks Alone* shows the protagonist entering the arena, hood over his head and game face on. He is the underdog, yet he walks past his opponent's adoring fans without notice. The bravado soon takes a turn in *Stations: A Fine Performance by Our Winning Fighter Tonight* which depicts the protagonist on the ground, blood spewing from his head, as his guardian trainers tend to him, while bystanders stampede over him to celebrate the winner. And finally in *Stations IX: Laid Out*, the boxer lies flat on his back on an altar-like gurney, unconscious, recovering, or dreaming of his next fight.

*Stations: The Strongest Man in the World is He Who Walks Alone*, 2001–4. Charcoal on paper. Photo: Peter Molick

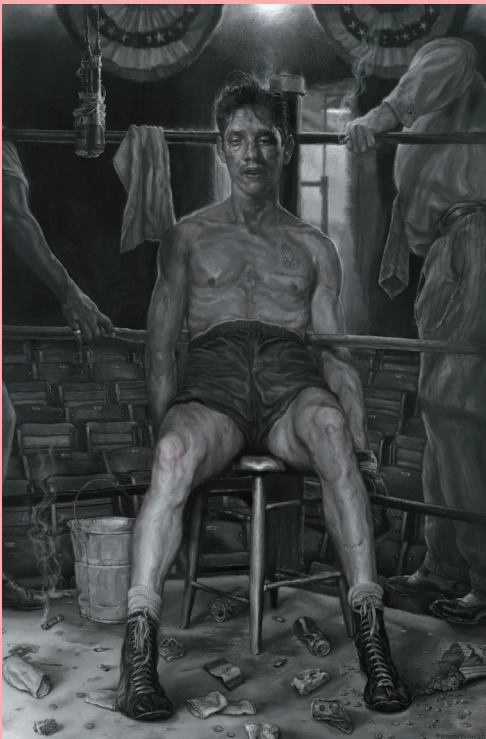
*Stations IX: Laid Out*, 2001–4. Charcoal on wove paper. Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston



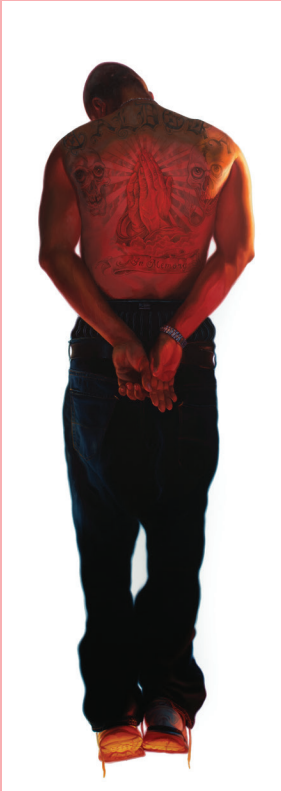


***Just a Dream (In America)* (2020–21)** is where the title for the exhibition is drawn. In the work, a boxer sits with arms heavy by his side, legs akimbo, and face badly beaten. Valdez breaks the painting's monochrome palette by adding hints of red around his swollen eyes, knees, and battered face. It is impossible to tell if we are mid- or post-match, but what is clear is that despite his defeated stance, tattered body, and empty arena, his eyes remain open and determined. Emanating from behind the painting is a faint soundtrack of Jimmy Clanton and His Rockets' 1958 song, "Just a Dream." The lyrics refer to love lost but still remaining, echoing the artist's own conflicted tale about America — "I know that we could never last / We just can't seem to in the past / Just a dream I dream in vain / With you I'd only live in pain."

*Just a Dream (In America)*,  
2020–21. Oil on canvas,  
audio component, and bricks.  
Photo: Chris Gardner



# THE STRANGEST FRUIT



***The Strangest Fruit* (2013)** depicts contemporary Latinos contorted as if hanged from trees while also appearing as rising up like ascensions. The postures for these paintings refer to the lynching of Mexicans and Mexican Americans along the Texas-Mexico border, a near-forgotten and ignored history that took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. *The Strangest Fruit* derives its name from Abel Meeropol's poem "Strange Fruit" (1937) and the resulting song made popular by Billie Holiday (1939). When speaking of the work, Valdez changes the original text from "black bodies swaying in the breeze" to "brown bodies," further reminding us of these forgotten histories and the state-sanctioned violence of today. The artist states, "Like the erased bodies of the past, the more these bodies struggle to break free, the tighter the noose will choke."

