

[00:00] **CLAIRE KIM**

Hi, everybody. Hi. My name is Claire. I'm a second year student here at CCS. I'm going to be introducing Vincent Valdez, and we're going to be chatting for the next 40, 45 minutes before opening up to questions. Thank you all for being here. Vincent Valdez is recognized for his monumental portrayal of the contemporary figure. His drawn and painted subjects remark on a universal struggle within various sociopolitical arenas and eras. He states, "My aim is to incite public remembrance, and to impede distorted realities that I witnessed, like the social amnesia that surrounds me." Valdez was born in '77 in San Antonio, Texas. He received a full scholarship to study at RISD and earned his BFA in 2000. A recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant for Painters and Sculptors, as well as residencies at Skowhegan, the Vermont Studio Center and Künstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin residency, Valdez currently lives and works in Houston. Exhibitions and collections include the Ford Foundation, LACMA, Mass, MOCA, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, and the National Portrait Gallery, among many others. When CCS had first reached out to Vincent, he suggested that we be in conversation for this presentation today, and I feel so incredibly grateful and honored to be introducing you and to be chatting with you.

[01:42] **CLAIRE KIM**

Please join me in welcoming Vincent Valdez. So, we worked together on the slideshow that I'm going to get started on, and the one edit that I had was to include this image of you. I think about these images. I feel like there were, like, clippings of newspapers from your childhood of you getting started in painting. And I feel like when I think of artists who have a destined relationship to their practice, I think of you often, and I think of these images of baby Vincent. And I just wanted to start off by asking you to talk a little bit about getting started with painting and your relationship to murals.

[02:42] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

Well, I think it's fair to say that it was as much destiny as it was doomed. I began looking at images and thinking about images very early on, probably a little bit too prematurely. I remember walking into my grandparents house in the southside of San

Antonio that still stands there today. It's the only house that, 365 days a year, has blinking Christmas lights. And while all my siblings and cousins would go outside and run in the backyard, I would love to go into their house, because in this dark hallway really was like my first museum experience. And I would look at all of these canvases, dated, like, as far back as 1890, 1939, painted by my great grandfather, José Maria Valdez. I never met him, but I knew him through these paintings, and I was obsessed. I couldn't understand how somebody could do this. I didn't understand the background of how you can compose an image on canvas. And so I would sit in the hallway by myself and obsessively just try to copy on notebook paper and make studies of his paintings. And I remember getting so freaked out and stressed out, because I was frustrated, because I couldn't make it look like he did.

[04:06] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

But I remember, like, vowing I was going to figure this out one day, and I was going to be as good. And so I was fortunate enough to know early on that making images is what I wanted to do with my life. And I think that since then, this has been my quest just to be able to communicate with other human beings through a picture.

[04:35] **CLAIRE KIM**

Yeah. And I think that in addition to those paintings, you also source a lot of your early inspiration from comic books. And you talk a lot about its relationship to the ways in which you—I'm going to start the slideshow, right—work often in series. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

[05:04] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

So, I would say that I would attribute my two earliest influences to comic books. The fusion, the marriage between text and image really sparked my imagination, like it does mostly kids. Right? It was a way of telling a story, of not only telling a narrative, but of completing a narrative. And so I learned a lot. The way that I saw an idea play out in the form of a sequence. I'd say that the other influence would be the television screen, right? So, I remember running to my mom and asking her to pause our VCR player. And

I was all obsessed with Superman and Rocky and these movies. And she would pause the VCR tape. And then I would run and get tracing paper and tape to the screen, and I would trace the image that was frozen on that screen. And it really is the way that I learned not only anatomy, but going a step further, it taught me composition, cinematic framing, cinematic lighting. Definitely, like, human emotion. A lot of these dramatic scenes playing out on the screen. It gave me my sensibilities of how to dramatize both the idea, the concept, the image, and the fashion of a sequence playing out like a film or like a comic book.

