

Esteban Cabeza de Baca, Bernadette Despujols and Caleb Hahne Quintana

The Salt Of Two Seas

March 22 — May 8, 2024

*"The silence spoke, not with harsh sounds, but softly to the rhythm of our blood.
'What is it?' I asked, for I was still afraid.
'It is the presence of the river,' Ultima answered."*

— Anaya, Rudolfo. *Bless Me, Ultima* (excerpt).

Within Latin traditions, emotions are frequently expressed through stories, intertwined with currents of history, myth, and personal narrative. Rooted in oral legacies passed down through generations, storytelling occupies a central place in the collective consciousness of Latin America. In *The Salt Of Two Seas*, artists **Esteban Cabeza de Baca**, **Bernadette Despujols** and **Caleb Hahne Quintana** employ narrative as vehicles for preserving their cultural heritage, transmitting wisdom, and fostering a sense of identity and belonging through their distinctive visual language.

The exhibition's title, *The Salt of Two Seas*, draws inspiration from Quintana's piece titled "*I Am the Salt of Two Seas*," created in 2022. In explaining his piece, Quintana says, "It is completely about my genetic makeup: my mother being Latina, and my dad being German, and somewhere in the middle, my body met at these two oceans." This title encapsulates the complex experiences of individuals straddling multiple cultures, where a sense of belonging is clouded with feelings of otherness and cultural alienation, while also presenting new perspectives and fostering an appreciation for diversity.

Implicitly conveyed in some of the works in *The Salt Of Two Seas* is a critique of the biased portrayals of the history of the land and its inhabitants, as exemplified by artists like de Baca. Born and raised in San Ysidro, a community situated in the southern part of San Diego, California, adjacent to the U.S.-Mexico border, de Baca's upbringing is intertwined with narratives of colonialism and Western expansionism, a common thread shared by many Latinx individuals, including Quintana. Similarly, Despujols, a Venezuelan multimedia artist who relocated to the U.S. during the country's crisis in 2009, explores themes related to the body and its position within social and cultural constructs specific to women. Her work delves into women's self-perceptions, juxtaposed with societal and cross-cultural expectations.

In *The Salt of Two Seas*, themes of displacement and the yearning for a connection to one's ancestral homeland are explored. De Baca, who is of Mestizo descent (Spanish and Indigenous heritage) and was raised in the U.S., articulates how reconnecting through artistic practice serves as a bridge between these diverse cultures; de Baca explains, "Growing up along the border, and feeling disconnected from much of my heritage, I had to embark on a personal journey to reclaim it." This journey of cultural reclamation imbues not only de Baca's creations but also those of Quintana and Despujols with novel perspectives. They seamlessly blend elements of the past, present, and future to envision new post-colonial worlds infused with optimism and healing.

This notion of temporal parallelism, appears in Quintana's *In Our Bones The Soils Secrets*, 2023-2024. The piece portrays an arid landscape rendered in earth tones, with a blazing sun backlighting a central figure as they traverse the canvas. Although the setting is not explicitly defined, the Southwestern

atmosphere is evoked through the colour palette. Two ethereal figures stand adjacent to the central character, hinting at a convergence of different aspects of one's character, or perhaps a multidimensional encounter with ancestral spirits. The enigmatic nature of the piece emphasizes the fusion of eras within a single moment.

Equally, de Baca's work *Ultima*, 2022, is a depiction of such a spatio-temporal amalgamation. In this non-hierarchical image a vivid Southwestern landscape, appearing like a fracture in the canvas, coexists alongside a figure depicted in gestural brushstrokes holding an owl. Expressive lines with flowers reminiscent of techniques used by Navajo artists in sand painting, also feature prominently, the same techniques that inspired Pollock's ubiquitous drip markings. The title "Ultima" refers to Rudolfo Anaya's Chicano novel, "*Bless Me, Ultima*." In Anaya's story, Ultima embodies the archetype of a wise and elderly curandera (a traditional native healer), guiding the central character, Antonio, through the complexities of identity, belief, and the path to adulthood.

Figures like Ultima hold significant cultural importance in Latin communities, symbolizing a longstanding tradition of spiritual guidance and healing practices rooted in the blend of Indigenous knowledge with elements of Catholicism —inherited from Spanish colonization. In Quintana's work *Limpia II (After William Blake)*, 2024, the artist portrays his experience during a *limpia*, a traditional cleansing ceremony with a curandero. The painting, rendered in ultramarine hues, depicts a white horse leaping over a figure lying on the grass. The oneiric scene reveals connections to Quintana's ancestral past, as he explains that during the ceremony, visions of horses came to him. Quintana's artistic practice is focused on uncovering personal stories and those of his ancestors, and he recently discovered that his great-grandfather was a horse rider, working closely with Pancho Villa during the Mexican Revolution.

Personal narratives also serve as the foundation for Despujols' artworks. In *Heladería*, 2024, the artist presents an atypical composition, as if constructed of distorted viewpoints. Despujols uses personal photos to create compositions filled with tension and an uncanny flatness. Rendered with palpable vitality, the portrait depicts two children, one adorned in flamenco attire and the other in karate attire, both seated against the backdrop of what appears to be the inviting ambience of an ice cream shop. This composition orchestrates a narrative imbued with both immediacy and introspection. The unwavering gaze of the young girl, complemented by the subtle gesture of her raised hand, draws the viewer into an assertive interaction, while her contemplative companion offers a contrasting sense of quiet introspection. Through a skilled treatment of impasto and stark retraction, Despujols applies layers of paint with varying thickness on a thickly gessoed background. She then uses knives to scrape the canvas, creating fine incisions, evoking a sense of dynamism that transcends the limitations of the canvas.

A central tenet of the exhibition is to elucidate the contemporary Latinx experience, reconciling the adversities of migration, such as ruptures in one's past or the assimilation of a new culture. In *The Salt of Two Seas* the exhibited artists offer a glimpse into the many stories and common threads of inhabiting multiple cultures, essentially highlighting the urgency for an optimistic, hopeful outlook of a world without borders, filled with cultural diversity and appreciation for our differences.

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Esteban Cabeza de Baca (b. 1985 in San Ysidro, CA) received an MFA from Columbia University in 2014 and a BFA from Cooper Union, School of the Arts in 2010. He lives and works in Queens, NY. **Bernadette Despujols** (b. 1986 in Barquisimeto, Venezuela) holds an MFA in Visual Arts from California Institute of the Arts, (2010). She lives and works between Miami, and New York. **Caleb Hahne Quintana** (b. 1993 in Denver, CO) received a BFA in Fine Arts from Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design. The artist lives and works in New York.

The Salt Of Two Seas is on view from **March 22 to May 8, 2024**. Opening hours are **Wednesday through Saturday from 13:00 to 18:00 hrs.**