

College of Humanities Research Fellow Application

Objectives:

My proposed project entails the completion of three chapters of a book on Los Angeles art photographer Ricardo Valverde (1946-1998). One of the few Chicano artists of his generation who worked exclusively in photography, Valverde's images are important artistic and historical documents of various communities and neighborhoods in Los Angeles from the late 1960s to the late 1990s. As a documentary photographer Valverde was drawn to a wide range of subjects. He photographed cultural and political events in East Los Angeles and the physical landscape of a rapidly changing city. He also created intimate portraits of working-class families and his own friends and family. His photographs are informed by the masters of 20th century photography and the aesthetics of American and Mexican photographers of his generation. Artistically, he excelled in photographing families in inner city neighborhoods and fellow artists/friends in an under-documented bohemian Chicano artist community in East Los Angeles. Although Valverde's photographs are artistic products, they are valuable to scholars outside the field of Art History, since they are primary research sources and important visual documents of neighborhoods and communities during an important historical period in the city (1970s-late 1990s).

My focused study of Valverde's work will contribute to the currently debated notion of "Chicano art" among curators and scholars, and will argue for Valverde's inclusion in the histories of 20th century documentary photography. The book is an artist monograph that will provide an overview of Valverde's working life as an artist and his accomplishments in the field of photography. The analytical and art historical component of the monograph will place Valverde's photographic work within the context of modernist American photography and

contemporary trends in international art photography. I will also continue to develop a theoretical argument that conceptualizes Valverde's body of work as an "archive" that makes unacknowledged aspects of history and community visible.

Methodology and Work Plan

The results of my initial research were published in an article entitled "He Was Your Mirror: Ricardo Valverde's Documentary Poetics" in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* (Fall 2009), the leading journal in the field of Chicano Studies since 1970. In the above mentioned article, the first published scholarly study on Valverde's work, I undertook the preliminary research that will guide further research and the writing of the first three chapters of the book. In this initial study I also established a structural framework that I will use to organize the individual chapters of the book. The book's individual chapters thread a biographical narrative to the stylistic/aesthetic import of Valverde's photographs. These stylistic phases and concerns are tied to crucial series of photographs, and are outlined according to the provisional chapters as listed below:

Chapter I: "Rewriting Modernism"—Valverde's displacement of modernist photographic ideas and practices.

Chapter II: "Street Photography"— An overview of the genre and Valverde's distinct vision of the Los Angeles landscape.

Chapter III: "Portraits of Community" — Valverde's various series of portraits of families, friends and subcultures in East Los Angeles.

Chapter IV: "Events"— Day of the Dead, Community Cultural Events, Art Performances. Analysis of controversies in representing traditional and non-traditional cultures.

Chapter V: "Experimental Work" — Valverde's last series of altered photographic work.

For my initial research and the article published in *Aztlán*, I consulted the archives at the Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) at UCLA, which hold the only existing collection of Valverde's photographs. I also conducted research in the Department of Photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and at the home of Valverde's widow, Espie Valverde, who provided access to Valverde's personal papers, letters and his collection of photographs by fellow photographers. I have interviewed Espie Valverde and four of Valverde's colleagues and friends.

The College of Humanities Research Fellow Award is intended to support the continuation of on-going research and the completion of three chapters of the book. The first half of the award period, or approximately the first seven weeks, would prioritize archival research and the acquisition of permissions for reproduction in the first three chapters of the book. The additional budget requests specify a budget for travel to specialized collections and archives and for the acquisition of reproduction rights. The travel funds would be used to establish contact with the collections and archives of the International Center of Photography in New York City and the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, as well as the collections at the University of California at Riverside's California Museum of Photography. Valverde's photographic work belongs in the history of documentary photography in the United States, and therefore I will need to acquire reproduction rights for the photographs of many well-known photographers (Edward Weston, Diane Arbus, Bruce Davidson, Nan Goldin and others). The above mentioned archives would primarily be used to study photographers who were pivotal influences on Valverde's art, and to acquire reproduction rights for images from their holdings to include in the book, and specifically in the first three chapters.

The second half of the award period would be dedicated to conducting interviews and to the writing of the first three chapters of the monograph. This first three chapters represent an expansion and elaboration of material that were covered in the initial study published in *Aztlán*. I have a list of artist and art professionals who knew Valverde and who I plan to interview as I write the first three chapters of the book.

Anticipated Outcomes

The book on Valverde has been contracted as one of a series of artist monographs currently being published by UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and distributed by the University of Minnesota Press. This book series, “A Ver: Revisioning Art History,” highlights the contributions of significant Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican and other U.S.-based Latino artists. The “A Ver: Revisioning Art History” book series is the first of its kind, and the series’ peer review board has selected highly respected scholars to author the books.

Significantly, the Valverde monograph will be the first in the series focused on a photographer, as the books contracted thus far are exclusively dedicated to painters and performance artists. In keeping with the goals of the A Ver Series, the monograph will be rigorous in its theoretical analysis and thorough in its historical underpinnings, but accessible to a general educated audience.

My study of Valverde in *Aztlán* has already generated support from curators, as well as scholarly interest. Rita Gonzalez, a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Dr. Ondine Chavoya, Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at Williams College, have included Valverde’s photographs in a groundbreaking exhibition of the Chicano avant-garde performance group Asco, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2011. The exhibition,

entitled *Asco: Elite of the Obscure*— jointly organized by Williams College Museum of Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—will be the first retrospective on the art collective Asco (1971-1987). Rita Gonzalez and Dr. Chavoya, the curators of the exhibition, have contracted me to contribute an essay to the exhibition’s catalogue. Valverde was not officially associated with Asco, but he was a friend of its members, whom he photographed individually and in the context of documenting the group’s performances. Valverde’s inclusion in this important exhibition is a promising indicator of the interest his work is sure to garner. I have also been invited to deliver a lecture in conjunction with an exhibition focused on the photographic portraits of Andy Warhol and filmmaker Gus Van Sant at Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon. My lecture, which I plan to eventually publish as a scholarly essay, will compare the photographic work of Warhol, Van Sant and Valverde’s portraits of Asco members. The book length artist monograph on Valverde, which the College of Humanities Research Fellow Award would help advance through the completion of the first three chapters, would introduce Valverde’s work to a range of specialists in the Humanities as well as an art viewing public.