

New Times

Indigenous painter Esteban Cabeza de Baca presents *Memories of the Future* at the SLOMA through June 22



Activism is in Esteban Cabeza de Baca's blood.

He was born into a family of labor activists who traveled between California and New Mexico. His work celebrates the civil movements that fought for marginalized communities' rights and celebrates those communities themselves. Now a collection of 11 of his colorful, large-scale, surrealistic works painted between 2015 to 2024 hang at the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art (SLOMA).

"I think the last solo show we had by a Latinx artist was Marela Zacarías in 2023, so it was time to engage Latinx artists more meaningfully in the museum," Chief Curator Emma Saperstein explained. "Actually, in June will be the first time that both galleries are hosting work by a Latinx artist."

"Esteban's work is incredibly timely," Saperstein said. "It's so much about migrant labor, Indigenous identity, peaceful protest, vocalizing desires and needs from the community, and advocating for that with joy."

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In his artist's talk, Cabeza de Baca explained his process.

"I do primarily observation paintings where I go outdoors and paint from observing the landscape and do it as quickly and honestly as possible," he said.

The body of work on display is the result of "that baseline process," he noted, mostly painted in New Mexico.

"I like to think about it as building multiple dimensions or multiple layers of seen imagery from a specific site," Cabeza de Baca said.

In one painting of northern New Mexico where Georgia O'Keeffe painted, he explained, "I'm thinking about ecological thinking, how plants see, how ecosystems relate, and also thinking how that could be related to our worldviews. Instead of being so individual and competitive, how we could model ourselves toward being more ecological, how some plants grow next to one another and how some plants don't."

He also noted surrealistic influences in his work, inspired by artists such as Frida Kahlo, Yves Tanguy, Salvador Dali, and Diego Rivera.

"I'm also really interested in dream journals, how you can document your dreams and then turn your dreams into a psycho-sphere of looking internally as a landscape inside your mind and subconscious," he said.

His father was a Chicano activist at UC San Diego and a bodyguard for Marxist feminist political activist and academic Angela Davis. California's then Gov. Ronald Reagan got Davis fired from her UCSD teaching job, and she was also under threat by the KKK. These childhood experiences shaped Cabeza de Baca's worldviews. He was also inspired by civil rights activist Cesar Chavez, the Delano grape strikes, and Chavez's fight for agricultural workers' rights.

"It's a lot of intersectional, interracial, and intergender solidarity that I'm interested in. It's something we're going to have to think about for democracy to exist," he said.

Some paintings have ladybugs, which symbolize a healthy ecosystem, while others don't, "because they were using pesticides at that time."

Curator Saperstein said that we often think about political activism as aggressive and angry.

"But in a lot of Esteban's work, it's inviting us to engage with joy in these conversations. I'm thinking of the work *March to Sacramento*—the painting of the Delano grape strikers and these goofy, long-legged people with the ladybugs inviting people to join them in resistance but full of joy and delight," she said. "That's really inspiring to me personally, and I think it's a timely moment."

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Many ideas and influences populate his work. He's also into "witchcraft and indigenous ways of knowing, and casting spells through painting, and how painting is a form of magic," Cabeza de Baca said.

He's inspired by ancient petroglyphs and recommends people visit some in person.

"You're literally standing right where the artist stood when making it, and you're also in community with all these different ecologies," he said.

Even modern-day graffiti finds its way into his work.

"I'm also really interested in the history of folk music and protest by people like Bob Seger to even people like Bob Dylan, and how that was intertwined in the histories of Mexican music, rancheros," Cabeza de Baca said. "Painting is silent. I like painting because I don't have to talk. I can make the painting, and it could talk for me. But how do you actually convey sound through it?"

"Finding ways to tap into certain messages, like simplicity of storytelling like folk music has, is inspiring to me, the utility of it."

Other parts of his work are about a "land acknowledgement."

"My mom's from Tijuana, and I was born just on the other side. I want us to think about the land that we're on now, who used to call this place home, whether it's Chumash or Indigenous communities like the Yaqui or even the Aztecs or Apache, for us to think about that type of history and the continued colonial segregation and apartheid state that exists from where I grew up [in Tijuana]," he said.

He has Indigenous blood from both parents, and it's informed how he thinks.

"The beautiful thing about humanity is that culture is changing, and more and more interracial people will rise in this country," Cabeza de Baca said, "and I think we should celebrate that rather than being fearful."

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