

A BURNING DESIRE: LOS ANGELES AS FEMME FATALE

TATIANA REINOZA, Ph.D. Candidate,
Department of Art History, University of Texas at Austin

Los Angeles is a city that seems to love life on the edge, whether through destructive nature or politics or LAPD or through illusionistic Hollywood, Disneyland or the endless traffic and gentrification, this city represents a defining moment in time.... it becomes the iconic dream, the bigger picture (or perhaps illusion) that reminds us that from destruction comes rebirth, and that all you can do, like all Angelenos, is continue to drive on.

—Vincent Valdez¹

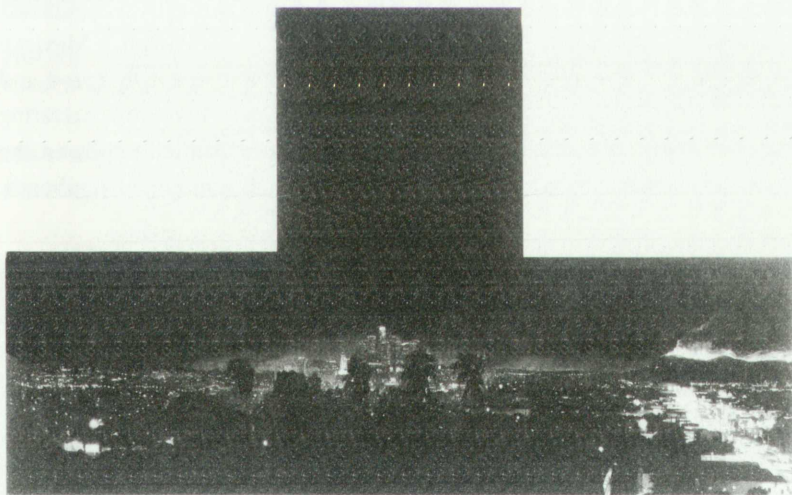


FIGURE 1. Vincent Valdez, *BURNBABYBURN*, 2009, oil on canvas, 96 in x 144 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

A syncretic mixture of quiet complacency and the implicit crackling sounds of burning hillsides animates the city of Los Angeles in the large-scale oil on canvas entitled *BURNBABYBURN* (2009) (Figure 1). Vincent Valdez captured this view from his eastside Lincoln Heights studio window.² With a cinematic quality reminiscent of Sunset noir (color noir film), the urban landscape vibrates like a force field.³ Lights flicker at a distance through the

shadow of tall palm trees. Our gaze embraces a postcard-perfect downtown cityscape that barely illuminates a vast darkness. The central panel of the triptych extends upward, phallic-like, guiding the eye into a monochromatic black sky. A blazing fire in the right corner of the lower register steers it back to the trailing horizon line. Chávez Ravine is a fiery furnace with a thick smoke stack, fueled by a menacing wind that threatens to engulf the surroundings.

Dark, evocative, and erotic qualities characterize the work of this San Antonio-native. Valdez was catapulted into national prominence with his tour de force painting *Kill the Pachuco Bastard!* (2001) (Figure 2). Now part of the Cheech Marin collection, the painting toured the country in *Chicano Visions* (2002), a ten-city traveling exhibition.⁴ After moving to Los Angeles in 2005, Valdez began work on one of his most ambitious commissions to date: *El Chávez Ravine* (2005–07) (Figure 3). Musical magnate Ry Cooder commissioned the artist to paint the history of Chávez Ravine, a Mexican American working class neighborhood that was systematically razed and then became home of Dodger Stadium. Valdez spent two years narrating this history through a fusion of film-like sequences, painted in oils on the body of a vintage 1953 Chevy ice cream truck with a mounted signboard.



FIGURE 2. Vincent Valdez, *Kill the Pachuco Bastard!*, 2001, oil on canvas, 72 in x 48 in. Courtesy of the artist (Collection of Cheech Marin).