[06:47] **CLAIRE KIM**

There's so many images, and I wish we had time to talk about all of them. But I wanted to start off with a painting that I had the privilege of seeing in your studio in its early, early moments. Let me find it. This is "People of the Sun." And I remember being in the studio and thinking, "Wow, this looks so different from Vincent's other works, solely because of scale." I stand in your studio and your works are massive, you know, and a lot of the figures often kind of tower over the viewers. And this painting was so small, and it was always in the side of your studio. And yet the people in these paintings felt like they didn't need that kind of scale to be larger than life. And will you talk a little bit about who the people are in this painting, and kind of the life that it's lived since?

[07:57] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

You know, I think scale in regards to a work like this, for me, it plays a different role in regards to the monumental scale that I first became interested in as a child, painting those murals, right? Like, I would be up on scaffolding working on these two, three story high murals. And so, scale really started to play an extremely pivotal role in the telling of these tales. But when I get to an image like People of the Sun, a portrait of my grandparents, Gabriel and Carmen Santana, their strength is in their silence, their strength is in their intimacy, right? And so this small scale is like a small people, a window into my world in life, and even offering a people in regards to, like, a national identity. Here is a glimpse of the American Southwest. In many ways, I feel like a history, a legacy, a region that is left out and overlooked amongst the national conversation.

And so "People of the Sun," for me, was a way of paying homage and respect to my own family, my community, not only of the south side of San Antonio, but of Texas, the Southwest.

[09:21] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

And for me, it's an American narrative, it's an American identity. Very much so. When I look at the elements that are very strictly minimized, right, there's very few elements, like the floating bed sheets that hover like protector and guardian. These are the bedsheets that my grandmother still has on her bed to this day, these flowered sheets that are from probably the 1960s. The AM radio, for me, that talks about an old world path, an old generation that's come before, an old way of life, but the simplicity of these components that make up this story. There's much pride in this story. You see the defiance and the pride and the love that they embody, not only as individuals, but as a couple, as a history. And so "People of the Sun," the title expresses their own story. My grandfather was a yard worker his entire lifetime under the blazing Texas sun, every summer, cutting people's yards, mostly in the wealthy communities of San Antonio. My grandmother is always outside working her gardens, hanging the clothes and the bedsheets on the lines. People of the Sun is a terminology that is mostly reserved for referring to the indigenous populations of the American Southwest, Mayan, Aztec lineage and legacies.

[10:52] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

And so here are the individuals that were born of the sun and die in the sun, right? They are. They speak about a tradition and a world that in many ways is still very present in communities like the Southwest or San Antonio. And so one last thing is, you see, what I tried to embody in these characteristics was revealed through their clothing. My grandmother sewed all of the clothes for herself and my mother, even when they were growing up. And so again, the pride in that, it becomes the American tale, right? The working class, and the struggle of the working class to survive, but doing it with integrity and with great pride and love and devotion.

[11:47] **CLAIRE KIM**

I'm going to show a short clip.

[13:21.600]

VIDEO PLAYS

[13:30] **CLAIRE KIM**

I was thinking a lot about portraiture, and your relationship to portraiture and why it is that I feel like there's this kind of trend that's happening in the art market around a lot of BIPOC artists doing these kinds of hyper figurative works. And there's something that I find that can be exploitative in those works. And when I think about your practice and these portraits, I don't relate that kind of frustration to these works. And I was trying to figure out what it was that I was feeling around that question. And I was thinking about this piece. I was thinking about the portraits that you did when we worked together in New Haven. And I think there's something that's so intimately connected to community, and your relationship to human beings that are so close to you, that is then being translated into these works, that allow for that kind of softness, that edges out that kind of frustration that I think about often. And I think a lot of my peers do as well. So I wanted to talk about the portraits a bit.

[15:22] **CLAIRE KIM**

So Vincent and I met in 2019, and we did a fellowship together. Two of our fellow fellows are here in the audience, and for the final exhibition, you had drawn each of the fellows. And I think what I, during the tours of the exhibition, really wanted to hammer in and share with folks is that these works really did appear so organically. This was never the plan for us to showcase a work of the eight of us. It kind of happened so slowly and built one upon the other. And I feel like the decision to do all eight portraits was something that happened quite late in the process of the exhibition. Can you talk a little bit about the first portrait and how that became what we see?

