



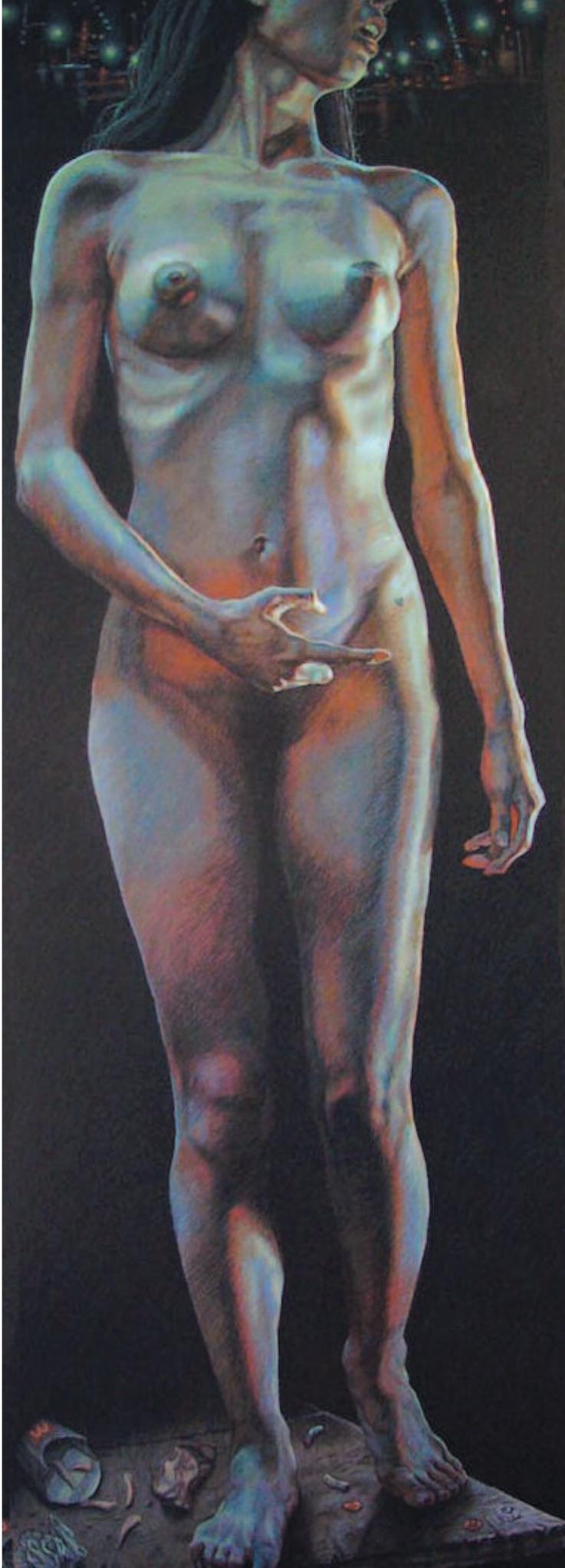
Stories of the Street The Work Of Alex Rubio And Vincent Valdez

Kathy Vargas*

◀ *I Swear I've Seen My Own Reflection*,
Vincent Valdez, 20 x 16 in., 2001
(charcoal on paper).



▶ *Rubio*, Vincent Valdez, 18 x 24 in., 2003 (pastel on paper).



Friendships between artists fill the spaces from a first concept to the final work. The ideas exchanged and the influences passed back and forth feed individual creative efforts. In artistic friendships the excitement of a shared perception multiplies possibilities. The unique view of each is nurtured through sympathetic yet honest responses. Even when style, content and context change, friendships persist. Alex Rubio and Vincent Valdez have been friends for a long time. Though both are still young, their friendship began when they were children, Rubio a street-wise teen and Valdez a child already sensing his path.

