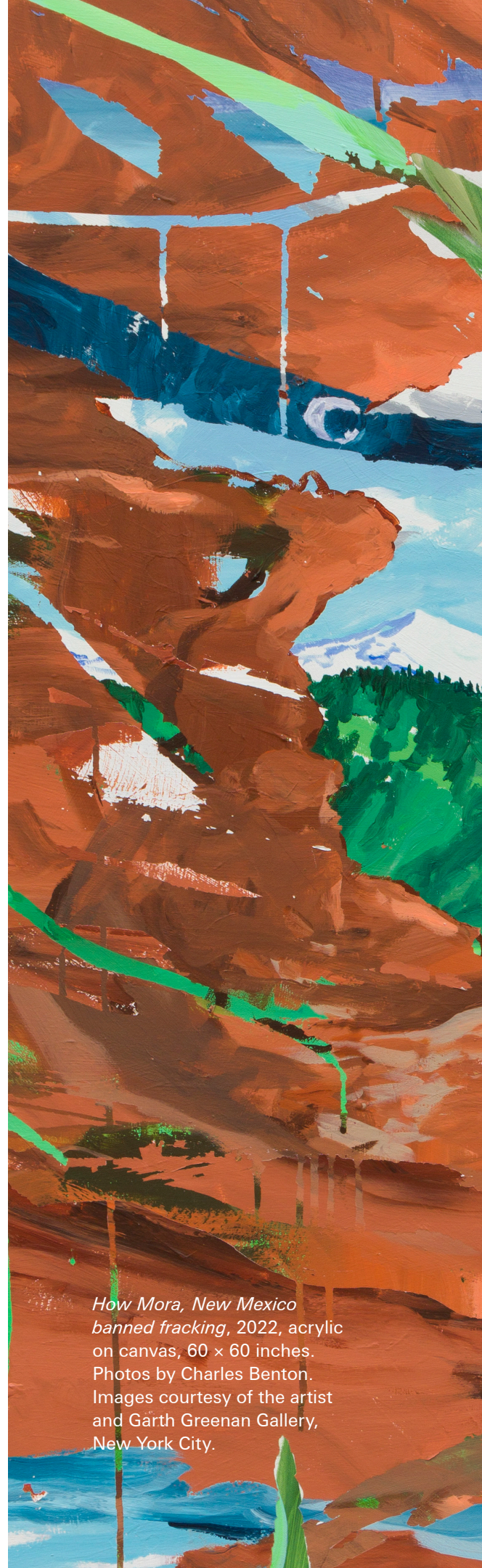


# Esteban Cabeza de Baca by Tarrah Krajnak

Esteban Cabeza de Baca's paintings are multidimensional timescapes. They pull the viewer into a spiral of past, present, and future: the deep time of the land and Indigenous mythologies, of the artist painting on-site, and of the hopeful speculations mapped in his canvases. Standing before one of Esto's paintings, I can imagine a time from deep within my own body and, in a dreamlike state, see myself seeing, my vision emerging from a dark cave. The skies in Esto's paintings defy horizontality, and, aware of my own bodily verticality, I feel small as I trace a path through his compositions. I can live here, I think, amid untold stories I do not yet understand and alongside Esto's figures, ancestors I forgot I was grieving for all this time.

Made by observing southwestern desert landscapes from multiple perspectives, Esto's paintings at once conjure a spiritual journey and deconstruct the all too familiar colonial visions of the American West. In layers of acrylic on cochineal-dyed canvas, we see the spiritualities, peoples, forms, and histories often made invisible in the canon. Though his gestural, expressive paintings grapple with the difficult histories of imperialism and westward expansionism, they also evoke the joy, freedom, and love of working on-site with materials at hand and, as he says, letting "paint take hold of the storytelling."

Born into a family of labor activists working in the politically charged border region of San Ysidro, California, Esto earned a BFA from the Cooper Union in 2010 and an MFA from Columbia University in 2014. He's currently based in Long Island City, Queens, and is preparing a show with his partner Heidi Howard at the Harwood Museum of Art in Taos, New Mexico, scheduled for 2025.