[16:40] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

The human figure, right? The portrait has always been the nucleus, the gel that entirely gives birth to all of my ideas. The figure, for me, is of such high interest for a number of different reasons, but I interpret the human figure to be—we are all walking memorials. We embody our own histories, our own ideas, our own beliefs, our own stories to tell. But going back a little bit to what you said about how I'm connected to these portraits—for me, I've always tried to keep it simple. These are so intimate and genuine as subjects because I am personally connected or invested in these faces. In these stories. Rarely have I ever tried to attempt to create a work in the studio that I don't feel personally connected to. And so one of the things that I do in the studio over the past two decades is— you know, drawing is key for me, there's such an immediacy and an honesty to drawing that I've yet to find in many ways in painting. And starting with this portrait here of Merik, who became a friend in New Haven, who was in the class right before Claire and my class arrived in 2020.

[18:17] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

I thought Merik was a really interesting character, and I really appreciated his face. And I asked him if I could portray him. He ran the studio. But right at this moment, for me, drawing again is like on a daily basis. I'm drawing, but I started to feel a little bit stagnant in the studio, just a little bit. I thought, okay, I need to try something brand new. And so one of the things that I always make it a point to do in the studio as an artist is to reinvent myself, to challenge myself, so that I don't ever find myself becoming predictable in regards to what I'm looking at in the studio. And so I started setting these timers and I would set it to 60 minutes. And then I told myself, okay, that's not enough. I'm going to now limit myself to two colors. And I had never drawn in color pencil. I'm going to try color pencils. And so I did this portrait of Merik, and I thought, oh yeah, that's something that could actually turn into something. And there was a certain, again, a freshness to the quality and the spontaneity of this drawing, but it seemed to capture something at that moment.

[19:29] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

And so I think we'll clear. Probably about ten months later, I'm now completing the series of all the fellows, but it's important to give you a little bit of insight about that moment in time for me. So, this fellowship was supposed to last twelve months. COVID hit, I think, the week after we arrived, 19 months later, we were finishing up our residency. You have to keep in mind, I'm from Houston. And so now I'm stuck in New Haven where there is no sun, there's no breakfast tacos, and I am struggling. And then halfway through that residency, my mother passes away, and I didn't get a chance to go home and say goodbye or send her off. And so, I was really devastated. The only solace that I had was locking myself in the studio. It was really my salvation. But I remember sitting in there, like, three days after she passed and just sitting in a chair and just sort of looking around me. And at that time, I had all kinds of sheets of paper, including the drawing of Merik tacked to my wall. And it almost became like the studio began to split, and I was sitting right in the center.

[20:58] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

On one side was a lot of the images that we breezed through that were very heavy in content, speaking ideas, observations, as witness to the world outside of the studio. And on the other side were these portraits, including Merik. And I thought, you know what? That's it. Like, maybe I don't have my family here, maybe I don't have my community here, but I have in return gained another family and another community with the artists that I was surrounded by. And maybe I wasn't the most social person, but I knew that these guardians, these protectors, were around me when I needed them. And that was it. It was an idea as simple as that. And, as you've said, I organically just began drawing the other or all the residents that were in fellowship with me. And then it turned into a series. And then it became more about the characters as time went on, and trying to exude their kind of personalities right. Of who they were in regards to their poses and their stances. So the idea of bringing these individuals in and allowing them to be themselves right. I never dictate how they pose or what they're going to wear.

[22:16] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

For me, it's so important that they become active, willing participants, engaged in the telling of their own histories, and their own tales. It turned into an entire series that I think remained untitled.

[22:31] **CLAIRE KIM**

They were individually titled, the first names.

[22:34] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

That's right. Each one is marked in Old English with their name stamp in the top left corner. Tried to get out of doing the self portrait, but Claire talked me into it, and for me, I'm really glad that I did, because it was the last one. They completed this story. And anytime that I look back at this series like this, I always will remember that moment in time. It really becomes a documentation for me. I mean, it really is a visual journey. It's my own testament to the things that I see, and the individuals that I cross paths with. And so, I became faster at the very end of the first three or four of the sequence. It was taking me, like, the full hour. And then towards the end, I was just like—I could have kept going. I was just really breezing through them. But so much about the drawing always informs the painting, right? And so it's really important for me to bounce back and forth.

