

Leo Valledor: Interview about the artist with Professor Carlos Villa of San Francisco Art Institute

CV: Carlos Villa

MB: Maria Bonn

CV: I think that he is probably super important. He is super important because at the time there were maybe five or six artists, all of whom came from the Philippines, that set the foundation for Pilipino-American art history for instance. But the first practitioner, or the first participant, in the art world who was born here was my cousin Leo Valedor. And Leo Valedor was an artist who came here to California School of Fine Arts on a scholarship directly from high school. He was about 18 at the time and he excelled so much in what he did. He stood beyond most of the people here at school that were just at his stage and he was recognized by a lot of the people who started the Six Gallery. The people who started the Six Gallery were all members of studio 15. Studio 15 was one of the studios, it's an honors studio now, but before that it was a studio in which Joan Brown, Hayward King, all of these people and Wally Hedrick...

MB: Here?

CV: Yeah, here at the school. And it was a hot bed. All of these people were students at the school. They were the people beyond the great teachers and they went out and started the Six Gallery. Well, they saw Leo's work and they said you are coming into Studio 15. So being in Studio 15 was incredibly honorific and he was the youngest kid there. Joan Brown was actually just as old as Leo. So they invited him and I think it was Wally Hedrick who said that none of the teachers here have anything to say to you and I think that you should do whatever you want to do. So they scheduled him for a show over at the Six Gallery. And so the Six Gallery, it was a hot bed, it was very active and near the end, around 1956-57 I can't be sure about the date, he was a part of the Six Gallery or at least a part of the list of exhibitors. And included in that was Ginsberg who wrote Howl and he did his first performance of Howl and right at the end they bashed and killed the piano and so many people were sad about that because that was part of the music thing. But Leo was very, very amazing. He kept painting and he was starving most of the time I mean he really fit that whole thing of the starving artist. And I remember when I was in the army in Korea I would get these letters from his wife saying he was doing these paintings and he was going to have a show and stuff. And it was amazing when I got back because here was Leo Valedor making these sculptures, making these paintings, and making huge paintings, for 18-19 years old, he was making these paintings, you know like 10 X 10 ft. And it sounds commonplace now but then it wasn't commonplace, it was a pretty heroic scale. He was living in the middle of the black and Pilipino ghetto in the Fillmore district. He was living in an alley. Where is he getting all of this impetus? As a young kid who is finding out about all of this stuff visually, visually informing himself. He is an artist who came up all the way through

this history that Deborah came up through. He wasn't one of the founders of the Six Gallery and there was only one artist of color who was there and his name was Hayward King. He became a curator later on, he started as a printmaker and he became a curator and I really suspect at that time since it was before civil rights, there was a kind of fear, a kind of paranoia, at least among a lot of the people of color. There was always a reticence about going into the other world. Leo definitely had that but California School of the Arts was, as Deborah was remembering, it was like a nurturing place. It was a place in which all of these ideas that were fragile were born and could be worked on here and that was the whole mission of California School of Fine Arts, that these ideas would be not only born here but also worked on here. And you would be able to have guidance if you wanted to push them out into the world or wherever you wanted to push them out. Leo Valedor left the school after his first year. And he never went back for a degree. He went to New York in about 1960 and was an artist there who was recognized by a lot of people. And when I say a lot of people I am talking about an art world that wasn't so large then. The contemporary art world was basically abstract expressionists. Those were the established people and then came the people who became the pop art movement. But right in the middle of that was a director of a gallery and it was a green gallery and his name was Dick, I forgot his last name. But at any rate, he was a discoverer of talent, which formed into the pop art movement later on. A lot of the people he discovered became part of the Castile Gallery. So there was the Green Gallery and the Castile Gallery that were very prominent in the 60's; and Dick Bellamy recognized Leo Valedor also... his name is Dick Bellamy. So Dick Bellamy would always visit him because Leo had a very unique way of paintings. We are going to have illustrations of his paintings. Leo was then befriended by people like Sol LeWitt, and many of the minimalists of the time; Smithson, Nancy Holt and also, I'm blanking out on names. But at any rate, he was an artist that everybody was looking to. The Park Place Group came at about that time and it was a group of maverick artists who their leader was actually Mark di Suvero, and all of these artists that were a part of the Park Place Gallery were dealing with visual vocabularies that had to do with physics, geometrical forms and Leo fit right in and everybody wanted to be a part of Leo. But Leo was a very reticent artist but one who was also very prolific artist and one who was always looked up to at that time. I guess you are going to have to interview me a little more about Leo.

MB: We're recording; we're getting a lot of information now.

CV: Leo was born in 1936 and he died in about 1989. And he died of a heart attack and I'm sorry to say that because he was my cousin and my best friend. I remember when he had a brain aneurism about 3 or 4 years before he died. It was almost like I was seeing him; it was like we weren't having the same conversations that we once had. And I would always think that he was faking it because I wanted him to be the same person that he was before and I was always in some kind of denial about his state of mind. I'm just glad that his paintings are still around and his paintings still inspire. He's going to be a part of a two-person show in November in New York and his spirit still lives. He is one of the reasons why I started on this project. I

remember teaching this Pilipino art history class up at USF. Which is going in it's fourth year now. You had your pioneer artists who came and then Leo and then myself. I'm following after Leo of course but Leo was one of the very few pioneers of the, or he was the pioneer in San Francisco. A person who was born here, educated here, participated in the art world here, and not as just a hobby painter, he was somebody who, as Deborah said, who had total and complete commitment and focus to what he was doing. It wasn't because of fame and it wasn't because of fortune it was because there was something about paintings that allowed him to be free. I think that meant a lot to him because growing up in a black and Filipino ghetto, at a place where not even any of the people cared for themselves in a very healthy way, he rose above that with his talent and he rose above that with his painting and he was an artist that young Pilipino artists can look up to because he was the kind of pioneer that he was.