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Oral history interview with Vincent Valdez,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Vincent Valdez on August 13, 2020. The interview took place from Valdez's studio in New Haven, Connecticut, and was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Hi. Um, so, we're here with Vincent Valdez, and this is Fernanda Espinosa recording an interview for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution, and this interview is for the Pandemic Project. Vincent is joining virtually from New Haven, from a fellowship that he's doing during this time. And Vincent, if you want to introduce yourself and just let us know how you're doing—also—sorry—today is August 13th of 2020, which I almost forgot to say.

VINCENT VALDEZ: [Laughs.]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Go ahead, please.

VINCENT VALDEZ: It's been a long week.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah.

VINCENT VALDEZ: Well, it's good to see you on here, Fernanda. My name is Vincent Valdez. I am speaking to you live from New Haven, Connecticut, where I have been in residence at the NXTHVN Fellowship since June of 2020. Um, I will be here through the summer of 2021. I am a Texas native, born and raised in San Antonio, Texas, was living in Houston for the past three or four years. Um, well, I'm glad to be here.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Great. Um, welcome to this virtual space. So, as I mentioned, we're trying to capture and document observations and perceptions from artists during these really tough times, and over the last few months. So, can you just tell me a little bit more about that? Just generally, how have you been coping and what have you been doing over the past few months?

[00:02:02]

VINCENT VALDEZ: Well, 2020, for me, has, by far, been probably the most challenging, difficult year of my lifetime and career, and—as it has been for probably many of us throughout the planet. Um, for me, it has been, um, most difficult of circumstances—both personally and professionally. I—like I mentioned earlier, I've been in New Haven since January. And it was difficult already, pre-pandemic, to leave Texas because my mother had been ill for the past three years or so. She recently passed away, almost exactly a month ago, and it was—you know, it was extremely, um, rough to not be able to be down in Texas with my family at that time.

Um, but, you know, there—it's really challenged to me to find ways to keep sane and keep myself grounded and on track; to keep myself safe and healthy while also figuring out other methods to be present for my family, my siblings, my father, my relatives. You know, and I—and I would say that one of the most surreal aspects of this experience has been trying to come to terms with, you know, not only things like normal mortality and the clock that is forever ticking, but as an artist in the studio, you know, it's really forced me to once again kind of step back and reevaluate, you know, what it is exactly that I'm doing and, most importantly, what it is that I'm saying from here on out. Um, and so, already in the studio a number of different, new approaches have been propelled forward, I think—propelling me forward every day as I walk in here.

[00:04:28]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Can you talk a little bit more about the new approaches, both in your art and also your personal life?

VINCENT VALDEZ: You know, I think one of the things that has not only surprised me the most—you know, it's something that I never really anticipated might occur over the span of the last 20 years of making this kind of socio-politically charged work. I never foresaw that, in a moment like this, when when my usual subjects would be most pertinent at—right now, at this moment in time, I would have assumed 10 years ago, five years ago, that this would be my moment. That this would—I would have so much more desire to go into the studio and make this very confrontational, you know, impacting—visually impacting work. But it—for me, right now, it's been quite the opposite.

I think for one of the first times—or the first time throughout my career, if not lifetime, as an artist, I have gone a different route, and I have started to step away from my familiar subjects. And I've begun—began creating a series of drawings. Every single day, I add a drawing to this large wall in the studio, and I've turned to basic, traditional portraiture, in a sense, of faces that I am surrounded by here in the NXTHVN community and family, in the community of NXTHVN—oh, I'm sorry, of New Haven. I even started turning to a large series of portraits of creating—of my family, of creating a family tree, titled, *La línea*.

[00:06:39]

And so, what I started to see—I'd say, after the first—you know, by March in here, was that the studio started dividing. And the very first concepts and visuals that I was turning out as early as January were now sort of subconscious—I was subconsciously placing them on one side of the studio, and on the other side of the studio were these portraits that almost started serving as guardians. These intimate portraits of just these faces, these—that carry a sense of pride and dignity and warmth and security. And it really struck me, you know, as—especially at the moment when my mother passed, because I started to realize that maybe, perhaps, for me, there was some sort of subconscious preparation, this intuition that had been preparing me since February, March, April for what was coming.

Because when I needed these people the most—not in a literal sense, because I'm always very isolated, you know, in the studio, as a painter. And, you know, I'm somewhat introverted, anyway, socially. But for me, the presence of these individuals, these figures, these humans in the studio, were really these pillars of strength that were keeping me—keeping me up and holding me together. And that was something entirely brand-new for me. You know, and it's really helped me to reconstruct, in a sense, you know, conceptually about where I go from here and about what I'm putting out into the world, right, from here on out.

[00:08:39]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, in my conversations with the friend folks around the pandemic, something that has come up often is the sense of losing loved ones and not being able to actually be there in person to send them away. Has that come up with you in your recent loss? And also, I'm really, really sorry to hear about your mom.

VINCENT VALDEZ: Thank you, Fernanda. Um, no, I would say it's once again been extremely opposite of that. I—the day after my mother passed, I created a short film for her that was extremely difficult to put together. It was based after a collection—an extensive collection of old super eight-millimeter film footage that I had collected from my parents and my grandparents that nobody else wanted over the years. And I had them all digitized a few years ago, and what a gift—what a gem to have now. And so, I sat there and created this five-minute short film about her life just in silent footage and was able to provide and present that to the family, to my family back home in the church during her service. That was my gift to her, and my sendoff.

And then, the day after that, I began painting the first portrait I've ever done of her. And so, in so many ways, I was struck by the sort of—some sort of spiritual presence of her and my own reckoning of feeling like I never really sent her away now. She's even closer to me now than she could have been physically, right? And so, it's been—it's a been a blessing to walk in the studio and see this image of her. It's in the very first stage of the line drawing, but it's her. You know, I light a—I light a candle for her every day while I'm working, and it's something that I've never done before.

[00:10:58]

You know, and so, you know, it has been somewhat of a—of a tormented times, because I will be working in here, and all of a sudden I get hit with this tsunami of emotion, and it—and reality really sets in, that she's—that I'll never be able to—that she's not actually going to be home

when I return home someday. She was captain of that household, you know, and so, a piece of me died with her. And—but I feel so extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to be able to create, right, and to create a presence for her in my own space and in my own life, from here on out until the last day that I'm around.

And so, um, that—you know, I'm totally grateful for that, and I can't be more thankful. So, yeah, I don't feel like I—it was—I don't feel like I sent her off, you know, or that I needed to—I—in a way I felt—I tried to explain to my father and to my siblings that, in some strange way, I even felt grateful to not be able to be down there because I didn't need to see the shell that was once her, right? I was able to make my peace from up here, and I think that it's an amazing way the universe works sometimes. You know, the way that stars just line up for whatever reason.

And, you know, I asked for her blessing when I found out that I got into Next Haven because I knew she was ill. And I told her I hated to leave, and I was—I was afraid to leave her. And she gave me her blessing and said, you know, "You have to go." And yeah, I'll always be grateful for that.

[00:12:59]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: So, these guardians that you've been painting—

VINCENT VALDEZ: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —that you have in your studio, who are they?

VINCENT VALDEZ: Well, there's several ongoing series, and I think one large portion of this new sort of concept is based off of these very fast renderings where I do one a day for an hour a day. And it's—I'm documenting every other artisan residence here, including the two curatorial fellows, their spouses, the staff here, even the sort of mascot pit bull that belongs to the director here. Eventually, I'll expand out and am going to start documenting the boxing—the community boxing center next door and all the young fighters and the trainers. And I'll just keep growing from there.

[00:14:00]

On a larger scale, I've been working—I've used this time to chip away at a series titled *The New Americans* that I—it's something that I've been wanting to execute for the past four years. I am considering *The New Americans* the third and final chapter in what I am titling *The Beginning is Near—An American Trilogy*. It began in 2015 with the 40-foot painting titled *The City* that confronted white supremacy in America. The—chapter two was created in 2018, titled *Dream, Baby, Dream*.

Chapter three is, in my opinion, the most monumental, important chapter of the trilogy. *The New Americans* will consist of 21 Americans scattered around the nation who I've been searching for, locating, and collecting each one of these individuals—like the drawings, the small drawings become my own personal chronology of what cities I've been—of where I've been, of who I'm crossing paths with, whether it's personally or professionally. Some of these individuals are only known to me online. Like, I research them, I read about them. But they're all known—unknown to each other, they are united, and they're—through their unique efforts of still fighting the good fight for their fellow citizen and noncitizen.

[00:15:39]

This series is my reminder as a public awareness project that we are—they are shining examples that—it's still worth fighting the good fight in America. In many ways, these become these—and you can sort of see one of these figures behind me, looming behind me. These are the new monumental pillars in America. Um, pillars that stand dignified, that stand resilient, in the center of a crumbling society. And so, these individuals are in their own ways challenging the American landscape, in order to change the American landscape. Eventually I'll get to 21. The first five will premiere this December at Art Basel, if Art Basel happens.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So time is running out really quickly, and I want to make sure that you discuss a little bit more about, specifically, both the pandemic and also the uprisings that have been happening over—all over the nation, and any general observations or thoughts that you think are worth documenting in these few minutes that we have, any reflections around these times.

VINCENT VALDEZ: Sure. I—you know, I feel so strongly about the moment that we are all part of right now. I feel that if we in America have ever wondered what the end result would be of several generations of distorted history, of uneducation, right, of unchecked power and balances, of corruption that's gone unchecked, here we are. This is what you get. And so, I feel that, unfortunately, as uncertain and as trying as these times are, I feel that this is just a test run of what's coming. Because you slap on top of a pandemic an unprepared nation, a nation entirely split and divided, and then you lay on top of that global warming, right? You lay on top of that mass migration, you lay on—you add on top of that an entire universal sort of unraveling of systems, right? That—in my opinion, what we are witnessing is the unraveling of a system [*dog barking*] of white supremacy that has gone unchecked for far too long.

[00:18:43]

But I will say that the one spark of hope for me is still to be found in fellow humans, and at our worst, we—if you just look closely, if you use that intuition as your own social antenna and pay attention, I can see the good—I find the good in others who are stepping up when we need it the most, right? And so, I have not lost hope in my fellow humans. I'm not willing to throw in the towel quite yet. This—all of this, this place, the lives that we're living must change, but it's worth fighting for in the end.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And is there anything before we end that I didn't ask you today or I didn't bring up that you would like to capture in this recording?

VINCENT VALDEZ: I would like to say that, you know, it's been—I couldn't have asked for, I couldn't have asked for a better community of people—of fellow humans to be around than the ones I'm surrounded by right now at Next Haven. They've been, in more ways than I think they'll ever know, tremendous pillars of support. Just knowing that their presence is here, the beautiful people, and I'm really grateful to these fellow artists who have really shown me—have proved to me that we can all be better, and we can all do better.

[00:20:29]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Thank you so much, Vincent. It's been great talking to you.

VINCENT VALDEZ: You too, Fernanda. Stay safe out there.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: All right, you too. Take care.

VINCENT VALDEZ: Bye-bye.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]