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## Review: John Valadez's art gets deserved attention at MCASD

*'Santa Ana Condition: John Valadez, 1976-2011' at Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego surveys the work of an important but under-recognized L.A. artist.*

**August 15, 2012** | By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic



SAN DIEGO — The term "realism" doesn't exactly fit John Valadez's exceptional work as an artist, even though his paintings and large pastel drawings are characterized by acute observation of men and women going about their business, often in public settings.

His compositional framework centers on heightened or self-conscious display — on theatrical performance and human drama, whether striking or routine. The technique simultaneously calls attention to his intervention as an artist.



The scene depicted in a Valadez painting or pastel might or might not be staged. But always a viewer is aware of Valadez, a skillful performer with brush or colored chalk who is arranging all the outcomes. If his subjects playing at the beach, preening at a car show, doing chores in the yard or passing on the street are going to expose themselves or be put on show, his work seems to say, then so must he. His finely honed and demonstrable proficiency as an artist is a fair trade.

A 35-year survey at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego sheds new and welcome light on the evolution of the Los Angeles artist. The focus is squarely on studio production.

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That matters because Valadez is perhaps best known instead as a muralist. His monumental, 60-foot-long "Broadway Mural" (1981), finished when he was 30 for the interior of downtown L.A.'s now-shuttered Victor Clothing Co., portrays the comings and goings of ordinary shoppers, merchants, strollers and vagrants. (In 2001, after the store closed, the 10-panel mural was acquired by art collector Peter Norton.) The picture is an epic chronicle of social dynamics on a lively street that is a spine of commercial activity.

The museum survey shifts attention to portable paintings and, especially, large-scale pastel drawings — some of them mural studies. Valadez's concentration on social dynamism is never far from view.

A two-panel pastel is the largest work at 20 feet wide. From it the show gets its woozy title — "Santa Ana Condition," with its overtones of Raymond Chandler telling incantatory stories in which "Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. Anything can happen."

Forget murder and mayhem, though. Valadez is more interested in the estrangement of the everyday — in keeping the familiar at a certain distance, from which it can be more clearly seen in all its ravishing

beauty, crushing poignancy or bleak sorrow. Take "Clavo," an extraordinary photographic portrait taken in the late 1970s.

"Clavo" — Spanish for nail — is a tall, willowy young man dressed in high-waisted, pleated and pegged gray trousers and a white tank-top undershirt, his swept-back black coif held in place by a hairnet gathered at his forehead. He stares straight into the camera, a hyper-stylish pachuco flashback, brow slightly furrowed and posed before a white wall.

The most riveting feature of his self-assured presentation comes in his hands, each held away from the body on bent arms and with tense fingers curled. He's like a predatory praying mantis ready to spring, and he fairly radiates erotic electricity.

Apparently being shown publicly for the first time here, "Clavo" is one of 20 black-and-white and color photographs in the exhibition. All of them are portraits, most casually posed but a few caught on the fly, dating from the era of the Chicano street art movement. Valadez then began to use photographs as source materials for detailed, life-size pencil studies — figures of a blind woman selling journals or a seemingly destitute man leaning into a telephone booth for a moment's rest. Pencil was eventually traded in for pastels.

The introduction of color, subtle and exquisitely handled, the marks soft and sensuous on the sheet, emphasizes the quality of light essential to the photographs. His portrait subjects invariably squint in the strong sunlight of an L.A. afternoon, mirroring the intense scrutiny brought to the picture by the artist and the viewer. Everyone is just trying to see.

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Valadez's single figures are iconic, isolated within white fields of blank paper, as if secular saints now beatified. You'll find yourself thinking of Caravaggio choosing people off the street to paint as Bacchus or the Magdalene.

"Liz," the sleeves of her gray sweat shirt pushed up to her elbows, leans into the sheltering embrace of "Robert," dressed in jeans and a workman's T-shirt whose worn cloth is a veritable rainbow of quiet pastel hues. "Preacher" cups a hand to the side of his face, as if to declare surprise (and satisfaction) at having been noticed.

"Fatima," a lovely and haunting portrait, clutches a small pink ice cream cone in her left hand, which also steadies the carried infant presumably hidden beneath a quilted floral baby blanket. The coverlet takes up half the picture. Everything, from the dull weight of her shoulder bag to her unsmiling and careworn face, revolves around that little pink swirl smack in the composition's center.

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