“The stories of the street are mine; the Spanish voices laugh.” This line, which begins a song by Leonard Cohen, best describes the work of Alex Rubio. Rubio’s life in art began on the West Side of San Antonio, Texas, in neighborhoods predominantly Mexican American. The city’s housing projects formed the backdrop for his first exercises as a young artist. “I could always draw,” he says, “science fiction and fantasy art.”¹ He was looking at the work of Boris Vallejo and Patrick Woodruff. Theirs was a style popular in the area around Rubio’s home, the Mirasol Housing Project.

At 13 years of age Rubio began working with a tattoo maker. He recalls that the tattoos he carved into skin reflected the need for escapist imagery; something without a basis in reality was wanted. It was Alex who drew the unique designs that would be used as the patterns (*copias*) with which skin would be imprinted. He quickly learned to handle the homemade tattoo machinery and set up in business for himself.

His neighbors lined up to be tattooed, paying in cash and goods: microwave ovens, furniture and jewelry. “At one time I had five bicycles,” he recalls. His mother was proud of his talent. Her son was an artist. With this skill she need not worry that he would ever starve. Fame and fortune were not pri-

* Photographer and writer living in San Antonio. Her work was reviewed in *Voices of Mexico* 64.

Photos courtesy of Alex Rubio and Vincent Valdez.

◀ *Expulsion from the Great City*, Vincent Valdez, 168 x 42 in., 2002 (pastel on paper).

orities for her. She made her living working in a tamale factory; survival was enough.

Rubio expanded his canvas. The walls of the Mirasol Housing Project were a beautiful white he recalls, and very clean; they were the perfect blank slate for graffiti images of dragons and knights in armor. A box spring mattress was used as a ladder to reach the topmost part of the walls; the fantasy became larger and more public. Rubio was admired and protected by his community, so much so that he almost missed the most important opportunity of his life.

The manager of the housing project was preoccupied with the continuous tagging prevalent in the neighborhood and with the inhalant abuse that often accompanied the use of spray paint. He reasoned that if there was professional artwork on the walls the tagging might cease; he invited the artists of Community Cultural Arts, a non-profit group already famous for their murals in the Cassiano housing project, to tackle the Mirasol walls. Scouting for neighborhood youth who might join their painting teams, Community Cultural Arts' lead artist Juan Hernandez spotted Rubio's work and asked where the young artist might be found.

Alex's friends were suspicious, thinking that the men looking for him must be police officers seeking to shut down his homemade tattoo operation. Mexican Americans/Chicanos working as professional artists was not a familiar concept. They hid Alex's identity until the day they saw the Community Cultural Arts group arrive in paint splattered clothes with photos of themselves working on community murals. Finally introduced to Alex, the artists of CCA promised to teach him to paint with brushes, and he agreed to join them. By the age of 16 Rubio was on staff as a CCA designer.

Rubio describes the process for creating each wall as a community collaboration. The team of artists would meet with the Residents' Association of the housing project to select a theme or a subject before the individual artist created the design. The city's expanding needs for mural art resulted