*The Strangest Fruit*  
(detail from 8 panels),  
2013. Oil on canvas.  
Photo: Mark Menjivar



# THE BEGINNING IS NEAR TRILOGY



***Beginning Is Near (An American Trilogy), Chapter One: The City (2016)*** images Ku Klux Klan figures in front of a fictionalized background of city lights and trash piles, all lit by the headlamps of a pickup truck. The composition is confrontational, as fourteen hooded figures look straight at/through us: one holds an iPhone, a baby wears Nikes, another figure drinks from a Budweiser American Centennial can. We naively assume these figures are of the past, but if the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol Building confirms anything, it is that these forces still function publicly and proudly. *The City* offers the opportunity to look hatred in the eyes, for when you stand before the painting, the figures' eye level matches your own, reminding us not to underestimate its presence in our contemporary American landscape. The artist urges us to remember Rage Against the Machine's lyric from the 1992 song "Killing in the Name:" "Some of those who work forces, are the same that burn crosses."

*The Beginning is Near (An American Trilogy), Chapter One: The City, 2015–16. Oil on canvas. Photo: Peter Molick*



***Beginning Is Near (An American Trilogy), Chapter Two: Dream Baby Dream (2017–18)*** presents mourners at Muhammad Ali's funeral. Valdez was astounded by the collected eulogists, a rare gathering of individuals from various races, politics, and

*The Beginning is Near (An American Trilogy), Chapter Two: Dream Baby Dream (detail from 12 panels), 2018. Oil on canvas. Photos: Peter Molick*

religious denominations united in celebration of a man who fought for underrepresented Americans. The paintings focus on the podium, microphones, flowers, and speakers, who stand silent. Rendered in black, white, and grey, with touches of red around the eyes, noses, and hands, this series reminds us of our resistance to numbness even in our darkest hours. The portraits are accompanied by two panels, one of the empty podium and one of the funeral wreath. On the ribbon are lyrics from Suicide's 1979 song, "Dream Baby Dream," which used the sound of a ticking clock to resonate its message as a "new national anthem."



***The Beginning Is Near (An American Trilogy), Chapter Three:***

***The New Americans (2021–ongoing)*** counters the somber tones of the previous trilogy chapters. In this series, Valdez pays tribute to people trying to make change: artist Teresita Fernández, and sociopolitical figures Mr. Checkpoint (who started #AFTP — Always Film the Police and Always for the People) and civil rights attorney Juan Cartagena. These beyond life-sized portraits represent their subjects frontally and with dignity. They stare at us, and we meet their gaze willingly, recognizing that despite the world's ills, there is still plenty worth fighting for. As the artist states about these figures, "*The New Americans* are a stubborn pulse in a dying heart."

LEFT: *The Beginning is Near (An American Trilogy), Chapter Three: The New Americans, The New Americans #3 (Juan)*, 2021. Oil on canvas. Photo: Peter Molick

RIGHT: *Study For The New Americans (Teresita)*, 2021. Pencil on paper. Photo: Peter Molick



# SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE



***The Slaughterhouse Five Drawings (2024)*** were created for a new edition of Kurt Vonnegut's 1969 novel published by Arion Press in San Francisco. Valdez's relationship to this book, which has been reintroduced to America's banned book list as recently as 2023, is personal. The novel tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, a prisoner of war (POW) in World War II, captured during the 1944 Battle of the Bulge in Germany. Vonnegut was also a POW during the same conflict, as was Valdez's great uncle Ernest. Valdez's ink drawings illustrate scenes from the book with a twist: an optometrist's machine becomes a device of time travel/state control; a boxcar turns sinister when it becomes transportation for POWs; a locket containing the Lord's Prayer sits empty on the page, divorced from its dead owner; and a gravestone with an angel draped over the top contains the epitaph: "Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt."

