

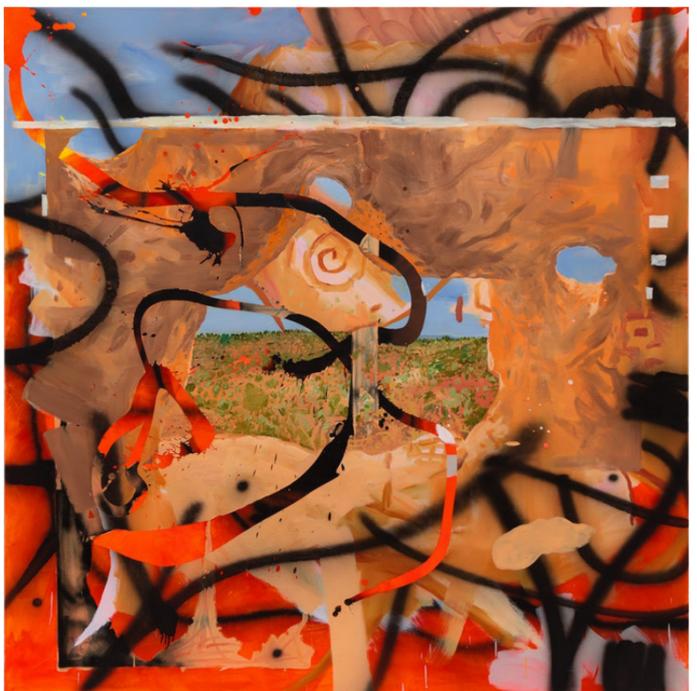
## An ocean of rivers: Esteban Cabeza de Baca

BY SANGRAM MAJUMDAR MAY 24, 2019

Since I first visited Esteban Cabeza de Baca's studio when he was enrolled in Columbia's MFA Program, his work has evolved, but his restlessness and unwillingness to fit into a visual niche has remained unchanged. In his first New York solo exhibition, "Worlds Without Borders" on view at Boers-Li Gallery through June 15, he has assembled paintings and sculptures into thoughtful installations throughout multiple rooms. Somewhere between his travels inside and outside the US, we found time in which to discuss his powerful new body of work and his commitment to a life where art, politics, family, and history are inseparable.

**Sangram Majumdar:** *Where did you grow up and what's your earliest memory of making an image?*

**Esteban Cabeza de Baca:** I grew up along the border of San Ysidro, California and Tijuana. It was beautiful but intense. People would run through our backyard and steal clothes; helicopters would pass and wake us up. My parents would also house so-called illegal immigrants in our basement. So, I grew up with the idea of giving sanctuary to people who are designated "illegal." I didn't start speaking until I was five years old. To help me express myself, I remember my Dad would give me clay or set me up with paints in front of Bob Ross on TV.



*Tsankawi*, 2018, oil on linen, 70.87 x 70.87 inches

**SM:** *Imagination and observation seem to have always been intertwined in your work. I still remember seeing your small premier coup landscapes sitting right alongside your dream paintings in your studio in graduate school. The title of your show at Boers-Li, "Worlds without Borders" feels like a call to imagine a better world which necessitates that we first recognize how things actually are.*

**ECdB:** Yeah, painting from life helps me do this. In grad school Susanna Coffey and my partner Heidi Howard would paint along the Hudson River at night. Painting the spider webs foregrounded by the moon was amazing. To me all the color theory taught in books can be understood if you just pay attention to nature. This past December-January me and my partner were in Carrizozo, New Mexico, at my friend Paula Wilson's residency. It's amazing space where community and creativity merge with the help of Paula's partner Mike Lagg who is a visionary artist. I painted the Sierra Blanca's mountain range on the roof of our house everyday in acrylics. I had to work faster en plein air than I'm used to especially because Carrizozo is a desert climate. It was visionary painting there talking to my ancestors.

But I also acknowledge landscape painting was the surveying tool of colonizers to romanticize the new world and to propagate manifest destiny. I counter the colonial perception of America by acknowledging who we were before 1492 by going to the cave paintings at Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico. When I'm there I recognize I'm standing in an ancient American painting studio. For instance, the painting *Tsankawi* I'm depicting the vantage point of looking out of the cave intertwined with spiral carvings and other perspectives of the same site. I'm painting circular vision that's wrestles with single point cartesian perspective. Reality isn't a river but an ocean of rivers reverberating in us.

