

BEATRIZ CORTEZ  
× RAFA ESPARZA:  
EARTH AND  
COSMOS

---

AMERICAS  
SOCIETY

---

EXHIBITIONS

---

BEATRIZ CORTEZ × RAFA ESPARZA: EARTH AND COSMOS

AMERICAS SOCIETY



BEATRIZ CORTEZ  
× RAFA ESPARZA:  
EARTH AND  
COSMOS

---

AMERICAS  
SOCIETY

---

EXHIBITIONS

---



# CONTENTS

- 5 Foreword  
Susan Segal
- 9 Artists Sharing  
Aimé Iglesias Lukin
- 17 A Conversation  
Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza

## Works

- 37 Part One: Prior Collaborations
- 60 Codex (Nomad 13)
- 63 Part Two: Earth and Cosmos
- 87 Altar de Kaqjay  
Kaqjay
- 93 Artist Biographies
- 94 Credits
- 95 Acknowledgments



## FOREWORD

Americas Society is pleased to present *Beatriz Cortez × rafa esparza: Earth and Cosmos*. The exhibition inaugurates a series in which Americas Society invites two artists who are friends and collaborators to jointly explore their influence on each other's work. This show highlights the ongoing conversations and collaborations between the Los Angeles-based artists Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza. This curatorial approach centers the exchange of ideas among artists as the subject of the exhibition—an integral part of artistic production that audiences rarely have the opportunity to engage with. Whether working individually or collaboratively, Cortez and esparza always remain in close dialogue. Their paintings, sculptures, installations, and performances share an interest in exploring the transtemporal legacies of ancient cultures of the Americas in the past, present, and future.

I am grateful to Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza for sharing their practices, creating this inspiring exhibition, and working with our team to bring it to our galleries. I would like to thank Kibum Kim and everyone at Commonwealth and Council for their invaluable collaboration on this project. I also express my thanks to the Art at Americas Society curatorial team: Director and Chief Curator Aimé Iglesias Lukin for her leadership; Assistant Curators Sarah Lopez, Carla Lucini, and Tatiana Marcel, who worked together on the presentation of this exhibition; Karen Marta for her editorial support of Americas Society's publications; Todd Bradway for his project management; and Garrick Gott for designing this series.

*Beatriz Cortez × rafa esparza: Earth and Cosmos* is made possible by support from Liana Krupp, as well as by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

Americas Society acknowledges the generous support from the Arts of the Americas Circle members: Amalia Amoedo, Almeida e Dale Galeria de Arte, Estrellita B. Brodsky, Virginia Cowles Schroth, Emily A. Engel, Isabella Hutchinson, Carolina Jannicelli, Diana López and Herman Sifontes, Elena Matsuura, Maggie Miqueo, Antonio Murzi, Gabriela Pérez Rocchietti, Marco Pappalardo and Cintya Poletti Pappalardo, Carolina Pincioli, Erica Roberts, Patricia Ruiz-Healy, Sharon Schultz, and Edward J. Sullivan.

SUSAN SEGAL  
PRESIDENT AND CEO, AS/COA





# ARTISTS SHARING

*Aimé Iglesias Lukin*



*Beatriz Cortez × rafa esparza: Earth and Cosmos* marks the beginning of an exhibition series in which Americas Society invites two artists who are friends and colleagues to confer together on the creative impact each has on the other's work. This new approach seeks to convey a vital part of artistic production that seldom makes it into the galleries: the conversations that artists have with peers and companions friends and colleagues that inform so much of the art they produce. Artists share with friends and colleagues all the time, enriching each other's practices through questions, suggestions, encouragement, and critique. They converse at their respective studios, homes, gallery openings, and even by phone. These relationships play a key role in the art they make.

Much of what we see in mainstream museums are institutional readings of the artist's production filtered through a given curator's view of contemporary culture or art history. In this model, incorporating the artist's input relies on the curator's ability to develop a relationship

with the work and its creator and to translate that relationship into the exhibition. Although there have been exhibitions in which artists act as curators of the works of peers and predecessors (e.g., MoMA's Artist's Choice series, 1989 to present) or even shows about artists' friendships (e.g., the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Manet/Degas*, 2023–24), most of these projects either offer a reading of a collection or are guided primarily by museum curators' interpretations of personal relationships. Our goal is the opposite: the curatorial team at Americas Society will act as coordinators, mediators, and facilitators of these artists' dialogues while minimizing our intellectual input in order to allow the artists to fully tell their own stories.

