


# MISSING

## A Conversation with Gabriel Chaile

by Elizabeth Fullerton





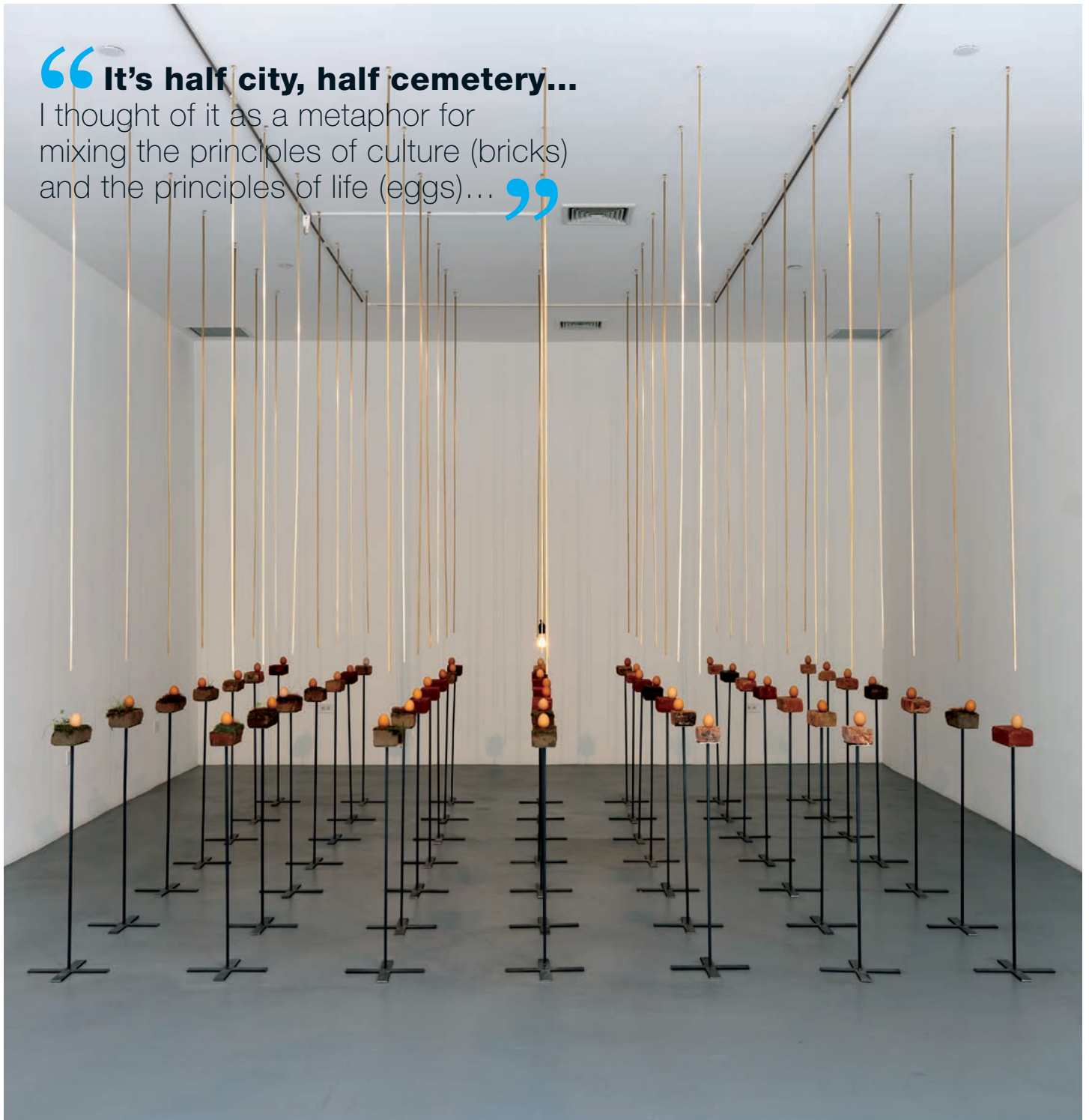
Installation view  
of "The Milk of Dreams,"  
59th Venice Biennale,  
Venice, 2022.

ANDREA ROSSETTI, COURTESY BARRO ARTE CONTEMPORANEO, BUENOS AIRES, GABRIEL CHALE, LISBON, AND CHERTLÜDDE, BERLIN

# Pieces:

“ **It’s half city, half cemetery...**

I thought of it as a metaphor for mixing the principles of culture (bricks) and the principles of life (eggs)... ”





**Gabriel Chaile** blends past and present in his poetic sculptures, uniting ancient ritual and function with a contemporary social consciousness. His colossal adobe oven-creatures inspired by pre-Columbian forms are regularly used for baking empanadas and bringing people together to share a meal. Encompassing performance, photography, drawing, painting, sculpture, and installation, his practice is driven by a strong sense of social justice rooted in his Indigenous and mixed European heritage. Chaile grew up in Tucumán, northwest Argentina, an area rich in pre-Hispanic culture, which inspired his idea of the “genealogy of form,” which suggests that neglected stories and histories are passed down and reworked through objects.

