



LOS ANGELES

John Valadez: "Como Fregas I What Now" at Robert Berman Gallery

With photorealist and social acuity as well as a penchant for the melodramatic, John Valadez dissects Los Angeles's Chicano experience. His work addresses issues of estrangement. He wants his work to go beyond reportage to embed allegories, noting: "These are stories that I don't know where they are going to go... it's all very mysterious." His murals, for which he's best known, are theatrical: vivid characterizations, large, detailed sets, and conflict born of alienation. This exhibition, featuring pastel and acrylic work, is as theatrical as his murals. His art can be described as baroque enigmas. They are splashy and true-to-life, but they also leave the viewer with a sense of contradiction and mystery. They're sensual. They're ritualistic. They are staged, but they're also raw. They document Los Angeles street life, but they're also open-ended.

Valadez has been compared to Richard Estes. Perhaps a better comparison is with Salvador Dalí. Dalí painted his Surrealist pieces in an academic pompier style. The Spaniard's subject matter is puzzling but its articulation is clear as day. At 47-by-78 inches, Valadez's *Drowning the Firebird* is a massive piece. It shows a yellow car that straddles the shore and the ocean. Two women are inside the car; two men are on the shore. Pictorially the composition is balanced. The details are perfect. There are the dynamic poses of the bodies; rocks that crop up out of the water; the spume of the crashing waves; the striations of the

water's surface; the tincture of wispy white clouds in an otherwise blue sky. And yet clarity doesn't preclude the work's ceremonial mystery.

The current exhibition at Robert Berman Gallery, titled "Como Fregas I What Now," includes a small survey of works from the 1970s to the present, among them a selection of the documentary photos that he uses for inspiration. As this show makes clear, John Valadez is a treasured LA resource. His work achieves something remarkable: it's both sincere and monumental. It is organic and homegrown. It has a singular Angeleno look and feel. It begins and ends with an apotheosis of an indigenous culture, but it transcends the particulars of that culture to become universal symbols. At the same time, it preserves the mystery behind that culture. It's as relevant here as Los Angeles as it is in Bordeaux, where he just completed a residency.

—JAMES SCARBOROUGH

"SOPHIA II," 2014, **John Valadez**
 PASTEL ON PAPER, 49½" x 35½"
 PHOTO: ALEXANDRA FIERRO
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