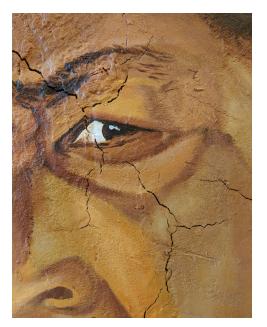


By painting on the surface of dirt, Rafa Esparza embodies material with image. For his exhibition With Land (2018) at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas, for example, Esparza painted a portrait of his maternal grandmother, Maria Guadalupe Macias Ybarra.¹ Her skin tone blends into the browns of the adobe panel, leaving the viewer to question where paint and portrait end and earth begins. The surface cracks, running through her eye, and adding texture. His portrait of her is both a celebration of her life and a material catharsis for Esparza himself, who had previously abandoned painting. As he writes, "It feels so right to blend her thick brown skin into the brown of this adobe panel."2 Through this reference, Esparza acknowledges the importance of ancestral presence in his work, through the depiction of his grandmother, as well as through the cultural and spiritual act of creating art from earth.

Having begun his artistic career as a painter, Esparza didn't relate to the "old master" paintings and drawings that he encountered in museums over



Rafa Esparza, Detail of *Abuelita Lupe, ¿qué*?, 2018. Featured in *With Land* at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas.

the course of his studies. For him, these depictions did not reflect his experience as a queer brown artist.3 In the face of this dissonance, he turned to performance, and began using his body to make art in the landscapes of his home of Los Angeles. This process began by recognizing a connection between body and land: Esparza learned to make traditional adobe bricks from his father, Ramón Esparza, who made them in Mexico as a trade. These architectural units come imbued with a history as one of the earliest structural platforms for indigenous buildings across the Americas. The artist deployed them as a foundation for his work, connecting him intimately, through material, to his cultural and familial roots in Durango, Mexico. The use of this ancient building material—a mixture of dirt, clay, water, horse manure, and other organic materials—became, for the artist, a form of institutional critique that pushes against whitewalled gallery spaces and museum institutions.

The paucity of feminist and queer artists of color in art institutions has motivated Esparza to deploy adobe brick structures as creative platforms for collaboration among queer brown activist artists. Building what he has termed brown architecture, Esparza uses earth as matter to build brown galleries that confront the physical, conceptual, and political architecture of the white cube. As he notes, "My interest in browning the white cube by building with adobe bricks, by making brown bodies present, and through collaboration—is a response to entering traditional art spaces and not seeing myself reflected. This has been the case not just physically, in terms of the whiteness of those spaces, but also in terms of the histories of art they uphold."4 For Esparza, creating a brownprint—a design plan built using earth as aesthetic "brown" matter-turns the gallery space into a spatial reflection of his racial and queer identity, a "body" that is not historically represented in traditional art spaces. These structures are not only meant to function as an "alternative" art space, but also as a specific practice that reflects the physical and racial realities of Latinx communities and artists.5

For the exhibition *staring at the sun*, Esparza has crafted a new "brown architecture" using adobe bricks made from local materials: dirt, water from the Hoosic River which runs along the museum campus, and manure and hay from Hancock Shaker Village. 6 These regional ties reflect Esparza's commitment to working with locally resourced material, connecting the work to a community and its landscape. In addition, by working with local volunteers to build a brown structure within the walls of the museum, Esparza has turned the gallery into a laboratory and a site for painterly experimentations in identity representation.

staring at the sun is also a site for Esparza to explore painting. Visitors walk on a floor of adobe bricks while portraits, landscapes, and abstractions are rendered directly on the surface of the earthen panels. This transformation of one of the museum's only "white cube" galleries turns the space into a brown-scape, a landscape made of brown matter and brown bodies, both in terms of material and of depictions of close friends and family. At the far end of the gallery, the adobe panels converge into the outline of a mountain, creating a topographic rendering of brown bodies sculpted both literally and metaphorically onto the 'white space' of MASS MoCA.

While the browning of the white cube allows Esparza to expand the representative dynamics of the gallery, this is also the first time the work will be installed in a climate-controlled space. Up until this point, his brown architectures have been relegated to spaces outside of museums' traditional exhibition galleries, given the concern that dust may travel and contaminate other artworks. Whereas previous institutions have required that the adobe bricks be fumigated, and even treated with radiation to sterilize the microorganisms that may live in the art materials used, MASS MoCA did not require artificial changes to materials. Esparza relates the chemical treatment of material so closely linked to histories of labor with such practices as the Bracero Program (1942-1964),

when Mexican workers were fumigated with DDT as routine medical protocol. He depicts this history in the opening image of the exhibition.