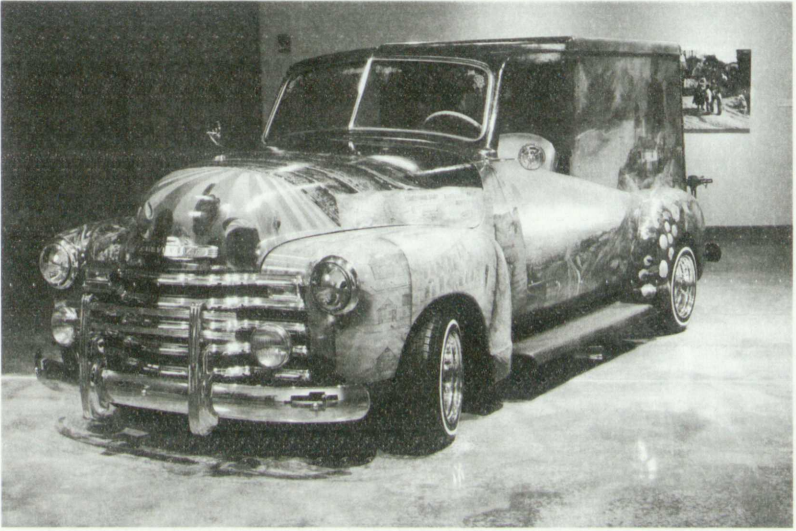


FIGURE 3. Vincent Valdez, *El Chávez Ravine*, 2005-2007, oil on vintage 1953 Chevy ice cream truck, 72 in x 156 in x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist (Collection of Ry Cooder).

His research on *El Chávez Ravine* eventually led him to this new series of Los Angeles nocturnes.

The largest of his nocturnes, *BURNBABYBURN* signals his embrace of, as well as his surrender to, his new adopted city. He pairs down his palette to a narrow range of hues echoing the work of American tonalists such as the dark and neutral hues in James McNeill Whistler's nocturnes. The darkness also suggests the lush black velvet paintings with kitsch themes popularized in the 1970s. Although he works primarily as a figurative painter, Valdez abandons the figure in favor of the city, which takes the form of a reclining muse, much like Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. But this is no ordinary or innocent muse—Los Angeles transmogrifies into a femme fatale complete with overwhelming sexuality and violence. As we are led down Broadway into the soaring fire we uncover a lethal plot, a crime scene that waits to be investigated. I argue that Valdez constructs a gendered fantasy of Los Angeles. This polymorphous fantasy is both male and female. His seductive view of Los Angeles engenders the trope of the femme fatale but the very materiality of its unusually shaped canvas simultaneously embodies the male-dominated discourses of power by revealing the very infrastructure of the city.

This reading poses a particular set of challenges. On the one hand, how can we define the figure of the femme fatale, not as an agent in history but as an archetype? With its origin in French for 'fatal woman,' the femme fatale is a female character that uses her sexuality to lure and entrap men leading to their downfall and often their death. As a recurring stereotype in popular culture we can trace the theories of fatal women to Sigmund Freud's views on 'femininity.' In film noir and neo-noir the femme fatale is a modern version of the vamp—female vampire—as it was known in the silent film era. The next challenge is to question whether such an archetype is applicable to the city. I am not suggesting this as a definitive reading of this work nor that it coincides with the artist's intention. I am merely setting up my own *mise-en-scène* that may in turn reveal more on the form of such expressionism, the gendering of landscape, and the puzzling shape of the canvas. Moreover, the artist has suggested that the canvas owes its shape to the form of City Hall. Thus, alternatively, this painting could be read as a reinterpretation of the Catholic triptych, such as those by the early Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden. The construction of these Renaissance triptychs emphasized architectural harmony and ideologically projected divine order and power. The same ideological projection is at work in the structure of City Hall. This, some would say heavy-handed, positioning of Los Angeles as femme fatale will, I hope, serve as a means to approach the work of a figurative painter who takes a leap towards the abstraction of subject and message in this work. Commenting on the use of film noir to describe urban spatial politics, the cultural critic Rosalyn Deutsche has noted:

It has become critical commonplace to observe that in noir the figure of the femme fatale resists confinement in—or as—space and, crossing boundaries, threatens the protagonist's identity. The role of the urban detective and, some critics believe, the work of noir itself, is to repress her image, to master the feminine—how successfully is controversial—thereby restoring spatial order and, with it, the detective's own perceptual clarity and geographic proficiency.⁵

Reading this ideational landscape as femme fatale also elicits the exploration of these issues of confinement, containment and repression. Although it attempts to subvert these paradigms of power, *BURNBABYBURN* is

still largely a masculine terrain, reinforced through its phallic canvas. The feminine position of the city is that of image and landscape, while the masculine is the privileged gaze and the container of desire. Other scholars have extended this critique to the male gaze prominent in Chicano art.⁶ This critique could certainly apply to the work of Valdez as a self-identified Chicano. It was certainly prominent in the *Chicano Visions* exhibition, which, in my view, says more about the vision of a collector than about the individual artworks on view. But I want to depart from the pervasive insular readings of Chicano art and position Valdez within the Americanist tradition of painting.

FIERY ANTECEDENTS

On a recent trip to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, I serendipitously stumbled upon a monumental predecessor to *BURNBABYBURN* with the same title: Roberto Matta's *Burn, Baby, Burn (L'escalade)* (1965–66). The iconic work by the Chilean-born master takes the Vietnam conflict and the then recent Watts riots as its subject matter, but renders them abstractly with riveting force. Comparing it to Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, curator of Latin American art Ilona Katzew reads it as "a bold indictment of the destructiveness of mankind and a manifesto for peace."⁷ The title of the work comes from the popular cry "Burn, Baby! Burn!" coined by Magnificent Montague, a Los Angeles disc jockey, who would shout the phrase on the local rhythm-and-blues radio station. Rioters in Watts appropriated it as a battle-cry. The term alluded to the arson that marked the riots. Although Valdez was apparently unaware of this piece when he painted *BURNBABYBURN* in 2009, Matta's work is an important historical antecedent because, like Valdez's painting, it is entrenched in Angeleno history—it bears witness to the racial violence that has plagued this quintessentially American city.

With regards to antecedents, Valdez is not the first to set Los Angeles on fire. In the mid-sixties, Ed Ruscha worked on a series of fire paintings of Los Angeles landmarks, including *Norm's, La Cienega, On Fire* (1964), *Burning Gas Station* (1965), and *Burning Standard* (1968). Ralph Rugoff, art critic and director of London's Hayward gallery, describes these images of fire as "visual analogue for noise."⁸ This is remarkable given the medium's limitations, that the materiality of paint can at one point vibrate as sound. Without abandoning the cool aesthetics of West Coast pop, Ruscha uses fire

as a visual disturbance in contrast with the hard-edged lines of the buildings. In these works fire is a formal device, but in *Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Fire* (1965–68) fire takes the form of institutional critique. The art critic Dave Hickey and curator Chon Noriega view the work as an outright challenge to cultural institutions that dispense “standards” and serve “norms.”⁹ Ruscha began work on this canvas a year after the museum opened its doors. The artist used the media and his access to commercial galleries to stage a theatrical opening for the work. The Western Union telegram that announced the opening read: “Los Angeles Fire Marshall says he will attend. See the most controversial painting to be shown in Los Angeles in our time.”¹⁰ Paradoxically, the mainstream machine quickly absorbed the institutional critique (so much for avant-garde practices), given that Ruscha and his contemporaries were soon welcomed into LACMA. Ruscha’s fire paintings are important in relation to *BURNBABYBURN* because they create a myth around Los Angeles, and the use of fire serves multiple purposes: visual noise and institutional critique.

