

The Playfulness Behind **GABRIELA GONZÁLEZ LEAL'S** Art



Wings, 2021 (commemorative bill for the centennial of the Mexican Constitution / five peso bill, Mexico, 1963).



Benched, 2019 (lithograph, prismacolor, and acrylic on paper).

There's nothing better than a metaphor to describe Gabriela González Leal's art. Teeter-tottering in time, her art interprets the society we live in. The past is no longer the time behind us, nor is it a nostalgic, lost paradise: it's the ability to transcend the violence and pain that has marked our time to generate a new outlook that might not be idyllic, but is still encouraging.

Voices of Mexico (VM): Your work clearly has impetus. What is this artistic impulse anchored in?

Gabriela González Leal (GGL): My artistic motivation comes from the everyday. This vital impulse is what gets me up in the morning, every morning. To me, creation is a vessel that allows me to say and express everything I think and feel. Currently, my art is situated in something I'd call play. Starting with the pandemic, I began playing and letting loose in order to find the freest forms. Before, I used to limit myself by saying, "If this isn't art, I'd better not do it." I let myself flow and started discovering materials and playing with them, with their textures, with ideas. The result is a coming and going, where I grab onto a thread to weave deeper ideas together.

VM: Like which?

GGL: I started my series "Héroes" (Heroes) by intervening old, Mexican bills to create small, sculpture-like silhouettes alluding to newsworthy events in which children are made invisible or are victims of violence. Subsequently, the idea for the series "Dioses" (Gods) emerged from "Heroes," since it also involved deconstructing toys: I intervened soccer balls to create masks akin to those of the ancient gods. Another piece, *El patio de mi casa* (The Patio in My House)

All photos are courtesy of the artist.

consists of a series of garments created with various materials to tailor our identity through traditional games.¹ The idea tying these three projects together is children being made invisible and the violence they suffer, all using the concept of play.

VM: Why play? Why playfulness?

GGL: I use play as a process of symbolic creation to represent reality. In a playful space, I can talk about these problems indirectly, without having to name certain horrors, like violence, child labor, femicide, and the abuse of young girls. This playful field has allowed me to be more subtle and address issues from the stance of the material. For instance, intervening soccer balls and having girls don pre-Hispanic masks is a way of not biasing the public, but of revisiting my ancestors and roots through play, transposing themselves to the present moment.

VM: Directly addressing some of the issues that children face could be too much to bear. The army of child soldiers and child day-laborers come to mind.

GGL: Of course, and that's not what interests me. What I'm trying to do is to emphasize children's innocence and the need to safeguard childhood, because if we don't, we'll be facing a very uncertain future. To me, childhood is a symbol of the keystone, the beginning, a starting point that we must care for and cherish. We need to remember our roots and our past so that history doesn't keep repeating itself.

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No Admittance, 2020 (five Bolivar note, Venezuela, 1985).



Calakmul, 2020 (art object and photo log).



*Argentinean Child with Mask III, 2019
(child's mask made with soccer balls; digital photo).*



Child's Mask II, 2019 (unused soccer ball and string).

VM: So, do you see the future in the origin?

GGL: Totally. I mean, I believe we have to preserve a lot of things—for instance, right now, I'm revisiting our ancestors' positive conceptions of life and childhood. While it's true that children were sometimes sacrificed for certain purposes, these acts did mean something—they were meant to secure the harvest and food—; plus, children were compared to precious creatures, like birds with gorgeous feathers. I aim to recover these symbols and the great value that our ancestors saw in children, unlike nowadays, when today's sacrifices—killing them, involving them in drug dealing and violence, or abusing girls—are absurd and unprecedented. They make no sense: violence is becoming so blatant, so mainstream, that seeing a dead child is something we've normalized.

VM: How has the pandemic impacted you?

GGL: In every sense. At the personal level, it completely changed my perception of death—an idea I used to perceive as distant. At the beginning, the lockdown didn't affect me much because I'm a very solitary person and spend a lot of time working at my studio, but with the pandemic, it's not that you don't want to go out, but that you can't, because it's dangerous. Seeing the empty streets, with news of illness and death, made me feel a certain hollowness and a sense of uncertainty in the face of a rather disturbing future. Nonetheless, this very uncertainty pushed me to start to free myself from constraints and to experiment. I believe that, during this time, my work has progressed quite a bit, in many ways, not just conceptually, but also in terms of materials; there's plenty of work underway. From the creative point of view, the pandemic catalyzed change in lots of artists; some colleagues I've spoken to have mentioned that their works have taken significant turns.

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Indigenous Little Girls across from the Juárez Semicircle Monument, 2020 (10 peso bill, Mexico 1967).



Child Laborers, 2020 (one peso bill, Mexico 1967).

VM: Do you think we'll be different after this, or will we be overcome with amnesia until the next catastrophe or the next collective tragedy?

GGL: I recently saw the Chilean movie *Machuca*. It's about a couple of kids who live in very different situations: one lives comfortably, while his friend lives precariously. And that's when you realize that history keeps repeating itself. Unfortunately, I don't think much will change. You might change individually, but then you realize the streets are still covered in trash; people keep killing and mugging other people. I think we'll end up the same, or worse. After the lockdown, you're suddenly free and you hanker for lots of things. I don't think we'll see a better future.

VM: Perhaps for the children?

GGL: They're the future. If we don't educate them, if we don't teach them and give them a certain awareness so that the future will change, if we keep mistreating them and exploiting them, then there won't be a future, because we won't be able to change it. They'll have to forge their own path, which is why it's important to give them a healthy childhood that can unfold in peace. We always say we want the pandemic to leave us to something good, but, personally, I don't believe in humanity much. We're not doing well as a society, but at least individually I hope that this experience will leave us something that resonates positively in societies across the world, but there's deep uncertainty ahead. **VM**

Notes

1 My House's Patio is a traditional childhood game still played in kindergartens. In this project, the patio is the artist's environment, and her home is the country. [Editors' Note.]