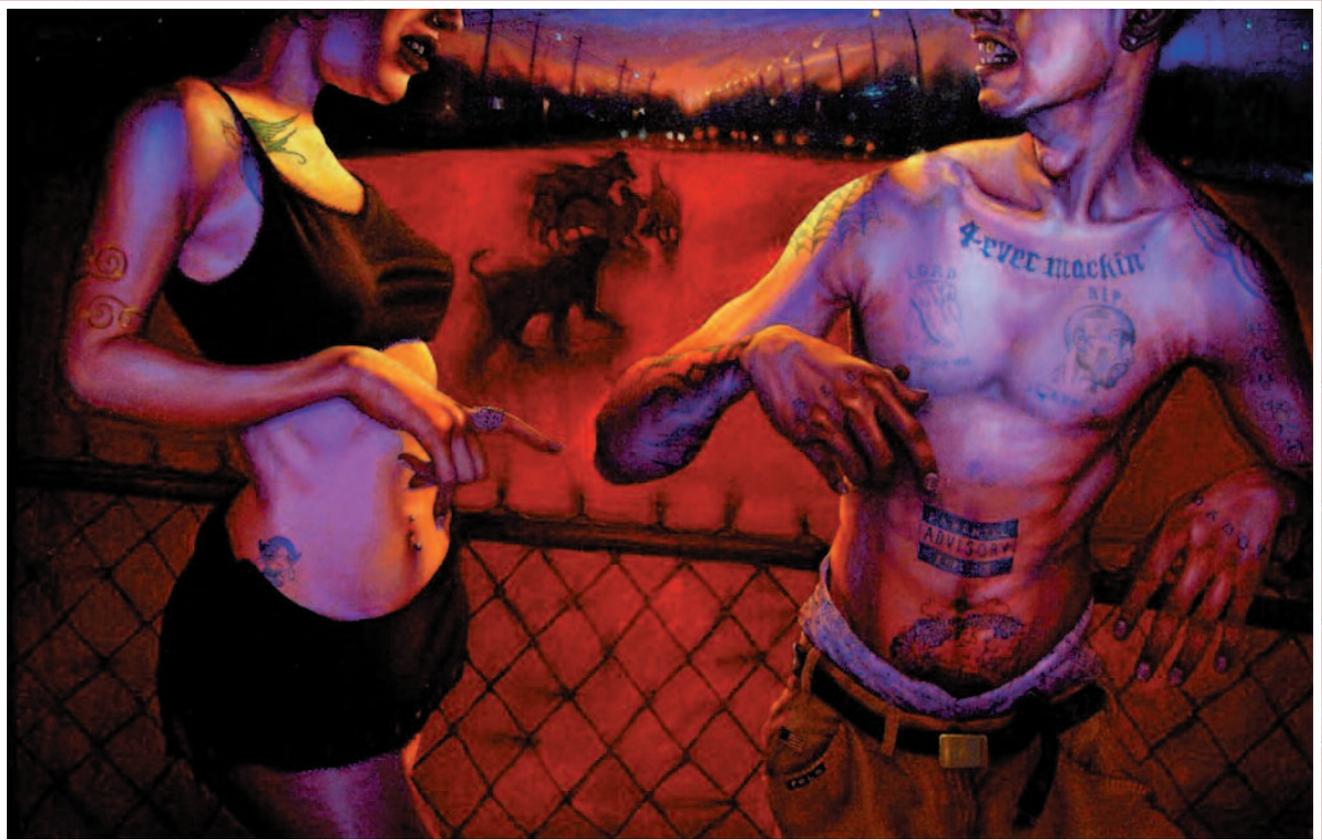
Expulsion from the Great City, Vincent Valdez, ▶
168 x 42 in., 2002 (pastel on paper).

in Rubio taking his first steps outside his own *barrio*. The South Side and East Side of the city wanted art as well, and Rubio took his turn recruiting young artists, continuing the process that had first begun his career. “Before that time I’d never left my neighborhood,” Rubio recalls. “I didn’t need to leave; I had everything I needed in those few blocks.”

During one of those expeditions outside familiar terrain, 17-year-old artist Alex Rubio met 9-year-

a wheat field with jets flying overhead and the words “make food not war.”

Valdez attributes his early shyness to a solitary childhood spent sketching. He preferred that to more boisterous times outdoors with other boys. The work of his great-grandfather, Jose Maria Valdez, a Spanish artist/muralist, formed his early aesthetic. Valdez’s father, a designer of jet engines, brought home art materials for his son, and Vincent



▲ *R Those Bugle Boy Jeans You're Wearing? Hell No Ho U Know They Polo!* Vincent Valdez, 48 x 60 in., 2001 (oil on canvas).

old, aspiring artist Vincent Valdez. Valdez had heard that young artists were needed to paint a mural at the former site of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center and convinced his parents to allow him to participate. At that time Valdez had completed many drawings but had never painted. Rubio remembers Vincent as a shy, serious child who jumped out of his mother’s minivan clutching his sketchbook. His talent was immediately apparent. He was allowed to create his own wall, which depicted a farmer in

sketched Superman as well as combat scenes influenced by his father’s experiences in Vietnam. When Alex Rubio needed an assistant he convinced Vincent’s mother to allow her son to join the mural crew.

