

**GABRIEL
SOSA**

IN CONVERSATION:

**READING
THE
PUBLIC
SPACE**

URBANO
PROJECT

READING THE PUBLIC SPACE:
A CONVERSATION WITH **GABRIEL SOSA**

CONVERSATION PARTNER: **GINA LINDNER**,
COMMUNICATIONS & OUTREACH MANAGER

URBANO PROJECT
BOSTON, MA

This conversation originally took place on July 28, 2021 via Zoom and has been condensed and edited for clarity.

GINA LINDNER: Thank you everyone for being here! We're excited to get the conversation going. I wanted to start by saying how Gabriel and I know each other. I actually met you as a curator before an artist: we were both volunteering at AREA CODE, a local art fair happening across New England exactly a year ago, in which you were curator of the Performance section. I had heard about this amazing billboard project you were doing with Now + There as a 2020 Public Art Accelerator Artist called *No es fácil/It ain't easy*, and fell in love with your work from there. I think part of why I enjoy your work so much is because of what we have in common: we both have passions for everyday encounters with art and strangers, a deep appreciation for language, and maybe also a "little things in life" sort of sensibility.

Reading the Public Space: A Conversation with Gabriel Sosa

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Gabriel Sosa, *No es fácil/It ain't easy* [No es fácil, pero tú tranquilo], 2020. Site-specific installation, Boston, MA

Gabriel is an artist, educator, curator, and linguist based in Boston, working in a multidisciplinary practice that intersects drawing, video, installation, performance, and public art. Translation, bilingualism, memory, and social justice are all intertwining threads throughout your work, which frequently explores the use of language and how it consistently shapes our everyday experiences. This year, you were our winter Artist-in-Residence at Urbano Project. You're also an alumnus of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA) and a Lecturer at MassArt since 2019, I believe.

GABRIEL SOSA: Correct.

GL: And you were born in Miami. How did you arrive in Boston?

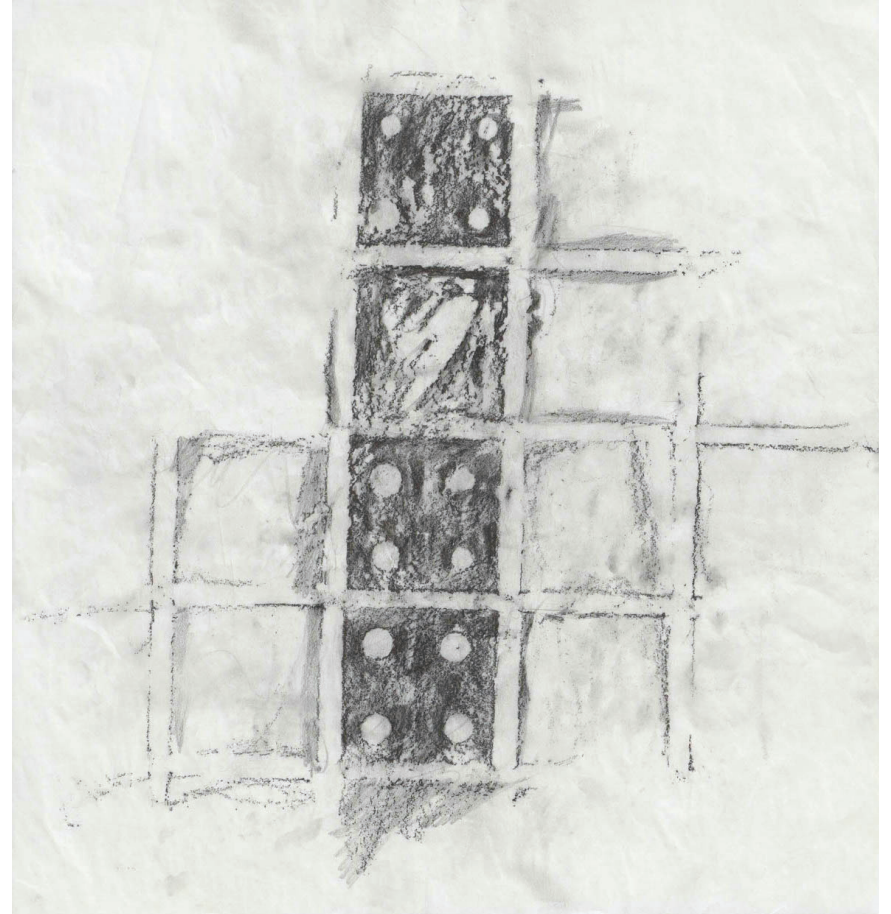
GS: Well, I went to undergrad here, but I feel almost in a way that doesn't really count between studying abroad and graduating early... But then I've been continuously living in Boston since 2010, so just past the decade mark. And it's definitely been a second home for me by this point.

GL: And you're now based in Roslindale, as of right before the pandemic.

GS: Right. A lot of these drawings stemmed from spending time outside and getting to know my neighborhood more, especially in the early days of the pandemic when most people were having fear or hesitancy about going outside.