*How Mora, New Mexico  
banned fracking, 2022, acrylic  
on canvas, 60 × 60 inches.  
Photos by Charles Benton.  
Images courtesy of the artist  
and Garth Greenan Gallery,  
New York City.*



*Crossing*, 2023, acrylic  
and cochineal on canvas,  
72 × 72 inches.



ESTEBAN CABEZA DE BACA: I've really been looking forward to talking with you.

TARRAH KRAJNAK: Me too! I was surprised you asked me to interview you since I'm not a painter, but then I thought about our work and how we've developed as artists alongside each other all this time. We have known each other for over a decade now, but we first collaborated when I was teaching my *Unsettled Landscapes* course at Pitzer College, and I invited you to exhibit your work and give a lecture. You gave a powerful talk on decolonized art practice, and although your work has changed a lot since then, at its core it still has those same values. We also have similar relationships with our Indigeneity, and I'm curious, how does it relate to your becoming an artist?

ECB: It was a big deal that you invited me to speak in *Unsettled Landscapes*. It was the first time anyone invited me to present in a college course, and I learned so much about my own trajectory from crafting my talk under your guidance and the other artists and poets you were working with, like Natalie Diaz. As an Indigenous Chicano artist, my origin is mythological and historical. Stories Indigenous people tell about our origins often begin with emerging from a cave, then there is the discovery of a motherland—in my case the Southwest—and the continued search for freedom and place in a community. This story has flowed epigenetically through my family to me.

Indigeneity, though, has been marginalized in the Mexican and US caste systems. I grew up along the border of Mexico and the United States, in San Ysidro, California, and visited family in Tijuana, where my mom was born. There was a white, military culture in San Ysidro that taught me to be ashamed of my heritage. You and I are talking the day before Columbus Day, which is like this annual brain-washing event. In school, I was told that being Mexicano or Chicano meant being a criminal, that we were dirty people who needed to be surveilled. My parents were deeply involved in the Chicano movement in San Diego and wanted us to be proud of ourselves and

our culture. They helped create Chicano Park. We recently visited, and it has become this huge public space filled with murals of cacti and Chicano histories. Making art is, and has always been, a way of learning how to love myself.

TK: There's a hopeful sensibility in your work, a way of searching and healing connected to reclaiming lost forms of knowledge that exist within the body and the land.

ECB: Going to the Southwest and painting the motherland, especially caves, is a way of reimagining that ancient American origin story. The Aztecs say that we came from a seven-lobed cave. Returning to New Mexico, where my father's family has lived since before colonization, means throwing off the human-centered, modernist, capitalist way of seeing painting and instead becoming possessed by the landscape. Directing my vision of the land in a different, more patient way has allowed me to access memories inside myself that I map on canvas.

I use gesture and freedom of movement in the work to signal collective movement. Outside of painterly bounds, memory maps of historical points of collectivity show where they might persist now. Gesture is a modernist trope that I riff on to deconstruct and complicate it and to fill in histories that informed that way of making.

TK: What is "landscape" for you? In my work now I'm thinking about what a landscape photograph is, what it means, how it functions.

ECB: I think there's no distinguishing Indigenous people from the land, even in the most man-made and degraded industrial sites. Painters bring big ideas down to earth in a simplified form for people to connect with and to think about a larger cosmos—that's what I think about at least. When I work at a specific site, I translate the experience of that landscape into a painting, grounding it in space and bringing the histories that are embedded in the land into the present.

TK: How do you resist being influenced by modernist Euro-American conceptions of landscape?

ECB: Photographs and paintings of the American West were useful for mythologizing the idea of "manifest destiny." The kind of observation implied in those photographs and paintings is at once a tool of surveillance and a way of romanticizing a harsh reality. Those images are like a gateway drug to acculturate people to a false sense of history and the environment. But I think the way I resist Euro-American concepts is by complexing that seamless read of a pastoral space with embedded signifiers that have predated and influenced modernism.

TK: You're talking about visualization and how we were taught how to see through these manipulations.

ECB: A photograph happens in an instant, but a painting takes time. When I go to a site, I paint it in one long session and then I leave.

TK: Like a very long shutter exposure. I think I need to photograph you painting.

ECB: That'd be fun!

