



Gabriel Chaile, *Ella vendrá a pagarle todo* (She will come to pay him for everything), 2023. Adobe, metal, and wax crayon. Courtesy the artist; BARRO Arte Contemporáneo, Buenos Aires/New York; Chertlütde, Berlin; Fortes D’Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro; and NVS, Lisbon.

Photo by Whit Forrester/Courtesy of BAMPFA

GABRIEL CHAILE: NO HAY NADA QUE DESTRUYA EL CORAZÓN COMO LA POBREZA

BY ARTISHOCK

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Gabriel Chaile (b. 1985, San Miguel de Tucumán, Argentina) creates soaring clay sculptures that expand on the forms, rituals, and traditions of precolonial cultures in northwestern Argentina, where he is from. Raised in San Miguel de Tucumán, a city on the margins of what was once the Inca empire—known for its melding of Spanish, Afro-Arab, and Indigenous traditions—Chaile playfully intertwines Indigenous mythologies and contemporary social references with reverence and humor.

His bulbous, anthropomorphic sculptures resemble the distinctive ceramics of the Condorhuasi-Alamito peoples (c. 400 BCE–CE 700, Catamarca, Argentina), which the artist has long admired and described as being “in between two states, as if they are about to become something else.”

Rather than replicate their intimately scaled antecedents, Chaile’s larger-than-life sculptures evidence how the cultures and visual forms of his ancestors are unquestionably alive, towering like deities from a new yet familiar cosmos. Some have even functioned as massive earthen ovens from which he has cooked and fed communities, actively functioning as vessels through which we nurture and relate to one another.

MATRIX 283 / Gabriel Chaile: No hay nada que destruya el corazón como la pobreza (Nothing destroys the heart like poverty) is the artist’s first solo museum presentation in the United States. For this exhibition at BAMPFA, Chaile presents newly commissioned work reflecting on the social concerns of his community. Often made in homage to particular individuals—ancestors, family, and friends—Chaile’s sculptures reflect how social issues of the present connect to long histories of anti-colonial resistance.

The exhibition is part of BAMPFA's ongoing *MATRIX* series of contemporary art exhibitions. Founded in 1978, *MATRIX* provides artists with an experimental platform to make and show new work.

The following is a conversation between Chaile and exhibition curator **Margot Norton**, courtesy of BAMPFA – Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive.



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Margot Norton: Our exhibition, *No hay nada que destruya el corazón como la pobreza* (Nothing destroys the heart like poverty), connects to a particular historical turn in Tucumán, the province in northwest Argentina where you are from. In the late 1960s, the government closed key sugar mills that had been the region's central industry, resulting in widespread poverty.

In 1968 a group of artists worked with journalists to expose the reality of the impoverished region, which culminated in a series of art events known as *Tucumán Arde* (Tucumán is burning)—a preeminent example of art's capacity for political intervention. How does the title of the exhibition connect to your own experience growing up in Tucumán and the resonance of these historical events?

Gabriel Chaile: The title of the exhibition is a sentence that I wrote down in a small notebook when I was a teenager. It connects to a specific period that I remember learning about in university—the avant-garde in Argentina of the 1960s and 1970s and events of *Tucumán Arde*. During my research, I discovered that there were actually no artists from Tucumán that were part of these events—most of them came from other areas of the country. I started wondering what happened to the artists from Tucumán and kept going back to that text I wrote in the notebook.

Recently, I started thinking about the courage of the artists involved with *Tucumán Arde*. Tucumán had been known as “the garden of Argentina,” but after the government closed down the sugar mills, it became known as one of the poorest provinces. These sudden closures transformed the region. My father was working in the sugar industry.

When I was researching *Tucumán Arde* and drawing connections between what happened then and my own experience growing up, I began to understand the responsibility that an artist has to respond. For me, this exhibition is giving me a kind of strength to carry out these convictions that I had as a teenager—thinking about this period, the work that my parents were doing, the journey that artists go through, and the courage I need to take this on.

