

BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART

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BLANTON MUSEUM TO EXHIBIT VINCENT VALDEZ: THE CITY



AUSTIN, Texas—June 22, 2018—The Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin will present *Vincent Valdez: The City* in its Contemporary Project gallery, opening on July 17. Acquired by the Blanton, *The City* paintings are comprised of two works: *The City I*, a large, four-part canvas portraying a group of men, women, and a toddler in Ku Klux Klan regalia on a bluff above a glowing metropolis; and *The City II*, a single canvas depicting a pile of mattresses amongst other discarded trash.

“Expanding knowledge and human understanding is among the university’s core values and central to the Blanton’s mission,” said Blanton Director Simone Wicha. “The university serves as a platform for complex inquiries into societies past and present, and at the Blanton we cultivate these conversations around great works of art. A leading Texas-based artist, Vincent Valdez is committed to exploring some of the most persistent and challenging social issues of the day. His works from an earlier series, *The Strangest Fruit*, are among our most-utilized teaching resources at the Blanton. I’m confident that the presentation of Valdez’s powerful paintings, *The City I* and *The City II*, will also engage important and timely dialogues.”

The Blanton has developed programming around *The City* that includes an opening day conversation between Vincent Valdez and Maria Hinojosa of NPR’s *Latino USA*. In September, the Blanton will welcome scholars, artists, students, and other members of the public to *Facing Racism: Art and Action*, a symposium that will feature keynote speaker Dr. Kellie Jones, Associate Professor in Art History and Archaeology and the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University. Dr. Jones

has curated exhibitions such as [Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties](#), which was on view at the Blanton in 2015 and included work that helped inspire Valdez to make *The City*. Twice-monthly, the museum will host more intimate conversations in the exhibition gallery that invite consideration and discussion of *The City* from diverse disciplinary and social perspectives. In addition, the Blanton will provide opportunities in the gallery and online for visitors to respond to and learn more about the exhibition.

“In advance of presenting Valdez’s work to the public,” added Blanton director Wicha, “the Blanton brought together over 100 leaders and thinkers from across campus and the greater Austin community who have helped us to enrich the dialogue around this work. In addition to these collaborators, we are also indebted to the generous funders who helped the Blanton acquire this work—UT alumnus Guillermo C. Nicolas and James C. Foster, UT alumni Jeanne and Michael Klein, and Ellen Susman who immediately understood the potential impact of having this powerful work on campus.”

The City

Valdez’s *The City* confronts the ongoing ubiquity of racism in the United States. The 30-foot long *City I* painting uses a grisaille palette to evoke historical photographs of a past era. However, symbols from contemporary life including Nike shoes, a glowing iPhone, a Chevrolet truck, as well as a modern cityscape, mark the painting as firmly set in the present day. “These individuals could be any Americans,” said Vincent Valdez. “There is a false sense that these threats are contained at the edges of American society, in small town landscapes or in the American South.”

The urban setting of *The City* also suggests the physical components of structural racism. “The designs of many American cities today still reflect segregation,” explained Valdez. “The plotting and location of train tracks, city dumps, land claimed through eminent domain, junkyard locations, city jails and police stations, storage and industry sectors, underfunded schools and housing, even down to the placement of parks and trees.”

The City was inspired by Gil Scott-Heron’s 1980 song, *The Klan*, and Philip Guston’s *City Limits*, a 1969 painting of cartoonish Klansmen that he saw in the Blanton’s presentation of [Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties](#) in 2015. “For centuries, artists, writers, and musicians have dealt with questions of identity, fear of the ‘other,’ and the threat of violence,” elaborated the exhibition curator, Veronica Roberts, Blanton curator of modern and contemporary art. “Although *The City I* offers a symbolic representation of American society, in many ways, I see it as a contemporary history painting, helping us to reflect on the ways the past continues to inform the present.”

The Blanton’s showing of *The City* follows its acquisition and exhibition of two paintings from Valdez’s *The Strangest Fruit* series, which refers to the overlooked history of the lynching of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the American Southwest during the 19th and 20th centuries. “Vincent Valdez is a virtuosic painter tackling some of the most challenging aspects of American identity and culture,” said Roberts. “The Blanton’s commitment to Valdez’s work reflects our larger mission to support significant Texas and Latino artists among the diversity of perspectives and histories we share in our modern and contemporary art galleries.”

The City was acquired for the Blanton's permanent collection with support from Guillermo C. Nicolas and James C. Foster in honor of Jeanne and Michael Klein, with additional support from Jeanne and Michael Klein, and Ellen Susman in honor of Jeanne and Michael Klein.

Major funding for the Contemporary Project is provided by Suzanne McFayden.

Campus & Community Engagement

Facilitated discussions with leaders from the UT campus and the city of Austin helped inform the Blanton's interpretive context for the exhibition, both in terms of the experience of *The City* in the museum's galleries and additional materials to further contextualize the paintings. Blanton leadership, curators, and educators hosted conversations that took place alongside *The City* paintings with diverse groups including UT student leaders, faculty and staff, as well as representatives from the Austin Independent School District and the Diversity and Inclusion Office from the City of Austin.