A soaring wildfire also comes to life in the masterful photo-realism of John Valadez’s *Pool Party* (1986). The native Angeleno captures the serenity of a quiet weekend afternoon, where two women, perhaps sisters, bathe a dog and prepare the pool for a swim. The smiles and ease that the two sitters project stands at odds with the roaring fire that threatens to encroach on their property. Here, fire is used as a formal device to contrast with the coolness of the blue pool water, but it is also a cultural commentary on the fact that Angelenos are so accustomed to the Southern California wildfires that they simply go about their day without a care in the world. Thus, John Valadez projects an image of Los Angeles culture as extravagant, lush, and fairly self-centered. For Vincent Valdez in contrast, witnessing the Los Angeles fires was tantamount to an apocalyptic scene, “The skies blackened and all around us were these monstrous flames that were uncontrollable.”¹¹ Valdez’s reference to fire equates it with danger. And in his portrayal of Los Angeles, this danger plays into his characterization of the city as *femme fatale*.

LOS ANGELES AS MUSE

However one tries to define or explain noir, the common denominator must always be the city. The two are inseparable. The great, sprawling American city, endlessly in flux, both spectacular and sordid, with all its amazing permutations of human and topographical growths, with its deeply textured nocturnal life that can be seductive almost otherworldly labyrinth of dreams or a tawdry bazaar of lost souls: the city is the seedbed of noir.

— Nicholas Christopher¹²

As the primary setting for noir, the city at night is the perfect setting for crime. That is precisely how David Lynch begins his neo-noir film *Mulholland Drive* (2001). A dark screen opens with a street-sign of Mulholland Drive: the camera moves in for a close-up and the sign flashes rapidly as if illuminated by passing headlights. The scene shifts, and we see a black limousine driving along a winding road in the darkest of nights. Only the headlights illuminate the paved road, the fluorescent red taillights twinkle with a haze. The limousine moves slowly and deliberately, like a snake slithering toward its prey. The camera angle shifts between looking down on the limousine and directly behind it, some of the shots overlap creating composite, layered images. As the car fades out, a panoramic aerial view of Los Angeles comes into focus. It is magnificent: teeming with life, the perpetual motion of Los Angeles traffic, the billboards and neon lights—the city vibrates with anthropomorphic qualities evoking lust and intrigue. With this dramatic opening sequence, Lynch sets the mood and the tone for his black melodrama.

Mulholland Drive and Lynch's view of the city greatly resonate with Valdez's *BURNBABYBURN*, in which the city is laid bare and naked in a wide-screen panoramic shot. Valdez is the detective or male protagonist assigned to the Chávez Ravine murder. But before he can solve the crime, he is seduced by the city who takes the form of a femme fatale. Through his investigation, he discovers a web of corruption and complicity all pointing back to City Hall, which takes the shape of a phallic canvas. Though this plot might sound far-fetched, *BURNBABYBURN* is remarkably akin to a film noir, particularly in



FIGURE 4. Vincent Valdez, *BURNBABYBURN*, 2009, detail, oil on canvas, 96 in x 144 in. Courtesy of the artist.

its gendered readings of the city. The femme fatale is one of the key figures in this genre. She is always portrayed as exquisite, ruthless and calculating—a combination of beauty, sensuality and cunning intelligence—unmatched by any other female character in the film.

Valdez's Los Angeles is a projection of male desire. One derives a great deal of pleasure from watching "her." The city is mesmerizing, glistening like a wet body in low lighting. Read from left to right, our eyes peer through an open window (Figure 1). A bright streetlight guides our view into a distant horizon where the lights begin to melt into a hazy atmosphere. Moving toward the center, black palm trees in the foreground cast their shadow on the iridescent city center; these obstacles draw the viewer deeper into the painting. The tall skyscrapers symbolize modernization and ever-expanding capitalism. Among this complex, City Hall shines like a beacon of power. These spatial relationships based on the consolidation of legal and corporate

power evoke the political and economic operations of what Saskia Sassen calls the global city. The tallest building in Los Angeles, the U.S. Bank Tower, with its large glass crown that is illuminated at night leads our view up to the dark night sky.

