

LOOKING GOOD

The local art market is going through an exceptional moment. New names plus the economic recovery and the proliferation of galleries have given an impulse some consider miraculous. Next, a portrait of five artists participating in the new edition of ArteBA that starts May 29.

By Guido Bilbao
Photos Patricio Pidal

Catalina León

Born in Buenos Aires in 1981. Took art classes at UBA (University of Buenos Aires) and attended IUNA. In 2001 she took painting lessons with Mariana López. Between 2003 and 2005 she participated in the Kuitca grant. She was part of a group exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris. In 2007 she won the first prize ArteBA Petrobras.

Catalina León (27) is building a Hornero nest for humans at Jorge Abate art gallery, in Bollini passageway. Just like the birds, she does it with adobe and leaves. And with her hands.

But the nest always falls apart a bit and she has to return to it with patience from another time. "Dedication is a nutritious fruit," says Catalina while making cinnamon tea in her Abasto studio where she works, bell eight from a PH block inhabited by Peruvian families. The children come and go through the flat roof while she paints and scratches with a steel wool sponge a painting that's got her angry. Until she speaks about the nest.

"Something about the mud called me, I can't really explain well. I connect very much with the materials I use, and while I can think a lot, when I work I do it with the body, with the heart. It was playing with the mud that the idea of the nest came up. "

-The Hornero is the national bird

-The national bird, the homeland bird. Words that make you feel something...

-Almost as if they were bad words

-Yes, dark words. You know what I did? I looked up homeland in the dictionary. And one of the first explanations said: "People joined together by heart" ... and of course, one can only laugh. But I started thinking about that, what it means to build from the union, to actually join another, to dare to think about society as a solidarity chain running through your day. What it means in relation to others and to oneself. But I have no answers.

-Meanwhile the fights here never end, like your nest that won't let itself.

-This is not a political work, but that not being able to raise is systematic, not being able to build. When you have to make the leap from the individual desire to the community, it gets hard for us. We cannot make that commitment and bear the desire of the others. I wanted to make the nest in a short time and luckily it did not let me. It asked me to wait.

The first thing Catalina knew about painting she learned it through her nanny who studied drawing by post mail. She received photocopies with instructions to paint

hands, it was a good way to play. Then she accompanied her to painting classes, all before she was 12.

"I was always collecting garbage to transform it into something, that's my biggest boost. Drawing and painting came later, when I finished high school. One afternoon we went out with a friend to take pictures of the city, just because, and something happened in that looking with attention, because I went to an art supplies store and bought a stretched canvas, paint and brushes. Later I wanted to go to Pueyrredón School but I didn't get in. "

-What happened?

-I was very clumsy, had no technique but I did have a disproportionate love for painting. I remember that there was a question that was how many edges are needed to draw a cube. I am scatterbrained and read 'artists'¹, and answered "just one artist is need." My friends say that on that day I graduated as a contemporary artist.

-Not a bad answer, you can always use it.

-But I was really upset when I didn't get in. I would go to museums, exhibitions and come out destroyed, I thought I would never be able to do it. I even began to study set design but it was terrible not to paint. A great uncle painter I have really helped me, Miguel Ocampo, he said something very pretty by Degas: "Drawing is learning." Then I sat down looking at things with pencil and paper to understand them and tried and tried until it slowly began to appear. It was not easy but I realized that was the way, the routine, and the everyday, to contemplate what is built. And we are back to the nest.

-Is it becoming more difficult to respect those processes?

-Some things take their own time and they ask for it. That interests me a lot. Things do not come out of nowhere. For example, in relation to my work, I worry about recognizing and respecting its stages. It is not made for selling or for an exhibition even if it can be sold or displayed. After I got the Petrobras award they asked me for work, there were people interested and I didn't have any, period, there just wasn't. There is a time for reflection and closure and devotion. It's like sometimes when I go to a store to buy something and they don't help me and I start to get nervous until I realize and tell myself: "It's great that someone takes his time."

¹ In Spanish the words edges *ARISTAS* and artists *ARTISTAS* differ by only one extra T in artists, hence the misreading.