**SM:** *A hand carved wooden totem stands in front of mesh-covered window. A brick 'line' disappears into the fireplace. A roughly-made clay water pot sits over a spray-painted the kind of water cooler that is ubiquitous in most office spaces. Each gesture seems thoughtful and carefully considered. What are you trying to tell us?*

**ECdB:** I'm trying to express how complicated colonization is and how history wraps around us in everyday objects. New forms of resource extraction are happening everyday while Trump's resource extraction policy in Bear Ears and Grand Escalante national monuments endangers ancient cave painting and our safety. So some of the three-dimensional totems come from these two-dimensional carvings. I want history to spill out in front of the viewer and get them to think about our story living with Earth.

**SM:** *This new work openly and unabashedly embraces politics. How and when did this shift happen?*

**ECdB:** I'm always political but at some moments its more visible. Separation was at first a painting of shanti structures along the border that I saw going to visit family in Tijuana when I was growing up. I wasn't happy with that flatness. I reconstructed sections in a Max Ernst fashion where he would use the blue sky to refigure the figure and ground. I wanted to paint what it feels like for mothers along the border to be separated from their children. In painting, you protect your childlike imagination and I want my work to give visibility to the growing problem of xenophobia in this country. I don't just paint like an artist-of-color while white male painters are able to speak about universal truths. I do both by expressing formally anomalies of perception through time and space.

**SM:** *I am always surprised how you manage to weave action, an image of an action, alongside imagery as space and a surface. Something about this seems vital to what you want to show us, or more specifically where you want to take us.*

**ECdB:** I think a lot about how Jackson Pollock looked at and appropriated the drip technique from Navajo sand painters. I wanted to make a painting that made a gestural mark but also deconstructed it. So a lot of my negative drips think about excavation of lost histories but also thinking about how American abstract painting existed long before the Ab-Ex painters of the 1950's. Pattern carving in many ancient sites serve to illustrate how ancient Americans represented non-objective subject matter.

**SM:** *You recently described the idea of painting as a 'living space.' Can you talk about that a bit more?*

**ECdB:** I want to paint a still image that fluctuates between different temporalities at once. I want to weave this hybridized space with colliding strings layered through the darkness of not knowing the result. At the end when the strings and liquid dots are excavated, there is a sense of temporal quakes in my paintings' history.

**SM:** *Recently, there seems to be a growing tension in your work, especially in relation to painting. How do you deal with this love/hate relationship to a medium that has been with you for so long? For example, when did you first start doubting what you were taught, and how has that dialogue evolved?*

**ECdB:** I think spending more time after grad school with my family in New Mexico and talking to more Latino and Native American community members like Nadema Agard got me to see the landscape before Alex Katz painted it. Nadema has helped me stay aligned as an artist in a long line of Native creators who I must pay respect to in order to see a longer vision. Kara Walker would talk to me about breaking paintings subservience to the master artist relationship. So, going towards recovered histories in combination with abstraction where meaning is non-normative but can drift towards ancient knowledge structures like cave painting helps reverse typical power relations in representation.

**SM:** *Your paintings play hide and seek with the viewer. Is this a fair comment?*

**ECdB:** Yeah that's fair. Sometimes I start with imagery of a stereotypical representation of indigenous art-making practice than shatter or hide it. Other times I hide pre-Columbian knowledge structures. The United States does not seek to honor the treaties made after 1492. The American dream needs indigenous people to exit or fit in a neat category. So, in terms of hide-and-seek in painting, I think of it as a gesture with the freedom of movement beyond categories.

**SM:** *Walking through the exhibition, I was struck immediately by the tightly knit color space that moves between the paintings, the sculptural objects and the activated spaces. Reds, Yellows, Oranges, Blacks permeate. But there is also a change between earth tones and fluorescent pinks and oranges. How did you arrive at this color palette for the show?*

**ECdB:** After grad school I went back to Colorado and New Mexico. The environment there peeled the city's dust off my perception. Seeing all the clays, terra cottas, pale oranges, mint shrubs and vast ultramarines got me to relax into the subtly of the southwest. There is a love of the land and of my ancestors there that I want to summon for guidance. Also my mom has flourscenthuichol yarn paintings on square panels that inspired me growing up.

**SM:** *Since receiving your MFA from Columbia, you have participated in a wide array of residencies, in NY, NM and abroad. How has this experienced affected you? Where are you off to next?*

**ECdB:** These experiences either in the USA or the Rijksakademie showed me to see craft globally and inspired me to see technological possibilities in the future. I want to keep pushing the handmade realm of assemblage and break down divisions between painting and sculpture with the help of Heidi Howard who collaborates with me. We are going to Amsterdam for my show at the Nederlandsche Bank with the help of Alexander Strengers and then off to China to exhibit through the Xian Academy of Fine Arts. I'm excited to see the terra cotta warriors and learn new clay techniques in porcelain from China. One day I want to live half my life in New Mexico doing what I can to preserve the environment/culture and fight in New York City for more representation of people of color in the art world making it a more equitable place.