Chaile, who is now based in Lisbon, has had a number of high-profile outings recently, including the 2022 Venice Biennale, a commission for the High Line, and a show at Barro Gallery, both in New York. He also installed his most ambitious show to date last year at Studio Voltaire, where he covered the interior of the former chapel in adobe, effectively transplanting the rustic mud brick churches of his homeland to London. “Usos y Costumbres” (“Traditions and Customs”) was a collaboration with his friend, the Argentinian painter Laura Ojeda Bär, who also participated in this discussion. Together, they used the space to rethink Western hierarchies of value and power, collapsing time and cultures into a new and vital synthesis of survival and resistance.

**Elizabeth Fullerton:** “Usos y Costumbres” seemed a departure from your signature sculptures, focusing on the architecture of the space, even though your giant sculpture-portrait, *Laura*, took center-stage.

**Gabriel Chaile:** Laura and I wanted to develop a project that involved a two-way dialogue while maintaining our individual autonomy. This collaboration allowed

both of us to experiment and do something unexpected. I wanted to create space somehow and remembered images of adobe churches in northwestern Argentina. Basically, we transformed the white cube into a brown cube inspired by those chapels. It’s the most ambitious project I’ve done, because I’d never used this amount of clay before—two and a half tons—not even in Venice.

**EF:** What is your connection to the adobe churches?

**GC:** I was born in Tucumán, a very urban, intense city, so it’s not as if I’ve known these adobe churches since childhood—I was far from the mountains where they are located. I know them from images and because my family told me of the tradition of adobe buildings. Similarly, I didn’t grow up with the pre-Columbian ceramics that inspire my work because I had a Western education that ignored those ancient cultures. I discovered them through my art practice and felt an immediate attraction to their forms and colors. They felt deeply connected to me and my ancestors. My family had come from the mountains, created their lives in the city, and lost all knowledge of their past. Through art, I began to recover and invent characters and histories in the face of erasure and denial.

**EF:** You’re trying to fill in the gaps?

**GC:** Yes. There’s a concept called “archaeological lacunas” in which you attempt to reconstruct missing pieces of a broken object with plaster, but you’re not sure if you’ve filled them in correctly. Filling in this white space of the archaeological lacuna is what I do in my practice; I invent it.

**EF:** At what point did you discover a personal affinity with these ancient objects?

**GC:** I studied art history at university, but I was also very interested in archaeology because I wanted to unearth my family’s lost past. I absorbed a lot of European art, which was wonderful. I spent time reading about Michelangelo’s methods and copying models in



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE:  
**Salir del surco al labrar la tierra: delirios de grandeza II** (*Leaving the Furrow when Tilling the Soil: Delusions of Grandeur II*), 2014.  
49 eggs, iron bases, brass, bricks with moss, and one light bulb, 447 x 334 x 338 cm.





Gabriel Chaile in collaboration with Laura Ojeda Bär, installation view of "Usos y Costumbres," Studio Voltaire, London, 2023.





SARAH RAINER, COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND STUDIO VOLTAIRE

gesso. I only really discovered pre-Columbian ceramics when a teacher projected some images in a lesson. I was struck by their beauty and humor and began copying them, like Picasso did with African masks. But whereas for him those objects were foreign and exotic, for me, these humble ceramics were a type of mirror. I started to realize why I was always interested in people on the margins, people whose pasts had also been erased.

**EF:** Today, the world has an image of Argentina devoid of Indigenous cultures.

**GC:** That's right, but, in fact, there are many people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry. It wasn't just the Spanish colonizers who abused the Indigenous populations, but the Argentinians themselves. They separated families and sent the children to serve in white homes. So, people grew up with no knowledge of their origins, without family or education, and inhabited the peripheries of cities, stigmatized and impoverished. My own parents, who were born in the 20th century, were illiterate. But now, artists with dark skin like me are gaining acclaim and recognition.

**EF:** Buenos Aires has cultivated a reputation as the Paris of South America. In fact, Argentina replicated much of the French capital's architecture in its cities. Were you harking back to this tradition of appropriation with the Studio Voltaire show?