The two young artists worked long hours to complete community murals. Together they created a Vietnam wall mural and an eight-foot painting of the Virgen de Guadalupe for San Fernando Cathedral. Valdez remembers it as his first taste of independence. He was learning the life of an artist.

Rubio would lecture Valdez about artistic responsibility, discipline and the need for constant practice, lessons that have stayed with Valdez throughout his career. Through Rubio, he met other artists and was included in his first gallery show at the Artists Alliance Gallery when he was 11 years old.

Life moved rapidly for both young artists. In 1988 Rubio graduated from high school and tried college, but even with a full tuition scholarship

county's jail arts program. In 1990, at the age of 20, he began working with Grace Olivarri, director of the Bexar County Creative Art Project. He taught inmates the skills necessary to create wall murals inside the jail. He stayed with the program until 1996, working side by side with men who had come from his own social and economic background. "I knew a lot of those guys from home, from Mirasol or the Cassianos," Rubio says. Their



▲ *Por tu culpa*, Alex Rubio, 30 x 40 in., 1998 (mixed media drawing on paper).

from CCA it was financially impossible. He recalls the more than hour-long bus ride to the university, the long art classes that made it next to impossible to hold a job, the books and art supplies he needed but found it impossible to purchase, and the feeling of letting his mother down because he could no longer help her financially.

While Rubio's position at CCA was gradually being phased out due to dwindling arts funding, he freelanced as a muralist and volunteered at the

images related to his work both culturally and thematically; it was an easy relationship. During that time Rubio rented a studio at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center's Visual Arts Annex, which was only three blocks from the jail; "it was an easy walk to work," Rubio recalls.

Rubio and Valdez lost contact at some point during Rubio's tenure as art instructor to the inmates. Valdez dreamed of having a life in the fine arts; his father preferred a career in commercial



▲ *El torcido*, Alex Rubio, 48 x 36 in., 1996 (oil on canvas).

Thematically their work reflects their individual backgrounds and ages as well as their experiences with the city.

art for his son. Like most parents, he hoped for something that might insure his child a livelihood. Valdez tried to accommodate his father and in the process lost track of Rubio for two years. The two artists met again when high school student Valdez won a contest, which promised to place his design on the wall of his high school. Rubio was the artist designated to work with the winner to help actualize the work. The two went on to complete other projects together and in 1994 they exhibited jointly, with artist Juan Farias, at the Guadalupe Annex Resident's Gallery.

After high school Valdez opted for an art school in Florida that offered him a full scholarship, but he didn't find the curriculum challenging enough for his needs. He transferred to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), again on a full scholarship, a move he calls the smartest he's ever made. He admits that he sounds like an ad for RISD, but he found the tough, competitive program to be exactly what he needed. "I got positive feedback and negative feedback, and both were important learning experiences." Valdez's first one-person exhibit at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center's Theater Gallery, which took place the summer before the artist's senior year, sold out on opening night.

Valdez returned to his hometown after receiving his BEA from RISD in 2000. Rubio, in the meantime, had moved into a position as coordinator of the mural program at San Anto Cultural Arts. The two artists immediately began working together on mural projects, including a large portable mural for San Antonio's Greyhound Bus Station. In 2000 Valdez began teaching classes at the Guadalupe, just a few blocks from Alex and San Anto Cultural Arts.

