

Interviews

RAFA ESPARZA

Rafa Esparza talks about “Tierra. Sangre. Oro.” at Ballroom Marfa
November 21, 2017

VIEW OF “TIERRA. SANGRE. ORO.” 2017–18, Ballroom Marfa.

Foreground: Rafa Esparza performing Eamon Ore-Giron’s Talking Shit with Quetzalcoatl/I Like Mexico and Mexico Likes Me, 2017, atop Esparza’s Raised Adobe Ground for Talking Shit with Quetzalcoatl, 2017. Background: Sculptures by Timo Fahler. Photo: Alex Marks.



Born and based in Los Angeles, Rafa Esparza “browns” the white cube through performances that involve bodies—his own and those of his collaborators. Recently, Esparza has begun using adobe bricks—traditionally made by hand with clay soil and other organic material—to build structures in galleries. His latest exhibition “Tierra. Sangre. Oro.” (Earth. Blood. Gold.), features pieces by Carmen Argote, Nao Bustamante, Beatriz Cortez, Timo Fahler, Eamon Ore-Giron, Star Montana, Sandro Cánovas, María García, and Rubén Rodríguez, and is on view at Ballroom Marfa until March 18, 2018.

MY INTEREST IN BROWNING THE WHITE CUBE—by building with adobe bricks, making brown bodies present, and collaborating—is a response to entering traditional art spaces and not seeing myself reflected. This has been the case not only physically, in terms of the whiteness of those spaces, but also in terms of the histories of art they uphold.

Adobe bricks are loaded; they signify brownness, the land, and labor. They also reference my own history:

my father’s practice of working with adobe and my experience of adobe brickmaking as a collaborative process. By building with adobe in galleries I am bringing all of this—and the muddy history of American soil, colonization, and progress—into a traditionally white context.

This work began when Clockshop invited me, in 2014, to perform on Michael Parker’s artwork *The Unfinished*, for which the outline of an obelisk—based on an unfinished ancient Egyptian obelisk—

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was excised into a pad of asphalt next to the concrete Los Angeles River. The artwork's trench resurfaces organic matter (seashells, soil) beneath the asphalt. This made me think about the history of the land, and of laborers who have historically been exploited while working on building projects.

Following this experience, I realized I wanted to use soil—adobe—as a platform. For the last Whitney Biennial I made adobe bricks and used them to create a structure in the gallery that felt like a container. As you walked into it, you stepped onto an adobe-paved ground and were surrounded by a rounded wall made of adobe bricks; the ceiling was left open. Before the rotunda was built, I invited other brown artists to imagine how their work could exist in this adobe space. The white cube was transformed into a brown, round space that held everyone's works inside it.

Every time I have the opportunity to work with adobe I invite new questions, new ways of integrating folks and the material. This was the case with my current project, at Ballroom Marfa. Marfa attracts the white international art world, yet it is in one of the nation's most impoverished counties and is situated on the border, in a state where 95 percent of land is privately owned. The town's long history of segregation—the cemetery is still divided—is invisible to many visitors, as is the strong presence in Marfa, beyond its two main streets, of adobe and brown people.

Within this context, I wanted to experiment with working collaboratively in order to make present and amplify brown artists who might not otherwise have access to establishment art spaces. I wanted us to serve as stewards of the land and of each other. Instead of making a container, I made a foundation. I used adobe bricks to cover sections of the floor, but I also used them as a vehicle for having conversations and for inviting other brown artists and artisans to work with me and with each other to consider

land and how to create within each other's spaces. There is a performativity to this way of working; it informed what we made.

In the show there is a series of stacked hybrid structures that Timo Fahler "planted" in Marfa Ballroom's courtyard; they include "his" materials (cacti, found objects) and "mine" (adobe). There is also an adobe brick portal—inspired by Mayan archways—which I made with Beatriz Cortez. Adobe is a material that Beatriz had not worked with before. For Beatriz, it is important to think of such structures, and the indigenous people they represent, as belonging not only in the past, but also in the present and future. For me, the structure and its material work against the way we essentialize people, particularly those who are indigenous and brown. This portal was the last thing we made for the show, yet it serves as its entrance: we placed it outside Marfa Ballroom and used it to reorient the way visitors enter the white-turned-brown cube, now facing south.

When I think of brownness, I think of an expansive and generative space of inclusion and amplification. Brown is a skin tone. Brown is a spectrum. I am not replacing the white cube with a brown cube, but building conflicting histories.

— *As told to Kate Green*

Link: [Interviews: Rafa Esparza talks about "Tierra, Sangre, Oro" at Ballroom Marfa](#)