[23:38] **CLAIRE KIM**

I think it was one of the best things I've ever done is to convince you to do this self portrait. I was so excited, and I have to commend it. It was your partner who eventually convinced you because you said no to me.

[23:54] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

I'm sorry.

[23:56] **CLAIRE KIM**

And then you changed your mind. And I was so happy because it felt like you had put

in so much. You say that you were antisocial at the time, but everyone knew that your door and your studio was always open, and you were there all the time. And I think that there was a certain level of kind of a lot of people. We all leaned on you as this kind of figure who was always kind of in this calm state whenever there was crisis, during that time of constant crisis.

[24:34] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

Well, I'll never forget arriving, the very first day or two — because I started so young, for so long I was always the youngest artist or person at any of these exhibitions. And I'll never forget meeting Jeffrey, and he kept calling me OG. And finally I was like, "Why are you calling me that?" And I thought in my head, he meant old guard. And he was like, "no, man, it's old gangster." And I was like, "well, still, man, you're calling me old." And so I remember saying to myself like, oh, shit, for one of the first times, I'm the old guy. And I was the oldest artist in that fellowship. But it was such an amazing awakening experience in so many different ways that I can't even begin to describe what we all experienced together, there at a moment in time like that. And so now, because of this series, to this day, I'm still creating numerous pieces limited to two colors. I've now moved to other tones, and now they've quickly evolved into no longer being on paper, but I'm creating these fragmented cast pieces of porcelain and plaster, and now there's just fragments of portraits that are left almost like in the fashion of, like, old Greek or Roman tablets that are about reconstructing these individuals, these bodies.

[25:58] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

And so I'm about to premiere them in Los Angeles next September. So I'm really excited because this has given birth to something entirely brand new.

[26:06] **CLAIRE KIM**

Again, I'm excited as well, to make a trip out.

[26:09] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

Yeah.

[26:11] **CLAIRE KIM**

I wanted to talk about the other work that was in this exhibition, "Uncommon Proximity," "This is Just a Dream." This is one of your larger pieces. I think it was 8ft tall, maybe.

[26:30] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

8 feet by about four and a half feet.

[26:32] **CLAIRE KIM**

8 feet by four and a half feet. And there's so many things that are such classic Vincent moves in this piece, starting with the monumentality, the subject matter of this boxer, and also this kind of dual aspect of the work itself. This kind of being pulled between two worlds is something that seems like a theme in a lot of your practice, but is so evident in this piece. And there was also a multimedia aspect to the work. The painting rested on these two large cinder blocks and we had a sound piece that was playing in the background, and I can hear it right now in my head, and we'll play a short clip of it. But can you give everyone a little bit of background of that song and how it relates to this title?

[27:31] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

Sure. So boxing, or the boxer, has been probably my longest revisited subject over the span of two decades. I began toying with the subject of boxing in my final year at RISD. Now, I wasn't too interested in the idea of boxing, of sport, but I was mostly interested in the idea of boxing being a representation and an echo of everyday life. I had made the tragic mistake of joining a boxing league while at RISD over at Brown University, not knowing that it's not a good idea to step in a ring when there's no weight divisions. And so I would get put in this ring and I'd be facing, like, these Irish guys, like, on the other end. And I never went into the ring thinking like, oh, yeah, I got a real shot here. It was always about, how am I going to walk out of this alive? And so after about three or four matches, I wised up and thought, it's probably not a good idea to damage my eyes or hands. And so I sat at the studio and instead channeled it out through a piece of

paper. And I invented this character called El Pollo the Great, which is "the great chicken."

[28:46] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

He's super skinny, like, mosquito weight division. But in his head, he had all hopes in the world for making it, whatever that means. And so fast forward 22 years later and we look at an image like this painting, "Just A Dream," rested on two cinder blocks because that's how I had it propped up in the studio. But also I was trying to fashion or mimic lowrider culture in Mexican American Chicano culture, like an old car that's sitting in your driveway for three years and you're like, "someday, I'm going to get to that vehicle." Right? And you have it popped up on cinder blocks. And so in lowrider culture, Chicano, oldies are everything. I mean, I remember hearing a song like Jimmy Clanton's 1953 tune, "Just a Dream." And I remember listening to it in the studio in New Haven, and thinking, "oh, wait a minute. That's pretty great." Like, if you listen to the lyrics and if you strip away the idea of the singer lamenting his lost love and substitute this metaphor for America it really becomes a powerful testament about this tug of war in America, mostly in communities of color, right?