TK: I feel like I'm much more adept at conversing with artists through the camera because photography is so much about time, light, and presence. I've heard you describe your paintings' relationship to time in different ways. Much like working in the darkroom is for me, I came to understand that the materiality of the paint itself is a way of embedding time into the experience of your paintings. And your methods of "seeing"—like the practice of plein air painting coupled with dreaming—resonate so much with my interest in connecting with Indigenous forms of knowing. In your paintings, time is so complex, circular, and even spiral-shaped. How would you describe the way time operates in your work? There's deep time in the work and the time of making the painting—maybe this is a photographer's question of a painter!

ECB: I'm looking at a lot of Mesoamerican art and Native American art along the border, which have been conversing for thousands of years and have survived colonization. This reminds me not to be nostalgic





Detail of *Glacial Timelapse*,  
2023, acrylic on canvas,  
72 x 72 inches.

and seek a return to the past but to understand how to persevere through trauma, especially the kind we experience in the present. When you're looking at my paintings' surfaces, you experience the first marks and gestures I make, while the last marks I paint are in the background, inverting how you experience time in painting. And the cave motifs help track as time signatures. The petroglyphs and cave paintings that I see in New Mexico, for instance, index care for that environment and the culture's resilience. I've been tracing these ideas and looking at the land for a while, but recently it's become more specific to these signifiers in the caves.

For the painting *8 Fold Way* (2023), I started by observing the landscape from the inside of a cave in northern New Mexico. And there I found this rock, which I didn't want to take with me. I took a photo of it instead, and I used that shape to frame a view of the earth from the vantage point of a rock from that area, linking the painting to the site.

TK: I love that.

ECB: I was thinking about multiple perspectives on the same place and about the history of painting on canvas, which I wanted to turn on its side to open a new space. I feel connected to the Southwest and the ideas that pulse through that region, but I love New York School painting. Riffing on modernist ideas of paint, color, and gesture brings the two together. As much as I critique abstract expressionism, it is an interestingly sensorial, bodily way of painting. Then the question is, How can I bring that kind of work to the border in a humane and collectively minded way? How can I have more conversations with institutions and communities and people that I'm really excited about there?

TK: You're borrowing gestures and some visual strategy from these modernists. The more traditional elements of landscape—horizons, clouds, landforms—are repeated over and over, but I can't tell if the composition is sideways or upside down or which layers come to the front and which move to the back.

ECB: So trippy. Sometimes on long drives in New Mexico, the landscape shifts in your periphery, and in the painting, I'm trying to recreate that experience of moving with the landscape.

TK: When you make your observational paintings in a cave, or paintings from the perspective of a cave, do you bring the same canvas back to your studio in New York City? Or do you make a separate painting in the studio based on your observations in the field? How does the work change between the field and the studio?

ECB: That's a great question. One of the reasons why I shifted from oil to acrylic painting is because you can work with it on-site in plein air. It dries fast, especially in the New Mexico climate, so I must paint fast. Sometimes I lay the canvas on the ground and work on it in one direction, let it dry, roll it up, work on it at another site to paint from a different perspective, and then roll it up and bring it to the studio.

I get charged with this feeling when I'm out in New Mexico, like I have a freedom of movement that I don't feel when I'm in New York City. The city has a very vertical energy, but when I'm out in the desert, I feel a much more horizontal and open energy that I register in a very subjective way through gestural painting.

TK: Considering how your work involves time, the body, and gesture, I'm curious if you relate it to performance.

ECB: I remember talking with Alex [Keefe, Tarrah's husband] about how Jackson Pollock registered the early premonition of art's expansive quality in action painting, and then Fluxus rerouted the movement of energy outside of commodity and into community. I liked that idea a lot. For my work, the question became, how can I use, reverse, and deconstruct modernism's gestures, so that I don't reinscribe violent hierarchies? With these gestures, how could I create more open work, a portal for people like us to find a foothold in art history or inoculate us against modernist art history?