Three early roundtable conversations featured 27 UT faculty members drawn from such varied disciplines as sociology, government, Mexican American and Latina/o Studies, radio-television-film, African American studies, and history. These conversations helped inform the interpretive context that will surround the paintings, including a video of the artist talking about his working process, intentions, and goals, and a gallery brochure featuring an essay and additional resources. The fall symposium, *Facing Race: Art and Action* was organized based on input from distinguished UT faculty from various departments and will feature many topics proposed by them during the roundtable discussions, including a consideration of the racial identity and authority of artists creating race-themed works.

Among the faculty members who participated in the roundtable conversations, Mónica Jimenez, Assistant Professor, Department of African and African Diaspora Studies, shared, "*The City* forces us to stop, to bear witness, to consider, and finally to participate in the banality of American racism and the commonplace of our violence...Here, at once, is our history and our contemporary, rendered in an undeniably stunning light." Eddie Chambers, Professor of Art & Art History, noted that the work "eerily articulates many of our insecurities about the state of our society and our country in the closing years of the second decade of the 21st century."

Vincent Valdez: The City will also play a role in the Blanton's well-regarded work with students, both locally and through partnerships with the Anti-Defamation League and the Massachusetts-based Facing History and Ourselves. In the fall of 2018, as part of its *Doing Social Justice* education program developed in collaboration with the national office of the Anti-Defamation League, the Blanton will premiere a lesson plan centered on *The City* paintings that discusses how teachers across the country can explore difficult content and imagery in their classrooms. Additionally, students participating in Austin Independent School District's Ethnic Studies program, a new interdisciplinary ethnic studies curriculum offered at several Austin high schools, will visit *The City* at the Blanton as part of their coursework.

Public Programs

Artist Talk

Vincent Valdez in conversation with Maria Hinojosa, Emmy award-winning journalist and host of NPR program, *Latino USA*

Tuesday, July 17, 2018, 6:30 pm
Blanton Auditorium

Symposium

Facing Racism: Art and Action

Thursday, September 27, 2018 (all day)

6:30 pm: Keynote presentation by Dr. Kellie Jones, Associate Professor in Art History and Archaeology and the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University, New York

Community Conversations

Twice-monthly gallery conversations will occur in the Contemporary Project gallery throughout the exhibition and will feature Blanton staff members paired with community members who will bring their diverse perspectives to a wide-ranging consideration of the works of art and the issues around race and social justice that it raises.

Website

The Blanton created an in-depth online resource for *Vincent Valdez: The City* that can be found at www.blantonmuseum.org/valdezthecity. It features an artist video, suggested additional readings, frequently asked questions, and more.

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About the Artist

Vincent Valdez is best known for his monumental portraits of contemporary figures. His drawn and painted subjects capture universal struggles within various socio-political arenas and eras. He states, "My aim is to incite public remembrance and to impede distorted realities that I witness, like the social amnesia that surrounds me."

Valdez was born in 1977 in San Antonio, Texas. He received a full scholarship to study at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he earned his BFA in 2000. Exhibitions and collections have taken place at institutions including The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Blanton Museum of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, The Smithsonian Museum of American Art, The National Portrait Gallery, and the Ford Foundation, among others. A recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant for Painters and Sculptors (2016), as well as residencies at the Skowhegan School of Painting (2005), the Vermont Studio Center (2011), and the Kunstlerhaus Bethania Berlin Residency (2014), Valdez currently lives and works in Houston and is represented by David Shelton Gallery.

About the Blanton Museum of Art

Founded in 1963, the Blanton Museum of Art holds the largest public collection in Central Texas with nearly 18,000 objects. Recognized for its modern and contemporary American and Latin American art, Italian Renaissance and Baroque paintings, and encyclopedic collection of prints and drawings, the Blanton offers thought provoking, visually arresting, and personally moving encounters with art.

The museum is located at the intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Congress Avenue and is open Tuesday through Friday from 10–5, Saturday from 11–5, and Sunday from 1–5. Thursdays are free admission days and every third Thursday the museum is open until 9. Admission Prices: Adults \$9, Kids 12 and under FREE, Seniors (65+) \$7, Youth/College Students (13–21) \$5. Admission is free to

members, all current UT ID-holders. For additional information call (512) 471-7324 or visit blantonmuseum.org

Image Caption:

Vincent Valdez, *The City I*, 2015-16 (detail)

Oil on canvas, four panels, 74 x 360 in.

Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Purchase through the generosity of Guillermo C. Nicholas and James C. Foster in honor of Jeanne and Michael Klein, with additional support from Jeanne and Michael Klein and Ellen Susman in honor of Jeanne and Michael Klein, 2017

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Photo by Peter Molick, courtesy of the artist and David Shelton Gallery, Houston