

A VER: REVISIONING ART HISTORY

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# RICARDO VALVERDE

RAMÓN GARCÍA

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# FOREWORD

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In the 1970s, Ricardo Valverde (1946–1998) started photographing Los Angeles. His various series explored the neighborhoods in which he lived—South Central and Boyle Heights—and those he encountered in his daily work for the Greater Los Angeles Community Action Agency in the mid-1970s and then for the Department of Water and Power until the early 1990s. Thus, if Valverde set out to document Los Angeles, he did so as a neighbor or participant in the communities that he photographed, not as an outsider, flâneur, ethnographer, or journalist, documenting a romantic, exotic, or stereotypical Other.

Two images, one shot in the 1970s, the other in the 1980s, suggest Valverde’s approach. The first photograph was taken on Broadway, one of the city’s oldest major thoroughfares, in a part of downtown that was once considered the city’s commercial and cultural center. Here, the street is still such a center, albeit for a Mexican and Mexican-descent population. Valverde photographs two older women (perhaps mother and daughter) walking alongside a storefront, one pointing toward the store and the other looking somberly at the camera. In between these two figures and behind the storefront window is a large poster of a younger actress’s smiling face, also looking at the camera. Reflected in the upper left corner of the window is an awning for the adjacent store with the word *Librería* (bookstore). To the right of the poster, the store’s doorway opens inward, and behind its glass is another poster, this one for a comedy about an unwed mother, *Soltera y madre en la vida* (Spain, 1969).

The second photograph shows Valverde’s niece standing in front of a photo booth that promises portraits taken “in complete privacy” even as it displays numerous photo strips of mostly female subjects. The portrait is playful and ironic, a personal exchange between uncle and niece, set against an enclosed space doubly marked as a “private” form of entertainment: first, as a proposed commercial transaction, and second, as the site for the production of self-portraits that bear no indexical traces of the city and its population. The advertised privacy takes on an added dimension in the contrast between the booth’s self-promotion

Ricardo Valverde, shoppers on Broadway, 1977.  
Gelatin silver print, 3½ × 5½ inches.

Ricardo Valverde, Valverde’s niece, 1980s. Gelatin  
silver print, 8 × 10 inches.

Courtesy of Esperanza Valverde and Christopher J. Valverde.

Ricardo Valverde, *La Ciudad—Un Barrio*, 1990.  
Gelatin silver print, 5 × 7 inches.

Ricardo Valverde, *La Reina—16 de Septiembre*,  
1976/1991. Hand-painted gelatin silver print, 11 × 14  
inches.

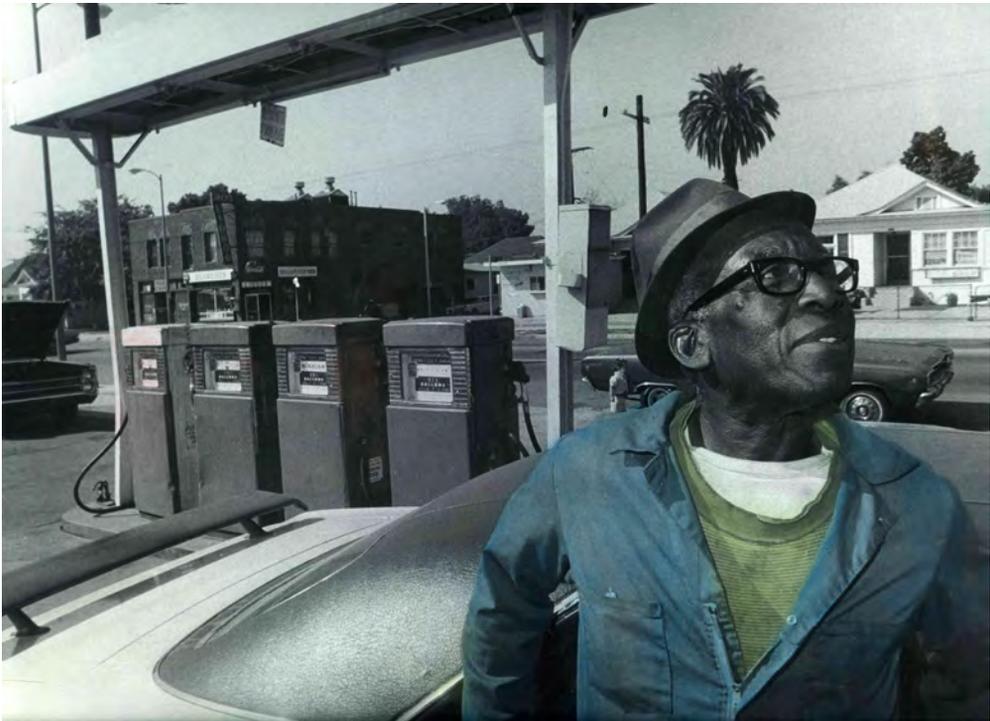
Ricardo Valverde, *Jack*, 1976/1991. Hand-painted  
gelatin silver print, 11 × 14 inches.  
Courtesy of Esperanza Valverde and Christopher J. Valverde.

