



Rodrigo Valenzuela: New Works for a Post-Worker's World at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles



Installation view, RODRIGO VALENZUELA: *New Works for a Post-Worker's World*, Luis De Jesus Los Angeles, 2022. Courtesy of Luis De Jesus Los Angeles. Photography by Paul Salveson. © Rodrigo Valenzuela. Courtesy of Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.

Rodrigo Valenzuela: *New Works for a Post-Worker's World*
Luis De Jesus Los Angeles
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By LITA BARRIE, January 2022

Rodrigo Valenzuela's futuristic vision of a mechanical world devoid of humans is so ominous, it makes us shudder - much like the surrealist films of Luis Bunuel. Valenzuela creates poetry from rebellion in eerie factory scenes that are filled with sinister machines and scary automatons - yet there are no humans in sight or glimpses of nature, except the mist which creates a surreal light. We do not know why the humans have gone or why they have turned machines into dangerous weapons. Was there a revolution? These puzzling, dream-like images are left open for the viewer to interpret. They are so visually well-organized that the underlying aggression and paranoia is almost subliminally felt. As Valenzuela told me, they are "memories from the future."

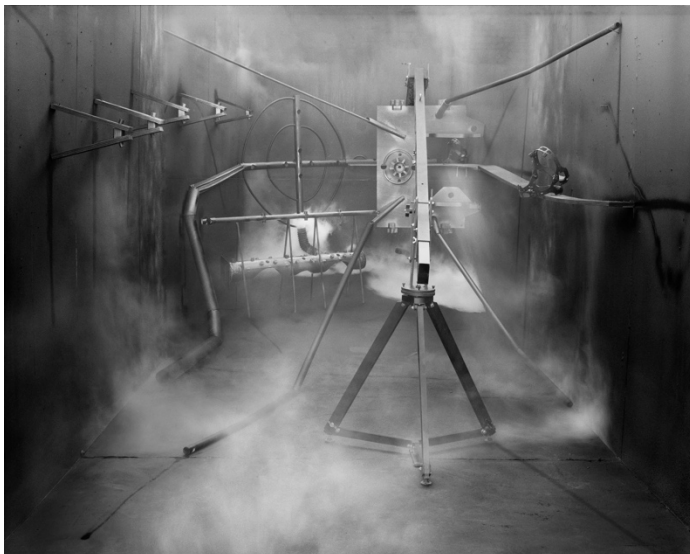
Valenzuela is a Chilean-born, Los Angeles based artist who is steeped in film, photography, art history and philosophy. Even though he had a degree in photography from the University of Chile, he worked as an undocumented construction worker when he first emigrated to the U.S. He then earned a degree in philosophy from Evergreen State College and an MFA from the University of Washington before taking a teaching position at UCLA, where he is now the head of the photography department. As the son of a strong union member in Chile, Valenzuela's experience as a laborer gave him a firm grasp of the plight of the working class in the U.S. today, with the decline of unions and diminishing workers' rights. As a Latin American, Valenzuela deeply understands what he calls "the aesthetic of protest" which most of us saw for the first time in the Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Valenzuela's work is also influenced by the Chilean surrealist painter Roberto Matta, and contains many references to the weapons seen in paintings by the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam.



Rodrigo Valenzuela, Case #2, 2021, archival pigment print mounted on Dibond, 40 x 50 in. (101.6 x 127 cm). © Rodrigo Valenzuela. Courtesy of Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.

The current exhibition is the third in a trilogy exploring labor themes and automation which contribute to a diminishing workforce. The first exhibition was at Orange County Museum in 2018, and the second at Asya Geisberg Gallery New York in 2020. In recognition of the significance of this ongoing project, Valenzuela was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2021. This current exhibition coincides with the Great Resignation, which makes it more relevant to the grievances of frustrated workers today.

Valenzuela's photographs are not only politically important, but they also have a menacing beauty, as he is highly skilled at using composition and lighting to create a sense of mystery. Valenzuela makes black-and-white photographic tableaux from fictional scenes he stages - rather like Joel-Peter Witkins, except without people. Inside an eight-foot by sixteen-foot plywood shed in his backyard, which he calls a "theater box," Valenzuela makes contraptions out of found materials, including washing machine drums, television mounting brackets, computer chairs, styrofoam casing and other detritus he finds in his neighborhood and recycles. Using protruding nails, screws, blades and knives, he transforms this collection of debris into threatening weapons. He told me he goes into his theater box to fantasize, so he constructs things that are a "documentation of the imagination."



Rodrigo Valenzuela, Afterwork #9, 2021, silver gelatin print, 40 x 32 in. (101.6 x 81.28 cm), edition of 3 with 1 AP. © Rodrigo Valenzuela. Courtesy of Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.

Valenzuela creates an otherworldly quality in his images by using the smog which comes through a hole in the back of his three wall theater box to create the mist, which makes the space look like an ambiguous imaginary projection. He built his studio without a ceiling, with only a plastic covering to diffuse natural light. He uses the same vantage point for all his photographs, setting up his tripod camera in the same station so that he can view the scene over a prolonged period, and visually think with the image. For Valenzuela, photography is a mental exercise beyond what we first see, which makes his images so distinctive. As he says they are “a departure point not an arrival point.”

Photography is most often used for its immediacy and rapidity, but Valenzuela’s images take at least two weeks to make, and even longer to print. Valenzuela loves the rich monochromatic tones of late 19th and early 20th century photography of factories. He painstakingly makes silver gelatin prints in his darkroom to keep mistakes and flaws that make each image unique. He also makes screen prints on top of collages of stamped time cards. Valenzuela’s use of an old-world, slow, hand-making process is a declaration of nostalgia for a bygone era when human labor was valued. It is also a statement that meaning in art resides in the making.

Valenzuela is philosophical about what it means to be a photographer and a Latin American artist living in Los Angeles. While the surreal quality of his mental landscapes is rooted in his cultural background, the dystopian sci-fi quality of his fantasies of the future is very L.A. - even if no one really understands what that means - as yet. This fusion gives Valenzuela’s old-style black-and-white photographs of strange machinery an almost retro-futuristic quality. These are images we can return to over and over again, rather like an aesthetic feedback loop that recalls the lost ideals of modernism in late-stage capitalism. **WM**



Lita Barrie is a freelance art critic based in Los Angeles. Her writing appears in *Hyperallergic*, *Riot Material*, *Apricota Journal*, *Painter’s Table*, *ArtnowLA*, *HuffPost*, *Painter’s Table*, *Artweek.L.A.*, *art ltd* and *Art Agenda*. In the 90s Barrie wrote for *Artspace*, *Art Issues*, *Artweek*, *Visions* and *Vernacular*. She was born in New Zealand where she wrote a weekly newspaper art column for the *New Zealand National Business Review* and contributed to *The Listener*, *Art New Zealand*, *AGMANZ*, *ANTIC*, *Sites and Landfall*. She also conducted live interviews with artists for Radio New Zealand’s Access Radio. Barrie has written numerous essays for art gallery and museum catalogs including: Barbara Kruger (National Art Gallery New Zealand) and Roland Reiss (Cal State University Fullerton). Barrie taught aesthetic philosophy at Claremont Graduate University, Art Center and Otis School of Art and Design. In New Zealand, Barrie was awarded three Queen Elizabeth 11 Arts Council grants and a Harkness grant for art criticism. Her feminist interventions are discussed in *The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* and an archive of her writing is held in The New Zealand National Library, Te Puna Matauranga Aotearoa.

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