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Esteban Cabeza de Baca: Alma



Esteban Cabeza de Baca, Detail of *Teatro Campesino*, 2023, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches

Garth Greenan Gallery is pleased to present *Esteban Cabeza de Baca: Alma*, an exhibition of recent paintings about family, community, and resistance. Cabeza de Baca started the series with observational paintings of the Mexican cloth dolls and Kachina dolls given to him by his mother. By working with the repeated imagery of these dolls, Cabeza de Baca reimagines these figures in the landscape of his father's ancestral home in New Mexico. These dolls, and the resulting paintings, reflect memories from the artist's childhood— stories of growth, migration, resistance, liberation, and solidarity. For Cabeza de Baca, this series is about radical futures rooted in imagery that flows from childhood to the present, in *la alma*, "the soul."

In 2019, Cabeza de Baca started experimenting with dyeing fabric and canvas with cochineal, red dyestuff that is made of the dried, pulverized bodies of cactus-eating female scale insects, *Dactylopius coccus*, which are native to tropical and subtropical America. Cochineal has long been used to produce scarlet, crimson, orange, and other tints of pigments in Mexico, before it was introduced into Europe and European painting. As a testament to the fluidity of borders, Cabeza de Baca has been dyeing his canvases in his studio in New York before taking them to New Mexico to do observational landscape paintings. This cochineal dyeing process is evident in works such as *Rosario Cabeza de Baca* (2023).

Cabeza de Baca's mother recalls what it meant to grow up as a child in a Mexican, low-wage immigrant family that regularly crossed the U.S.-Mexico border. Before 1960, the border was porous. The farms just north of the border along the Tijuana River and the communities of Mexican workers that lived along and crossed over the border were essential to each other in exchange and their mutual survival. *La golondrina*, "the swallow," is a common theme in the titles of works in this series. The migrating bird evokes sentiments of searching in a long journey and yearning for home from afar. In *Golondrinas* (2023), the dolls fly across the landscape alongside the monarch butterflies.

Cabeza de Baca's parents met in the 1970s while working as union organizers with César Chávez and Dolores Huerta. Chávez and Huerta, co-founders of what became the United Farm Workers, were dedicated to improving the lives of farm workers using non-violent practices such as boycotts and strikes. Cabeza de Baca's father joined the movement as a bodyguard during the lettuce strikes, or the Salad Bowl strikes, in the early 1970s. These strikes resulted in increased wages and the passage of the 1975 California Agricultural Labor Relations Act, recognizing the right for farmworkers to unionize. In *Huelga* (2023), Chávez and Huerta march next to each other, holding signs reading "AFL-CIO" (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, a federation of unions in the United States), *huelga* (Spanish for "strike"), and the Aztec eagle of the United Farm Workers logo, which became a symbol of Mexican American identity. Chávez and Huerta walk through fields of grape pickers – a reference to the five-year long Delano Grape Strike, which became one of the most significant labor campaigns and associated social movements in US history.

These unions and their strikes were organized around the premise that the farm workers' struggle was part of a much broader movement for civil rights. In *Si Se Puede* (2023), the central figure strums on a guitar riddled with stickers reading "Si Se Puede," "Land Back," "American Indian Movement," and "United Farm Workers." The stickers are all reminiscent of the 1970s, except for one: Land Back. Land Back, introduced in 2018 by Arnell Tailfeathers, is a campaign by Native peoples that seeks to reestablish Indigenous sovereignty and political authority over unceded Indigenous territories. With this subtle blending of sovereign timelines, Cabeza de Baca connects new and old histories to be woven and rewoven.

Cabeza de Baca's father taught him that it is not only important that we know history, but that we acknowledge that history is actively woven within us. Within this series, Cabeza de Baca weaves together familial histories, campesino histories of the 1960s and 1970s, histories of landscape and color field painting, and future histories of land and Indigenous knowledge.

Esteban Cabeza de Baca (b. 1985) received a BFA from Cooper Union, School of the Arts in 2010 and an MFA from Columbia University in 2014. He currently lives and works in Queens, NY. Cabeza de Baca has received numerous grants and awards including a Robert Gamblin Painting Grant (2013); a Stern Fellowship, Columbia University (2013); a Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program Award (2014); a Stokroos Foundation Grant (2017); and a Henk en Victoria de Heus Fellowship (2018). His work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, including: *Bluer Than a Sky Weeping Bones*, Gaa Gallery (2016, Provincetown, MA); *Unlearn*, Fons Welters Gallery (2018, Amsterdam); *Esteban Cabeza de Baca*, Gaa Projects (2019, Cologne); *Worlds without Borders*, Boers-Li Gallery (2019, New York); *Esteban Cabeza de Baca – Life is one drop in lim-it-less oceans ...*, Kunstfort Vijfhuizen (2019, Amsterdam); and most recently *Let Earth Breathe at The Momentary* in Bentonville, Arkansas (2022). He has participated in over 15 group exhibitions at venues such as the Leroy Neiman Art Center (2014, 2015, New York), the Yale University School of Sacred Music (2017, New Haven, CT), the Dutch Royal Palace (2018, Amsterdam, Netherlands), and the Drawing Center (2019, New York), among others. His work was included in MOCA Tucson's 2023–2023 exhibition *Plein Air*, which will travel to the Armory Center for the Arts (Pasadena, California) in July of this year. He will have a two-person exhibition with his partner Heidi Howard titled *Light from Water* at Wave Hill in the Bronx this Fall.

Garth Greenan Gallery is pleased to represent Esteban Cabeza de Baca.

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