

Himanshu Desai

Text

The Cosmic Dance of Fireflies

Ximena Labra, Mexico City, Mexico

My interview with Ximena Labra did not go quite as I had planned. It quickly turned into more of a conversation. I feel that people like her are the hardest to interview. I say that because her strong personality is one that is full of humour and playfulness. In my humble opinion, such people are often the hardest to engage in a formal conversation, because any kind of formality would never do justice to such an attractive personality. That said, it was also evident from the get go, that behind her infectious charm, her playful spirit, and her casual demeanor, she hid a deeply spiritual nature and a wisdom that traverses her global experience as a traveler, and a resolved expression as an artist.

Playfulness is often saturated with deep hidden truths.

Perhaps playfulness can wash away tears, as was done in the work she did during the Sandarbh Artists Residency 2023, titled Nayana.

Upon hearing that a school girl named Nayana literally stopped her school from being shut down – by the sheer power of her tears; Ximena decided to convert the story into a performance art piece.

“I decided to show up in the schoolyard and paint her name with water during recess at 1:40 p.m. when the sun is at its zenith. The water represents Nayana’s tears that rise towards the sun as they evaporate, celebrating the fruit of her wish to go to school. The audience is the girls and boys who now study there”. – excerpt from Ximena’s artist statement.



I had to literally operate outside of conventional methods of interviewing and writing, as Ximena seemed to carry within her, a world that she continually explores from the inside, and that, she even invites you to explore with her, through her experiences, and her superlative works of artistic expression.

If Ximena's exploits as an artist were to be assembled in a room, I feel that it would be like a nursery school classroom full of multicoloured toys.

As we conversed about her works, artistic processes, diverse skillsets, and what have you – I felt an air of familiarity in her stories, because I feel that I am quite similar in my approaches to art. I thought deeply about her works, and asked myself some important questions:

- **What could be better than to have a creative process that is in fact not much different than a children's play group activity?**
- **Given the belief that humour is a difficult artform, is it true then, that to have a work of art that looks so effortless on the surface, in fact requires deep diligence, hard labour, intense contemplation, and strong resolve?**
- **How does Ximena bring such complex and serious questions to an artistic outcome that appears playful, and yet is deeply philosophical?**

Ximena once told me that play is the essence of life, perhaps it could be the catalyst of an ever evolving nature of the universe. I was reminded of the great analytic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who is known to have once said:

“A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes.”

Clones in Memoriam

Her work titled Tlatelolco Public Space Odyssey – at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, was installed where a massacre occurred in 1968, the very year Stanley Kubrick's epic film 2001 Space Odyssey was released. Ximena remarked about the plaza that one can sense death over

there, it was perhaps like a death of the pre hispanic world, the deaths of the students, and the deaths resulting from the earthquake of 1985; and therefore it is perhaps a place where a tectonic shift in Mexican consciousness has happened. It is like an allegory of injustice. That said, she chose to respond to this by cloning the stela with the inscription of Rosario Castellano's poem titled *Memoriale de Tlatelolco*. The clones then became like movable artefacts of public landmarks. In a way, the clones portrayed the failure of the immovable monuments to tell their stories beyond their locations, which now as clones could navigate the city. They would appear and disappear sporadically in key places, creating ephemeral architectural interventions in the public domain. A domain that you may play with in real time.



It is evident in Ximena's artworks, that in her world – history, myth, and legend are enmeshed in a sphere that the spirit continually explores, and extends beyond the realms of the real, into ethereal and metaphysical domains.

Some of the most casual moments of our lives are at times deeply spiritual events. Upon a visit to the Mayan archeological site at *Palenque*, while Ximena was casually resting during sundown, and amidst her exploration of the ruins of this ancient civilization; she was overwhelmed by fireflies rising out of the jungle canopies of the great Yucatan peninsula. She described this event with particular care as she explained its spiritual significance as a turning point in her life. She referred to it as an event that may have opened her mind to the comprehension of a cosmic consciousness. She has been a seeker since then, seeking out not just a celebration of life, art, and creativity, but a purposeful tryst for enrichment of the soul. Later in life, it appears to me, she came into spiritual practices such as silence and meditation.

This intriguing narrative of hers made me stop and wonder – would I ever comprehend her inner workings reasonably well? Uncanny forces seem to have become for her, the drivers of a deeply contemplative yet analytical artistic language.

Shroud of Memory

Ximena could have preserved and conserved the Library of Alexandria if only she were alive at the time.