Valdez points out that "the complexity in color of a night sky is richer than most of us tend to notice."¹³ He works from dark to light and begins by priming the canvas with his night time blacks: ivory black, Prussian blue, alizarin crimson, dioxazine purple, yellow ochre and burnt sienna. Once the entire surface is covered, he proceeds to carve out the skyline with its smog and clouds, hills and buildings. He achieves a surface that appears to be a single skin of paint, what tonalist James Abbott McNeill Whistler referred to as "like breath on the surface of a pane of glass."¹⁴ This single skin of paint effect lends *BURNBABYBURN* film-like qualities, which are not surprising given its geographic relation to Hollywood. But upon closer inspection, the viewer discovers multiple layers of pigment, meticulously blended with medium, adding a smooth sheen to the oils. Brushstrokes are only evident in the more detailed areas, such as the fire or the dense city streets. From the sky we descend back to downtown, and the horizon line steers us toward the fire. Much like Ruscha's fire, this fire creates visual noise. Valdez employs it as a formal device that serves as a contrast to the overall dark palette. As visual noise, the fire breaks the heavy use of blue in the hazy horizon line and the detailed outlines of Broadway. Nowhere is the city teeming with life more than in Valdez's view of the Eastside (Figure 4). The taillights of cars and Metro buses flicker in the hustling Broadway thoroughfare. Traffic lights are tinged with blue and lampposts emanate a soft yellow glow, as do the golden arches of McDonalds, the billboards and neon signs. Valdez renders his second home, the community on the Eastside, as full of vitality, vibrancy and resilience. This is by far the most detailed of the panels. Here, Valdez shows off his hyperrealist technique. It is masterful and reminiscent of John Valadez's canvases, though less expressive and more equivalent to the viscosity of film, photo-based works and video games. The apartment complex in the bottom right is so real and haunting, we want to peer through its windows, make sense of the shadows and the flickering television lights. Through these intricate formal devices, Valdez slows us down and forces upon the viewer a close-looking or close-reading of the work. The diagonal line of Broadway, lit up like a roman candle, guides us back to the fire, and we begin once again to navigate the nocturne.

Los Angeles as femme fatale is also a projection of anxiety. The anxiety comes from the flames, which are also suggestive of sexual rhetoric, but threaten to incinerate the dreamscape that Valdez painstakingly built up. It leads the viewer to question the fire as the site of the crime. What happened at Chávez Ravine? Ry Cooder explains in his *Chávez Ravine* (2005) album notes:

It cost about 7 million dollars of public funding to regrade Chávez Ravine according to Richard Neutra's housing site plan. But there wasn't going to be any housing, public or otherwise, because there was just too much heat over the whole thing, so the city council worked out a sweet deal with Walter O'Malley and brought the Dodgers out there. Because baseball was clean, you couldn't argue with it, and it was good for the town. O'Malley loved money and a good deal, maybe even as much as he loved the game itself.¹⁵

The PBS film *CHAVEZ RAVINE: A Los Angeles Story* (2004) narrates the account in greater detail. Located just a couple of miles from City Hall, Chávez Ravine was home to generations of Mexican Americans and African Americans. After the Federal Housing Act of 1949, the Los Angeles Housing Authority earmarked the site as a prime location for redevelopment. By the summer of 1950, all residents were notified that they would have to sell their land in order for the city to begin construction on a large public housing project (Elysian Park Heights) that would "benefit" the area. Through the power of eminent domain, the city bought up the land and began demolition. But the public housing promise never came to fruition. The project was stalled in a decade-long battle. Intertwined with the politics of the 1950s "Red Scare," public housing became synonymous with socialism and was deemed un-American. Instead, the most American of pastimes would come to supplant the Chávez Ravine community. Walter O'Malley, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, struck a deal with the city officials (including an alleged illegal deal with Mayor Poulson) to bring the Dodgers to Los Angeles in exchange for a new stadium at Chávez Ravine. After much political turmoil, including a public referendum, the city cleared the land and removed the last of the families. The Dodgers Stadium officially opened on April 10, 1962.