To start this series, we have engaged Beatriz Cortez (b. 1970, San Salvador) and rafa esparza (b. 1981, Pasadena)—two prominent Los Angeles–based Latinx artists who are close friends and cocreators. Cortez and esparza have stormed the contemporary art scene with their

vibrant yet discerning artworks that interrogate the power dynamics underlying identity construction in the United States. Although the artists have previously collaborated on joint artworks, this is their first collaborative exhibition in New York. Cortez and esparza each work with a variety of formats and materials, including painting, performance, and sculpture, to imagine new worlds and to investigate history as a construct that can accommodate different temporalities, narratives, beings, and affects. They share an interest in the earth, the cosmos, the wisdom developed by ancient Indigenous peoples on this land, and the flow of this knowledge between all beings and matter on the planet.

In developing this project, Cortez and esparza have embraced—and even gone a step beyond—the premise of our invitation. They prefer to avoid the category of “curator” for that of “artist” because they consider their work for this exhibition as an extension of their collaboration and conversation. *Beatriz Cortez ×*

*rafa esparza: Earth and Cosmos*, therefore, is not only an opportunity for the artists to reflect on their individual and collaborative work but also a way to expand what curating means. In turn, it will draw viewers' attention to the fluid boundaries of authorship and the collective spirit inherent in art-making by exposing the networks of personal relations that inform artistic creation and animate culture. Most importantly, *Beatriz Cortez × rafa esparza: Earth and Cosmos* brings horizontality into exhibition-making and exhibition viewing, enriching the field by prompting museum professionals to contend with alternative conceptual frameworks such as affect as a political tool—a strategy of relating to the world that artists, curators, and audiences can share.







# A CONVERSATION

Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza



rafa

Hola, Beatriz. I look forward to continuing our ongoing conversations together, with ancient peoples, and with the planet.

Something that I always enjoy about being in dialogue together is how fluidly you inhabit time and space when making work, and how that, in and of itself, becomes a way of speaking in transtemporal paradigms—allowing us to communicate outside of the bounds of linear and Western time.

We have both discussed the challenges of talking to or about our work within the framework of linear time. Since our last conversation, you have done and traveled so much! You've visited the glaciers and traveled across oceans. Can you share how your recent voyages are informing how you are making work now?

Beatriz

Hola, rafa! I want to say something about our exchanges first: I always imagine that there are ancestral and contemporary reasons that enable

our conversations to flow. From the start, we have approached ancient cultures with the same respect, amazement, and joy. We don't come from the same places; we don't come from the same time; we are meant to be segregated, separated, considered discrete, with different identities, and yet we are so close to each other, thanks to the cosmic energies of Los Angeles. I am so grateful.

rafa

Yes, it feels empowering to be boundless in our conversations and in our creative journeys and to work in ways that are reciprocal and not unilateral. You're right: there is something about Los Angeles that feels special and is vital to how we have gotten to work together and also become good friends and have the conversations that we've been having over time. Los Angeles is both the city with the largest population of Indigenous peoples in the country and one that is diverse with many diasporic populations.

I was just recalling earlier today how a dear elder, who was also my school counselor—Tío Frank from my early years in college—invited me and a young cohort of Brown students to help organize an intertribal Northern and Southern Winds Powwow that gathered Native and Indigenous peoples from across the continent, as well as to assist in other, more intimate ceremonial gatherings. I learned very early on about the importance of honoring, respecting, and helping to preserve and protect many sacred traditions and ceremonies in collaboration with different Indigenous peoples. This experience served as one of the most powerful decolonial pathways for probing and interrogating American history, while deepening my knowledge of my own personal and family history.

It's been a gift to learn of you—of all of the work you've done as an educator, an artist, a thinker, and an organizer. It's been an honor to get to collaborate and be in conversation with you—to learn from one another, to discuss

our ideas, and to explore our relationship to materials, processes, collaborators, time, Indigenous knowledge, and ancient objects.

