

Teacher Guide

Vincent Valdez: Just A Dream...

On view | November 15, 2024–March 23, 2025



Vincent Valdez, *Godspeed*, 2019, Oil on canvas, Collection of Brent Barry, Hermosa Beach, California

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Exhibition Overview

“I am an observer. I bear witness. I am committed to putting it down on record. To testify. I choose to confront the world as opposed to turning away from it.”

—Vincent Valdez

Exhibiting 25 years of artwork, the exhibition *Vincent Valdez: Just a Dream...*

- centers overlooked or erased American **histories**
- exposes American **amnesia** (or, a failure to learn from or acknowledge injustice)
- critiques American **heroisms**
- offers hope and invites viewers into their own political **empowerment**

Vincent Valdez often works across a series of pieces and through influences such as music, cinema, TV, boxing, and Chicano-rooted aesthetic and political traditions like mural-making.

Quick Facts

- It is the first time the Museum has devoted both main-level and lower-level galleries to the presentation of a single artist.
- Valdez’s documentary and archival ways of working can be seen in flat-file cabinets located in the lower-level gallery’s **Drawing Room**.
- A **bilingual audio guide**, with contributions from 15 art historians, activists, community members, the exhibition’s curators, and Vincent Valdez, bears further witness into the historical contexts to which Valdez’s works respond.



Vincent Valdez, *People of the Sun (Grandma & Grandpa Santana)*, 2019. Oil on canvas
Collection of Alexa Pooter Brundage, San Antonio, Texas

About Vincent Valdez

Valdez began painting murals at the age of 10. He has since become celebrated for his large-scale figurative drawings, though his mediums also span video, prints, bronze, and found objects, including a vintage lowrider ice cream truck. All contribute to a practice of **witness** across history, material, and scale to present testimonies of **American injustice**, and to trace **absences in American memory**.

Born in San Antonio in 1977, Vincent Valdez now lives between Houston and Los Angeles. In 2000, he earned his B.F.A. at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) with a full scholarship.

Vincent Valdez: Just a Dream... is co-organized by Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) and Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA). It is co-curated by Patricia Restrepo, Curator at CAMH, and Denise Markonish, Chief Curator at MASS MoCA.

Key Questions

- Who needs to be remembered, and why? How should we **remember** them?
- In American history, who and what do we forget? Why do we **forget**?
- How did you become American? Are you seen as one? What does this story contribute to **American history**?
- What is the history of your neighborhood? Of your **family**?
- What are the qualities that define **masculinity** for you?

Themes and Concepts

“They choke people. We choke their budgets....Police unions and departments, mega churches, media networks, banks, developers, politicians, institutions and corporations. Connect the dots. Nothing but dominoes.”
—Vincent Valdez

Power and Witness in American History, Injustice, and Optimism | *Since 1977* (2019), *Eaten (In America)* (2018–19), *Kill the Pachuco Bastard!* (2000), *El Chavez Ravine* (2005–7), *The Hole / In Memory (For Joe Campos Torres)* (2024), *The New Americans* (2019-ongoing)

Masculinity and the Fight | *Just a Dream... (In America)* (2020-21), *Made Men* (2002), *Stations* (2001-04)

Family and Everyday People | *Recuerdo* (1999), *People of the Sun (Grandma and Grandpa Santana)* (2018), *The New Americans* (2019-ongoing)

Curricular Connections

“Even when the odds are stacked and the game is rigged—justice, truth and humanity must prevail. Hold your heads high.”
—Vincent Valdez

History/Social Studies

Who chooses what stories we tell and remember? How does history get erased or forgotten? Look closely at several of Valdez’s artworks including: *El Chavez Ravine* (2005–7), *The Hole / In Memory (For Joe Campos Torres)* (2024), and *Kill the Pachuco Bastard!* (2000) did you know about the history presented in these artworks? How can you learn about history through art? Are there current or historical events that you can retell through a poem, story, or artwork? How can you show a different perspective or viewpoint

Visual Arts

(2D) How can you create a portrait of a person without featuring them directly? In *Dream Baby Dream* (2018), Valdez depicts Muhammad Ali's memorial service through those in attendance mourning him. In this diverse array of subjects, Valdez offers a portrait of Ali without directly depicting him, showing him as a fighter, advocate, and activist through his relationships, and also offering a representation of 21st-century America.

Create a portrait of someone you admire through thinking of their objects, their space, and the people in their life.

(3D) How do you define memorial? What does it mean to honor a memory? Can you create a list of memorials you know about or have visited? How does that compare to the memorial artworks *El Chavez Ravine* (2005–7), *The Hole / In Memory (For Joe Campos Torres)* (2024), and *Notes For a Future* (2024)? Can you find a photograph, an article of clothing, a letter, a poem, a recipe, a portrait, etc., which can become the beginning of a makeshift memorial or altar? What memories, emotions, or contexts do your chosen materials archive? What memories are stored in your artifact? Use these objects as the beginning of your memorial artwork.



Vincent Valdez, *Notes For a Future*, 2024. Pencil on bronze
Cast at King Foundry, Houston, Texas Courtesy the artist

Music

Can you create a new work of art inspired by a favorite song? Several artworks in this exhibition make musical references, including *The Strangest Fruit* (2013), which references a song by Billie Holiday, *So Long, Mary Ann* (2019), which references a song by Leonard Cohen, and *Just a Dream... (In America)* (2020–21) which references a song by Jimmy Clanton. Look closely at the work of Vincent Valdez and imagine what songs he might have been listening to while creating the different artworks. Listen to your favorite song—what kind of artwork does it inspire?

See Also

Civic Histories

- In the 1943 **Zoot Suit riots** in Los Angeles, California, U.S. servicemen and police officers brutalized Mexican-American (and sometimes, Black and Filipino) youth, culminating in clashes of striking and striking-back.
- From the 1950s, 1,800 homeowners in the predominantly Mexican-American Los Angeles neighborhood of **Chavez Ravine** were forcibly removed by eminent domain. The land was sold to build the Dodgers Stadium; remaining houses were sold for \$1 each to build movie sets.
- **José (Joe) Campos Torres** is a veteran of the Vietnam War who was murdered and brutalized by Houston Police Department officers at the age of 23 on the banks of Houston's Buffalo Bayou. He was murdered in 1977, the same year Valdez was born.

Archives are collections of primary source documents, often used as raw material for creating new knowledge. Suggested archives, particularly focusing on Latinx culture in the United States, include icaa.mfah.org at the MFAH and artepublicopress.com at the University of Houston.