Marie Cameron

The image for my painting, La Niña, came to me in a flash and it haunted me, calling me to paint it. I had been following the coverage of the tide of unaccompanied minors from Central America flooding across the border between the United States and Mexico and I was driven to try and understand the circumstances in their homelands that must be so horrible as to drive them to make this dangerous journey alone. What I found was an environment of rampant gang violence, gangs like Mara 13 and 18 that began in LA and were deported to El Salvador where they had flourished, fueled by poverty and civil unrest. So pervasive and endemic was this culture of the Maras, many minors felt they had no choice but to flee from forced recruitment and rape. There was this one photograph I came across that made such an impression on me, it was of a young woman with a giant 18 tattooed across her face which she had received in punishment for refusing to execute a gang murder, it was a family portrait with her baby and her husband, who was the gang's tattoo artist . She seemed so sad and worried - branded in this very obvious way, an admonishment, a possession, a target. The photo was taken by Christian Poveda, a Hispanic-French photo-journalist and filmmaker of La Vida Loca who was later killed by the gang for his work. In this photograph, I saw the impossibility of the situation where your very skin is indelibly marked with violence. I imagined  the image of an innocent baby floating buddha-like in a sea of tattoos, those of one gang etched on to her body, and those of the rival gang floating around her. In searching for a more universal statement, these very specific gang symbols later morphed into more generalized symbols for danger and entrenchment that are marking the lives of our children.