Beatriz

For me too, having you in my life has been a gift, and it has been a gift to be here in the same place and time. I appreciate so much what we have learned from each other and the ways we have amplified each other's messages and concerns. But more importantly, I appreciate that you were one of the first people to curate my work into a show, to believe in my work, and to share with me your vision of my future as a professional artist. It fills me with gratitude that you believed in my work before I began making large installations or welding. You believed in my ideas and in the ideas we shared, and that was moving and beautiful—it changed the art world for me.

But let me answer your previous question. This year, I have traveled to the Arctic in search of a particle of Ilopango's eruption; and for the

first time, I have crossed the border with my work, going south into Mexico; and I moved a stela to Venice—to Europe—a stela carrying a message for all the ancient stelae that were moved elsewhere against their will.

So rafa, what have you been up to these last few days?

rafa

You also moved a volcano down the Hudson River. I am finishing working with two amazing artists, Zalika Azim and Dewey Tafoya, on a constellation of sorts for Prospect 6 in New Orleans. We are thinking about ancient, present, and future architectures, movement, migration, labor, leisure, and being simultaneous beings. It's a perfect way to segue into returning to *Hyperspace* for our show next year.

I love that your response invokes so much geography and the journey of unlikely objects, all within a single sentence. Tell me, how was it to make a work for Venice? I imagine it's similar to, but also different from, making work within



the framework of traditional art spaces. But still, the weight and history of taking a stela to Europe . . . that feels like a monumental undertaking.

I remember the first time I saw the stelae of Copán in books and how mesmerized I was by the beautiful carvings . . . figures that escaped gender—they have always felt androgynous to me—and the bountiful, intricate, zoomorphic attributes that adorn them. How did your work with the stelae begin?

Beatriz

I had the weight of responsibility on my shoulders. I felt this way because I was the first artist from El Salvador to ever be invited to the International Art Exhibition curated for the Venice Biennale. Also, because my work is a stela, and stelae have been looted and taken to Europe and other locations. To become part of art institutions, they are extracted from their cultural and spiritual contexts, and they are often broken in order to make each section lighter. For me, it felt impossible to send a stela

to Europe without referencing this history, without engaging with the absence that the looted stelae have left in our imaginaries, in our present.

But rafa, let's talk about *Hyperspace*, a work you are making for our show—a work that engages not only with the past but also with the future. Could you share the importance of making this work and the histories that it engages with in New York and in the Americas?

rafa

I've always witnessed your process as responsible, thoughtful, and caring, especially when it comes to working with objects and ideas that are important to us. Congratulations on that, Beatriz. I know it was a proud moment for so many people, especially for many of us in your orbit.

Beatriz

Thank you, rafa.

rafa

*Hyperspace: -100km- $\infty$*  is an iteration of a piece that I am planning to materialize at full scale one day. It was a finalist for the penultimate round of submissions for the High Line's Plinth. There is a lot packed into this work. I have felt the closest to time traveling through the process of imagining, thinking, and now creating this work. It all started when I was looking for ways to work with cosmic matter or material not from this planet. I was simultaneously thinking about the materials ancient peoples chose to carve out magnificent monumental works, like the Olmec colossal heads, which are made of basalt, a volcanic rock. I went down a rabbit hole, relearning the history of the Chicxulub impactor—the asteroid that plummeted to Earth about sixty-six million years ago and initiated the extinction-level event that ended around three-quarters of all life on Earth at that time.

The popular theory suggests that the impact created a thick dust cloud that layered the entire planet, blocking sunlight, halting photosynthesis,

and killing a lot of plant life. This rapid decline in plants quickly affected herbivorous dinosaurs, which in turn impacted the carnivorous dinosaurs that preyed on them. That dust cloud, once it settled, created a thick layer of clay and other sediments, including ejecta, or space matter expelled during the asteroid impact. This clay layer is now visible in parts of Earth's crust and is known as the Cretaceous-Paleogene or K-P boundary. The K-P boundary, formerly known as the Cretaceous-Tertiary (K-T) boundary, is a geological signature that marks the end of the Mesozoic era and the beginning of the Cenozoic era, where remains of the first mammals appear.

