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When Summer School Means Survival

By Kristine Schomaker

There's something deeply wrong when an artist can spend seven years making work about gun violence in schools and the material never runs out. Gina M's *The New Normal: Summer School* at Gallery 825 shouldn't exist. But here we are, walking through what looks like a classroom but feels like a memorial, past chalkboards that should hold math problems but instead carry the words of kids who've learned to play dead.

"I hope they leave unsettled," Gina writes about what she wants viewers to take from the twenty-four handmade pieces that transform Gallery 825 into a space of interrupted comfort. "I want the work to interrupt people's comfort. To make them stop and ask why this is our new normal. And why we're okay with it."

The show began in 2018 after Gina attended March for Our Lives, feeling hopeful in her pink hat. Within a week, the headlines faded. Then came another shooting. Then another. The work has been growing ever since—because the crisis keeps growing too.



Gina M. The New Normal-Summer School at LAAA - Gina Fernandez (Artist Gina M)

Walking through *Summer School* feels like moving through a school day that never ends safely. You enter through a toy-filled metal detector, pass chalkboards and globes and desks, walk over hopscotch lines painted on the floor, and arrive at a makeshift memorial. The familiar becomes sinister. Summer—a season meant for freedom and play—becomes shadowed by lockdown drills and survival lessons.

Gina grew up in a puppet theater, literally. Her mom ran one, and weekends meant building puppets and throwing birthday parties where art and storytelling were just part of life. That background shows up everywhere in her work now—there's whimsy, but it's paired with something darker. She uses childhood imagery not for nostalgia but to expose what's shifted. Teddy bears and chalkboards and toys become vessels for conversations we shouldn't have to have.

No Words uses 3,000 individual Scrabble tiles arranged into six hidden crossword puzzles. "Lite-Rite" employs over 2,000 Lite-Brite pegs to spell out a phrase that shouldn't have to exist: "Guns Over Kids." The Gunball Machine repurposes a vintage candy dispenser, filling the capsules with miniature 3D printed toy guns and a plastic ribbon with a thought or prayer—Collect them all.

The process sounds exhausting in the best way. Gina works on multiple pieces at once across different media and themes, with sheds full of found objects and a living room that turns into studio space when deadlines approach. Her family becomes part of the artistic team—her son brings tech tools and laser cutting skills, her husband knows every power tool, her brother-in-law helps with graphic layout. It takes a village to hold this much grief and still make something meaningful from it.

But January brought a different kind of challenge. A massive fire swept through Gina's Altadena neighborhood. Their house barely survived. While repairing their home, she built the rest of the show. "Creating under that pressure—with both grief and gratitude—was the hardest part," she writes. Even disasters become part of the work's DNA. At a post-fire yard sale, she found a vintage traffic light with neon and transformed it into *Mixed Signals*—blinking red, yellow, green between "Shoot" and "Don't Shoot."



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The room moves you through spaces like a school campus, long and narrow, broken into digestible areas that make the immersive story feel manageable without diminishing its impact. *Run. Hide. Fight.* wraps the room in 90 feet of painted paper—border decoration that started as a window drawing and grew into something that still doesn't feel like enough.

What strikes me most about Gina's approach is how she treats the gallery like a teaching space. Because that's what it is, isn't it? We've taught kids to hide under desks. To use umbrellas as protection. To play dead. We've convinced ourselves this is normal, sent our thoughts and prayers, and moved on. The work asks the questions we're avoiding: How did we let this become normal? Why are we teaching kids to survive instead of keeping them safe? Who will fix it? How?

Her son once texted from under his desk during a lockdown, holding an umbrella—his only protection. That image crystallizes everything wrong with our new normal. Kids shouldn't know how to barricade doors or identify exit routes or weigh whether their hiding spot is good enough. They should know multiplication tables and state capitals and which books make them laugh.

If Gina could have a conversation with one of her pieces, she'd ask *I Hate the New Normal*—a series of chalkboards covered in words from kids who've lived through gun violence or fear it daily—"Is anyone really listening to you?" The question haunts because we all know the answer.

Teachers and librarians cry when they see this work. That response says everything about who's carrying this crisis daily. But when a pro-gun visitor pauses and starts thinking about gun violence in schools differently, that's when the work proves art can still change minds, one uncomfortable moment at a time.

Gina's planning to take the show to college and university galleries next—"where the real conversation needs to happen, with the people inheriting this crisis." Her ten-year-ago self would be sad and amazed that we're still having this conversation, that an artist could make so much work about gun violence in schools and it would only grow more relevant.

The New Normal: Summer School looks like a classroom, but its lesson is about our failure to protect students. Our future. The assignment is clear: Stop pretending this is okay. Figure out how to fix it. And do it before another generation learns that hiding under desks is just part of growing up in America.

The New Normal: Summer School runs through July 12 at Gallery 825, 825 N. La Cienega Blvd, Los Angeles. Artist talk: Saturday, June 28, 2PM. Gallery hours vary Tuesday–Saturday; call 310.652.8272 or email gallery825@laaa.org to confirm.



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