Valdez spent almost two years studying this history through vintage maps of Los Angeles, texts and testimonies from the Housing Authority, and interviews with former residents. This research led him to develop the concept and imagery for his three-dimensional mural, *El Chávez Ravine* (2005–07) (Figure 3).¹⁶ One of the most poignant images from this mural is the eviction scene, where a young woman is literally being dragged out of her home by Los Angeles police officers.¹⁷ Her grimacing face is contorted with anger and teary eyeliner runs down her cheeks. At the top of the stairs, we see the legs of an officer with a baton holding her by the arms. Two more officers drag her by the legs. The one in the foreground carries a gun on his holster with a bullet belt around his waist, signaling the police's intimidation tactics and their power to use all necessary force. In the backdrop, Valdez painted the seal of the City of Los Angeles in bright red hues to reference the "Red Scare" politics that dominated the 1950s and played a role in destroying the public housing project destined for Chávez Ravine. He placed bright, colorful light bulbs on the perimeter of the seal to resemble a game show and in the middle ground he painted the leering faces of key players in the Chávez Ravine saga.¹⁸ This is the ugly underbelly of the noir city that Valdez lights on fire and a source of a great deal of his anxiety. His great fear is the purposeful amnesia of Los Angeles, its willful neglect to come to terms with its own history of violent displacements, and its seductive lure as an image-making machine through its powerful film industry. With this political act, Valdez continues to prove that he is a history painter in the vein of Kerry James Marshall.

Marshall's ten-by-eighteen-foot streetscape, entitled *7AM Sunday Afternoon* (2003), captures the sun-bathed elegance of a Chicago neighborhood: the movement of cars and residents, the musical notes emanating from windowsills, birds traversing the sky, all through a prismatic reflection of fracturing light that bears witness to the changing economies and politics of displacement. According to curator Helen Molesworth, "Marshall's *7AM Sunday Morning*, functions like a history painting; it is a concrete image of the present, readable to a local constituency in its documentation of a contemporaneous situation, yet it is also destined to function for posterity, as a record of what has happened."¹⁹ The painting reflects on the failures of urban public housing, Chicago's infamous Robert Taylor Homes, at one time the "largest concentration of poverty in America." Analogous with the

case of Chávez Ravine, the city of Chicago recently decided to demolish the buildings, displacing 12,000 families in the process.²⁰

History is always about bringing the past into the present, but the present is also tainted with anxiety. 2009 was a difficult year for California's economy, notably when the state began to send out IOUs to county agencies and resident taxpayers as it found itself on the brink of bankruptcy.²¹ Some of California's most prominent cities came to be known as foreclosure capitals. The Great Recession hit the Golden State with a punch. The unemployment rate rose quickly into the double-digits.²² In addition, eight years of failed foreign policies and two of the costliest wars in American history, had left many wondering, what had gone wrong? How did we get here? These uncertainties were just as real for Valdez who faced his most difficult year (financially). Commissions were drying up. Art patrons were holding out. It was a test of faith for artists who made a living from their work. *BURNBABYBURN* is like a film still in that sense: it captures the beauty and sensuality of Los Angeles as evil temptress, its treacherous past, and its uncertain future.

Feminist film critics have argued that the femme fatale is a projection of male desire and anxiety about the changing gender roles in American society.²³ Particularly in the postwar period, as many more women worked outside of the home, their financial and social mobility began to threaten the established social order. I return here to Rosalyn Deutsche's comments on the figure of the femme fatale and how it resists confinement. As much as the artist tried to contain Los Angeles within the phallic framework and through his male gaze, the elusive city is always just out of reach. His painting lies somewhere in the ambiguous spectrum that questions the discourses of power that regulate the sprawling, yet gentrified body of Los Angeles. This body is nonetheless constructed through the male gaze. Thus placing us in a masculine terrain where repression serves to obscure unwanted histories such as those of Chávez Ravine. The ambiguity is challenged by lighting the body on fire.