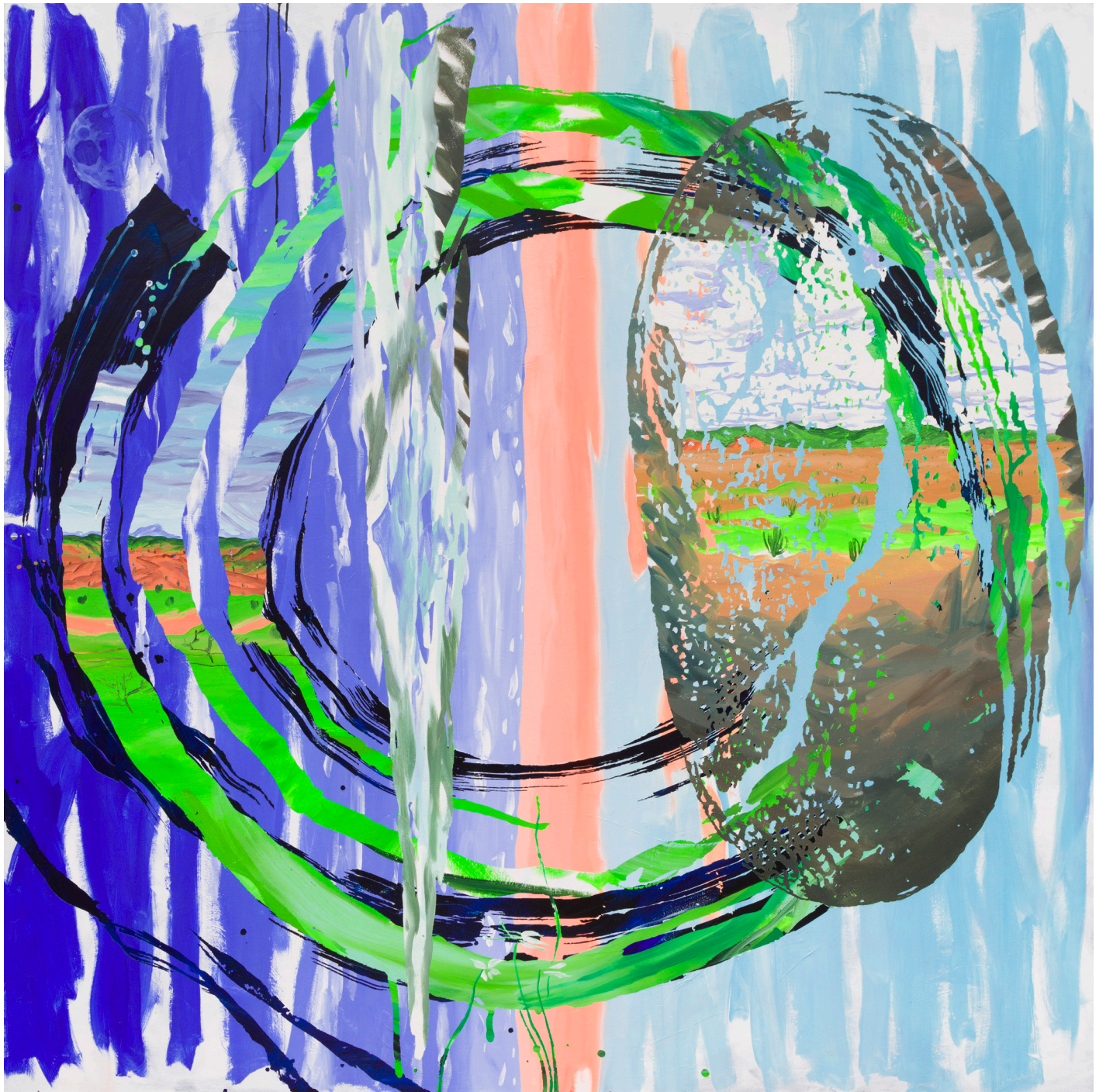
TK: You brought up Pollock, which brings me to the idea of influence. We're both interested in canons: what they are, how they're written, how and for whom they're maintained. Critiquing the canon is not simply denouncing the past but rather interrogating how we live with history. Is there a canonical figure who you've both been influenced by and critiqued?

ECB: Jackson Pollock was heavily influenced by Native American sand painting. There is a record of him watching these sand painters work on the ground. Then he created these works by throwing paint on the ground in a similar way. This is considered canonical American painting. I find that gesture deeply ironic. The primary American paintings art students should be taught about are the ones we can see in caves in the western United States. At the Cooper Union, I started making these pours of masking fluid, thinking about the pours of Jackson Pollock and the layering of histories. My father was a historian, and so I think a lot about history, painting, and painting with history. Institutions are essential to forming these canons. In America, this is the whole construction of Judeo-Christianity, and in art, there are museums that maintain connections with history but are also literally involved in material resource extraction. I'm thinking about different structures of thinking and writing history from a more circular, more inclusive point of view that is not so canonical, more open-ended.

