



A Painter's Painter:

Anna Valdez & the Joy of Emulation

CHAD ALLIGOOD

LET'S BEGIN with a picture that begs closer looking. In a casual studio scene, the wiggly screen of a MacBook Pro, paused on a close-up of Charles Bronson in *Once Upon A Time in the West*, perches atop a table festooned with brightly colored fabrics. Nearby, a pig's jawbone faces away from the screen, its googly-eyed molars socketed at uneven intervals across the crest of the jaw. Behind the bone, an oblong ceramic vessel thrusts upward, competing with the towering leaves of the Sansevieria plant across the table. A fistful of blooming lavender, jammed into a milk crock, anchors another corner of the tabletop alongside a postcard, its edge softly curved, perhaps freshly pulled from a pants pocket. In the foregrounded plane below the table, a host of characters bear witness to the lively color and texture of this scene: two wooden tables, a slapdash stack of art books, and five plants of various species gather together to watch in silence. Beneath it all, an intricately patterned rug tilts the composition forward, as though this whole robust array of objects might fall out of the picture altogether.

The painter, Anna Valdez, titled this lush and dynamic painting *References* [FIG. 1]. What can we make of that? On the one hand, one supplies references when applying for a job—references signifying a collection of contacts who will formally vouch for the character and working ability of the applicant. In that sense, the picture succeeds: it shows off Valdez's uncanny eye for juxtaposed pattern; her distinctive, coral-inflected color sensibility; her attention to the unexamined moments of beauty and drama in our quotidian rituals. Like elsewhere in her work, there's humor here, too.

FIG. 1 — Anna Valdez

References

oil on canvas

70 x 80 in.

2014

In this very human environment of the artist's studio, there's not a single place for a human body to alight: the plants stubbornly occupy the best seats in the house. But my favorite parts of this picture, as in so many other Valdez paintings, occur in between the depicted objects. The stack of books improbably juts into the space of the log stool. The line of the table disappears behind the laptop—only to re-emerge at an impossible angle from the other side. The tallest leaf of the Sansevieria plant kisses the upper border of the painting at just the spot where the quilt intersects that edge, flattening the area completely. This sophisticated handling of space appears intuitive, but in fact, it's intensely studied, demonstrating Valdez's deep engagement with a long history of painters before her. Evidence of that study emerges from every cranny of a canvas like this. You could imagine, on being asked to provide her references, the painter simply sending along her *References*.



DETAIL — Anna Valdez, *References* (2014)

Of course, the title *References* also calls to mind a Works Cited page—a bibliography listing the other texts to which the current text refers. Suddenly, that stack of art books deserves a closer look, especially since Valdez revisits this subject in other pictures: *Landscape in Studio*, *Studio Moments with Matisse*, *Study-ing*, *Stack*, *Quilt Pattern on Teacup*, and *Broken Cow Skull on Studio Books* among others all feature Valdez's depictions of other painters' monographic volumes. Throughout these stacks of books, Valdez's "works cited" include artists' names familiar to the casual art observer: Henri Matisse, Paul Gauguin, René Magritte, David Hockney—all superstars of the last century or so of Western painting. But just as often, Valdez

invokes artists whose places in the art historical canon remain somewhat more fluid: Warren Brandt, Joan Brown, Elizabeth Blackadder, Silvia Plimack Mangold. These figures often fall into that dubious category of the “painter’s painter”.

WHO, EXACTLY, counts as a “painter’s painter” is tough to nail down. Broadly interpreted, these artists’ compositions often mull the problems of rendering three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane, sometimes reveling in the materiality of paint itself, often working in intense (even lifelong) series. Because of their dogged focus on approaching the perennial problems of painting, these artists are often deeply admired by other painters; thus, the “painter’s painter”. But art historians have tended to overlook such painters, focusing instead on (primarily white, male) artists whose work plainly reflects contemporaneous events or political history, or whose practices fall in lockstep with the myths of the progression of Modernist painting. In so doing, art historians have committed a disservice to us all: they’ve abandoned the intuitive, the personal, the felt, and the loved—the preferred realms of the painter’s painter.

Perhaps it’s time to repatriate the painter’s painter from the hoary denigration of our past art histories. In the context of Valdez’s paintings, then, let’s consider one important star in her constellation of influences, a reference she cites again and again: Joan Brown. A key member of the second generation of Bay Area figurative painters, Brown was best known for her colorful, intensely personal paintings of the 1970s and ’80s. Her large, sublime canvases often depicted autobiographical events, blending the real and the imagined. At the California School of Fine Arts, she studied with the painter Elmer Bischoff (another book in Valdez’s stacks), who at the time dubbed Brown “either a genius or very simple.” From him, she gleaned the hallmarks of her own style: expressivity, bright color, and sometimes cartoonish drawing. In landmark pictures like *Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat* (1970) [FIG. 2], for example, Brown elevated everyday imagery to the realm of individual mythology, finding universal motifs in the deeply personal settings, objects, and animals that colored her life.