In an interview I asked the artist about the unusual shape of this canvas, he quickly replied it was the shape of City Hall.²⁴ Home to the mayor's office, the city council and its meeting chambers, Los Angeles City Hall is the

center of government. Architects John Parkinson, John Austin, and Albert Martin designed the building that was inaugurated in 1928. It is the tallest isolated structure in the world with a seismic retrofit that can sustain an 8.2 magnitude earthquake. Up until the mid-sixties it was the tallest building in Los Angeles. As a testament to its power, an image of City Hall has been engraved on Los Angeles Police Department badges since 1940.²⁵ The fire in *BURNBABYBURN* points to City Hall, the beacon of power, where most of the decisions to displace and demolish the Chávez Ravine community took place. Since its incorporation as a city and municipality in 1850, Los Angeles has been governed by men. All of the mayors, including the current mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, have been male. Some of these men have been corrupt, and have abused their power for monetary and political gains. I read Valdez's phallic-shaped canvas as an aggressive masculinity projected over the city and as an indictment on city council politics over the dissolution of Chávez Ravine.

These allegations of corruption recall another well-known neo-noir, *L.A. Confidential* (1997). Set in 1950s Los Angeles, the plot involves three LAPD officers: Ed Exley, Bud White and Jack Vincennes and their investigation of the Nite Owl Coffee Shop slayings, which leads them to uncover a web of corruption that points back to City Hall and the Chief of Police. The femme fatale Lynn Bracken, played by Kim Basinger, is part of a high-class prostitution ring, run by a rich real estate developer. The film uncovers the dark world of Los Angeles crime: gangsters, prostitution, drugs, and corruption. Several of the scenes feature wonderful shots of the City Hall building, but one scene in particular shares a pronounced visual similarity with Valdez's canvas. In this nocturnal scene, Jack Vincennes (played by Kevin Spacey) is on the street, talking with Sid Hudgens (played by Danny DeVito), publisher of *Hush-Hush* magazine. They are about to go and arrest a young couple for marijuana use, but must photograph them naked with the evidence first for the pleasure of *Hush-Hush* readers. The scene was carefully constructed to place Hudgens on the left and Vincennes on the right with two young officers behind him. Palm trees—a quintessential Hollywood trademark—frame the image. Vincennes gestures with his right hand and guides us directly to El Cortez, a towering theater with the same phallic-form as City Hall and *BURNBABYBURN*. The brightest area in the shot is the theater's marquee, which stands in stark contrast to the dark night, the

palm trees, and the officer's uniforms. Superimposed over the tower in large type is the name of the film that is currently debuting: *When Worlds Collide*. The costumes, the cars and this direct reference to a 1951 sci-fi thriller are like a time machine that magically places the audience back in the 1950s.

When Worlds Collide, the sci-fi movie and the phrase, is perhaps a good way to close this story. The violent collision of worlds and cultures is what makes incidents like Chávez Ravine happen. As Vincent Valdez masterfully narrates in *El Chávez Ravine* mural, most notably in his eviction scene, greed is a violent force willing to displace anything or anyone that stands in its way. And like a clever villain, it desperately tries to erase the evidence or sweep it under a rug. In *BURNBABYBURN*, Valdez opens up the Pandora's box and asks viewers to question why Chávez Ravine is on fire, and what really happened there. His is a seductive form of visual rhetoric—the city is a muse, the muse a femme fatale—that causes pleasure, anxiety, and hopefully, awareness, “off the record, on the QT, and very hush-hush...”²⁶

TATIANA REINOZA is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Art History at the University of Texas at Austin where she specializes in Chicana/o and U.S. Latino art. Her advisor is Dr. Cherise Smith and the title of her dissertation is *Latino Print Cultures in the U.S., 1970–2008*.

NOTES:

¹ Vincent Valdez, email to the author, December 7, 2010.

² Ibid.