In Esparza's hands, the replacement of the traditional white canvas painting surface with sculpted earthen panels is deliberate, carrying the symbolic weight of the bodies—and all that those bodies represent—back into art history. In effect, Esparza rewrites, or repaints, the racial and ethnic representations that have been so fundamentally lacking within art history. In this respect, Esparza's installation is unapologetically painterly, a purposefully over-corrective gesture that highlights a field that is, quite simply, "too white." After years of estrangement, a kind of reconvening between Esparza and the medium of painting transpires in a brown gallery characterized by works both intuitive and sensual.

Despite this temporary correction of art history, Esparza seems to point out that inclusion can be but a fleeting gesture. He paints directly on the adobe, a surface that is fugitive and will crumble through the duration of the show, turning these portraits back to dust.⁷ Yet this built-in obsolescence also acts as an animating component of these works, in that it provides them with an actual life span while also complicating and creating discourse on historical modes of experiencing portraiture, demanding that the viewer acknowledge the inherent sensuality of Esparza's bodily *brown-scape*.⁸ In Esparza's hands, earth becomes lively, deploying texture, smell, and touch to influence the way in which the viewer understands this environment.

Esparza's work is strategic. For him, earth is brown matter that can be used to both build and paint, to create a more capacious art history, to create room for bodies that are conveniently excluded by art institutions, and to radically alter traditional museum modalities. In Esparza's words, "I want to overwhelm you with earth."

Rafa Esparza (b. 1981) is a multidisciplinary artist born and raised in Los Angeles. Esparza uses live performance to implicate his body in matters of location, materiality, and memory. Recently his collaborations with brown and queer artists—grounded in laboring with land vis-à-vis adobe brickmaking—have created a network of makers outside traditional art spaces.

Esparza is a recipient of numerous awards, including the Artpace Artist-in-Residence program in San Antonio, Texas. He has performed and shown nationally at REDCAT, LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), Vincent Price Art Museum, J. Paul Getty Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art, Ballroom Marfa, and internationally at Oficina de Procesos, Mexicali, and El Museo del Chopo in CDMX.

He recently led a guerrilla processional performance with over 25 artists through Los Angeles' historic fashion thoroughfare market, The Santee Alley, as part of his project *de la Calle (of the Street)* in collaboration with the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

- ¹ Rafa Esparza, Abuelita Lupe, ¿qué?, 2018. Featured in With Land (2018) at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas.
- ² Rafa Esparza, Instagram post from March 11, 2018: https://www.instagram.com/p/BgMy0k2j9qt/.
- ³ For Rafa Esparza it is important that he is identified as brown rather than Latins. As defined by Risa Pulco, 2017 Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts Curator-in-Residence and curator of Monarchs: Brown and Native Contemporary Artists in the Path of the Butterfly, a traveling show following the migratory path of the monarch butterfly, brown is a term that includes "a complex and diverse aggregation of people referred to at various times as Hispanic, Latino, and Chicano." Fauerso, Neil. "Monarchs: Brown and Native Contemporary Artists in the Path of the Butterfly." Glasstire, 5 November 2018, https://glasstire.com/2018/11/05/monarchs-brown-and-native-contemporary-artists-in-the-path-of-a-butterfly. Accessed 1 November 2018.
- Green, Kate. "Interviews: Rafa Esparza." Artforum, 21 November 2017, https://www.artforum.com/interviews/rafa-esparza-talks-about-tierra-sangre-oro-at-ballroom-marfa-72422. Accessed 16 June 2018.
- I turn to the thinking of women of color for a consideration of an aesthetic in the flesh—an embodied art practice in which the physical realities of artists of color merge to create an intersectional aesthetic out of necessity—because for artists of color, especially queer and feminist artists, art has served as a mode of survival and world-making responding to systematic forms of oppression. As noted in the foundational publication, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríc Moraga, "A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (19). Originally published in 1981, This Bridge features women writers and visual artists responding to white feminist politics by highlighting intersectionality as a mode of drawing greater attention to race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. Anzaldúa, Gloria and Cherríe Moraga. This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color. Fourth ed., SUNY Press, 2015.
- ⁶ While Esparza's "brown architectures" have primarily been completed in the Southwest, with the exception of the 2017 Whitney Biennial for which handmade adobe bricks were made in Los Angeles, staring at the sun at MASS MoCA is a direct engagement with locally resourced material. "Whitney Biennial 2017: Rafa Esparza on His Work." Whitney. org, uploaded by the Whitney Museum of American Art, 14 April 2017, https://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/513.
- All the works created for staring at the sun are derived from earth. As Esparza continuously made evident through the process of making the adobe bricks and portraits, 'our bodies will return to earth after death and will nourish it.' Thus, here lies the poetic beauty of staring at the sun, for, like our bodies, the paintings will crumble and dissolve back into the earth too.
- 8 We may also consider staring at the sun as a strategic material gesture meant to disrupt art economies that readily turn artworks into expensive commodities to be purchased.

Rafa Esparza staring at the sun

On view beginning January 19, 2019

staring at the sun is made possible by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in support of MASS MoCA and the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art.

Many thanks to Hancock Shaker Village for its generous in-kind support.

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