Gabriel Sosa, *Ser*, 2020. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"



Juego, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"

GL: This graphite “rubbing” technique that you’re working with, I believe you began at an earlier residency at Lugar a dudas in Cali, Colombia in 2019. Can you talk a bit about your trajectory with this technique since?

GS: I’ve been creating rubbings of the language in my surroundings for a few years now. I started doing it in Cali just because it was a fun way to explore my neighborhood at the time and get to know the city blocks around me. There was something really playful to it that I enjoyed. I started doing them again last year at the beginning of the pandemic, when they started to take on a more serious weight. It became something much more charged, I think, when you reflect on how in the early days of the pandemic, things were so surface-based, like how people were afraid to touch a doorknob and were sanitizing their groceries and everything like that. So going out with a stick of graphite and paper and rubbing stuff on the sidewalk seemed like not the best idea at the time. It gave me a lot of pause to step outside and look at what was around me with a much more critical eye. So I think when I was making them in Cali, I would just kind of search around for things that caught my eye, and then I remember all of these moments where maybe somebody’s dog would come over, or a sweet older lady would peek out her window and ask if I was from the electric company, and I would have to convince her that I wasn’t, and all sorts of encounters like these. Whereas making them here, a lot of the time I was alone and it was just much quieter. I was also making these drawings as kind of a complement to what the students at Urbano were creating through my seminar with them in the residency.



Propiedad de nadie, 2019. Grafito sobre papel, 15 x 16"

GL: Right—as part of your residency with us this winter, you taught a 10-week virtual seminar called “Reading the Public Space” to local high school students. This year’s curatorial theme at Urbano was “Radical Care,” and so you focused on exploring language as a medium for healing, and charted how text has been used in art from art history up to now. I remember you had a fantastic syllabus—I stole a few of the readings from it myself—and led different workshops with the students. What sorts of projects did you work on together?

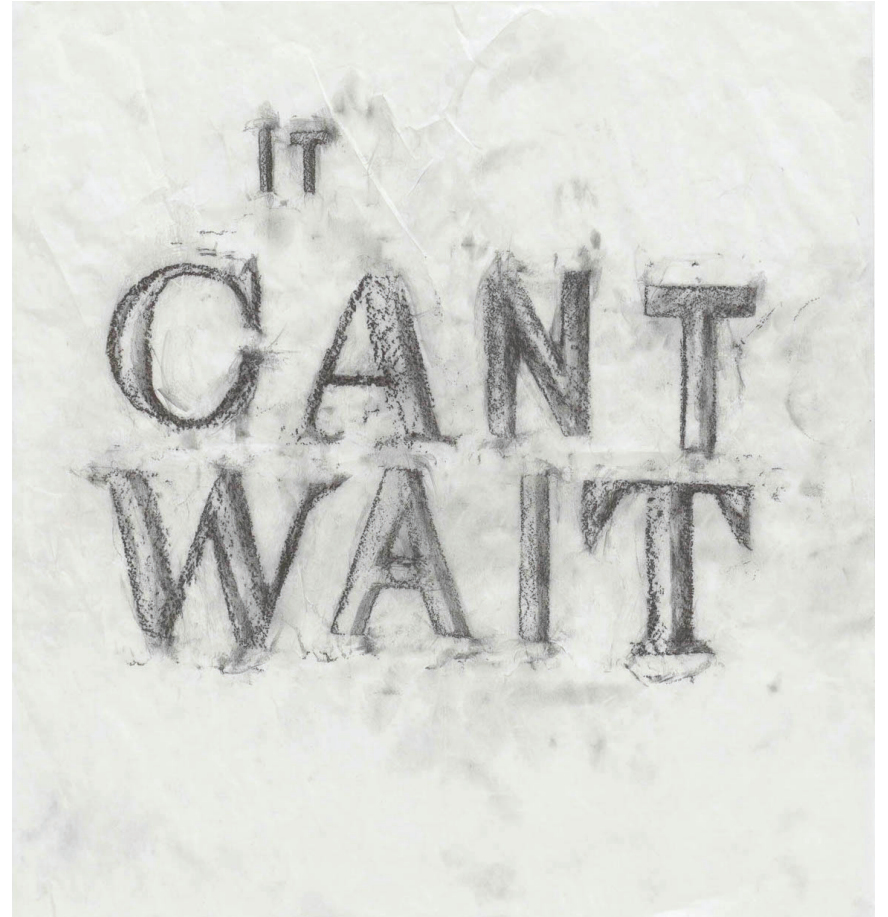
GS: Each of the students developed their own text-based public art projects, considering the various roles that text can play in public space. And so the name “Reading the Public Space,” and some other work I’ve made in this vein, were what began to inspire these drawings. It was all just very fresh in my mind at the time. And so while the students were sourcing material from their immediate, everyday surroundings to work with—whether it was something that they saw online, or read somewhere, or had written themselves—and then putting that out into the world, I was doing the exact opposite with these drawings: I was taking something from out in the world, bringing it back into the studio, then transforming it into something else.