I became very curious about the life of stones and the vast spans of time they've existed—time we, as humans, can only begin to fathom, given how minuscule our presence on this planet is.

I remember reading about the Olmec and how their belief in harnessing power from the underworld through their use of basalt was performed through sculpture. This was most

evident in their monumental works such as the colossal heads. Coincidentally, the colossal heads were made within the vicinity of the Chicxulub crater. The amalgamation of geological processes and the passage of time in this region, which had such a profoundly consequential impact on the planet's history, combined with the Olmec's monumental material culture, helped me imagine a stone—an Olmec head—traveling through space and time, surviving thousands of years to reveal these evolutions, these collaborations between the cosmos, Earth, and humans.

Beatriz

I find this super interesting because in many ways, we are both studying a moment of great change on Earth—a volcanic crater, an explosion, the darkening of the sun, and the rocks from elsewhere, from the cosmos and from the underworld. I am looking at the eruption of Ilopango in the year 536 and how it darkened the sun and spread its particles all over the

planet. Of course, the destruction was not as intense as that of Chicxulub. However, about half of the world's population perished or was seriously impacted. Like you, I am looking at Earth, at each particle of Earth with new eyes, and I am thinking of how these particles migrated in ancient times. Now, as we all migrate, these particles are here and elsewhere to receive us, to make our journey possible, to help us build a new home where our fruits and corn can also grow.

rafa

Upon studying how these stones further traveled, mobilized as cultural objects, I learned about the problematic world's fairs, which typically exploited Black and Indigenous peoples and their art to create spectacles for entertainment and consumption. It was at the 1965 World's Fair when an Olmec head was first viewed in New York, following a show in LACMA a year earlier.

After learning all this information, I became as concerned with protecting the image of

the Olmec head as I was with centering it as a time-traveling stone. I imagined the head as a portrait and thought of the years and spaces through which that face had been preserved, the time it took to sculpt it, how it lived amongst ancient peoples, the years it lay buried in the soil, its “discovery,” and its life exhibited in museums. I was thinking of it as a living entity. I wondered, how can an Olmec colossal head return to New York and not be vulnerable to the same kind of tokenism and exploitation that it experienced over fifty years ago? How to honor this geological collaboration and still refuse its consumption as a foreign and exotic cultural object?

Beatriz

I see that your concerns with the stone and my concerns with the stela are so close, and I think it is so important for us to have these concerns and for them to impact our work and our decisions when making our work.

rafa

You approach an entire set of similar questions that originate from distinct concerns and are compelled by unique forces, all while carefully honoring and considering the many ethical questions that arise. I imagine this reflection happens both when you're collaborating with ancient peoples across space and time and when you're collaborating with your peers in the present.

You make evident the violence of extraction, the violence of colonial erasure, but you also imbue objects with possibility, and you imagine futures where ideas thrive and flourish. Can you talk about your sculptures, the materiality they embody, the histories they speak to, and the places they inhabit?

Beatriz

This is such a beautiful question, rafa. Like you, I see my sculptures as time-travelers. I don't always know if they are coming here from the past or from the future, but I know that they are



spaces of generosity. They honor the technologies, strategies, spirituality, and knowledge of ancient peoples and celebrate their survival in the future. I think that the matter for my sculptures comes from the underworld, goes through a process of industrialization, and, through the labor of becoming sculpture, it returns to Earth, and its chronologies. It belongs to multiple temporalities. It exists in simultaneities.

rafa, it will be such a joy to see your Olmec head and the *Altar de Kaqjay* together in New York, as time-travelers that cross paths once more, as old friends, as migrants, as comets.





# WORKS



**PART ONE:**  
**PRIOR COLLABORATIONS**

## NOMAD 13

*Nomad 13* is a steel space capsule traveling over adobe bricks, which also function as time capsules, as carriers of life, seeds, and organic matter across space and time. The work resists the simplified notion that a garden is a symbol of sedentary life. It symbolically carries a garden in orbit across space and time, as a gift of generosity from the ancestors to the humans of the future—who could be us.



Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza, *Nomad 13*, 2017. Adobe bricks, steel, concrete, hammer, plastic, paper, soil, and plants: corn (maíz), black bean (frijol negro), prickly pear (nopal), sorghum (maicillo), amaranth (amaranto), quinoa, chayote squash (huisquil), chia (chía), chili pepper (chile), yerba buena, yerba santa, sage (salvia), and silk floss tree (ceiba)







# XOLOTL'S TIME TRAVELS

*Xolotl's Time Travels*, a space capsule carrying a dog made of adobe with a nopal ear as a tail, evokes the ancient Aztec deity of Xolotl, the companion of lost souls on their journey to the underworld. The undesired, the excluded, the expelled, and the unwanted are protected by his company. At the same time, the space capsule recalls an era of animal experimentation in the effort to cross a different threshold and travel the cosmos, as was the case with Laika, the dog sent to space by the Russian space agency.



Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza, *Xolotl's Time Travels*, 2019.  
Adobe, steel, mirror, and cactus





# TIME TRAVELER: NIÑX TRANSFRONTERIZX

*Time Traveler: Niñx Transfronterizx* honors the children who have walked and are walking long distances, often unaccompanied, to cross the border and be reunited with their parents and family members. The backpack is filled with futures: dreams, memories, plant life, light, dormant seeds, fertile soil. This work is the result of a conversation between rafa and Beatriz, which continued in rafa's mind, becoming a speculative collaboration—a collaboration in absence—that led Beatriz to further explore the idea of absence and the role that the void we leave in the places we have inhabited plays in the daily life of our loved ones.



Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza, *Time Traveler: Niñx Transfronterizx*, 2019. Child-size backpack, dirt, and cactus