TK: I taught this course on anathotypes, which is a plant-based means of image reproduction. I was thinking about no-waste or low-waste photography. An anathotype can't be fixed, so it will eventually disappear, which got me thinking about the politics of disappearance and the labor that would go into a photograph that eventually disappears. I feel like you and Heidi are tapping into a similar ethos around what materials are at hand and local.

ECB: I think it's because my parents were really involved with the farmworkers' union, getting their hands in the earth and communing with it. Growing up in that environment has

*8 Fold Way*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 72 × 72 inches.





influenced my painting. Instead of just making paintings and extracting that way, how can I give back and touch the earth again? How can I relate to and think about painting in an ecological sense? It also has to do with time and place. Instead of using acrylic painting, how can I use ancient Mexican ways of making pigment, like with cochineal? And with my sculptures, how can I use clay and mud to be hosts for plants? During the pandemic, Heidi and I collaborated on this sculpture of an ancient Mayan figurine that we scaled up to host native plants. The objects that I work with can be made into paintings, which can inspire other sculptures or installations. That's one of the great things about painting: you can world-build or diagram things and reimagine paths that have been taken away. I love what you said about disappearance and labor. With plants, you work with the seasons, so things grow and then they die.

TK: Can you talk about collaborating with plants? I love this idea of collaboration extending beyond people.

ECB: I have to give a lot of credit to Liz Phillips, who's in the show with me and Heidi at Wave Hill Public Garden and Cultural Center and who is also my mother-in-law. She's from a different community in the United States than I am, but we have this shared thread of caring for the land. Liz is one of the pioneers of interactive sound sculpture. For fifty years, she has been making electronic installations that respond to visitors' body water content mixed with natural elements like wind and water. She also maintains a garden that I often use for contemplation and plein air painting. She thinks about her plants almost like an electronic sound installation. We as artists can think about making an installation space that responds to an environment. I try to think about how to make something that can live past the timeline of an exhibition. Instead of showing a singular commodity that's privatized, what's something that's more communal and collaborative? During that exhibition, Heidi and I did two workshops: one where we made snake pots visitors could bring home and grow seeds in and another where we



gave new life to stained materials with indigo dye.

TK: Who in your community has been important to your practice?

ECB: Heidi is a phenomenal painter. She and I talk about painting and art all the time. I've also been inspired by my mom and dad's organizing in the 1960s: improving education for Black and Brown students in the Southwest, diversifying the curriculum, and setting up community clinics. The conversations that Heidi and I have about art might seem like they're in a whole different world but they're similar in some ways: imagining and following through on creative projects with one another humbles your own ego in the pursuit of something bigger than yourself. I've also been inspired by you, too, Tarrah.

Detail of Esteban Cabeza de Baca and Heidi Howard, *Host*, 2022, bronze with native plants, 84 x 84 x 60 inches.

TK: Thanks, Esto. We're both deeply invested in teaching, and how the back-and-forth dialogue of the classroom can inform one's practice. A lot of artists don't like to talk about this because it's like a "day job," but for me and you, it's more than that. I see the ethics of teaching in your practice.

ECB: Yes. Sometimes I think about each of my students as a different species of plant in the forest, and their root systems are the concepts they're engaging, and the flowers are their art. You have to meet each student at their own starting point, with their own gifts, and figure out how they all can exist in a classroom together.

One of the reasons why I want to teach for the rest of my life is because that's how you cement real, lasting change at an institution. We change by keeping ideas alive for the next generation. Teaching collaboratively with Heidi in Tennessee during the last presidential election and sharing ideas with the Indigenous communities down there and connecting with students from very different backgrounds gave me so much hope and positivity. And I had a lot of fun! I'm teaching a graduate course now at Hunter College called Restoring Ecosystems about developing art practices that engage the environment—growing plants that are responding to sculpture, restoring an ecosystem from a depleted position, landscape painting, and social practice.