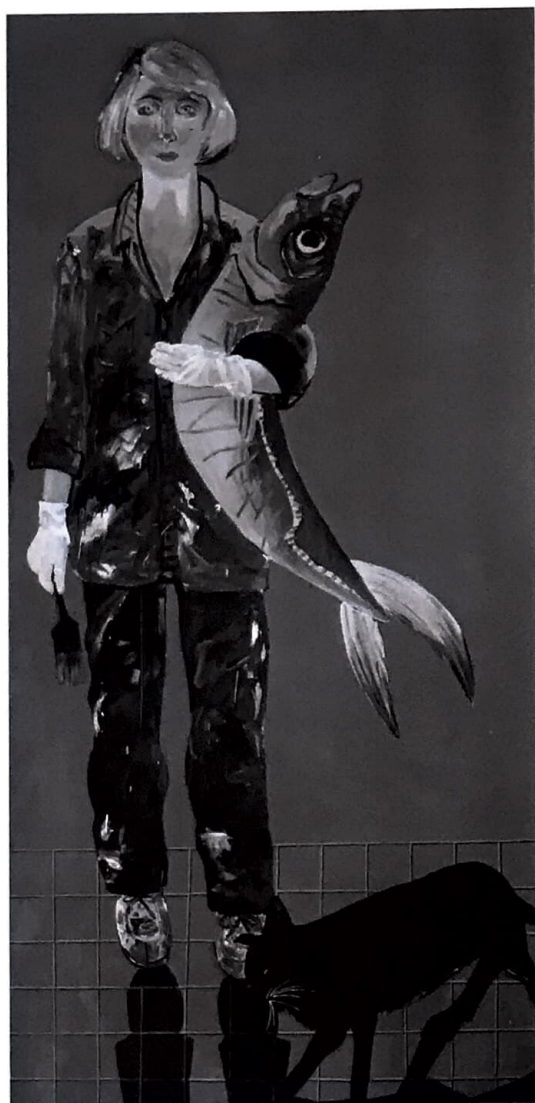


FIG. 2

Using the lens of Brown's influence to view Valdez's work, certain affinities readily emerge between the two painters.

Like Brown, Valdez deploys an idiosyncratic and highly personal cast of "characters" that recur in her paintings. In Brown's images, these characters included animals alongside humans, which for her represented an *"exchange of the animal nature and the human nature, or the connection and psychic response that the animal picks up from the person."*¹ The recurrence of cats, fish, dogs, and other animals in Brown's images enabled her to access and communicate a psychological dimension in her portraits that she could not otherwise convey. Because Valdez primarily focuses on still lifes, her recurring characters aren't animals or people, but objects: the plants, books, textiles, coffee cans, shells and bones that populate her studio life take center stage in

her paintings. Like Brown, too, Valdez often uses the repetition of these characters as a way of depicting herself: *"I think people are products of their environments,"* Valdez has noted. *"What you tend to surround yourself with can become who you are [...] I definitely believe that my still lifes function as self-portraits."*²

FIG. 2 — Joan Brown

*Self-Portrait with
Fish & Cat*

oil enamel on masonite

96 x 48 in.

1970

Courtesy of Anglim Gilbert Gallery,
San Francisco, & George Adams
Gallery, New York

© Estate of Joan Brown

¹ Qtd. in Tsujimoto, K., & Baas, J. (1998). *The Art of Joan Brown*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

² "Studio Visit: Anna Valdez." Need Supply Co., 7 Sept. 2014, blog.needsupply.com/2014/09/07/studio-visit-anna-valdez

Valdez's sensitivity to the narrative and psychological potential of objects likely stems from her early studies in anthropology. Importantly, her repeated inclusion of certain objects sometimes indicates a particular narrative intent. For example, for Valdez, the coffee cans that appear repeatedly in her pictures represent a specific "*reference to ritual*," underlining the importance of the habitual act in daily life.³ Other co-stars of her paintings likewise connect to deeply personal and even autobiographical stories. The expressive succulents, ferns, and other plants that populate her pictures surely indicate Valdez's own love of plants; they thrive in her lofty, light-filled Oakland studio. But they also index her own family history, as she has explained: "*my father was an arborist and managed the City of Sacramento's nursery for the majority of my childhood.*"⁴ Similarly, Valdez's appreciation for textile and pattern, readily apparent in pictures like *References*, stems ultimately from her mother, a quilter and crafter who surrounded the family with quilts and patterned fabrics.⁵