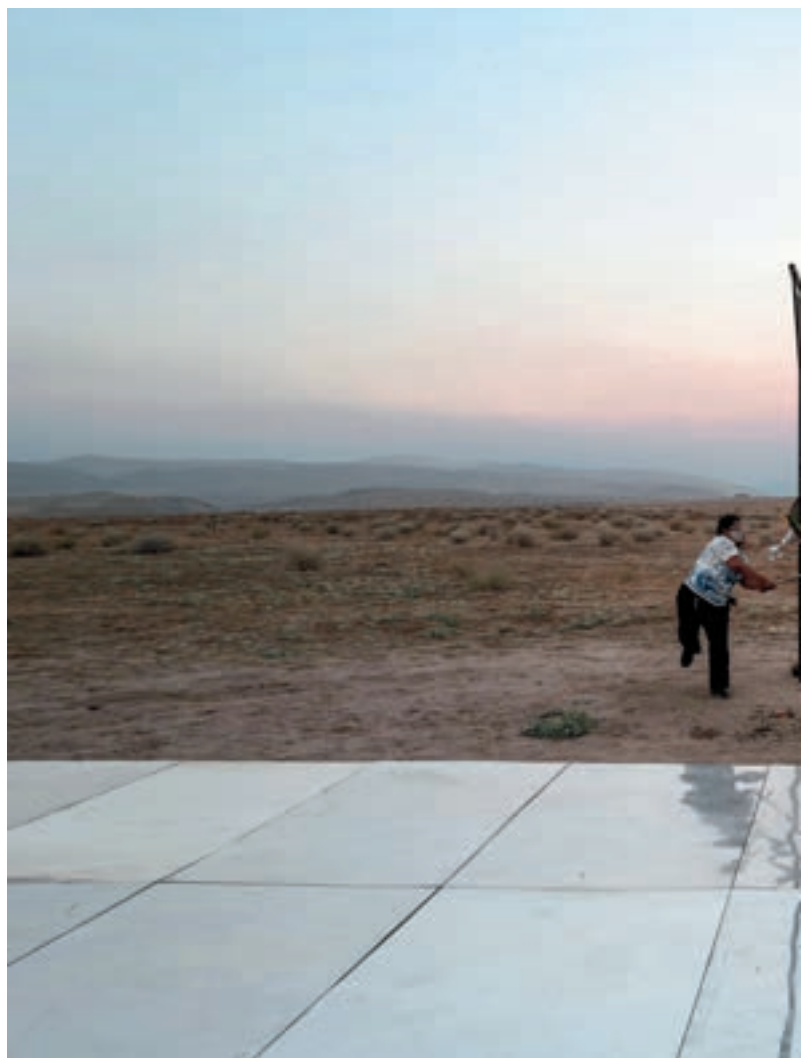
# SOLAR STAR

*Solar Star*, a collaborative performance captured on video, expands the ancient concept that we now know as piñata into the present and spreads desires for the future across the land. The land and what it holds (the underworld) and the Sun (the source of life) were sacred to the ancient peoples of the Americas and their descendants. The Aztecs held a ceremony in celebration of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of the sun, by filling a clay pot with offerings and covering it with feathers. It is believed that the Maya held a similar ceremony with a spherical clay pot filled with gifts hung from a string and struck with a stick. *Solar Star* inserts itself as an extension of these ancient cultural practices, while also evoking the colonial piñatas brought to the Americas by the Spaniards, as well as Sputnik, the first satellite to orbit Earth.

In addition, the title of the piece oscillates between a space capsule, a cosmic source of light, and the name of the largest solar panel farm in the world—a privately owned power plant in Antelope Valley, California, containing approximately 1.7 million Sun Power monocrystalline silicon modules on single-axis trackers. This plant generates 579 megawatts and occupies over 3,200 acres of Antelope Valley. The facility serves not only as a symbol of the destruction of the natural environment but also of the colonization of Indigenous habitats for plants, animals, and humans. Furthermore, it privatizes the energy produced by the sunlight.



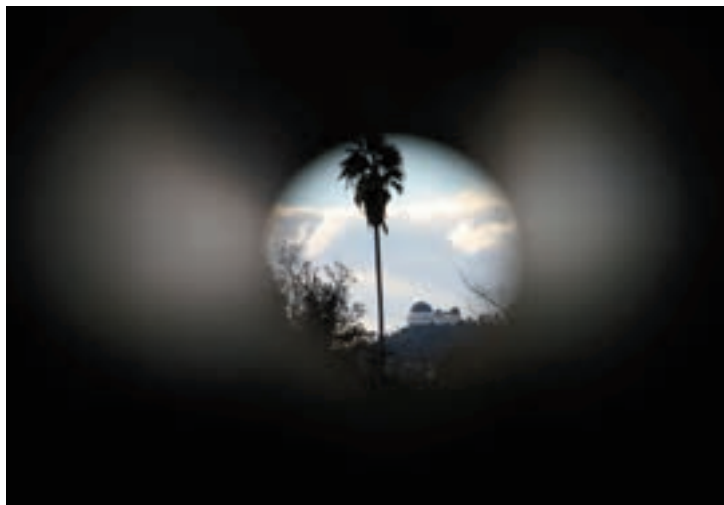
Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza, *Solar Star*, 2020. Performance





# PUENTE

Referencing the ruins of Los Angeles's historic Sixth Street Bridge, *Puente* invites viewers to reflect on their surroundings, infrastructural isolation, and potential connections. Conceptually and aesthetically responding to a found concrete pillar at the Bowtie, *Puente* builds a path of adobe pillars extending from that point toward the river. Each newly built adobe pillar features viewing tunnels that frame specific views of the surrounding landscape, shaping the way we see the landscape and its relationship to the rest of the city.



Mario Ayala, Karla Ekaterine Canseco, Beatriz Cortez, rafa esparza, *Puente*, 2019. Adobe, rebar, ABS pipe, ceramic tiles, steel frames, and airbrushed acrylic







## PORTAL SUR, AFTER COPÁN

*Portal Sur, after Copán* invites us to imagine one of the great urban centers of ancient times by leading us south and evoking the ancient city of Copán. Created with adobe bricks from Ojinaga, Mexico—made by an adobe master brickmaker, Manuel Rodriguez, and moved across the border by rafa and Beatriz—the work was built in front of Ballroom Marfa. It was also made with two welded-steel frames and a wooden pallet, symbolizing the labor often undertaken by immigrants in the United States. The structure evokes the monumental gate or entrance of Copán built by the ancient Maya while reorienting the gallery entrance from north to south.