[29:59] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

So I first created this image, I think, maybe about three or four months before I arrived in New Haven, titled "The Dream." So this very cinematic, sort of invented, imaginative idea about examining what the dream is and who it's for. And so in many ways, one can look at an image like this and assume that, well, it's this young boxer and he's been knocked out and it's game over for him. But I always saw it as he's sort of in a meditative trance almost curled up in bed just daydreaming about what it's going to take to make it. I think also in many ways, like, it really describes where I was at that moment in time of just my own experience in the art world as an artist, right? Of giving everything I have to this one thing. Knowing that the fine line between self destruction or disappointment, and achieving that so-called dream is a fine line. And so then this small work on paper gave birth to this painting which I toiled with for over a year.

[31:18] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

And so it's entirely from imagination. But here's two things that occur— this skewing of a colored palette versus black and white. I revisit black and white as a palette often, as a means to blur the realization between what is past and what is present. It's my way of merging the two together, saying the past is present. And so this becomes an homage to my father's generation, my mother's generation and those that come before me. Especially thinking in regards to the birth of Chicano identity in the United States of America born out of the civil rights struggle, born as a means to defy and resist American assimilation. Here we see this individual, this young fighter who sits on his bench in that corner. But if you look around, originally, that composition in the background had about 130 faces in the audience and then I quickly realized that it was time to erase all of them. And it was more of a powerful story to have this individual—the fight's already come and gone, right? And he remains on his bench refusing to get up because he's trying to figure out where he's at, where he needs to go from here.

[32:46] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

But if you look compositionally, it creates a sort of pyramid like effect from bottom to top. Look at both sets of arms on each side. Here is the tale of this Chicano male who is caught in this sort of purgatory like state between black and white America, hovering in limbo in regards to identity, in regards to politics, right? You see the rat race. There's a little snow cone. It's hard to make out at the bottom. It says "Enjoy" at the very bottom of that canvas. And it's the idea of, like, enjoy the rat race. We're all at the races trying to achieve the very top of that pyramid. And then you see those Centennial American banners, right, with this sprinkling glitter dust. It's falling over him. And so I decided towards the end of the painting to include this old 1953 song. It comes out almost like a distant echo. Like a faint whisper from actually within the canvas. The idea there was to just distort it enough, because in some ways, it becomes a fine line between a nightmare sort of quality versus this distant mirage, often the distance where it's just coming to life and you're just starting to realize what your own dream is.

[34:20] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

And again, so if you listen to the lyrics in regards to and think about as if this person is singing lamenting towards America, then it starts to make a bit more sense.

[35:22]

SONG PLAYS

[36:23] **CLAIRE KIM**

This painting has such insane details and moments that kind of bring viewers in. And I think in this work, and in all of your works, there is this way in which the viewer is being kind of led from behind. I feel like instead of being kind of taken on this journey, there's this open invitation to kind of be brought in through so many different places. And I think often about this scar on the shin of the boxer and how that brought me into the painting when I first saw it, when it was all done, when it was finished. And there are so many of those in the details when you see this work in person. And I think that that's something that you work so hard towards to kind of have this entry point for anyone and for them to kind of create this story on their own, even though you come with such a specific goal.

[37:34] **VINCENT VALDEZ**

For me, it's always the details that reveal the truth, right? The truth lies in the details. I get so lost in these details that it really becomes, like my way of inventing my own visual codex puzzles to tell a story. And it's up to you, the viewer, to pick up the pieces and put them together. There's traces of red tint around the knees and the scars and the gashes on his face. And so it's up to you, the viewer, to decide for yourself whether it is the last traces of life seeping from his own body or whether it's that same life re-injecting itself, right? To re-energize and get this individual to stand back up and continue the fight. Yeah. Thank you.