

Esteban Cabeza de Baca: Nepantla

BY AMANDA GLUIBIZZI | MARCH 2021



Children, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches. Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

In his first solo exhibition with Garth Greenan, Esteban Cabeza de Baca shows paintings and ceramic sculptures that flicker with the colors of Southwest border towns: turquoise and marine blue, dusty terracotta, and the bloody hues of open sky sunsets. Topographically, the region shared by Mexico and the United States is so striking, with its desert and brush, sand and scrub—plus the ocean, as we venture even further west. But that environment can also be exceptionally brutal, particularly for those who move between the borders, as suggested in *Children* (2020), which depicts figures facing one another across a wall, pressing the palms of their hands against one other's. It is not only nature that is cruel.

Cabeza de Baca calls his show *Nepantla*, a Nahuatl word for liminality. Deployed in Chicana studies to examine “in-betweenness,” nepantla is an apt term for the artist's examinations of growing up on the border. He paints both present-day and historical aspects of that visual culture: cowboys, ascetics, yuccas and, in a bravura turn, an obsidian blade and arrowhead—as well as erecting his own totemic sculpture (*Nepantla*, 2021), which he then includes in several paintings. This tall clay outline of a figure, strung with charms and crystals, recalls Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* (1973–78) and suggests a solid volume while simultaneously offering vistas through its contours across the gallery; it serves as a focusing device to direct the viewer's gaze to images within the paintings hanging beyond it.

The concept of the in-between suits Cabeza de Baca's technique, as well. Building up his canvases with acrylics and masking with tape as he goes (some paintings bear the telltale rim of paint in raking light), he strips away that tape for the finished works, exposing his earlier paint layers. Such a strategy permits the paintings to be finished *and* newly begun, descendants *and* ancestors. In one particularly beautiful moment, a drip on the right-hand side of *Looper* (2020) reveals itself to be modeled, an *ombré* effect that both mimics and rejects the tonality of the painting's background landscape.

Landscape in Cabeza de Baca's paintings, though, is not always background. The artist plays tricks with scale, painting, in *Mesa Glorieta* (2020), a distant swath of blue sky, dry ground, and desert plants streaking just above a brown smudge of underground, tunneling ants. The juxtaposition pushes the two ecosystems up against each other, but because the ants loom larger than the brush, we cannot fathom which is macrocosm and which microcosm in this retelling. Similarly, the microscopic cactuses in *Osha Root* (2020) are every bit as “big” as the clouds in the sky, though we know that can't possibly be.

Throughout the show, Cabeza de Baca disrupts relationships between figure and ground: the yellow flowers on the right-hand side of *Besar la Tierra* (2020) grow out of and onto what looks like a tree trunk, rock outcropping, stela, or another totem; but they also explode that structure, flowers, stems, and shards suspended in rotation around each other. In other paintings, what could be staffage moves forward and features of the foreground sink back, seamlessly and inexplicably. They are subject *and* support and neither of these, all at the same time. Esteban Cabeza de Baca confounds our expectations in truly dizzying ways. Elements are both/*and*, either/*or*, neither/*nor*. Somehow in-between.