MN: Berkeley is fertile territory for this kind of work to take place—the university and the Bay Area have a long activist history, particularly during the 1960s. Tell me about the sculpture that you created for our exhibition—I know that perfecting the shape was very important to you. I am particularly curious about this smaller vessel that seems to be emerging from inside the larger one.

GC: I always thought about this idea to create a sculpture with one shape inside another, like a *matryoshka* (Russian nesting dolls). Typically, my works have more humorous references, but I wanted this one to be slightly more menacing. It took time for me to find this shape—it is based on child funerary urns that I saw at the Museum of Anthropology in Salta, Argentina.

I also thought a lot about this technique in cooking where you put a pot inside another pot of hot water [double boiler]—one shape helps the other to transform. I relate it to how a generation can advance from what another projected and also the possibility of that generation to fail.

MN: Something I think a lot about with your work related to genealogy is this funny saying: “What comes first, the chicken or the egg?” It relates to the nearly impossible nature of tracing the origins of something—where it begins or ends. I think about these forms nesting inside one another as cyclical or continuous, and the ripple effect of generations and time.



Gabriel Chaile, *Apenas soy y me doy cuenta (I realize I just am)*, 2023. Paper, acrylic, and glue on canvas. Courtesy the artist; BARRO Arte Contemporáneo, Buenos Aires/New York; ChertLüdde, Berlin; Fortes D’Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro; and NVS, Lisbon. Photo by Whit Forrester/Courtesy of BAMPFA

GC: From a very young age, I always wanted to understand the origin of issues and circumstances. With the double boiler pot, the fire will heat the outer one with more intensity than the one inside. The reactions of the vessels differ based on their position and what they contain. I’m thinking about that relationship in terms of how generations progress and the circumstances that lead people to react with anger or violence. Certain issues don’t always take shape in a linear way; rather, they’re responding to consequences that have a domino effect.

MN: Thinking about the history of Tucumán, I think about how the closing of the sugar mills resulted in poverty, which resulted in the resistance of labor unions, which resulted in violent repression, and how a new generation—your generation—inherits these histories. This also resonates in what you have often called “the genealogy of form,” which is how you connect to the forms of your ancestors even though much knowledge of their rituals and traditions has been erased.

GC: I was teaching in Barcelona last month and spoke with the students about two different concepts: the first was about taking care of shape, and the second was the social consciousness that the shapes need to transform—whether

we need to maintain or look after these forms, or we need to have the strength to break them. It goes back to this idea of transformation.

MN: Right, this tension between revering the shapes and rupturing them, which could also give birth to something new. I wanted to ask you more specifically about the relationship to cooking. I know that a lot of the earlier works took the form of clay ovens, which evolved into more monumental sculptures. Did you begin making these sculptures thinking about cooking and the social practices around these objects?

GC: I have a bit of a fetish with anything related to the kitchen. I love the forms of kitchen utensils, understanding how they work, and this idea of something as a recipient, a container. In archeology you can understand history through these objects. When you're in a kitchen while people are cooking, it's like being in a concert, in a collective moment of enjoyment and nourishment.

I always felt like I was an artisan repeating the same shapes and process, similar to a cook in a kitchen repeating the same recipes. It's a meditative kind of labor, which I greatly value, and one with infinite variations.

MN: I would love to hear more about this idea of making something in community. I know that working with students in Barcelona and here at Berkeley has been a rewarding experience for you. The kitchen is a space of community gathering, and when you work, it is not a solitary practice, but one that involves a group of people working together to transform raw materials into something else.

GC: This is not something that I get asked often because it's not necessarily evident when you see the work in the context of an exhibition, yet there is always community involved. The only moment when I work alone is when I'm making the initial drawing for the sculpture, but afterward it is important for me to work with others. I love the back and forth of discussing ideas, particularly while everyone's sharing food. These conversations shape the work and are when the engine of the project is in full motion. I feel that constructing these objects together, and by hand, gives added value to the actual work itself. The sculptures also need to have people around them to serve their purpose— they're performative in that way.