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'The Last Judgment' brings catharsis to Little Village

Kerry Cardoza

8-10 minutes

Artist Adela Goldbard draws from Mexican traditions to address issues in the neighborhood today.

By [@booksnotboys](#)

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Adela Goldbard's "The Last Judgment" includes papier-mache renderings of two Judases and an ICE SUV.

[Kiam Marcelo Junio](#)

Have you ever wanted to see a police car set on fire? You may

soon have the chance to, albeit the car in question is made of pulped paper. Artist Adela Goldbard's "[The Last Judgment/El Juicio Final](#)," on view through October 10 at Gallery 400, features papier-mache set pieces mirroring iconic symbols of the Little Village neighborhood—both good and bad. The exhibition combines the history of Mexican effigy-burning traditions with the complexity of carnival to delve into the challenges facing the neighborhood of Little Village today, complete with a flame-filled finale.

Entering the gallery is like entering Little Village itself. First you're face to face with a replica of the Little Village Arch, which stretches over 26th Street and is akin to the arches in many towns in Mexico. Nearby are a paleta cart, a small brick house, a copy of the 26th Street Discount Mall sign, and of course a Homeland Security vehicle, complete with federal agents sporting devil horns.

Goldbard, who is originally from Mexico and graduated from SAIC in 2017, chose to focus on Little Village because it's a majority-Mexican community that retains a strong link to Mexican traditions. In September, just after the exhibit opened, the neighborhood held its 50th annual 26th Street Mexican Independence Day Parade, part of Fiestas Patrias, which commemorates Mexico's independence from Spanish rule.

The exhibition draws from a 16th-century morality play called *The Last Judgment*, which warns of the dangers of not living a devout life. The first Western play to be staged in what is now Mexico, *The Last Judgment* was written by Franciscan priest Andrés de Olmos as a tool of religious conversion. Goldbard takes this

morality play and cleverly turns it into a liberatory text.

"Instead of generating fear, it's about celebrating traditions and it's about burning what needs to be eliminated from the community," she says.

Goldbard came upon this play while researching other projects, and was immediately drawn to the use of pyrotechnics in its original staging. The play's central character, Lucia, wears earrings made of fireworks that explode, symbolizing the punishment she receives on Judgment Day.

Lucia also appears in Goldbard's work as a modern-day immigrant from the Mexican state of Michoacán. Her story is told via a sound piece played in the gallery, spoken in the indigenous language Nahuatl, which was also used in the original staging of the play. A final version of this sound piece will be the central component of the project's culmination. On November 2, the set pieces will be transported to La Villita Park, where a spectacular public performance will take place in connection with the [Chicago Architecture Biennial](#).

"It's something in between a play, a pyrotechnic spectacle, and a movie," Goldbard says. "People can expect a celebration. People can expect a cathartic event. People can expect to have fun, but also to be encountered by events that require some criticality of them."

Most of the objects in the gallery will be set on fire during the spectacle while surrounded by fireworks. The idea stems from the tradition of the burning of Judas, during which effigies of the traitorous figure were burned as a way of disposing of evil. These

traditions are sometimes written off as merely celebratory, but Goldbard sees them as deeper than that, more complex. She says it's a crucial way for a community to be openly critical of society's ills and allows people to ritualistically destroy those ills.

It was crucial to Goldbard that this project be conceived in collaboration with Little Village residents. She spent months meeting with community members and local artists, listening to their concerns and holding art workshops with students. The large papier-mache sculptures featured in the exhibit are based on models from these workshops. Artisans from Artsumex, a collective from Tultepec, Mexico, were flown in to craft the final objects.

"For me, it was important that, visually, the project is a bridge between communities on both sides of the border," Goldbard says.

In one of her workshops, Little Village fifth-graders were asked to make cardboard models of an event that had a negative impact on their lives. Many depicted a house in flames, like the 2018 fire that left ten children dead. One created an ambulance. Another made a gun.

Goldbard's project makes it clear that this community faces immense challenges—they're so apparent even elementary school kids can see them. For decades the coal-fired [Crawford Power Generating Power Plant](#) led to elevated rates of asthma and other respiratory illnesses among residents, especially children. In 2016, Fidencio Sanchez, an 89-year-old paleta seller, revealed he couldn't afford to stop working. The increasing threat of ICE raids caused a recent [20 to 50 percent drop in sales](#) for

Little Village retailers. But residents have fought against these injustices every step of the way. In 2012 they successfully shut down the plant. They raised nearly \$400,000 to support Sanchez. They've formed defense networks to warn neighbors about ICE raids. It's that strength, in the face of staggering odds, that drew Goldbard to tell this neighborhood's story.

"At the end of the play, it's a story of a very brave community," Goldbard says. "And that's how I see Little Village. It's a community that has been struck by a lot of systemic violence, and not only are they still standing, but they're a community that would never stop fighting for their rights. This is a story of fighting for your own community." v

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