³ I want to acknowledge San Antonio Museum of Art's curator David S. Rubin's reading of *El Chávez Ravine* and his mention of film noir movies of the 1940s for inspiring this reading of *BURNBABYBURN* through the language of film noir. David S. Rubin, “A Los Angeles Story,” in *El Chávez Ravine*, exhibition catalogue (San Antonio: San Antonio Museum of Art, 2009), 11. Film noir refers to a genre or style of film depicting a dark, corrupt and fatalistic world. French critics coined the term in the 1940s to describe the new wave of cynical and stylized American movies. Most often, the films are set in urban spaces and scenes take place at night. Film noir was initially thought to have a time span bounded by *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Touch of Evil* (1958). However, new iterations, often called neo-noirs, continue to be produced.

⁴ Tatiana Reinoza, “Collecting in the Borderlands: Ricardo and Harriett Romo's Collection of Chicano Art” (Master's Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2009), 41–2.

⁵ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 252.

⁶ Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art Inside/Outside The Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998). Amalia Mesa-Bains,

"Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquachismo," in *Chicana Feminisms, a Critical Reader*, edited by Gabriela F. Arredondo (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 298–315. Laura E. Perez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁷ "Burn, Baby, Burn (Lescalade)," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, accessed December 6, 2010, <http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=focus;id=182095;type=101>.

⁸ Ralph Rugoff, "Heavenly Noises," in *Ed Ruscha: Fifty Years of Painting*, exhibition catalogue (New York, NY: Distributed Art Publishers, 2010), 17.

⁹ Ibid.; Dave Hickey, "Available Light," in *The Works of Ed Ruscha*, exhibition catalogue (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 24; See also Chon Noriega, "Early ASCO: Your Art Disgusts Me," *Afterall* 19 (2008): 109.

¹⁰ The invitation is reproduced in Catherine Grenier (ed.), *Los Angeles, 1955–1985: Birth of an Art Capital*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Centre Pompidou and Panama Musées, 2006), 180.

¹¹ Vincent Valdez, email to the author, December 7, 2010.

¹² Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 39.

¹³ Vincent Valdez, email to the author, December 7, 2010.

¹⁴ James Abbott McNeill Whistler quoted in Joyce Hill Stoner, "Materials for Immateriality," in *Like Breath On Glass: Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly*, edited by Marc Simpson (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute; New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008), 96.

¹⁵ Ry Cooder, album notes to "It's Just Work for Me," *Chávez Ravine*, 2005.

¹⁶ Rubin, "A Los Angeles Story," 11.

¹⁷ Although based on an actual photograph by Don Normack, Valdez recreated and photographed the event with friends as actors. Ibid., 15.

¹⁸ Rubin identifies three of the faces as Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, and developer Fritz Burns. It is likely that William Parker, Chief of the LAPD at the time, is also one of the faces. Ibid.

¹⁹ Helen Molesworth, "The Art of Hanging Pictures," in *Kerry James Marshall: One True Thing*, exhibition catalogue (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 12.

²⁰ The last of the buildings was destroyed in 2007.

²¹ Tami Luhby, "Cash-poor California Turns to IOUs," CNNMoney.com, July 2, 2009. Accessed December 12, 2010, http://money.cnn.com/2009/07/02/news/economy/California_IOUs/index.htm

²² David Pierson, "State caught in avalanche of job losses; After steep January cuts, more than 10% of Californians are out of work. And it's even worse in L.A. County," *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 2009.

²³ For an extensive discussion of film noir and feminist criticism see Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1998).

²⁴ Vincent Valdez, in conversation with the author, Los Angeles, November 11, 2010.

²⁵ LAPD Badge Description, Los Angeles Police Department. Accessed December 12, 2010, http://www.lapdonline.org/search_results/content_basic_view/1125.

A BURNING DESIRE

²⁶ Sid Hudgens (played by Danny Devito), the publisher of Hush-Hush magazine repeats this phrase in the film. *L.A. Confidential*, DVD, directed by Curtis Hanson (1997; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1998).