**GC:** Yes, for sure. The cultural exchange between the Americas and Europe is a super violent collision. As an artist, that is basically how creativity evolves: you observe something, take it, and advance it. Through our insistence on using a material specific to another place, we have copied the London architecture and transported it elsewhere somehow. We were also thinking of the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade's *Anthropophagic Manifesto* (1928) in which he proposes that you derive power from cannibalizing different cultures and traditions.

**Laura Ojeda Bär:** The Studio Voltaire project is a very layered one. It's also about creating a new kind of museum, thinking about the relationship between great institutions of art and something with a more homely feel. Gabriel initially suggested that I make a





huge painting to fill the wall at the entrance, but I felt it should remain adobe. It's a very strong image to be in front of an 18-foot wall of adobe. Our original plan was to use this brown landscape to hang paintings, but since adobe is such a malleable material, we thought some paintings should be embedded into the wall or the wall could come out. The idea was that the wall became a protagonist.

**EF:** Your diminutive paintings are mostly of famous sculptures by the likes of Joseph Kosuth, Louise Bourgeois, and Doris Salcedo and of disputed ancient objects from the British Museum, such as the Warren Cup, a Greco-Roman drinking vessel, and a Moai from Easter Island.

**LOB:** I made them in Buenos Aires from reproductions. I'm interested in that distance. I've taken important works from Western art history and made them small and cutesy, presenting them on an intimate, domestic scale. It's the reverse of what Gabriel does, which is making the small and invisible monumental in a non-traditional technique like adobe. But I also feel an intense connection with these works I've never seen before, as Gabriel does with the adobe chapels in Argentina.

**EF:** There were multiple layers of copying and re-appropriation going on, not least in terms of Studio Voltaire's history as a chapel.

**GC:** We made a copy of the space, conceptually. In transforming it into another material, we made an active observation of how Studio Voltaire works, its history and role today, its links with non-art spheres. It's a meaningful way for us to think about collaborative work because we have founded a cooperative experimental platform in Portugal called NVS. Instead of changing our work to enter the art-world structure, we have created a cultural network of friends and colleagues, a publishing house, a gastro-nomic center with international artists, musicians, and others. It's very fluid and experimental, and there's a lot we don't agree on; we work in various mediums, have discussions about the nature of art and the artist's responsibilities. We are all very different, that's the real power of the project.

**EF: Do you feel a responsibility to recover forgotten voices from the past?**

**GC:** It's a question of occupying a place that wasn't intended for me. There's a community that is not necessarily Indigenous, but is poor, that recognizes itself not only in my work, but also in my way of occupying other social spaces. This is a new responsibility because I didn't plan it. In trying to fill the archaeological gaps, I take forms that tell dark and difficult stories and transform them through synthesis into humor or irony, but the narrative is still there.

**EF: You're best known for your oven-creatures like those shown in Venice. What was the genesis of those forms?**

**GC:** Clay awoke a social consciousness in me. I was invited to make a sculpture to commemorate 200 years of Argentina's history, and I planned to imitate another Tucumán artist whose trademark material was resin. But then reality hit, because I couldn't afford the material. I had clay in my studio and was playing around with spherical nests made by the hornero bird, which look like ovens (its name means "oven-maker"). I would find nests on the ground while out walking and bring them back to the studio.

I tried to apply the clay to a Styrofoam armature, but it kept falling off; and then I remembered that my dad used to mix clay with other materials to make adobe to cover the brick oven that we had in our backyard. Our family lived by selling bread, so the oven, similar in shape to a hornero nest, was a very precious object in our household. I hadn't thought of the adobe oven previously because I wanted to use materials more associated with art.

**EF: It must have been a revelation.**

**GC:** Yes, and it allowed for an art that could be useful. The first sculpture, *Irene*, was just a figure; but in the second one, *Patricia*, which was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires, I connected the shape of the oven with pre-Columbian ceramics. Suddenly I felt that I'd discovered something quite unique. However, my oven still didn't work. Then, I was invited to an art festival in a tiny village in the mountains, where they taught me to make a functioning oven.