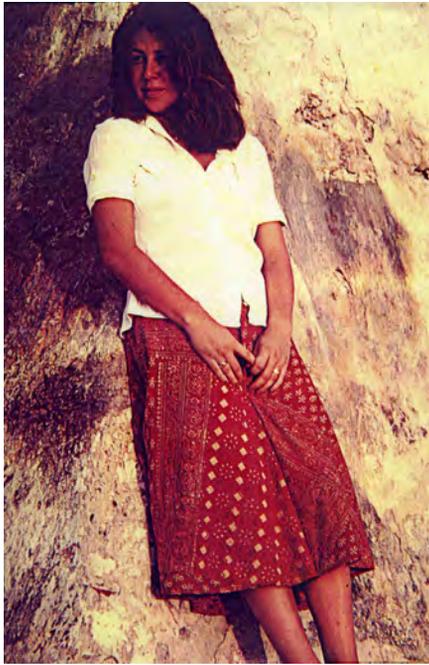


through the display of all-white subjects and the Chicana subject standing in front. For Valverde, documenting Los Angeles also meant capturing the presence of media (and mediation) as part of both urban landscape and cultural identities.

For the most part, Valverde's black and white photography foregrounds people within the built environment. In contrast, *La Ciudad—Un Barrio* (1990), shows a Mexican urban landscape in which people are dwarfed by concrete. The lower half of the image is framed by an opening in the concrete balustrade in the foreground and cut through along the diagonal by a wall located across the street. These concrete bands occlude and overpower both the figures and the buildings, while graffiti in the foreground contrasts with a barely legible billboard for Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari in the upper left. While somewhat anomalous in its dystopic framing, this image suggests the existential stakes for Valverde's larger project to document the human condition.

In the 1990s Valverde started painting on his prints, placing an even greater and more expressive emphasis on the subjects. In *La Reina—16 de Septiembre* (1976/1991), three Chicana teenagers dressed in formal gowns sit atop a Ford lowrider as part of a Mexican Independence Day parade in East LA. In *Jack* (1976/1991), Valverde pays tribute to his mechanic, the one person "worthy enough" to work on his 1959 Triumph TR3, which he used to commute to UCLA as a student.





Valverde was highly influenced by the New York School of street photographers, especially painter-turned-photographer Roy DeCarava, whose emphasis on personal vision he shared. DeCarava documented the African American community in New York, sustaining a balance between the indexical and metaphorical qualities of his images. In DeCarava's book project with Langston Hughes—*The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955)—Hughes's text engages with DeCarava's images of everyday life in Harlem, highlighting the photographer's aesthetic and how it rests on the expressive and affective dimension of his photographs. While DeCarava's work, like street photography in general, can be seen as a form of social documentation, his subjective approach also engages with a broader field that includes painting, poetry, and jazz. The photograph is never a document, pure and simple, but a work of art, a visual artifact of urban modern life, and a personal expression. Likewise, as Ramón García argues, "Valverde's images . . . exist on the border between traditional documentary photography and the highly personal, directorial, and conceptual photography that transformed it."

