

Four Artists to Watch Now

They are fearless, and their works are among the season's exciting shows. Drawing on memories and research, they propose new ways to live with our histories.

BY SIDDHARTHA MITTER APRIL 25, 2019

Esteban Cabeza de Baca

Esteban Cabeza de Baca grew up in the struggle.

His father was a historian forged in Chicano and Native American political movements, and who taught in community colleges so as to reach black and brown students directly. His mother is a Mexican-born union organizer.

“But they were really cool with me being a painter,” Mr. Cabeza de Baca said. “My dad would say, you look really gringo but that’s the way you’re going to infiltrate and change it from the inside.”

The prediction wasn’t off. Having trained at Cooper Union and Columbia University, Mr. Cabeza de Baca, 34, is honing a method that draws on the American canon, the insights of Native artists, and his own sense of the Southwest as physical and cultural terrain.

It’s a political project, yes. Mr. Cabeza de Baca’s ancestry is Spanish, Mexican, Apache, Zuni; his lineage goes back to Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, the 16th-century conquistador who wandered for years in the Southwest after his mission went awry. The artist grew up partly in San Ysidro, Calif., across from Tijuana, and spends as much time as possible in New Mexico. Questions of conquest, forced removal, and the current border crisis are always on his mind.

But the project is an aesthetic one, as well. The Native painters Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and Edgar Heap of Birds count among his influences, but so does Jackson Pollock, whose attraction to Navajo sand painting — said to have inspired the drip technique — registers as simultaneously genuine and colonial.

“That’s another demon in the room,” Mr. Cabeza de Baca said. In the Columbia M.F.A. program, where he teaches, he puts the Lakota medicine wheel and Chinese color theory on equal footing with Josef Albers.

Mr. Cabeza de Baca’s first New York solo exhibition is at Boers-Li Gallery, on the East Side. His large-format oil works are busy and bright, with shades of orange, pink, golden brown. They feature landscape elements — a mesa, a field of flowers, chain-link fence — and turbulent abstract forms. Some layer in maps of the Southwest and its indigenous nations. Motifs from ancient petroglyphs dance through.

“The paintings are trying to create a new language in the way we represent the landscape,” he said. “Employing certain traditions of white, European landscape painters but trying to shatter that through abstraction, and through cave paintings too.”

The practice extends to works in ceramics, metal, brick and wood. The sculptural pieces have a reverent aspect — some by allusion, suggesting totems and altars; others literally, for instance a medicine bundle with sage and tobacco.

“With a lot of these forms I’m trying to ask my ancestors for help,” he said. “Just trying to summon them in some nonderogatory way. Not to be exotic, but to try to pare it down as much as possible to the most essential prayer or thought.”



Circle and a Square, 2019, oil on linen, 60 x 60 inches