

CESAR'S ANGELS
ESTEBAN CABEZA DE BACA
May 11–June 8, 2024

Parker Gallery is proud to present its first solo exhibition with Esteban Cabeza de Baca, simultaneously marking the first presentation of his work in California.

Cesar's Angels debuts a new group of paintings set in 1960s California during the Delano grape strike (1965–1970), a grassroots effort co-organized by American civil rights activist and labor leader Cesar Chavez (1927–1993). This nonviolent movement galvanized the Chicano farm worker community, ultimately leading to better wages and working conditions for this marginalized group.

The paintings on view weave a complex narrative about human resilience and ingenuity in the face of adversity, through oral histories passed down by the artist's father, Vincent Cabeza de Baca, who was Chavez's bodyguard during this pivotal moment in California history. Translating his father's stories onto canvas, Cabeza de Baca honors the legacies of his forebears and calls attention to the impact of and advocacy for justice in the fields through rich paintings of protest and resistance, but also of rest, relaxation, and community building.

The central painting in the exhibition, *Campesinos*, is a sun drenched scene of idle play. A sense of calm sweeps across the diptych, capturing a vibrant couple dancing at left, and musicians in their truck bed at right, in front of an expansive Coachella valley. Among the materials employed in Cabeza De Baca's canvases is cochineal, a natural reddish purple dye made from the dried beetles which live on cacti native to California and Mexico – an homage to his culture and materially connecting the paintings to the land they depict. This hue features prominently in *Dolores*, which highlights Dolores Huerta, a significant leader in the Chicano civil rights movement and a cofounder of the United Farm Workers association. Enshrouded in a bright red cloak, she is depicted in action, speaking into a microphone, cohabitating with the verdant landscape, ladybugs, a heart-shaped wreath of flowers, Mexican dolls and the Virgin Mary.

On the presence of insects and flora alongside human portraits in his work, Cabeza de Baca notes: "We all rely on farmers, growers, ecosystems, and the environment for our survival. Farmworkers touch everything we consume before it gets to our plates and so do pollinator species like the ladybug....Caretaking through storytelling is a relay system similar to how healthy ecosystems send the seedlings of growth out alongside deterioration and regrowth. The work connects narration with other forms of life on this planet towards optimistic futures."

Other paintings capture significant moments within the Delano grape strike, such as the 300 mile march on foot from Delano to Sacramento, begun in 1966 (*March To Sacramento*), including Mexican American and Filipino American farmers, together with various supporters who joined along the way. In a related painting, *Stay Up Late*, Vincent Cabeza de Baca can be seen on the periphery of the march, struggling to stave off sleep as the march extends into the night.

In these works, and in his practice as a whole, Cabeza de Baca advocates for the continued fight for migrant and environmental rights, weaving historical events back into our present moment.

Esteban Cabeza de Baca (b. 1985 in San Ysidro, CA, lives and works in Queens, NY). Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design (RMCAD) organized the artist's first solo institutional exhibition in Colorado, *West of Federal*, earlier this year. Recent solo exhibitions include those held at Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, NY (2023); The Momentary, Bentonville, AR; Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, NY (2021); and Gaa Gallery, Provincetown, MA (2021). Recent two-person and group exhibitions include *The Salt of Two Seas*, Newchild Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium (2024); *Light From Water: Heidi Howard and Esteban Cabeza de Baca*, Glyndor House Gallery at Wave Hill, Bronx, NY (2023); *Plein Air*, Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson, Tucson, AZ (2022); and *Dream Life*, BB&M, Seoul, Korea. His work is included in the collections of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego, CA; Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ; and Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA.