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Vincent Valdez’s ‘The Strangest Fruit’ Takes on a Century of Latino Lynching in the U.S.

Posted on October 15, 2013 by Paul Niemi



Vincent Valdez, Untitled
From *The Strangest Fruit*, 2013
Oil on canvas, 55" x 92"

In the United States, for most of us, the concept of lynching seems so far removed from our day- to-day experiences. After all, we have come so far from the barbaric days of the past, right? Wrong. That racism is merely transmitted in other ways through subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, aspects of our modern-day lifestyles. For certain, we are not a country made up of thoughtful people who like to remember the past as it was and learn from our mistakes.

Historically, we know all too well the atrocities that African-Americans have tragically endured as a matter of course in this country. And who could forget the 1915 abduction and hanging of New York Jewish-American Leo Frank by anti-Semites in Georgia? This happened even after he was found not guilty of the rape and murder of Mary Phagan, one of the young factory girls who worked for him. Jason Robert Brown based the stirring Broadway musical *Parade* on his story that brought his experience to the mainstream consciousness years after the fact.

Did you know that Latinos were hanged in the United States, more specifically Texas, up until the Mid-20th Century? This is one of our country's dirtiest secrets. As a result of the media and mainstream American society remaining tight lipped about the lynchings that began in the mid-1800s, few people know about them. While buried, these acts became part of written Latino history by way of community leaflets as well as traditional ballads called "corridos."



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The victims of these hangings may not have a musical telling their story coming to town anytime soon, but they are getting an art exhibition that pays somber homage to the horrors they suffered. **"The Strangest Fruit,"** opening on October 19 at Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery at the List Art Center is the brainchild of San Antonio-born and Rhode Island School of Design-educated painter and muralist Vincent Valdez. Known for his metaphorical realism, Valdez has created an installation that metaphorically equates the unwritten deadly treatment of Latinos in the past with the oppression and persecution their descendants feel today in modern-day America. All of the exhibition paintings feature images of people with whom Valdez has a personal relationship. And while the ropes aren't there, he has strategically depicted his subjects in positions that hint at the throes and aftermath of a death by hanging. "Slightly larger than life-size, the figures float, decontextualized on a white background," says Valdez. "The compositions become an ambiguous scene between hanging and ascension."

According to curators at the David Winton Bell Art Gallery, Valdez, at the far end of the gallery "presents an adapted version of the poem 'Strange Fruit' by Abel Meeropol (aka Lewis Allan) written and performed in the mid-to-late 1930s as a protest song that exposed racism and the lynching of African Americans in the United States, capturing popular imagination through recordings by singers such as Billie Holiday. The text stands as an transcribed 'corrido' ...inscribing the history of Latino lynching onto the wall of the gallery. The last line '...here is a strange and bitter crop' echoes amongst the pained and contorted figures, presenting them as subjective evidence of ongoing social and cultural oppression."

"The Strangest Fruit" runs through December 8. The Gallery will present a symposium on Friday, October 18 from 3:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. in the List Art Center Auditorium, followed by an opening reception at 6:30 p.m. For more information, visit <http://www.brown.edu/bellgallery>.

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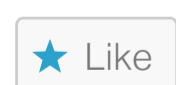
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