GL: Yes, I love how you’re literally capturing contexts in public space—which we could say is the primary “medium” you’re working with—then bringing it into yet another, new context. Compared to your billboard series, these drawings feel so much more intimate. I know we’ve both spoken before about how being stuck in our living spaces over the course of the pandemic has been so transformative for us, for better or worse. You’ve also mentioned to me that you see the drawings as sort of a collection, like a sketchbook. Where do you see these drawings living? Could you see them exhibited in people’s homes, or elsewhere?

GS: I feel like with the concept of “wall art,” there’s this element of “lame-ness” to it. But I think there’s something really beautiful and powerful in it. For many years, I had this hang-up about my home being this very empty, minimalist space with very few things hanging on the walls. But once this pandemic hit and my wife and I were stuck home most of the time, we were like, this is ridiculous! We know so many amazing, talented artists whose work we would rather be looking at than these empty walls in our apartment. And so we’ve been building a small art collection, primarily through exchanges with friends, just exchanging pieces and supporting artists whenever we can. I feel like all art is something to be celebrated more than not.



Ayayay, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"



Getting a little impatient, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"

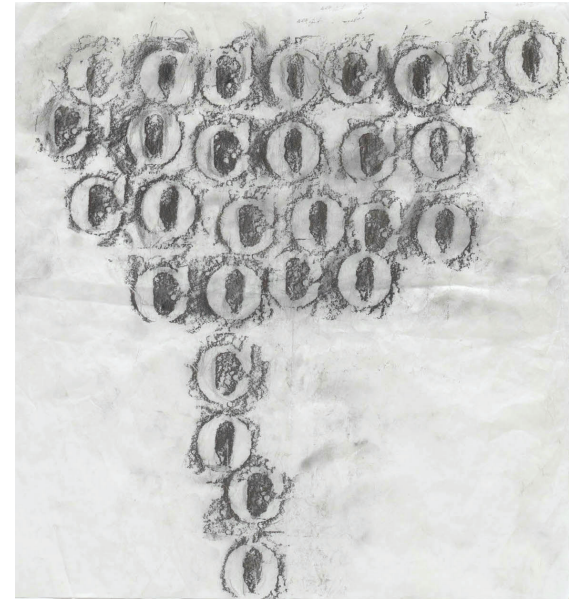
GL: Absolutely. I mean, we couldn't go to see art in galleries for... I don't even know how long. So there's something, like you said, really powerful especially now about intervening into someone's living space with art, and that being a means of fostering everyday encounters with art in our lives. The way that these drawings "freeze" public space and recontextualize it has me thinking about public and private spaces, and how our public and private lives have become so enmeshed over the pandemic. What's the significance of bringing public space into private space for you?

GS: Well, I think it just sort of gives us an awareness of where we live. I think for so many people over the last year and a half, and certainly for me, there's been a lot of pause and slowing down. All of these drawings are based on this premise of noticing things in my surroundings: going outside, then seeing a sewer cover or something, and then thinking to myself, "what would that look like if you were to just take like the middle three letters in that word?" or "what if I were to eliminate the R at the end?" So I think really all of these drawings both come from and promote a greater awareness of all these little details around us.

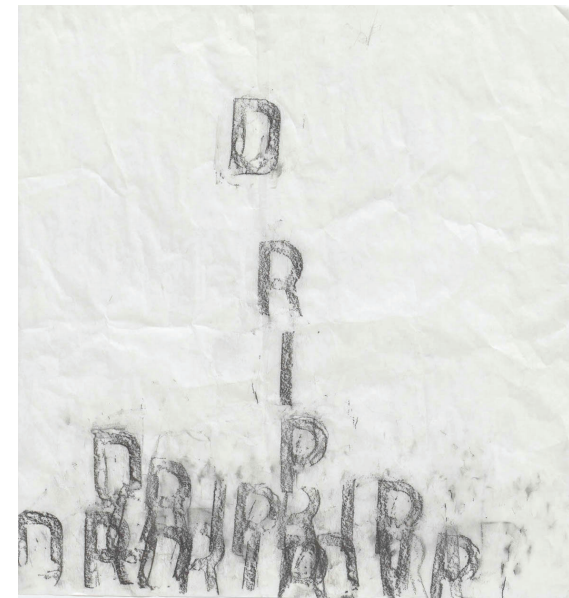
GL: Would you say it's almost an exercise in mental mapping? And can you describe the process of making these a little bit more?

GS: Yes, totally. Years ago for a project, I bought a large supply of sandwich paper from a restaurant supply store. It's kind of like tracing paper but stronger, and so most of the drawings I've made for this particular project are using this restaurant paper. I'll take a handful of it under my arm, walk outside with a graphite stick, and find where these letters or phrases, or possible phrases, kind of catch my attention. I'll see a sewer cover and take one letter from there, then find another plaque or something down the street that has an L on it and use that. And it tends to be a quick process. Actually, the earlier ones I had done in Colombia and at the beginning of the pandemic were all created completely onsite, whereas the ones I've made during my Urbano residency have been worked on more at home. Some of them even have color added to them, or these hints of shadows or something else. So I think that would be the biggest difference: thinking about them beyond an experience of something in the moment, and instead about how they can live on.

