

Tomás Esson: *EKELE KWA*

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57 Walker Street, New York NY

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EKELE KWA presents five new large-scale abstractions by Tomás Esson, marking Esson's first presentation at the gallery's TriBeCa location at 57 Walker Street.

Tomás Esson, a Cuban artist of Jamaican descent, has been an essential voice of the contemporary Afro-Caribbean diaspora since his very first exhibition in Havana in 1988, which was censored and closed by Cuban authorities. As an artist living in exile, Esson connects disparate aesthetic and political traditions, ranging from subversive caricature to the concrete abstraction of modernist Cuban painting.

Akin to the renowned Jamaican novelist, Marlon James, who stated “Our past does not define us, but it shapes who we become”, Esson’s encyclopedia of references and influences are vast: from cartoons to graffiti to reggaeton music to poetry to activists to Surrealism to Fransisco Goya etc. The resulting practice is a variegated tapestry that forms one of the major sensibilities of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, discovering the myth and challenge in the legacies of colonialism and communism.

The title of the exhibition comes from the Igbo term meaning “Greetings! O!” and is commonly used in Cuba in its Afro-Caribbean or Hispanicized variation of the phrase, “equelecu!”, which is used to express “thank you!” or “that’s right!” Perhaps Esson's proclamation is of his own freedom; his right and destiny to make art.

The deftness of execution in Esson’s paintings, both in form and color, evokes the visual languages forged by the American and European abstract painters before him such as Joan Mitchell and Willem de Kooning. Esson's dynamic and liberatory abstractions have established a singular vocabulary, one originally born from a figuration that has since evolved from a Surrealist socio-political narrative to an emotionally charged, intuitive, and timeless visual patois.

In paintings like *ROCK THE BOAT* (2024) and *BIRTHDAY* (2024), Esson's abstract alphabet is tightly formed and repetitive; persistently emphasizing the informed intensity of his personal history through this intuitive visual language. Whereas in the painting *ALBOROTO* (2024), Esson's abstraction seems to slow down, becoming more expansive, allowing the gestures to bloom and breathe. The abstraction becomes almost distinct from the surface of the canvas, hovering in the painting field as though a nebula or an organism.

Gean Moreno, the Director of the Knight Foundation Art & Research Center at the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, and the Curator of Tomás Esson's 30-year retrospective at the ICA Miami, *The GOAT* in 2020-21, writes of Esson's abstractions “The logic of coupling forms and an infinitely elastic line that Esson borrows from early animation is intensified in these works until it generates a non-referential set of interweaving elements. It is almost as if the sub-visual dynamics of the landscapes—the microbial and chemical transactions—are amplified into sweeping high-energy gestures and quickly shifting densities of pigment.”

Tomás Esson (b. Havana, Cuba, 1963) lives and works in Miami, Florida. Esson graduated from the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, in 1987. His work was showcased in a number of controversial exhibitions in the late 1980s, as he became a central figure in the decade's renaissance in Cuban art and began to exhibit internationally. In 1990, he left Cuba and has since then lived in Miami and New York City. In 2020-21, Esson was the subject of a 30-year career retrospective *The GOAT* held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami. His work is in the collections of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Germany; and Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, Monterrey, Mexico, among others.