

The Edge of Adolescence
By Hua Hsu | December 13, 2025



Griselda Rosas, *El payaso de la Chancla*, 2025

When I was young, I imagined that life progressed as a series of discrete linear segments. Puberty would pass and I'd never again worry about zits or feeling awkward. I'd turn eighteen and be fully equipped to participate in the political process. I assumed that I'd wake up one day and cross a threshold into adulthood. Life is too fluid for such clear demarcations, yet the idea spoke to the relationship I felt to time as I was growing up—I yearned to fast-forward through all the slow, boring bits and get to the adventures I coveted and believed that I deserved.

As I've gotten older, I've realized that such attempts to segment a life are arbitrary, even if they satisfy some need for order. When my son turned ten, earlier this year, I suddenly became worried about adolescence. This was partly because of the hit Netflix show by that name, about a troubled thirteen-year-old, which came out a few months prior to his birthday, bringing with it countless think pieces about the glum interiority of

tween boys. Adolescence, I read, was a crossroads that required constant vigilance, where too soft a touch or too much screen time might result in some kind of teen-age radicalization.

In fact, my kid was no different than he'd been as a nine-year-old: sweet, loving, oblivious. I learned that the length and character of adolescence is fuzzy, with some experts saying it ends as late as one's thirties. In other words, it's most useful as a kind of narrative device—a socially sanctioned time for difficulty and sullenness and parental worrying, akin to that span when a baby's grouchiness is automatically attributed to teething.

The fifteenth California Biennial, currently on show at the Orange County Museum of Art, is about adolescence. California trades on its outsized mythology, and previous installments have surveyed how emerging artists reckon with the state's status and symbolism. The current biennial, curated by Courtenay Finn, Christopher Y. Lew, and Lauren Leving and titled "Desperate, Scared, But Social," considers what it's like to grow up somewhere that's often used as a metaphor for youth itself. The exhibit doesn't treat youth as a vague, wide-open expanse but instead focusses on the subtle transformations that begin just shy of the teen years—the new calibration of interiority and exteriority, the emergent understanding of independence and accountability. It is a time of awkwardness and boredom, fearlessness and insecurity, when stasis feels like torture, a last gasp of innocence before you should really know better.

The biennial's rooms feel like a collection of pre-internet distress signals, low-level emergency beacons, messages in bottles. It reminded me of my own desire to figure myself out in private and hide the evidence, something that seems far more difficult today, when our actions are tracked and archived.

LUIS DE JESUS LOS ANGELES

1110 Mateo Street, Los Angeles CA 90021
213 395 0762 | gallery@luisdejesus.com
luisdejesus.com

My son came with me to the biennial, and in return I promised to take him to the amusement park at Universal Studios in Hollywood. He's accustomed to tagging along to things I want to see, with a begrudging enthusiasm that has begun to fade as his own sense of autonomy evolves. He didn't detect the layers of ironic meaning in Yao's reëxamination of Disneyland; maybe he'd grown up too comfortable to recognize her comment on immigrant thrift. He was simply delighted that junk could be in an art museum. His curiosity was sufficiently piqued that he listened to some Emily's Sassy Lime songs in the corner ("Pretty good"). If he lingered before a piece for more than a few seconds, I would swoop over and ask what drew him to this specific work. His responses ranged from "I don't know, it's interesting" to just "I don't know," and then he'd ask when we could go to the gift shop. Although parenthood has changed my views on nature versus nurture, I have come to believe certain things must be hereditary—in this case, a love of souvenirs.

Eventually, he pulled me into a room to show me his favorite work, "El Payaso de la Chancla," a charcoal drawing by Griselda Rosas, a multidisciplinary artist who works in the San Diego-Tijuana border region. It appeared to depict a demented creature streaked in blacks and grays, with a lopsided face, bulbous eyes, spikes protruding from its neck. Given Rosas's work on border culture and the legacies of colonization, I wondered if this was some mythological being. But it turned out to be her rendition of a monster that her son invented when he was eleven.

My kid drifted over to study a series of Rosas's pieces nearby, his hands carefully folded behind his back. Riots of color, a horse or a human figure here or there, stringy webs of fabric. These had begun as her son's watercolor paintings, and Rosas had slowly added her own layers of embroidery. I was drawn to a colorful tapestry that looked like some kind of psychedelic hide being stretched a dozen ways, with bits of fabric that had been tightened and sewn so that the surface was all ripples and bubbles. I leaned in and saw a zipper, and then what appeared to be a distressed logo from a T-shirt. It turned out to be a tapestry made from the scraps of her son's shirts and sweaters as he quickly outgrew them. I recognized the desire to stop time—the melancholy of a child growing too fast. For many, adolescence marks a turn inward, a withdrawal into private realms. Rosas, here, was trying to keep her son in her world for a moment longer, compelling him to understand something about her: she is his mother, but she is an artist, as well.