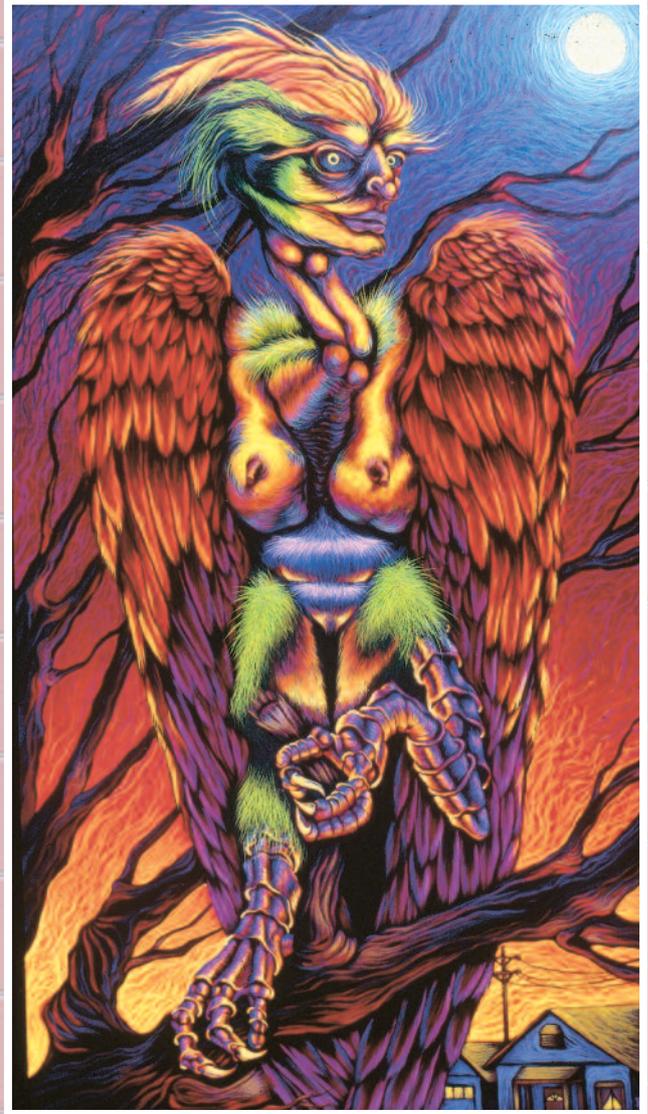
Both artists speak frequently about their love for their students. Valdez loves the diversity of ages and backgrounds he encounters. "The students come from all over town," he states, "and range in age from eight years to adults." Rubio confides that he stopped drinking while teaching at San Anto. "The kids were always there; they were from the neighborhood; I was living in the same neighborhood. I didn't want to set a bad example, so I quit drinking."

Rubio has since left San Anto and now supports himself as a full-time artist, but he still lives in the neighborhood. Valdez confides that he would eventually like to go to graduate school and possibly have a second residence in another city, but will always keep a home base in San Antonio. Both artists see the city as very unique and the people of the city as familia.

Thematically their work reflects their individual backgrounds and ages as well as their experiences with the city. Rubio's work retells his life at Mirasol and with the inmate art program, as well as the family legends that were a part of his youth. *El Torcido*, Rubio explains, "is a piece about one of the inmates." His *Street Preacher* is a rendition of a man he saw preaching on the corner of Commerce and Main streets. *Por Tu Culpa* tells the story of a man who, after an argument with his wife at the Esquire Bar, took up with a streetwalker and blamed his wife for his fall. *Jesus y Chavalon* shows a gang member's pride in his son.

Rubio's drawing, *Drive By*, tells a very personal tale. On Christmas Day, 1986, he was shot while attending a party at the Viramendi Housing Project. "I was standing outside with some friends. A car went by and a guy just opened fire. He wanted to shoot whoever he could. I felt a burning in my chest and I thought a firecracker had hit me. I turned to the guys around me and asked which one had thrown fireworks at me. When I patted my shirt to find the spot where I'd been hit the blood soaked through. I walked all the way home before asking for help; I didn't want to get my friends in trouble." Rubio spent weeks in the hospital, recovering from the gunshot to his chest, which had gone in through the front and come out through his left side, traveling a mere inch from his heart.