*The Slaughterhouse Five Drawings, 2023. Ink and pencil on paper; published by Arion Press*

# RECENT WORK



***Eaten* (2018–19)** depicts a large pig with an uncannily human face modeled on American political forces such as J. Edgar Hoover, Steve Bannon, and Robert McNamara, while also referencing the dictatorial character Napoleon in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). The painting conjures Orwell's line, "The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which."<sup>7</sup> In Valdez's hands, the pig-man sits in a wasteland strewn with everyday objects: eyeglasses, a man's dress shoe, a wristwatch, a pair of pants, a wallet with money falling out, cookie crumbs, etc. Looking closer, it is clear that the objects do not belong to the pig but to its victim, the human stuck beneath his bloated belly with only hands and feet visible under the hog's weight, a new symbol of the (defeated) American dream.

*Eaten*, 2018–19. Oil on canvas, and bronze.  
Photo: Paul Salveson





***It Was Never Yours* (2019)** is an apt emblem for the broken American dream: mania, greed, power, and control. The painting begins with the *Earthrise* (1968) image taken by astronaut William Anders during the Apollo 8 mission. This was the first photograph to show the planet from afar, which, at the height of the Cold War, allowed many to recognize Earth's insignificance within the universe and others to imagine how easy it would be to strive for world domination. Valdez presents this image set against the Milky Way. The phrase, "The World is Yours," painted like a red neon sign, encircles the globe. This image references the Universal Studios logo as well as the film *Scarface* (1983) — both of which symbolize an America brimming with consumerist greed and entertainment.

*It Was Never Yours*,  
2019. Oil on paper.  
Photo: Paul Salvesson



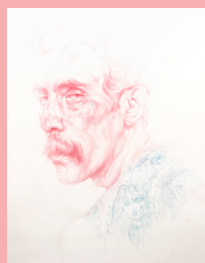
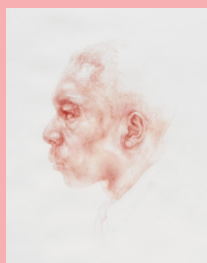
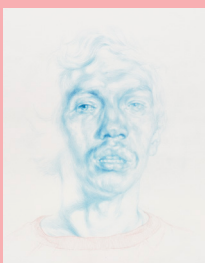
***Since 1977* (2019)** depicts each elected president from the year of the artist's birth to the completion of the series. The images primarily consist of fields of black with pinpricks of starlight, as the figures, from Carter to Trump (in his first term), peer at us from just above the bottom of the paper. Valdez reduces each president to hair and eyes, freezing them in a single gesture. As the series progresses, the presidents sink further to the bottom of the page until Trump is reduced to a mere candy floss swirl of hair.

*Since 1977* (detail from 9  
panels), 2019. Lithography  
crayon on paper. Photos:  
Paul Salvesson



***So Long, Mary Ann's* (2019)** central figure has a gentle quality to him despite his appearance. We see scars on his chest and the name "Mary Ann" tattooed across his knuckles, conjuring the 1967 Leonard Cohen song from which the painting borrows its title. In the song, Cohen sings of lost love: "Oh so long, Marianne, it's time that we began / To laugh and cry and cry and laugh about it all again." You can almost hear the refrain swirling in the head of Valdez's subject, and while we may not know his story, we do know what loss and heartbreak feel like, bringing him closer to us and us closer to empathy. Look closely at the figure's eyes and you can see a reflection of the sunset in the painting *Rise* (2019).

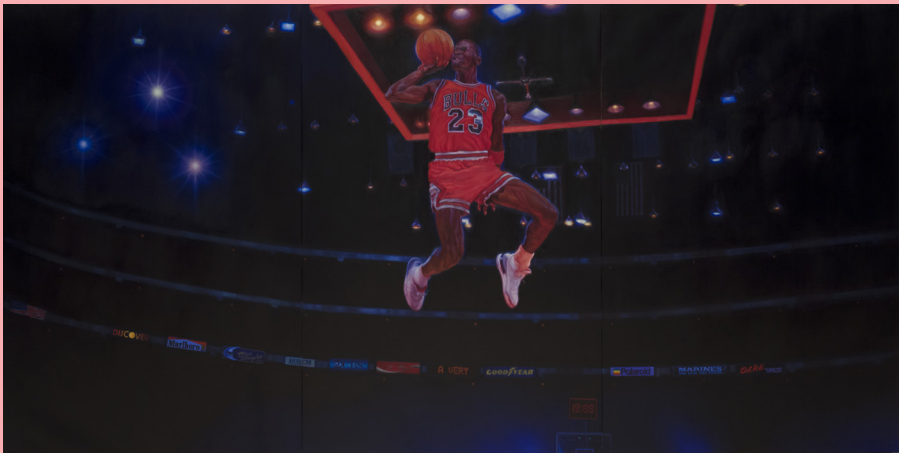
*So Long, Mary Ann*, 2019.  
Oil on canvas. Photo: Paul  
Salveson