GL: Yeah, that's interesting. I also love the tactility that comes through in these drawings—even just the fingerprints that you've left in. I know that your earlier drawings tended to be a bit more figurative, but just as textural and dynamic. I'm curious if you can remember maybe what drove your shift to more text-based work.



Cocococo, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"



Puddle, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"

GS: That's a good question. There's definitely been a shift over the past few years where most of what I've made has been language-based in some way. What's funny is that I used to be terrified of making text-based work. I had somewhat of an interest in it but was really hesitant because whenever you put a word out there, I mean, that's the word. If you put the word "dog," like, that's the word. It's not the same as putting a shape or a color out there and having all sorts of different interpretations. I think it really grew from working as an interpreter in the Massachusetts court system for over a decade now. I'm translating constantly back-and-forth between English and Spanish, and most of the time it's very fast-paced: I have to make these split-second decisions about what word I want to use for what, then also think about how to say things that can't be translated, like certain idioms or sayings.



Whatever doesn't kill us, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"

For example, if someone were to say to a defendant in court, "you have one bite of the apple," or "let's touch base," they just don't translate one-to-one. It's a constant exercise of figuring out how a phrase can truly live in this other language, and still be understood and felt in a certain way. Also, seeing how sometimes language is insufficient, and having watched so many moments where the communication breaks down. Because when you're in a court proceeding, the interpreter can't interrupt to say, "hey, that's a poorly phrased question, you might want to phrase it this way so it's easier to understand." If it's a convoluted question, then you have to translate it convolutedly. So, all this to say that it was almost inevitable that I would be making work about language. It became kind of this way to face these frustrations, to confront and process them, almost like a catharsis of sorts. So, yeah, I think working as an interpreter and having all of these observations and feelings build up over the years, I wanted to make sense of them and respond to them.

GL: Yes, that makes so much sense. Your 2019 installation, *Do you understand what I'm saying?*, in Somerville's Davis Square is a great example of your talents with manipulating language, particularly this unsympathetic language of "officialdom" in the legal systems that you speak of. The questions in red vinyl we're seeing here are sourced from local court proceedings you've participated in. How did you arrive at choosing these specific questions, and can you describe the role of the drawings layered behind?

GS: So I was invited to do this project by my dear friend David Guerra through the Somerville Arts Council. The questions I chose were all impactful or salient to me in some way. But specifically, all of these questions insinuate senses of doubt or skepticism. These windows for the installation were sandwiched between a CVS and a Boston Sports Club, both of which use this token red lettering for their logo and branding. So the idea was to to subvert that: to reclaim the space for a more social concern. You have the questions printed in vinyl on the window, and then behind those are drawings that represent potential responses to these questions from witnesses, from defendants, from people on probation. And I wanted to play with the space between these two elements of the work: there was at least a foot or two between the drawings on the wall and the red vinyl on the glass. I came to see it as sort of a metaphor for the inequities that exist in the court system between the people that work there, the people that work in court, and then the people who have to appear in court. Also, the bar between where the attorneys and the judge sit, and then where the audience sits, is another visual signifier for this kind of separation. The red is what jumps at you, then everything else that's behind it gets kind of lost. And that's very much a commentary on what I see.



YOU HAVE A LOOK ON
YOUR FACE THAT I
HAVEN'T SEEN BEFORE –
WHAT'S GOING ON? DID
YOU DECIDE THIS FREELY
AND VOLUNTARILY? DID
ANYONE FORCE YOU? IS
YOUR MIND CLEAR
TODAY? ARE YOU UNDER
THE INFLUENCE OF ANY
DRUGS, ALCOHOL OR
MEDICATION?

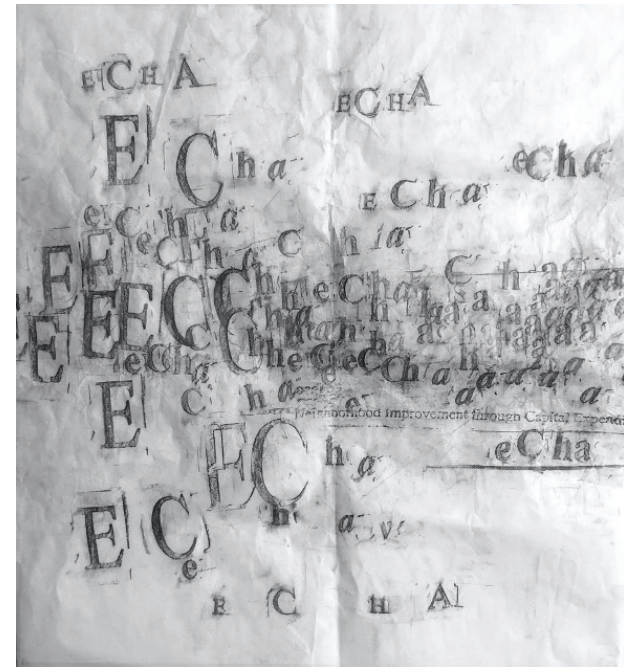
Do you understand what I'm saying?, 2019. Site-specific installation, Somerville, MA.