Nevermind, intention transcends time, as was evident in her act of shrouding the entire collection of books housed in the hundred square meter space of the Foundation Gallardo in Santa Tecla, El Salvador. It appears that she managed to bind the whole space into an immersive site specific installation titled Phantom Library. In the act of shrouding the narratives of a literary collection, is also shrouded a plethora of forgotten discourses that are frozen in time, and a geographical space that stands silent in an inert timespan – and by this very virtue, it stands as a monument of an absent collective memory. However memory is free of space and time, and the fabric artwork which is an allegorical shroud, may travel geographically as evidence of a life-sized memory, just like the *Shroud of Turin*.



“This project is about the dissolution and creation of History regarding a country of such recent conflicts it is still struggling to rebuild and re write its own story”. – Ximena Labra



Ximena once mentioned that she doesn't just read books, she literally walks into them and is able to visualise narratives, perhaps just like a clairvoyant would see distant lands. Narration to her, is as visual as it is literal. The mind renders the universe that literature is narrating. Mystical as it may sound, it does effectively seem to cast itself onto real space as artwork. I for one, as a new friend of hers, feel that I still have much to uncover as I research her artistic intentions and processes.

A Dagger Through the Heart

Her work *Transverberaciones* appears to be an utterly immersive environment that will take you through the domains of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity in equal measure, going through mundane hell and culminating in an exit point through a sublime and landscape of ancient philosophical concepts that externalise the unearthly experiences of St. Teresa of Ávila; and of the visions she had during her path to enlightenment. Lest we forget that this transmedia installation also lends itself to aural experimentation that emerged as the 3 meter tall, 350kg musical instrument *Citrapatamga Brevicornis*, a collaboration with composer Leonardo Heiblum and luthier Carlos Chinchillas.

In terms of etymology – “*Transverberaciones*” is Latin for “*transverberatio*”, which means being speared through the heart. St. Teresa of Ávila is said to have written in her autobiography that in one of her visions she had experienced an angel (perhaps a cherub or a seraph) piercing her heart with a dart of love, which had fire at its tip; and that, the extremity of the ensuing pain

itself was blissful. Ximena pierces the aesthetic of this work with trans-religious iconography – you enter a shark's mouth on a turmeric laden brick road, that leads to an altar facing a Devi Yantra, followed by Buddhist chants, and then a *Gunas* (mundane existence) laden hellscape where microscopic transmorphs stare at you, as you enter a realm of the infinite, and a prism spear that illuminates St. Joseph (the patron saint of humility).



To me, in its very utterance, the path to enlightenment, and the visions of St. Teresa sound like a mystical/transcendental game of cat and mouse – where you are the cat and, you are the mouse.

- *Verberato = fundamental trespassing*

Imagine for a moment, your mind rendering what St. Teresa saw, then imagine for another moment how Ximena converted the rendering into an immersive art viewing experience, with its experimental aurality, its immersive visuality, and its articulations of the microscopic manifests of an uncanny physicality. I bet it will be even harder to imagine how so many trans-religious references are merged into a single site specific transmedia work of mystical wonderment – perhaps like a garden of unearthly delights.

On second thoughts, perhaps it is not that hard for Ximena to cast such wonders onto extant spaces, because she seems to bring to the table – the whole atmosphere of a modern 21st century mysticism, along with her strong persona. My conversations with her have only just begun, and I hope they will extend into a future that will strengthen the bond I have formed with her as a friend. The little time that I was able to afford in conversing with her during my brief participation in the Sandarbh Artist Residency 2023, veered in various directions – spirituality, mysticism, religion, art, expression, collective consciousness, silence, meditation, and what have you! We even spoke about being overwhelmed by uncanny visions that one may experience while coming face to face with the idol of Dattatreya and, or Hanuman; about her long silent retreats at ashrams; her keen interests in the topics of ephemerality, transcendental experience, telepathy clairvoyance, and last but not the least, the manifestations in our lives that may in fact be great gifts from the universe.

I feel that conversations with Ximena can only begin, and can never end; and I hope that in my case this comes true because there is always going to be so much to learn from her art and experiences, in equal measure.

In any case, I will try to update, refine, and expand this piece of writing as I engage her in future conversations. Do visit her website, should you wish to view her works in further detail: ximenalabra.com

[« previous](#) [next »](#)

© 2023 [Himanshu Desai](#)

[Back to top](#)