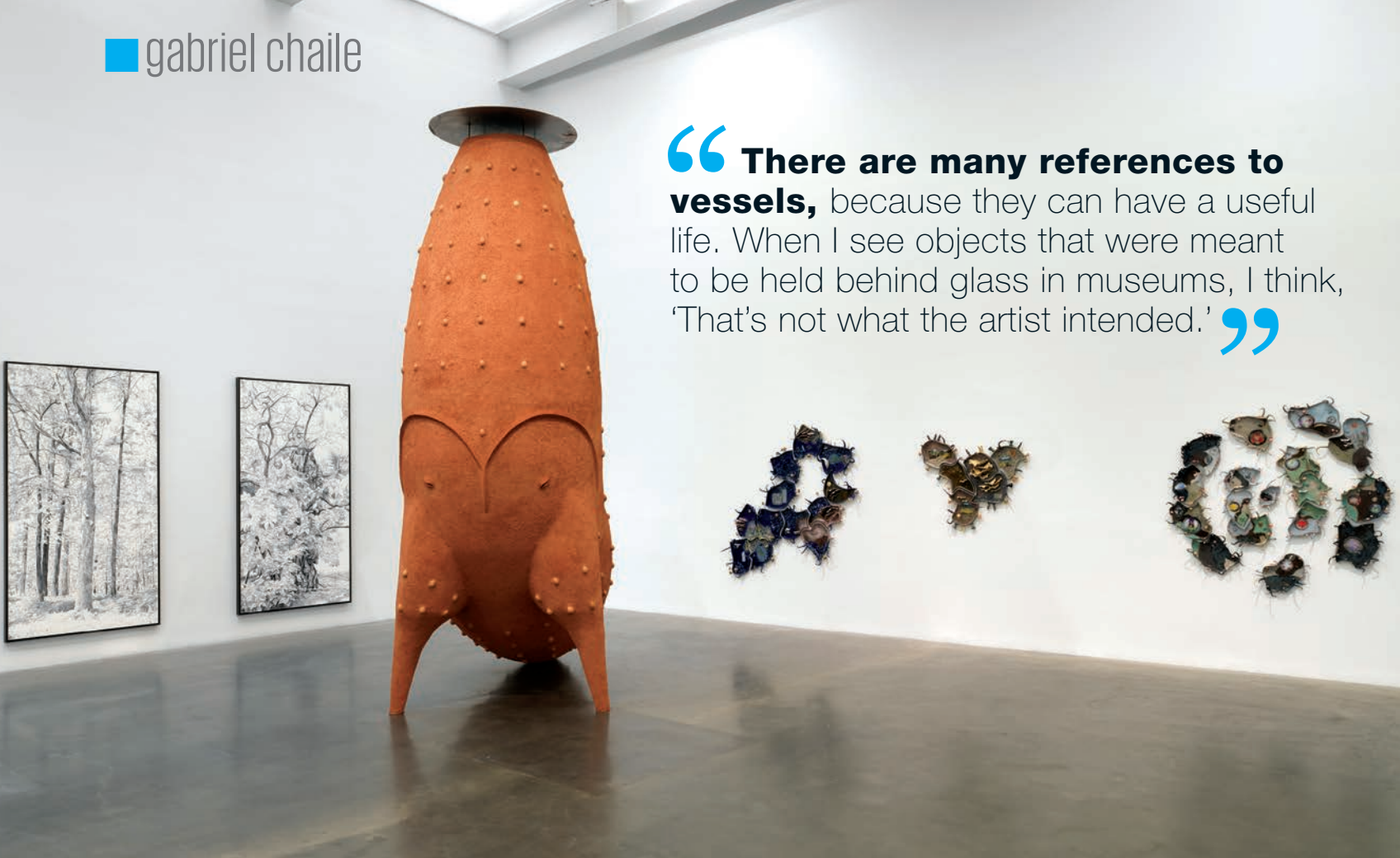


OPPOSITE AND  
THIS PAGE:

**Patricia,**  
2017.

Adobe, iron, bricks,  
and eggs,  
320 x 150 x 210 cm.





“ There are many references to vessels, because they can have a useful life. When I see objects that were meant to be held behind glass in museums, I think, ‘That’s not what the artist intended.’ ”

**EF: Why did you give human traits to the sculptures?**

**GC:** Anthropomorphic characteristics are very typical of pre-Columbian ceramics. When I was living in Buenos Aires with a group of marginalized friends and giving art classes in deprived neighborhoods, I saw the forms of the ceramics repeated in the faces of these people—the grapefruit cheeks, the little eyes. I would ask them about their past, and no one knew. I realized that centuries of suppressing Indigenous culture had created this systematic inequality and denied them their history.

**EF: Your work clearly has an activist aspect.**

**GC:** It does. My most political sculpture was *Diego (Retrato de Diego Núñez)* (2018), named after a young man killed by trigger-happy police in the immigrant neighborhood of La Boca where I was living. I had wanted to make a classical bronze sculpture of his face, but Cecilia Alemani, who was curating the public art

THIS PAGE:  
Installation view of *Mama Luchona* in “Soft Water Hard Stone,” New Museum Triennial, New York, 2021–22.