GL: Yes. Your public artwork often co-opts commercial spaces in such clever ways. If I were to encounter this piece walking down the street, it might read as just another advertisement, until you get closer and start to actually absorb what you're reading. I love how your work makes people pause and think deeply about the everyday interactions and impressions that we no longer notice, or that we take for granted. And so thinking more about the authority of law and about capitalist endeavors, I think we're seeing a lot of these threads in the drawings as well. This one in particular with the multiple water valve covers got me thinking about access and water as a commodity, and how all sorts of basic needs and resources are becoming increasingly normalized as commodities, and how we've experienced a rise in mutual aid during the pandemic partly in response to a lack of resources.

GS: Yeah, and as my brilliant friend Danielle Abrams just wrote in the chat, "bringing attention to the way language is so externally constructed and shaped by the use of capitalism." It's an idea that I brought into a lot of these drawings without quite realizing at first, but I agree that there's definitely this subtle capitalist critique running through many of them. Even with that first one you just shared there that says water... it's the fact that you can't read the word water. It looks like it says water, but not quite. It becomes something imperceptible. For me, I almost see what I see when I dream: I can't read in my dreams, and everything always looks a little illegible. Even in this one with the word "echa," which in Spanish means "to move" when somebody's standing in front of you, and you're like, "move out of the way!" I think the frustration is similar to how in my neighborhood



WAATTEER, 2021. Graphite on paper, 13 x 16"



Echa, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"

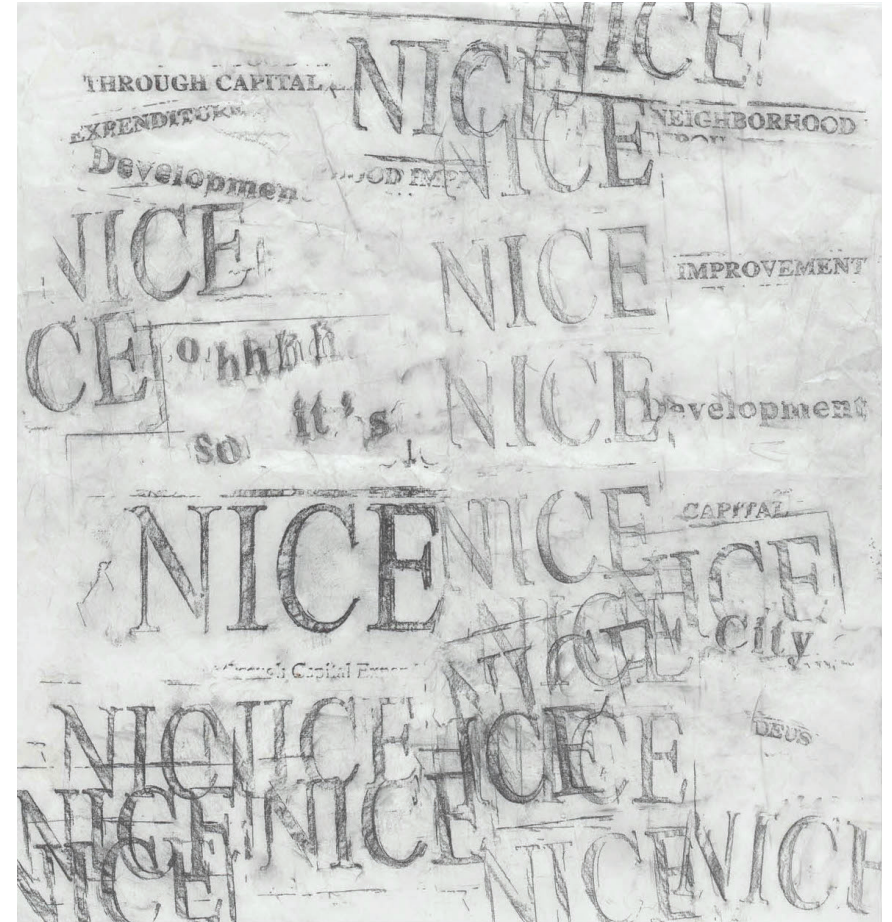
and so many Boston neighborhoods, and just about anywhere, you have these big blocks of expensive condos being built. You have constantly increasing income inequality, people being pushed out of their homes and businesses. And it's happening everywhere, but then you also have these signs that say things like "neighborhood improvement" and plaques that say, "this park has been provided by..." and so thinking about that, too.

GL: Absolutely—the language of gentrification, and who that's meant for.

GS: Right. So some of these are very much made with a sense of social critique in mind, but others are just kind of playful, too. And this one is one that maybe straddles a bit of both: the huge B's from sewer covers, combined with the words from the plaque at the park down the street, to make "trust fund baby." Knowing how so much of our surroundings are coming from some kind of philanthropy, and thinking about the problems with that: how philanthropists have agendas and egos, etcetera... And to think all of these ideas come from making a simple drawing and noticing something in my environment.