TK: Do you consider yourself an artist-activist?

ECB: No, because my parents are real activists. For a true democratic society to exist, there need to be artists and educators who can question and accurately portray histories. Our positions are so valuable in their own way.

TK: A lot of my students want their work to function as activism, and they want something like tangible outcomes and "direct change" in the world, but I don't think art really functions that way. It's much more complex, slower, and maybe more difficult. I love the ways that you're working, *Esto*, because I think yours is an example of how to build an art practice that is meaningful, relevant, and ethical in the world now. I see this in the ways you collaborate, in your teaching, and in the relationships you've built with diverse communities across the country through your commitment to public art and accessibility. You're dealing with a lot of difficult issues, like genocide and the erasure of Indigenous histories and people, but there's also such joy in your practice and the work itself, in the color and the movement.

ECB: Going to art school in New York City and being the product of organizers in the Southwest taught me that each day you have to keep showing up. My mom inspires me to keep showing up and keep that ethos alive. And for

me, I just see so many joys in painting. It's for the love of painting. Sometimes, on my really good days in the studio, when I'm doing something worthwhile, it's like I'm channeling something better than myself. Not in an egotistical sense, but something larger than myself that can connect with people. It's kind of romantic and idealistic, but that's where the drive comes from.

TK: What was your path to becoming an artist? What influenced you to go to art school?

ECB: My dad really encouraged me at a young age to paint. Maybe it was a life that he had wished he had because he didn't have a gentle childhood, but he allowed that gentleness for me. My parents placed a lot of importance on education and got me into a magnet art school. This is a shout-out to public school! We couldn't afford art classes at all, so it was really important to have those art classes in my public middle school and high school. Then I went to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which I really couldn't afford, so I made this escape plan to get into the Cooper Union. At the Museum School, I was only able to pay for one class a semester, but I was working harder than the full-time students, busting my tail until I was finally accepted to the Cooper Union. From there, it was like, Boom. Professors like Dana Schutz and Jason Fox got me thinking more critically about my painting, its formal qualities, and how paint on its own can be a very active form. I was also exposed to New York School painting and a whole pantheon of artists—but ideas about the desert kept percolating in my work. When I went to Columbia University, where I met Heidi, Gregory Amenoff was head of the painting department. He has a long history of painting landscapes in New Mexico, and he helped Heidi and me plan a trip there the summer we graduated.

TK: I never really thought about this when I was in school, but I had no people of color or women educators until I went to grad school, where I had one woman of color as an instructor. I think it's so important to see yourself reflected in the faculty that you work

with. What was that experience like for you? Did you ever have a Native American painting mentor?

ECB: I didn't really. There was Lorenzo Clayton, who was a printmaking professor at Cooper, but I didn't take his class when I was there. Chakaia Booker was a fantastic mentor at Cooper, and so was Kara Walker at Columbia. Gregory Amenoff introduced me to Jaune Quick-to-See Smith at a gala in 2015 or 2016. She later introduced me to my gallerist, Garth Greenan. I love that showing with him has brought me in conversation with so many other Native artists like Mario Martinez, Melissa Cody, Yatika Starr Fields, and Cannupa Hanska Luger.

TK: It's astonishing to have had this whole education and no Native American educators or references. These should have been mainstream histories and artists for us to learn about. It happened late for me too. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's work must have been so important for you to see and engage with.

ECB: Her show at the Whitney Museum, *Memory Map*, was so on-point for a lot of the things that I'm thinking about, including this commandeering of modernist tropes. It's important to see how she uses Jasper Johns and abstract expressionism to make an inclusive version of a map of the United States by erasing borders and states through drips of brown and terra-cotta colors.

TK: You introduced me to her "Nomad Art Manifesto."

ECB: I teach it to my students when we discuss how to make biodegradable art. It's meaningful for asking why we have to have permanent monuments. I think her responsiveness to and conscientiousness around the environment, making work that is sculptural and ephemeral, is really inspiring.

TK: I was thinking about "Nomad Art Manifesto" and this idea of painting as an envelope. A painting can travel, and the way you work—moving canvases between sites—resonates with the ethics of the manifesto. This goes back to the feeling of joy I experience in your

work. There seems to be a lot of play in your paintings, and I think of play and love as being connected. How do they figure in your practice?