OPPOSITE:  
*El viento sopla donde quiere (The wind blows where it wishes)*, 2023.  
Adobe and mixed metal, 770 x 439 x 277 cm.

project Art Basel Cities, convinced me that the adobe oven works were portraits and that I should continue developing them. So, I decided to make an oven sculpture with Diego’s name and invite the public to eat pizza and empanadas while talking about issues of social injustice, stigmatization, institutional violence, and poverty.

**EF: The sculptures that you presented in Venice were also political in a way.**

**GC:** Yes, I developed those pieces based on the clearest confirmed information that I have about my family’s past; that’s why the sculptures have names and surnames. There was always a certain haziness around these family members because little was known about where they came from. Venice was a space of maximum visibility and legitimation, so it allowed me to say that these people existed and exist. It’s like a manifesto.



**EF: So each has a distinct personality?**

**GC:** Yes, the angriest one is my dad; the one that tells stories is my mom. My grandmother, who is of African origin, has an afro; and there's my grandfather, who has simple features because not much is known about him. The central figure is named after my maternal grandmother, Rosario Liendro; I never knew her personally, but I heard many stories about her. She was an artist and a militant activist. Her history had the biggest formative influence on me. Her portrait is based on a small ceramic piece from the Condorhuasi culture. It's made rustically, but, to me, it seems much more beautiful than more technically sophisticated works.

**EF: What is the role of drawing in your practice?**

**GC:** I copy a lot of ceramics from books, drawing quickly in charcoal on big sheets of paper. At a certain moment, I find the form I want by recalling the sensuality of these cultures. I've always felt that the way the oven transforms material relates somehow to the orgiastic sexual act, like a nude body transforming itself. I particularly admire the round forms of the Candelaria culture, which combines humans with animals; I take the sexual character from that and fuse it. When I draw these beings, they're animated, often walking, and I give them faces and mouths that look like an ass or an orifice. The oven is uterine, like a belly. The thing I like best is when I light them. And I always draw the smoke because I like this cartoon aspect.

**EF: Your Barro Gallery show "Time, Times, and Half a Time" (2023) showed a different side to your practice, revealing your interest in animation.**

**GC:** I like cartoons. They have a synthetic and precise language that gives you a sense of movement, speed, and transformation. That show featured a poster for an animated film that doesn't exist called *Proto*, along with drawings of scenes from it narrating a kind of post-apocalyptic origin myth about a quadruped character with a brick body and egg head. I wanted to show what has happened to me, like films where you have prequels and sidelines—even while I'm making adobe sculptures, I'm still fantasizing in animated pictures and making works with forms and materials that I used before.



I also presented a version of a 2014 installation with sculptures of bricks on metal stands, each with an egg balanced on top; bronze lines hung from the ceiling above each arrangement, and in the center there was a light. It's half city, half cemetery, like a city prototype; I thought of it as a metaphor for mixing the principles of culture (bricks) and the principles of life (eggs), the idea being to put them in an incubator to see what would happen.

**EF: Your High Line work, *The wind blows where it wishes*, returns to pre-Columbian forms.**





**GC:** It uses an orange clay and white paint found in Portuguese ceramics. It's syncretic, mixing cultures like a well-seasoned stew. The title, which is taken from the Bible, references the wind because I was told from the start that it was a windy spot and I couldn't make anything tall or touch the plants. So, I decided to make a work that would coexist harmoniously with everything. It was also a homage to an engraving titled *Stability*, by the Tucumán artist Alfredo Gramajo Gutiérrez. I activated the space with a creature in a garden, playing the Andean flute, who seems to be walking, surrounded by plants and animals.

**EF:** Does movement feature a lot in your work?

**GC:** There's a lot of vitality. I always make the sculptures in a kind of movement and imagine them to be active and transforming themselves. Some even have wheels. Art viewing can be very static, but I like things to be used. There are many references to vessels, because they can have a useful life. When I see objects that

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OPPOSITE:  
Installation view of "The Milk of Dreams," 59th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2022.

were meant to be held behind glass in museums, I think, "That's not what the artist intended." Narration is also movement. I never saw the images created by my grandmother, yet oral tradition has transmitted a knowledge or story that is at least as powerful as the works themselves.

**EF:** What is the significance of the monumental for you?

**GC:** Monumental scale gives an object a presence, it subjugates you. I studied Latin American church architecture and understood that whether or not you believe, it's about how the sheer size makes the body feel in front of the form. I am making enormous sculptures derived from overlooked cultures. It has to do with what we consider important and with refocusing the gaze. ■■■

*Gabriel Chaile's sculpture The wind blows where it wishes is on view through April 2024, on the High Line at 24th Street in New York.*