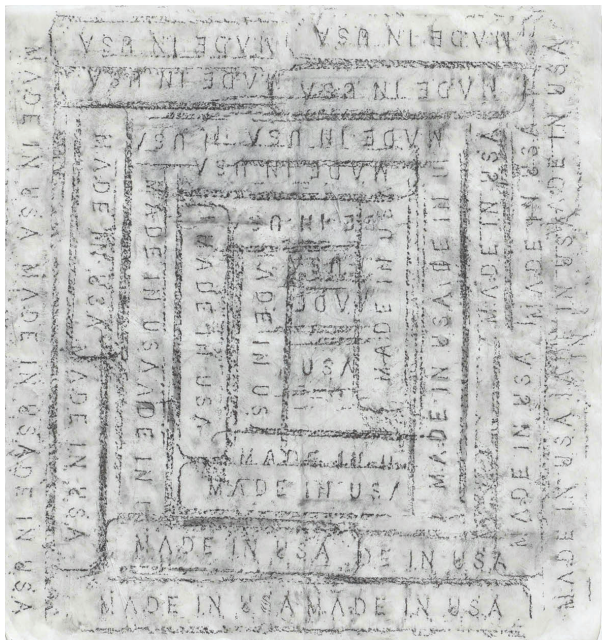
Trust Fund Baby, 2021. Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 15 x 16"



Ohhhh it's so nice, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"



Sell that system, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"



Madeinusa, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"

GL: Exactly! I also want to touch back on the roles of translation and bilingualism in your work quite literally. As a non-fluent Spanish speaker, I ran into a few interpretational walls that you had to help me understand. For example, this phrase “estoy como coco” is sort of saying, “I’m all good, I’m fine,” similar to “I’m as cool as a cucumber.” And since “coco” also translates literally to “coconut,” you also get this image of being hard on the outside and soft on the inside. So communicating a kind of resiliency even in moments of fragility. And thinking about how context is everything in your work, I wanted to return to this major installation you created in your residency at Lugar a dudas in 2019 called Cali Codiciada, or “Coveted Cali.” You were riffing off this local phrase “Cali es caliente,” pairing “Cali” with different adverbs to create similarly rhythmic sayings. One of your greatest strengths as a public artist, I think, is the attention you pay to lived experiences of others in the context within which you’re working, and the depth of emotion you’re able to extract from a particular place. Also, your work’s success in reaching what you might call a non-art–or non-art world–audience. Can you talk a bit about these ideas in relation to this earlier work and these drawings?

GS: You know, with this piece in particular, I had never been to Cali before the residency. But Lugar a dudas is a cultural center that I had admired for a long time. But while in Cali, there were a number of things that reminded me of growing up in Miami, and of Havana, too. One of the things that stuck out to me was that there’s a lot of local pride there, as well as playful sayings. One of them is “Cali es caliente” to describe the city, and so I found that really interesting and unique, because people say it in unexpected ways. Like sometimes I would tell people I’m going to Cali for this residency, and they’d be like, “oh, well, you know, cali es caliente!” Like, how many other cities can you name-drop, and then the person’s response is some playful saying about the city? Like, who does that for other places? So I was thinking about the different things that community can mean in that context, and all the different meanings of caliente: hot in temperature, sexually hot, or even referring to crime. Thinking about all these different things just within this one, condensed little saying. And so it’s not only “Cali es caliente,” but also “Cali es cálida,” meaning “Cali is warm” temperature-wise but also just warm and welcoming. And there are so many others. There’s actually a famous book by Andres Caicedo, who’s sort of like the chosen son of Cali’s literary history, called Calicalabozo, which translates to “Cali jail cell.” So for the installation, I wanted to see what would happen if I just started writing down all of these descriptors for the city, and what it can be. So literally making an exhaustive list from my mind—and then once I arrived at the end of that, going through a dictionary and finding more adjectives: Cali cuestionada, Cali comparada, Cali conformada... The best part was when people started writing in their own words on the wall. Some folks might call that graffiti, but I welcomed those responses. The work stayed up for four months before weather took it down, such is the nature of wheat paste.



Soft on the inside, 2021. Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 15 x 16"



Cali codiciada, 2019. Site-specific installation, Cali, Colombia

GL: Just the fact that locals felt compelled to interact with the work is so powerful, and shows your success in both tapping into and building upon the sense of community there. And that's what great public art does, I think. On the topic of the drawings and the whimsicality of your work and process, what do you think motivated you to add color to some? I know you've mentioned before that color helped to counteract the serious or somber impression that graphite can give.

GS: I feel like during the pandemic I started using color more just in general. There was a little period for a few years where I was working almost exclusively in black and white. I don't particularly know why that is, but I've always been a huge fan of charcoal and pencil. But I think probably since last year, like a lot of people, I was looking for more brightness and color in life. That definitely played a role here, especially working with things that are so colorless and grey, like a sidewalk or a plaque.

GL: Right. Something interesting that I learned about you recently is that despite working increasingly—or almost exclusively—with text in your artwork recently, you don't necessarily consider yourself a writer, or even enjoy writing all that much. Knowing that, I'm interested in how you think text reaches you and your audience, as opposed to images. Why do you think it is that you choose to create language visually in art, and not so much with writing?

