

LAURA ZELAYA

Laura Zelaya grew up in a family of artists: Her mother is a wood sculptor, her father a painter, and her sister a dancer and choreographer. In 1975, at seven years old, her family moved to Berlin for an artist's residency. Witnessing the growing power of a military dictatorship in their native Argentina, the family remained in Berlin for seven years. The city was riveting; the family lived in a house of artists in a city where art was seemingly everywhere. The young Zelaya wove her way in and out of workshops and studios filled with conversation about art, and in the best moments was invited to participate in making.

Like many children of artists, Zelaya chose not to pursue her parents' art forms; instead, she studied theater and set design and fabrication for many years. In time, what began as singular gifts for friends with children became a business making beautiful, imaginative, vividly painted kinetic toys from wood. But moving from individual and wondrous gifts to small scale production can change everything: What was imaginative and playful comes to feel like labor, so Zelaya moved away from the business of handmade toy production and began to focus on kinetic sculptures in which poetic, cultural, and sometimes overtly political narratives are enacted on stage sets rarely more than twelve inches wide.

“My work is the perfect combination of all these artistic disciplines and experiences,” says Zelaya. “Putting wood on stage, making it move, bringing it to life.” The intimacy of Zelaya's stage shrinks the distance between actor and spectator; we come close to witness the figures that move rhythmically on multiple axes across the landscape. Most often audience is the agent, turning the wooden crank that drives a shaft on which figures enact the story. In an award-winning work titled *The Contraption*, a standing figure walks atop the water. Upright, masked in gold and dressed in white, the hero—not obviously gendered—is followed by figures swimming in waves that bob up and down on the water while the leader walks upright. Seen through foundational Christian narratives, or the experience of authoritarianism, the simple action played out on this tiny stage operates as metaphor, prophecy, and experience. *I will take you out of the water*. The title points to the intransigence of power: We are promised opportunity, perhaps to walk together, but instead we remain reaching for the figure at the lead; it's only a contraption.

The narrative power of Zelaya's work is reminiscent of Michael Ende's 1973 children's book, *Momo*, a prescient story that speaks to technology's ever-unrealized promise that time saved will be returned with interest. Excited about the prospect of saving time in order to gain more, the novel's citizens avoid chatting, recreation, art—anything that could be considered “wasting time”—while the Gray Men secretly steal and use the people's time for themselves.

The beautiful analog mechanisms that drive Zelaya's works feel neither anachronistic nor nostalgic in a time when the news media wrangles daily with the ethical and economic implications of artificial intelligence. Zelaya's machine parts are typically hidden from view, inviting us into the narrative rather than the *how* of her work. Behind the scenes she is a builder and inventor. Each stage set requires a new combination of actions fueled by mechanisms with evocative names like “eccentric circles” which, unlike their concentric cousins, make the figures mounted above rise and fall rhythmically. With a scroll saw, a drill press, and a sander, as well as various hand tools in her home shop, Zelaya plays with combinations of concepts reminiscent of physics class or machine shop to make a mouth open and an eyelid rise in one gesture.

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I create scenes where the Human Being is the protagonist. In its solitude, its quest for self-improvement, for union with others, with nature, itself and with its desire. Viewers can see in the work our limitations, inequality, dreams, longings, feelings, or simple poetic actions.

The last few years have changed us all, and Zelaya is no exception. A personal health crisis followed by both living through and witnessing the impacts of COVID on the communities and culture of Buenos Aires inspired Zelaya to move back to Colón in the Entre Ríos province just across the river from Uruguay. Seeking the solace a more natural environment can offer, and a community with more spaciousness and time than life in the capital city allows, the artist also found her work changing. In the first work made here in residency, the figure who dreams of the boat and the urbanscape within, also goes after that dream on the waves ahead. As viewers, the agents who will turn the crank and perhaps see ourselves in the gently moving figure, we are invited to conjure our own wildest dreams. The narratives on Zelaya's small stages today deal less with the intransigence of power and more with our dreams, but as second wave feminism taught us, the personal is political, so the figure and the boat also conjure migrations, forced as well as chosen. Where her figures had been genderless, she is aware that the emergent female figure in new work allows for personal narratives to take shape. "I find myself now," says the artist, "with more appreciation. Appreciation of life and nature and simple moments."