La Lechuza is a visual reminder of his mother's constant warnings about supernatural spirits seeking to harm humanity. "My mother would cancel a trip to the grocery store if she thought she heard a *lechuza* in the neighborhood. And once, after a particularly long night, I saw a huge bird in the trees of a park that looked like the *lechuzas* she'd warned me about."



▲ *La lechuza*, Alex Rubio, 96 x 48 in., 2000 (oil on wood panel).

Valdez had to deal with the fact that he was not the Mexican American of his parent's generation. His was the MTV generation.

Vincent Valdez, younger and from a less stressful economic background, takes on the themes of his generation. Away from home in Rhode Island he made work that yearned for his Latino home and connected him with the culture he had left at home. But through this work he also searched for who he might be. His palette became darker, and he began to experiment with technique. He relates that it was an essential step in coming artistically to where he is now.

His later work became more about the people in his personal life. *Yo Soy Blaxican* is a portrait of his brother, whose chosen cultural affiliation includes the influences of African-American music and culture. Valdez relates that when he came home from school at RISD with paintings of skeletons and other cultural icons, his younger brother questioned his aesthetic. The question arose between them, “when you get that box at the bottom of the questionnaires asking what you are,

what do you check off, Hispanic?” The artist was questioning his own identity and partly envying his younger brother’s easy assertion that he chose to be partly Black because of his love for Tupac and rap music.

Valdez had to deal with the fact that he was not the Mexican American of his parent’s generation, and he was too young to have been part of the Chicano Movement. His was the MTV generation rather than the generation of political movements and folklore. His work began to reflect more personal concerns. As early as middle school there was a stigma to not owning Air Jordans and Guess Jeans. His painting *R Those Bugle Boy Jeans You’re Wearing? Hell No Ho U Know They Polo!* deals with the brand name fixation of his generation.

Even in his renditions of cultural myths such as the devil at the dance, portraits and nudes of former girlfriends make their way in to personalize the work. His series of boxers, he tells us, is about

Today both Rubio and Valdez have received accolades from the mainstream community, and both return to their Latino roots for inspiration and renewal.



▲ *Drive by*, Alex Rubio, 30 x 24 in., 1994 (graphite on paper).



▲ *Kill the Pachuco Bastards!* Vincent Valdez, 48 x 72 in., 2000 (oil on canvas).

Valdez and Rubio expand our boundaries with their reality and their mythology; they ask us many more questions about our identities than they answer.

“death, revelation, coming to terms with destinies, coming to terms for the sake of cleansing and being set free through being beaten.” The series is reminiscent of the Simon and Garfunkel song, *The Boxer*: “In the clearing stands a boxer and a fighter by his trade, and he carries a reminder of every glove that laid him down or cut him ‘til he cries out in his anger and his shame, ‘I am leaving; I am leaving,’ but the fighter still remains.” The words apply but the young artist had not heard the song until the series was well under way. He had come to the theme independently, through the influences of his own generation.

Today both Rubio and Valdez have traveled extensively. Both exhibited in “Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge.” Both hold places in prominent collections, including that of entertainer Cheech Marin. Rubio will exhibit in Santa Monica next January and was the recipient of an ArtPace residency to London. Valdez will show his boxers at the McNay Museum of Art next year, and

was chosen Artist of the Year by the respected and established San Antonio Art League Museum. Both have received accolades from the mainstream community, and both return to their Latino roots for inspiration and renewal.

The edge of the artwork is always with us. It delineates the territory between our own reality and that of the artist then blurs itself just enough to give us entry. Our presence within the work is outlined by our own experience; we are enlarged by the artist’s knowledge. Valdez and Rubio expand our boundaries with their reality and their mythology. More importantly they ask us many more questions, about our identities—where we come from, what we leave behind, where we are going—than they answer. Their work leaves just enough space for us to continue searching. **MM**

NOTES

¹ All quotes are from interviews with the author in August 2003.