

# THE INVISIBLE CAGE

## VICTOR CASTILLO

CURATORIAL TEXT | MIGUEL LÓPEZ

### The Magical Spell of the Bell

Víctor Castillo's exhibition, *The Invisible Cage*, is inspired by the shared understandings, protocols, and behaviors associated with education, presenting us with a harsh, disillusioned view of our present time. Castillo, a Chilean artist who lives in Los Angeles, delves into his own memories and explores popular culture in search of hidden nuances lurking in representations of children's stories and animated characters, assessing their psychological effects, their political uses, how they project false mirages of reality, what expectations, values, or perceptions of the world they transmit, and how they serve as models for adolescent body language.

The artist cannibalizes the aesthetic of kids' cartoons, extrapolating little narratives from those fantasy worlds to draw attention to their undertones of cruelty and violence. Castillo uses the idealized happiness of those stories and animated adventures as a warm, fuzzy backdrop against which to juxtapose stark symbols of despotism and dominance. Castillo was born in 1973—the year of the Chilean coup d'état—and grew up watching television under the dictatorship. Critically reviewing his childhood love of cartoons, such as the *Merrie Melodies* series produced in the United States between 1930 and 1960, forced him to reassess how the imported American films he used to watch as a kid intersected with the apparatus responsible for persecution, torture, and death that the Chilean dictatorship operated with support from the United States. He is part of a constellation of artists whose art, rooted in the trauma of dictatorship, seeks to explore the tragic links that somehow connect visual and commercial representations of childhood fantasy to the military coups that have taken place in South America.

But unlike other artists of his generation, Castillo does not try to document or recreate the past in his works. On the contrary, his paintings are languid glimpses of a distant future. The name of the exhibition alludes to something Che Guevara said—which the artist came across in Steven Soderbergh's movie, *Che*—concerning the alienation people feel as a result of the “invisible cage” of capitalist doctrine, an idea which Castillo then applied to childhood experiences in school classrooms. Castillo's paintings suggest that subjecting one's life to the laws of the commercial economy is a crude metaphor that equates education with a colonized world. His works reflect a situation in which the global success of the financial worldview has meant that education is seen as a form of investment, which leads to the steady dismantling of the public education endorsed by neoliberal policies throughout the region.

Castillo's paintings *El peor de la clase* [*The Worst in the Class*] and *The Magical Spell of the Bell* are eloquent statements. He presents scathing depictions of schools being run according to police academy principles or highly competitive standards, underscoring how discipline is meted out on students' bodies, creating ladders that lead to promotion, hierarchies, and patterns of ‘correct’ behavior. He shows how institutions—schools, churches, military service, and others—are standardization mills designed to mold people. It is no coincidence that some of these paintings are based on illustrations found in books and magazines produced by public education authorities in the United States, showing happy, uniformed children who have been transformed into little adults.

The artist also refers indirectly to aspects of his own life: He was expelled from art school because he would not conform to the expectations and demands of conventional teaching. These paintings are a symbolic acknowledgement of the tension that exists between control and creativity, between training and imagination, and of the fact that thinking, reflection, and art are largely seen as unnecessary or subversive elements in a world driven by capitalism's need for extreme productivity.

One of the main pieces in the exhibition is an installation that features children protesting, holding posters. As in Castillo's paintings, the faces in his sculptures appear to be masks. Their long red noses and feigned smiles convey a sense of shared repression. The work captures what it feels like to live in a constant state of fear and warlike paranoia and shows how certain political symbols have gradually been drained of meaning.

Castillo's post-apocalyptic nightmares are clear reflections of the rise of fascism, misogyny, racism, and religious conservatism—a brutal parade of forces that have been tightening their grip on many Latin American countries. He shrewdly connects images of a bleak reality with early memories of childhood, reminding us of the social fallout inherent in the scaling back of public education and the dangers of confusing education with indoctrination.

**Miguel A. López**

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*The Magic Spell of the Bell*  
2018



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