GS: I mean, I don't consider myself a bad writer, but it's something that I always kind of labor over very intensely. Whether it's a grant application or writing about my own work, I read it over and over again. I would always rather have a phone conversation with somebody than respond to an email. I read a lot and language has always been something I really, really value in my life and goes back to my upbringing. I've been surrounded by language ever since I was a little kid: I remember my grandfather had these giant bookshelves from floor to ceiling, and my mom always reads a lot. But why is it that I choose to create language in this way, rather than writing in a more traditional way? I don't have an easy answer to that, but I think it might be the fact that, this way, I can make language more my own. I can do things that language normally doesn't do when you read it in a book.

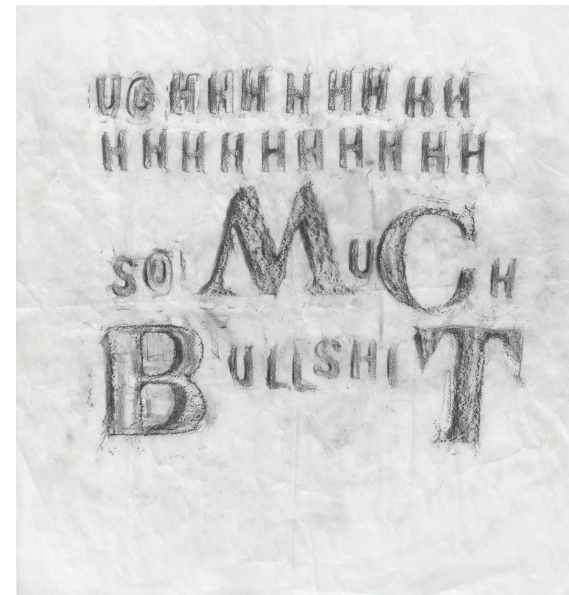
GL: Totally. I know that for your billboards project, you were inspired by the 20th-century imagist poet William Carlos Williams. My understanding of imagist poetry is that it's sort of similar to haiku, in that it's typically very short in length and free verse, but the big idea being that it summons imagery more directly, because of just how simplified and direct the verbiage is.



If I were, 2021, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 15 x 16"



Ayyyyy ke rico, 2021. Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 15 x 16"



Tired of it, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"

GS: Yeah, he was just really known for the paring-down of text and keeping things very short and impactful. So in a similar way with these drawings, making an effort to keep things simple and focused.

GL: Right, and in both cases, it means being extremely selective with what you're presenting to an audience. I would imagine that that's one appeal of working with text in the ways that you do: working within limitations. Maybe that also leaves more room for people to impart their own experiences and use their imaginations. Another reason why I enjoy these drawings so much is that the ones with words evoke a desire to say the phrases out loud, which perhaps is another whole element of interaction.

GS: Right, like "Ayyy, ke rico!" or "Ughhh, so much bullshit!" Yeah, there was something I had read a while back about Augustine being surprised that his mentor would always read silently to himself. And that was because in the earlier stages of written language, when the written word started to be used as a typical form of communication, punctuation wasn't a part of it. That's something that came later. There were no spaces between words, no periods, no commas. And so really, in order to read a text and have it make more sense to you, you would read it out loud. And so I think there's some lingering element of that in these drawings. They come to life more when you read them out loud.

GL: I completely agree. We have a related question for you in the chat: how do you think about the performativity of language, and how can your work be read as performance as well?

GS: Yeah, that's a really great question, which I think kind of comes back to this practice of reading aloud. So for that Do you understand what I'm saying? installation in Somerville, there was a workshop I had held in conjunction with it, where a group of us met on the sidewalk for a series of language-based exercises. One of them was reading the red text out loud together. And I think whenever we see something in the public space and we read it, it's always in silence. We just kind of read it to ourselves and move on. But with this, and particularly because these are such forceful questions, the idea was for everybody to read it out loud, one-by-one as a group, and just kind of allow the words to occupy public space in a different way, and also be processed in a different way. So I think that performance opened up another whole dimension to that work. I also think about this a lot whenever I'm interpreting in court... that, too, is a performance.



Straight on till morning, 2021. Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 15 x 16"



No pare sigue sigue, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"

GL: Another question for you from the chat: “Are there other ways that your work as a translator and your work as an artist feed each other?”

GS: Yes, definitely. One, in terms of communication, as an interpreter in court, I’m constantly encountering very poorly worded questions, or people speaking at disparate registers where one person, perhaps an attorney, is speaking in legalese that only they and the other attorneys in court understand, and not the defendants. If we pull any one off the street and ask them, “hey, do you know what a Four Corners argument is? Or the fruit of the poisonous tree? Or compliance and election?” Like, no one knows what the hell this stuff is. So I think a lot about creating work in ways that are more accessible. And I think that carries over into the classroom, and being able to meet people where they’re at. That’s one way being an interpreter and artist feed each other, and then another way is just the resourcefulness of both. I feel like, as an artist, sometimes the more restrictions you have, the more exciting the work you make in the end. I mean, not always, but sometimes it prompts you to think on your feet in certain ways. Thinking in the moment being resourceful in these ways I think has helped me become a better translator, too.

