



Her mother wants her to get a job as a 'secretary or something,' but

Patssi Valdez is making it in art

By Hunter Drohojowska

Patssi Valdez had three strikes against her as she started out to be an artist: She is female, Latin and sensationally good-looking. But she didn't strike out. Instead, she has honed an autobiographical style of work that is determined to break the stereotypes of Latin women. And she is succeeding in the art game despite the odds.

Valdez is having a solo show this month at New York's INTAR Gallery, and she was commissioned by the Women's Building to create a poster with writer Sylvia Delgado for its May exhibition, "Cross-Pollination." Her poster is on display, along with others, at City Hall's Bridge Gallery through Wednesday.

Valdez, 29, lives in the faded glory of the Asbury, an apartment building across from MacArthur Park and Otis Art Institute/Parsons School of Design. Wearing a purple knit shirt with black pants and sweater, Valdez sits on the floor of her tiny apartment and rifles through a portfolio of photographs. Most are dramatic portraits of her girlfriends, solarized black and white with details rendered in colored pencil or paint. She styles the makeup and hair and occasionally dresses them in one of her elaborate paper gowns.

"I'm interested in breaking the stereotypes of Mexican women, the *chola* or the *madonna*. We all don't look that way, we're diverse. That's why I started photographing my girlfriends," she says.

Although Valdez graduated from Otis only last May, she has been a working artist for more than a decade. In the '70s, she was the often-overlooked member of the Latin collaborative art group ASCO — meaning "nausea" — formed with her artist and writer friends Willie Herron, Harry Gamboa and Gronk.

They worked together on murals, performances and other works, ostracized by the Chicano and the Anglo art communities alike.

The foursome met while attending Garfield High School in East L.A. "We started hanging out together and became inseparable. We had the same experiences and concerns, we'd brainstorm, come up with an idea and pursue it," Valdez says. "We didn't fit in the Chicano art movement, the Latins who were painting serpents and the Virgin. We were living in the present and pursuing the future. We were making comments about police brutality, gay rights, verbal abuse against women. We were considered too avant-garde by our own community. We weren't painting what Mexicans were supposed to be painting. That drew us closer together and it helped me to have a support group."

It also had its drawbacks. "I'd have shows with ASCO, I'd be there, dressed up for the opening and people would compliment the other artists and think I was a groupie or somebody's girlfriend." ASCO's last show was in 1975. "Then we started to grow in different directions, but we're still friends," she says.

Valdez's interest in collaboration, performance and installation is certainly a holdover from the ASCO days. While Herron and Gronk have garnered attention as artists (both were included in last summer's group show at the Museum of Contemporary Art), Valdez has found the voyage a bit rough.

"My mother is happy when I get recognized, but she still hopes I'll be more stable. She hopes I'll get a job as a secretary or something," Valdez says with a wry smile. Instead, in 1981, Valdez quit her job to enroll in art school. "I'd always wanted to go to art school, but I could never afford it. But I had

Patssi Valdez grew up in East LA, which is reflected in her work, including this photo collage of the city.

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to break that curiosity I had about what it was to be in an art institute. I can't say I learned to make art there because I had already been making art for years. But I learned other things. I learned history.

"Before school, I never looked at any other artists' work. I started to look at art history and it helped me feel better to know there were people in history who felt just like me. I also learned how to talk about my work, to use art terms and labels. I had never thought about labels, but you have to have them in society. And I met people from other parts of the world. I had lived in East L.A. my whole life and only hung out with Latinos until then."

Connections are another important outgrowth of art school. One of the most important to Valdez was Otis gallery director Al Nodal. He spotted her talent and commissioned her to work with teenagers from the neighborhood and paint a mural on the MacArthur Park bandshell as part of the public art program. Since its completion a year ago, the mural hasn't suffered graffiti.

Next she found herself commissioned by L.A. Contemporary Exhibitions to create a flag to fly over Pershing Square. In graphic black, white and magenta, she depicted the sultry, dark, sad eyes of "La Reina" of the City of Angels. A crown of thorns rests on her brow.

"Public art has given me a lot of recognition," she says. "It is more accessible to people and you meet more people than with a gallery exhibition."

Valdez's art and life have the edge of theatricality. "It's a form of escape from the harsh realities," she says. "I combine make-believe with realism. I'm influenced by fashion, music, and by the present, whatever is happening in my life right now."

Despite her success, her family still hopes art is a passing phase. "I told me mother they offered me a show in New York and she said, 'I wish someone would offer you a job!' They think something must be wrong with me, but I've been doing this since I was a child, before I even knew it was art. What is there to settle down about? I am getting known, I'm doing what I want, and doing what I have to do."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.