In many photographs Valverde uses tight framing that balances close-ups of his subjects with the built environment. But this space is not that of a generic modernity—a cityscape of intensified imagery, technology, and construction. Instead, it is caught looking back at the camera in two languages (through banners, movie posters, advertisements, and other signs) and across two racial imaginaries (one a black-white binary, the other based on *mestizaje*, or racial mixture). Drawing upon street, snapshot, portraiture, and landscape photography, as well as staged variants of each, Valverde created a visual record of the city's African American and Latino communities. As he explained in 1989, "I see photographs as 'environmental portraiture' because I try to show the living conditions of the subject."<sup>1</sup> Insofar as Valverde documented the undocumented—with all the paradoxes such an action implies—his project necessarily eschewed straight photography and its belief in objectivity. The alternative to a stereotype can never be an unmediated, authentic image. While a photograph is indexical and as such bears the imprint of its referent, it is also still a medium. It cannot stand outside the medium and offer an objective image. The photograph's message, its content, will always be just beyond our reach. As Marshall McLuhan famously



Ricardo Valverde, Esperanza Valverde, 1978.  
Chromogenic color print, 8 × 10 inches.

Ricardo Valverde, self-portrait, 1976. Chromogenic  
color print, 8 × 10 inches.

Ricardo Valverde, child in backyard, 1978/1991.  
Hand-painted gelatin silver print, 11 × 15 inches.  
Courtesy of Esperanza Valverde and Christopher J. Valverde.

argued in 1964, the medium is the message, and “the ‘content’ of a medium is always another medium.”<sup>2</sup>

Valverde was conversant within both American and Mexican modern photography, producing images that had what García calls “an uneasy and critical beauty” and “surrealist disquiet.” Valverde documented LA families (including his own), neighborhoods, and cultural practices. He also took self-portraits, which he never exhibited in his lifetime. With his wife Esperanza (“Espie”), he played a catalytic role in bringing Chicano and Mexican artists together, and he was among the founders of Self Help Graphics and Art, Ojo, Council of Latino Photography/USA, and Chicano Art Collectors Anonymous (CACA).

I knew Ricardo in the final two years of his life. We had several conversations while I was conducting research on CACA for an exhibition. Strangely, I never recorded them, although I did record my discussions with other CACA members. Instead, our interaction left me with a powerful feeling that I also sense in his photographs. The indexical element of an image, as Mary Ann Doane states, “appears as a brute and opaque fact . . . pure assurance of existence”; the index assures, yet it is inherently limited by its medium.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the expressive dimension of the image offers no assurance, just a sense of how the artist must have felt. Neither can stake a claim to knowledge. If we speak of a photographer’s eye—as the mark of his or her creative act within an indexical medium—then Valverde’s final images constitute a *mise en abyme* for such a “signature.” Here, Valverde’s eye





documents the work of his hand over time, first in the printing of the photographic image, then in transforming the print with paint, scratching, and adhesive paper, and finally in turning that unique work of mixed-media art into a photographic image. What is indexed here is the fact of the artist; what is expressed is that every creative act struggles against, participates in, and mourns a loss in the world. In doing so, Ricardo can be said to have documented the undocumented—his community, Los Angeles.

## NOTES

1. Ricardo Valverde, quoted in *Personal Document/Cultural Identity: Essays in Photography*, ed. Michael Shapiro, exhibition catalog (Chico: University Art Gallery, California State University), 1989.
2. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 8.
3. Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2007): 135.

Ricardo Valverde, Los Angeles street scene, 1977/1991. Hand-painted gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 inches.

Ricardo Valverde, chair on a porch, 1970s. Gelatin silver print, 4 × 6 inches.

Ricardo Valverde, dance group in Los Angeles, 1973. Solarized gelatin silver print, 11 × 14 inches. Courtesy of Esperanza Valverde and Christopher J. Valverde.