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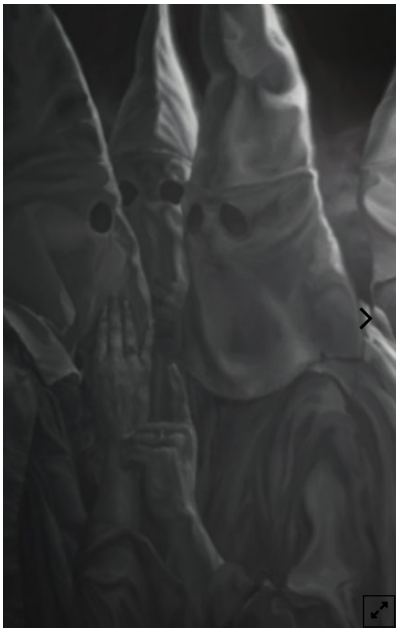
# A Powerhouse Texas Artist Examines America Through the Ku Klux Klan — and the Results Are Beyond Haunting

BY CATHERINE D. ANSPON (HTTP://WWW.PAPERCITYMAG.COM/AUTHOR/CATHERINEPAPERCITYMAG-COM/) // 09.09.16



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*The artist in his studio, with "The City I" in summer 2016 (Photography courtesy Zeke Peña)*

Every once in while, an artist comes along who is both mirror and chronicler of our times. In Depression-era and post-War America, it was Edward Hopper. His *Nighthawks,* 1942, speaks of alienation and the loneliness of the city while reflecting the fear surrounding World War II. Another example from the American art canon is the realist Reginald Marsh, whose teeming crowd scenes are emblematic of the shifting demographic of 1930s New York — especially his paintings and drawings of Coney Island (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/unlock-the-weird-greetings-from-coney-island_us_57cdd01ce4b0b9c5b739e685)'s sultry, summertime pleasures.

Then there's Andy Warhol, whose silkscreened paintings of Jackie Kennedy in her veil during services for her assassinated husband and images torn from headlines, such as *Race Riot,* 1964, summarize the turbulent '60s.

Who is the artist for the post-Iraq invasion/post-Wall Street meltdown? A worthy candidate is Texas-based Vincent Valdez, who rose to prominence as a teen prodigy with a gift for drawing that earned him a full scholarship to the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design. He soon garnered attention with the no-holds-barred activist painting *Kill the Pachuco Bastard!*, which commented on the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles. The socially aware canvas headlined the 2001 traveling exhibition "Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge," culled from the collection of Cheech Marin. It broke attendance records during its 12-city museum tour from 2001 through 2007.

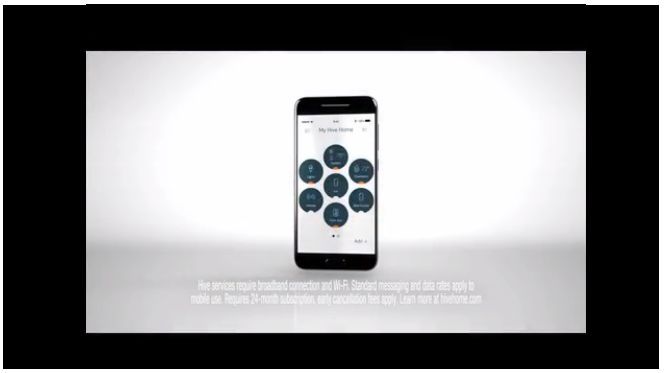


In 2004, at the age of 26, Valdez presented his iconic "Stations" at the McNay Art Museum, (https://www.mcnayart.org/) San Antonio — the youngest artist ever to solo there. The works shown conflated realist scenes of boxers, drawn with great detail and gravitas, with the Stations of the Cross. The narrative drew the viewer into the action, effectively making us a ringside spectator, while Valdez's black-and-white vignettes melded past and present. After closing at the McNay, "Stations" attracted attention on a multi-year national tour.

Valdez has continued to be a voice for his generation, and in 2014 was included in Crystal Bridges' epic survey of contemporary American art, "State of the Art."

In 2013, Valdez brought forth "The Strangest Fruit," a series of paintings that opened again the Pandora's box of American racial history — an elegiac look into Latino lynchings throughout the Southwest, beginning in the 19th century. Contemporary figures drawn from real life, posed with actual nooses around their necks, suggest ascension, as the artist removes the rope in the completed canvases. Each individual rendered (all males, startlingly life-sized), appear to levitate. "Strangest Fruit" got its title from Billie Holiday's classic 1939 recording of a protest song written by Abel Meeropol. The series touched down at Artpace and also Washington and Lee University museum, after beginning its tour at Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery.

(http://www.papercitymag.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/1238-4x6-VValdez-TheCity06.jpg)



All of this is but a preamble to Valdez's bravest art yet. This month, he unfurls "The Beginning is Near (Part I)," a room-sized installation at his long-time dealer, Houston's David Shelton Gallery, detailing the Ku Klux (http://www.wsj.com/articles/graffiti-of-maine-governor-in-ku-klux-klan-garb-fuels-uproar-1473205312)Klan. A year in the making, the multi-paneled artwork *The City I* and the single canvas *The City II* have already caught the attention of *The New York Times*.

On March 5, Times editorial writer Lawrence Downes — who had journeyed to San Antonio for the story — covered Valdez's Klan series in an op-ed feature chillingly titled "An All- (http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/06/opinion/sunday/an-all-american-family-portrait-in-white.html?_r=0)American Family Portrait, in White." In an age that we thought, with President Obama's 2008 election, was supposed to be post-racial America (we now sadly realize that it is not), Valdez's Klansmen, Klanswomen, and even Klankids, portrayed in starkly haunting grisaille, force us to wonder who is under those hoods. The viewer sincerely hopes the answer is not the face that looks us back in the mirror.

**Our Q&A with the artist, conducted via email, follows.**

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**When did you begin thinking about this new series that features the Klan front and center?**
The subject in "The Beginning is Near (Part I)" developed from multiple directions over a period of time. In 2005, while in L.A. working on a collaborative project with Ry (http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-guitarists-of-all-time-19691231/ry-cooder-20101202)Cooder, I found myself drawn to a framed lithograph by Philip Guston (1913 – 1980) that hung in his house. The print depicted a clumsy, but exquisitely drawn, Mickey Mouse car with overinflated tires that seemed as if it was roaming around a dystopian world with no destination in mind. I remember telling Ry that Guston's car reminded me of the large, round, clunky 1953 Good Humor ice cream truck that he had restored so that I could paint its surface with a visual history of the Chavez Ravine neighborhood that dates back to its namesake in 1844.

The project, which took two years, involved complex issues, topics and events including public housing development in the City of Los Angeles from 1949-1959, the displacement of 1,800 self-sustaining Mexican-American residents, "progressive" urban and business developers, the Housing Authority, eminent domain, the Los Angeles Police Department, the McCarthy Trials, J. Edgar Hoover and Communist paranoia, the Brooklyn Dodgers, and, most importantly, current-day Dodgers Stadium. During that time in L.A., which is where Guston grew up, I wanted to learn more about this painter, whose work had a lasting and profound impact on me. The first Guston book that I purchased was *Guston: Retrospective* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art bookstore.

Around 2011, I came across a YouTube video of the epic song "The Klan," from the album *Real Eyes* (1980) by poet/performer/activist Gil Scott-Heron (1949-2011), an artist I have long admired for his commitment to the social and political issues of his day. I was struck by the song's haunting and almost visual lyrics that lament for "father, mother, sister, and brother" to "stand by me" and "underneath his white disguise, I have looked into his eyes." The video provided a single, unsettling visual along with the caption: "Coming from five generations of Ku Klux Klan members, 58-year-old 'Ms. Ruth' sews hoods and robes for Klan members seven days-a-week, blessing each one when it's done." This led me to consider the stark contrasts and similarities between the lyrics and image, with each side opposing the other, and each side calling out for strength, love, and protection of family.

Veronica Roberts, the curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Blanton in Austin, invited me in 2015 to tour the exhibition "Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties," which originated at the Brooklyn Museum. Little did I know that halfway through the exhibition I would find myself face-to-face with Guston's painting *City Limits* (1969), on loan from the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It features a three-man crew of cartoonish figures in white hoods cruising around in a beat-up pink car. As stated in the text from MoMA about the painting: "Wearing Ku Klux Klan hoods, they are plainly up to no good; but rather than invoking a specific evil, these men are symbolic embodiments of a general know-nothing violence. The principal story told here is that of an America run afoul of its democratic promise." Driving home [that day], lyrics from Scott-Heron's "The Klan" continued playing on a loop in my head, a loop that started as I was transfixed by the images in Guston's painting. The words of Scott-Heron and the images of Guston had merged.

Some ideas are instant. Others lie dormant for years, unfolding gradually. Later that evening, while working on other drawings, the image and concept of what became *The City* appeared. I grabbed a sheet of paper and quickly began drawing. By the end of the night, a second, third, and fourth sheet were added as the image kept expanding and evolving. Shortly thereafter I was convinced it needed to be painted on a small scale. Several months later, I found myself staring at the early stages of *The City*, which now measures at almost 40 feet of painted canvas.

**Why did it resonate?**
I wanted to claim my place within a lineage of American artists who have tackled issues regarding American society during their time. Guston, Scott-Heron, Valdez. This became a most crucial statement: Three artists of three various backgrounds that span three generations in America. These topics not only challenge the trajectory of American history, they define who we were and very much still are. American artists like Guston and Scott-Heron, George Bellows, Paul Cadmus, and Peter Saul have all been visionary, critical observers of the world around them and have had a profound impact on the way that I see. How many more generations of American artists will have to address the Klan as subject and confront issues that some people believe distort the American way of life? James Baldwin articulates most profoundly: "It is astonishing the lengths to which a person, or a people, will go in order to avoid a truthful mirror." And this is what the white hood symbolizes to me. It is a self-reflection. As a collective society, it is easy for us to look away or to simply maintain our neutrality.

**(http://www.papercitymag.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/1237-4x6-VValdez-TheCity05.jpg)Your work has always had a historical underpinning, about reexamining chapters in American history that were written over or conveniently forgotten. Did you employ historical research for this new series?**
I had originally planned to ask my mother to sew me a hooded costume in order to reference it in the studio, but I couldn't figure out how to convince her. I ended up creating my own hood out of a few pieces of white canvas. Between my makeshift hood and a few historical and contemporary photographs located in books, film stills, and online, I was able to compose my characters. I decided to

limit the palette to black and white in reference to the historical photos because I wanted to blur the line between past and present. It comes across as an image from the past until you notice the cell phone, the Nikes on the baby's feet, the beer can, and the modern city. This suggests that we are looking at both the past and present, 1929 and 2016 in one glimpse.

More importantly, I spent quite some time researching vintage American advertisements. I was considering images like yearbook photos, family reunion photos, beer commercials depicting friends on the beach, old Coca-Cola ads, etc., because these types of things personify and sell us an Americana and quality-of-life through white-centric visuals and simple tag lines. Life is good. The gang's all here. BBQ. Drink up. Don't worry, be happy. When compared to Gil Scott-Heron's lyrics, "It's not so easy to be free, nobody ever said it would be easy," it presents a chilling example of who is entitled to celebrate and live freely in America. I also dug out old childhood drawings that my mother has kept all of these years. It is evident in these drawings that there was already an obsession for the figure and the portrait. In middle school, I created a series of notebook drawings that depicted the various clans in school: the jocks, the band geeks, the skaters, the punks, the nerds, and the homeboys. Assimilation, unity, pride, communication, love of family and friends, protection, mistrust, and fear of the unknown are introduced to us at an early age, and never really leave us.

From a distance, the presentation of hooded characters in *The City* appears normal, very human, like any gathering between friends, family, or colleagues. Body language, gestures, postures, and expressive hands signify basic human instinct. As I painted each character, I found myself wondering who was lurking underneath the cartoonish masks. Are they parents, teachers, grandparents, cousins, neighbors, best friends, doctors, lovers, politicians? As we approach them, we interrupt their gathering as an uninvited guest. We confront them as peculiar, wary subjects, and they confront us in the same untrusting manner. Both sides can be interpreted as subject and as viewer, but who is who? There has been an ongoing staring contest for the past 11 months in my studio. I stare at them and they stare back. I am as curious about them as they are about me. I fear them as much as they do me. Perhaps this is where we find ourselves in 21st-century America, endlessly drawing lines over histories, territories, and differences.

**How do you and David Shelton plan to install *The City* at the gallery?**
I closely considered Shelton's new gallery space, which determined the scale and composition of these paintings. The title of the exhibition is "The Beginning is Near (Part I)," and there will be two paintings in this iteration. One is a 30-foot-long painting made up of four canvases, titled *The City I*, that was specifically designed to take up almost an entire wall in the new main gallery space; the other is a single canvas, titled *The City II*, that will be near the entrance to the exhibition. I was most excited by the thought of the viewer walking into the space, turning a corner, and uncomfortably finding themselves standing in the middle of a hooded gathering.

***"Vincent Valdez: The Beginning is Near (Part I)," opens Friday, September 9, 6 to 8 pm (through Saturday, October 8), at David Shelton Gallery (http://davidsheltongallery.com), 4411 Montrose, 713.393.7319. Upcoming for the artist in 2017: The solo presentation "Excerpts for John" will be included in "Portraiture Now: The Face of Battle: Americans at War, 9/11 to Now" at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.; and the group show, "Home – So Different, So Appealing," in conjunction with "Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA" at LACMA, traveling to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, recently acquired two works by Valdez: one of the "Stations" drawings, and one of the paintings from "The Strangest Fruit" series.)***

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