***Amnesia* drawings (2023–ongoing)** image their subjects with lines both precise and fading. Faces are rendered just enough to be recognizable while bodies are barely there, as if the figures are disappearing on the page. These portraits began during the COVID-19 pandemic, relying on Valdez's memory to pay homage to those close to him, while also recognizing human frailty in such a vulnerable moment.

*Amnesia*, 2023–24.  
Color pencil on paper.  
Photos: Elon Schoenholz





***It Was a Very Good Year* (2024–ongoing)** — a nod to the song of the same name made popular by Frank Sinatra in 1966 — begins with recognizable images from news media. These aren't just ordinary events but ones which occurred in Valdez's lifetime and have become frozen in time, creating a series that is both a chronology of American life as well as Valdez's own. On view at MASS MoCA is *It Was A Very Good Year, 1987/88*. The work consists of two canvases: Oliver North swearing in at the Iran-Contra Hearings (1987) and Michael Jordan's gravity-defying slam dunk contest (1988). The paintings render their subjects in beyond life-size, pulling them off the screen and into space as free-standing objects attached back-to-back. The Iran-Contra Hearing scandal took place when Ronald Reagan's administration brokered a deal to illegally sell arms to Iran in order to fund the Contras, an anti-Sandinista rebel group in Nicaragua. In Valdez's painting, North's mouth is closed as if mute to his own wrongdoing, while Jordan floats. Both gaze upward, appearing before an invisible audience as spectacles, with right hands raised, for different reasons. The paintings are accompanied by a bronze newspaper onto which Valdez has hand-drawn an image from the cover of the 1992 *Los Angeles Times* reporting a riot in LA following the beating of Rodney King at the hands of the police.

Installation view of *Ordinary People: Photorealism and the Work of Art since 1968*, November 23, 2024–May 4, 2025 at MOCA Grand Avenue. Courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA). Photo by Jeff McLane

**Vincent Valdez** (b. 1977, San Antonio, TX) lives and works in Los Angeles, CA, and Houston, TX. He earned his BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2000. He was a recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant for Painters and Sculptors (2016), and was awarded residencies at the Skowhegan School of Painting (2005), the Vermont Studio Center (2011), the Künstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin Residency (2014), and Joan Mitchell Center (2018). Valdez was the 2019 Artadia awardee in Houston, TX, and a 2020 artist fellow at NXTHVN in New Haven. Recent exhibitions include *The Face of Battle: Americans at War, 9/11 to Now*, Smithsonian Museum of American Art and National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC; *So Different, So Appealing*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; *The City*, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; *Between Play and Grief: Selections from the Permanent Collection*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; *Suffering from Realness*, MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA; and *ESTAMOS BIEN: LA TRIENAL 20/21*, El Museo del Barrio, New York, NY. In 2024 he was named Texas artist of the year. In 2025 he was given the ACLU Artist in Residence Award. He is represented by Matthew Brown Gallery in Los Angeles, CA.



### Vincent Valdez: Just a Dream...

May 25, 2025 – March 2026

Vincent Valdez: *Just a Dream...* is co-organized by Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH). The exhibition is co-curated by Denise Markonish and Patricia Restrepo.

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**Front & Back Cover:** *The Slaughterhouse Five Drawings*, 2023. Ink and pencil on paper, published by Arion Press

- 1 The essay title comes from Langston Hughes' poem, "Let America  
Be America Again," from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*  
(New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 189.
- 2 Gore Vidal, "The State of the Union," *The Nation*, September 13, 2004.
- 3 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 115.
- 4 Artist Statement sent to the author
- 5 June Jordan, "Where is the Love?" *Some of Us Did NOT Die: New  
and Selected Essays* (New York: Civitas Books, 2003), p. 269.
- 6 <https://www.laalamac.com/history/h1071.php>.
- 7 George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2003), p. 97.