

ARTFORUM

2025 California Biennial: Orange County Museum of Art
By Andrea Gyorody | December 2025



Griselda Rosas, #99445, 2022, embroidery and watercolor on paper, 12 × 16".

Curated by Courtenay Finn, Christopher Y. Lew, and Lauren Leving

When I was coming of age in the 1990s, there were constant parental freak-outs about the scourge of pot smoking and sex parties (neither of which I was actually cool enough to engage in), and lots of culture-wars pearl-clutching about oversexed pop stars and raunchy rap lyrics. Then came Columbine in the spring of 1999, just before I turned fourteen, which redirected attention to a legion of video-game-

addicted boys seemingly at risk of turning their disaffection into violence against their teachers and classmates. Fast-forward twenty-six years, and worries about drugs, sex, and violence persist, but most of the talk now revolves around the brain rot caused by cell phones and social media, which are making kids—and adults, for that matter—dumb, lazy, disconnected, and depressed. The sensationalist Newsweek headlines and 20/20 episodes of my youth have been replaced by influencers of dubious credentials peddling half-baked advice, while public intellectuals, led by The Anxious Generation author Jonathan Haidt, prescribe solutions to problems that we don't yet even comprehend. The media would have us believe that the kids are anything but all right—but then again, maybe they never have been.

Despite its title, “Desperate, Scared, But Social,” the 2025 California Biennial is decidedly not about teen panic, or at least not in a tedious, moralizing sense. Curated by Courtenay Finn, Christopher Y. Lew, and Lauren Leving, the exhibition—which features a tight list of just twelve participating artists and collectives—takes adolescence as its theme, framing it as a time marked by intensity, insecurity, transformation, and possibility, perhaps especially for those who might go on to be artists. The show is neither a rigorous historical exploration of the theme nor your typical scene-surveying biennial. Instead, it's something in between: idiosyncratic, exuberant, unexpected, and sometimes awkward, with vibes that swing high and low to capture one of life's most significant and least understood moments of physical and psychological metamorphosis.

The next few galleries retreat from a DIY aesthetic and direct attention to other aspects of youth culture. Griselda Rosas's large-scale drawings and embroideries, made in collaboration with her preteen son Fernando, capture a relationship between parent and child that is on the precipice of transformation. Coronation, 2025, one of the most moving works in the group, is a memorial to Fernando's childhood, woven and sewn together from his old clothes. Feelings of melancholy carry over into a cavernous space for Stanya Kahn's austere film No Go Backs, 2020, in which Kahn's teenage son Lenny and his best friend Elijah try to survive in a barren landscape after the collapse of civilization, with ragtag bands of teens as the only other survivors they encounter.