ECB: I'm of the belief that the more you let yourself freely associate, the more you can unlock something subconscious and run with it. The more you strip your own ego of preconceived notions and the more you're in the moment working with the materials at hand, the more you can access a bodily and loving way of being. Most of the time, if I'm not really feeling my work, I stop, though I do sometimes push myself. I'm invested in the labor of painting. Finding a balance between that and joy is important, but so is pushing myself past what I know I'm capable of doing.

TK: There's a lot of pressure on artists of color to make meaning in their work. For so long, white artists were allowed to play around, and I think we need that freedom to play and make something and not know what it means. This seems to me very anti-institutional, to privilege the act of joy in making.

ECB: My parents didn't send us to extracurricular activities, which was kind of, like, anti-fascist. You know, some parents plan out their kids' schedules all the time. I'd be like, I'm so bored, what am I going to do? I'd have to find a creative way out of that feeling. Letting your mind drift, especially off-screen, and sitting with those uncomfortable moments of self-reflection are so important for an artist. You can't box yourself into producing a commodity that you're not really psyched on making.

TK: Off-screen, what are you reading?

ECB: Right now, I'm reading this book called *Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire, and Revolution in the Borderlands* by Kelly Lytle Hernández that's about the history of this rebel group from the time before the Mexican Revolution to the present. Oh! Also, I just finished reading this biography on Cesar Chavez—

TK: —who your family has a history with!

ECB: Yeah! It's *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez* by Miriam Pawel. Then I read this other book, *A Minor Chorus* by Billy-Ray Belcourt, an Indigenous writer. It's really, really good.

TK: We're both interested in science fiction. What's your most influential science fiction book? Or writer?

ECB: Oh, that's so hard. There's so many of them. Some of the mythologies from our backgrounds are like science fiction. I'm definitely still influenced by Ursula K. Le Guin and her carrier bag theory, which you actually introduced me to. That's a philosophy that I've consistently had for my practice: rather than be like a phallic object of individuated heroic energy, how can you hold space and be like a host for a symbiote or something similar?

TK: Care, too, is something that is important to you and your work. That seems related to the carrier bag theory.

ECB: As artists, we're trying to get people sensitized to themselves and the things that we need to survive as human beings. I talk to my students about trauma and about how an art practice could also be a form of meditation, like checking in with yourself alongside making art, because it's not always about the product or production. I see a lot of hope in the next generation: they're much more in tune with themselves and their feelings than my generation was. This has to do with boundaries. When the state and institutions extract as much as possible, how do you form healthy boundaries so that we have rights as workers and intellectuals?

TK: Maybe missing from this conversation is the way that your work engages with the trauma of westward expansionism and the mythologies of the West.

ECB: It's important not to reinscribe trauma onto the viewer. Violence can take on so many different forms, like bombardment or spectacle or flattening, so the task is avoiding these tendencies while engaging histories and making the work open. I've been thinking a lot about how artists can

empower and show care through histories and tell stories that call up ideas of camaraderie in very trying times. So, as much as I'm thinking about landscape in the work, I'm also thinking about the communities, critters, and ecosystems that have survived there.

A lot of those painters of manifest destiny were working in their studios or, if they were working in the environment, they were painting through their manipulated, anthropological experience and abbreviated knowledge of the people, creatures, and plants that called that place home before 1492. How can I make that as complicated or as ambiguous as possible and work between places to create a third or fourth or fifth place for other dimensions and histories to come into play? That's where science fiction inspires me too. But I think about how those tropes are perpetuated in Hollywood movies and how people see the light of the West and that promise of reimagining your whole identity and changing yourself to participate in what? The false promises of the American dream. With my more figurative work, how do I present a figure and make it as complex as possible but also grafted toward reality? How can I interview my family members about what the Southwest was like in the past but then also let paint take hold of the storytelling as well? Being real about certain things is what I do when I go outdoors to paint the landscape. I know that the history of working from observation is cloaked in colonial notions of space and nature, so I have to subvert them and create portals to access the alternatives.

opposite: *The Men Lost to 20 Bruckner Blvd*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 84 × 84 inches.