GL: And these drawings are, of course, extremely resourceful. Someone from the chat is asking if you can “talk about the impact of bilingualism in your work. Has the contrast between Spanish and English and their possibilities opened new inclusive spaces, and at the same time, limited particular works and installations to specific audiences?”

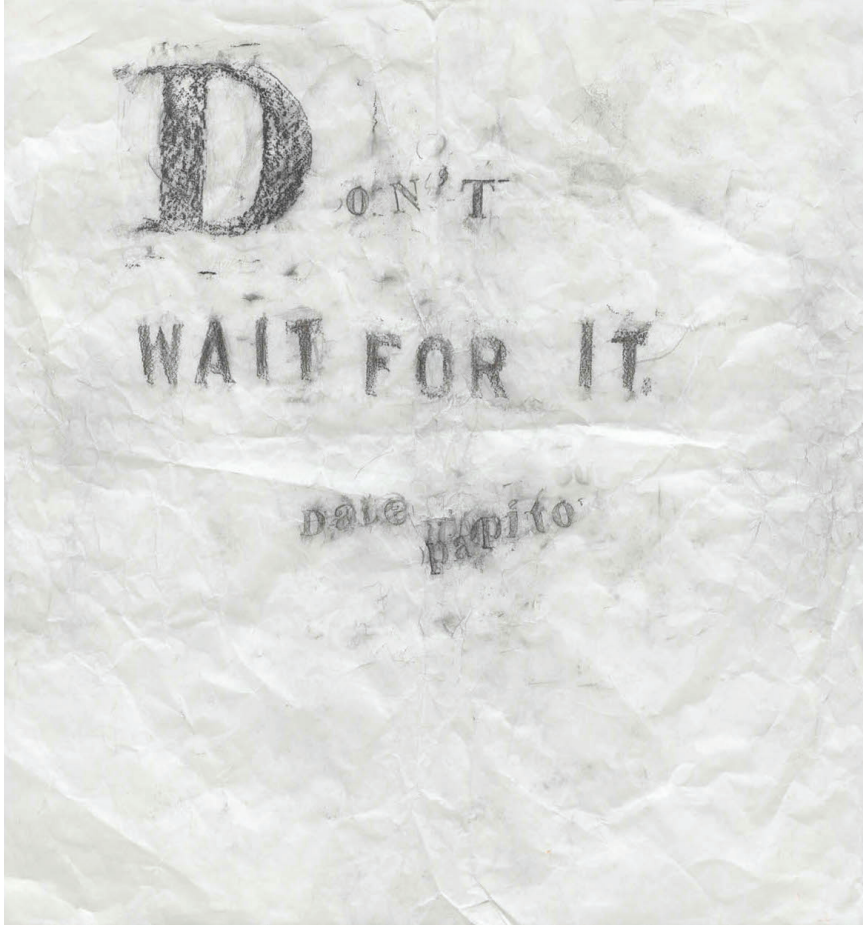


No es fácil/It ain't easy [Esta vaina no es fácil, pero no te atormentes], 2020. Site-specific installation, Boston, MA

GS: Sure. I mean, the impact of bilingualism has been with me since childhood—growing up Cuban-American in Miami, where bilingualism is sort of just a built-in facet of everyday life, and now on a daily basis for work and with friends. It’s with me all the time, so how could it not make it into my work? But to address the second half of your question and thinking about something as public as the billboards, I wanted to make them both in English and Spanish because those billboards were installed in areas of Boston that had been significantly or most affected by COVID-19. These were also neighborhoods with high populations of essential workers and thus a high population of Spanish speakers. So it was really a gesture to these populations and communities, but also a nod to the fact that there are so many other languages than English in the United States, despite there being so much monolingualism here. There are so many cultures and languages here that live in so many different ways, and something as simple as putting something in Spanish in the public space was a way to celebrate that. And then, at the same time, that limits it to certain people, right? Like if you’re not a Spanish speaker, you’re going to see “no es fácil, pero tú tranquilo” and you’re not going to know what that is. On the one hand, that’s just sort of par for the course, because not everything is going to be for everybody, but the people that it is for, I’m hoping that the work is especially meaningful to them. And I personally always like being around other languages. You know, my wife is of Russian heritage and sometimes at a larger family gathering, there’ll be a lot of Russian being spoken. And I just only know how to say a few silly, sassy things in Russian. I can’t really follow a conversation, but I’m totally happy with a conversation happening in Russian around me and people being able to express themselves in whatever language they want to express themselves. So, yeah, making work in different languages cuts both ways.

I believe we’re just about out of time, so thank you, everybody, for attending and for all of your thoughtful questions tonight!

GL: Yes, thank you so much, Gabriel, for sharing these beautiful drawings and for your amazing residency at Urbano. And thank you everyone for your thoughtful questions and reflections, they’re what make these conversations great. Goodnight!



Dale, papito, 2021. Graphite on paper, 15 x 16"