Still, though the objects Valdez includes in her still life compositions may carry specific narrative intent or biographical meaning, she remains mindful to leave space for the viewer to bring their own experience to bear on the image; she has described her range of subjects as "*a language of symbols and motifs where people can form their own connections.*"⁶ This balance between the personal and the universal through the depiction of common studio objects calls to mind another painter's painter in Valdez's personal canon: Philip Guston. Though Guston began his career in 1950s New York City painting in the classic Abstract Expressionist style, he eventually famously returned to figuration in the 1960s. With this turn, his career no longer neatly fit into the trajectory of 20th century painting, and his work fell out of critical favor. He retreated from the New York art world to his studio in Woodstock, NY, where he produced the outsized figurative compositions with which we associate him today.

3 Farr, Kristin. "Anna Valdez: Everyday Exceptionality." Juxtapoz, www.juxtapoz.com/news/magazine/features/from-the-magazine-anna-valdez-everyday-exceptionality

4 "Interview: Anna Valdez." Create! Magazine, 28 May 2017, createmagazine.com/read/anna-valdez

5 "Anna Valdez." Maake Magazine, www.maakemagazine.com/anna-valdez

6 "Studio Visit: Anna Valdez." Need Supply Co., 7 Sept. 2014, blog.needsupply.com/2014/09/07/studio-visit-anna-valdez

Those watershed pictures, such as the gargantuan *Painting, Smoking, Eating* (1973) [FIG. 3], described a hothouse studio life through Guston's personal lexicon of symbols and the expressive application of paint.

The objects that recur throughout these works—ticking clocks, smoldering cigars, piles of shoes—oscillate between the profoundly personal and the utterly universal. This quality makes Guston's approach ripe for Valdez's emulation: she finds Guston's approach ripe for Valdez's emulation: she finds “a shared experience” and a “kinship” with painters like Guston whom she loves and with whom she identifies.⁷ The slow, psychological sense of time spent alone in the studio that pervades Guston's representational paintings also finds its way into Valdez's work. But where Guston's tone can shade into doleful pessimism, Valdez's slow time instead passes with knowing patience. An active gardener, cook, and fermenter, she imbues her paintings with a keen understanding that good things can take time to root and care to flourish. Likening the process of painting to cultivating plants, Valdez succinctly explains her approach to these various parallel activities: “*Through patience and ritual (practice) ideas become a reality.*”⁸



FIG. 3 — Philip Guston

*Painting,
Smoking, Eating*

oil on canvas

77.4 x 103.5 in.

1973

Collection Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam, Netherlands

© The Estate of Philip Guston,
courtesy Hauser & Wirth

7 Anna Valdez, in discussion with the author, April 23, 2019.

8 “Interview: Anna Valdez.” Create! Magazine, 28 May 2017, createmagazine.com/read/anna-valdez

Ritually, then, we return to the image with which we began. Gathered together in *References*, we find still life subjects that attract readings both particular and expansive: books and blankets, plants and pots. That missing human body that couldn't find a place to sit because of all the plants? That's Anna Valdez, taking a step back in her studio to capture this setup in an underdrawing directly on the canvas. Simmering just beneath the surface as she works, her references emerge fluently: Hockney's keyed-up color, Vuillard's flatness, Brown's simple genius. For Valdez, the obvious joy she finds in emulating this pantheon of painter's painters lies in patiently filtering their influence through her own lived experience. Like her father the arborist, she knows intuitively that deep roots beget strong buds; like her mother the quilter, she forges something new and enduring from the threads of the past.



Chad Alligood is an independent curator and art historian of modern and contemporary American art. Previously, he served as Virginia Steele Scott Chief Curator of American Art at The Huntington, overseeing the collection and exhibition of American art. Prior to that, as curator at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, he significantly expanded the diversity of the collection and led the reinstallation of the postwar permanent collection galleries. He also spearheaded multiple exhibition projects, including *State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now*, which garnered Excellence in Exhibition honors from the American Alliance of Museums in 2015.

His research for *State of the Art* took him to nearly 1,000 artists' studios across the country.

Born and raised in Perry, Georgia, Alligood earned his BA in the History of Art and Architecture from Harvard University, his MA in Art History from the University of Georgia, and has completed his PhD coursework in art history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). Alligood taught art history at Brooklyn College, received the Kress Foundation Fellowship through the Smith College Institute for Art Museum Studies, and held the Graham Collections Fellowship at Cranbrook Art Museum.