

Esteban Cabeza de Baca: Worlds without Borders

BY COLIN EDGINGTON JUNE 2019



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

Before entering the Boers-Li gallery on the 4th floor of this ornately decorated building, there hangs in the hallway between a stairwell and an open door, a small square painting by Esteban Cabeza de Baca. Painted white on canvas, a wavy circle is cut out that reveals the interior of the stretched painting and the wall behind it. On the underside of the top frame hang two objects from twine: a vertebra and a stone. They feel, somehow, eternal. The stretcher of *Bone and Clay* (2019), the painting's title, frames the objects, much like museums have framed non-Western cultures and colonial society has framed the artist. The gesture, the universality of the circle cut into a square, is both an artistic and political act that uses, and breaks from, the Western tradition. On the interior of the frame are brownish, triangular shapes that look like symbols of mountains or the partial spine of a vertebrate, marked on the apparatus by the artist. It sets the tone for de Baca's first solo show in New York, *Worlds without Borders*, which uses an array of tactics to take on more than just the topography of politics and colonialism.

Through sculpture, painting, and mixed-media, de Baca embraces landscape as a form with which to explore “a method to reinvigorate ideology in the Americas before 1492.” This method must dig through the present to get to that place. In *Tsankawi* (2019) a trompe l'oeil brown surface reminiscent of adobe or plywood is spattered with what looks like spray paint and through it (as if the viewer is inside an abandoned space) a New Mexican landscape is visible, that familiar reddish-brown dirt stippled with the greens of chamisa, sage, and juniper. *Tsankawi* was built by Ancestral Puebloans in north central New Mexico. Today it is part of Bandelier National Monument and contains petroglyphs, cave dwellings, village ruins, and ancient paths. This is not readily visible in the painting but alluded to through the spray paint-like lines that meander around the surface like snake tracks in the sand. From a distance, some of these marks appear to be painted over the top of the landscape and the brownish forms, but up close, their edges are raised and in places, peeling, exposing a ground image of deep black and electric orange, as if the bowels of the Earth are being exposed. This effect, achieved by pulling liquid masks away from the canvas once dried, expresses an uncovering of what is hidden in the topography of its surface—the latent memory that lies within the land but never disappears. For de Baca, this gesture is an act that is meant to show the viewer we aren't peering *through* the surface like voyeurs through windows but are being *shown* the matter of memory and time.

Like his paintings, the sculptures exist as material fusions of terrestrial, ideological, and critical forms. Two human-sized obelisks in the exhibition, *Earth Chant* (2017) and *Jornada Morolla* (2019), stand like severed spines leaning like fragile artifacts. The front is smooth and painted while the back reveals a visceral sculpting with the hands, the finger marks drawing through like hand-dug pits in the desert where clay can be found inches down into the earth. The hanging sculpture *Bear Ears with Medicine Bag* (2018), suggests an abstracted bear, cute in its shape, but ceremonial in its expression, like an ancient totem. The figure's head, with stunted ears, is sutured to its neck (or is its mouth sewn shut?) with twine, from which a bag hangs down below on the left side. The finger marks of the artist are seen throughout the surface, the physicality of its making drawing attention to the artist's labor and its earthen color. Embedded in the torso is a white form that can only be discerned as a petrified heart. It too is sewn to the figure and in its center a star-shaped crack opens it up. The viewer may consider the danger Bear Ears National Monument is in and take note that the ears look more like the land that bares its name than the actual mammal. The work then becomes an offering of healing to, as well as a lament of, the place itself.

The symbols that are recurrent in many indigenous cultures commingle throughout the show with those that are readily recognizable to contemporary culture such as chain-linked fences and barbed wire. In *Circle in a Square* (2019), 2016 electoral maps are overlaid with the historic boundaries of indigenous people (their names peeking through fields of color and crisscrossing lines). The spiral, which appears throughout de Baca's work as both painted and sculptured images (even the snakes are coiled), is found in the petroglyphs in the Southwest (including Newspaper Rock in Bear Ears) and often represents a journey, the migration of the body and spirit through space and time. The petroglyphs themselves are often interspersed with graffiti, not just with the scratches of angry or in-love teenagers, but also those that the Spanish colonialists left behind. De Baca's painting taps into this marking of history, of different temporalities, different modes of seeing the land.

By adopting an approach that layers, obscures, and juxtaposes images and gestures, Esteban Cabeza de Baca's paintings become a kind of mnemosyne atlas or layered Photoshop image that, like the petroglyphs and digital culture that influences him, feel simultaneously slippery and imperishable. His interest in breaking from the hegemony of Western landscape painting stems from a desire to reopen the narrative of history, to question its strict linearity from a single perspective, so as to reclaim what has been lost in the process, or jumbled through its appropriation. “Like imperialism itself,” wrote W.J.T. Mitchell, “landscape is an object of nostalgia in a postcolonial and postmodern era, reflecting a time when metropolitan cultures could imagine their destiny in an unbounded ‘prospect’ of endless appropriation and conquest.”¹ For de Baca, art-making and the resulting objects and images that come from it, ought to do to the heart and mind what he does to the surface of many of his canvases and sculptures: cut skins and peel masks, dig into surfaces, contradict, reveal, and ultimately extract, the blood, bone, and earth—to remove the borders built by white supremacy and colonialism so as to reclaim the possession of pre-Columbian consciousness.

1 W.J.T. Mitchell. *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p.20