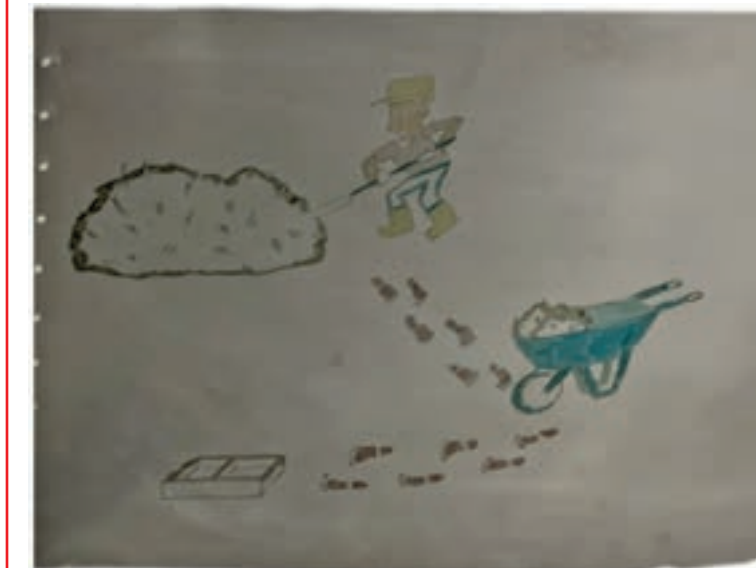
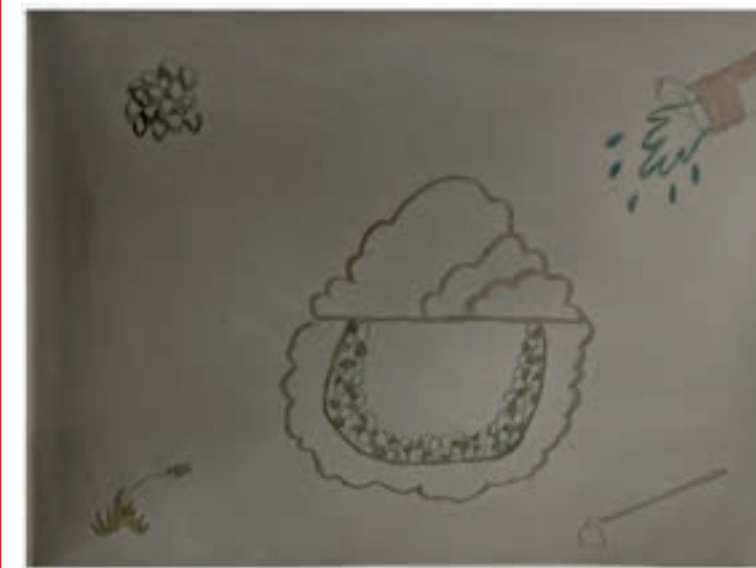
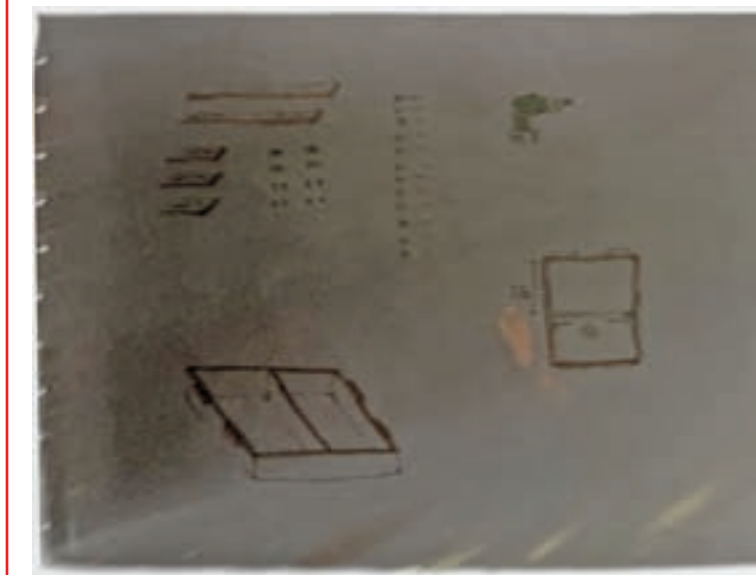
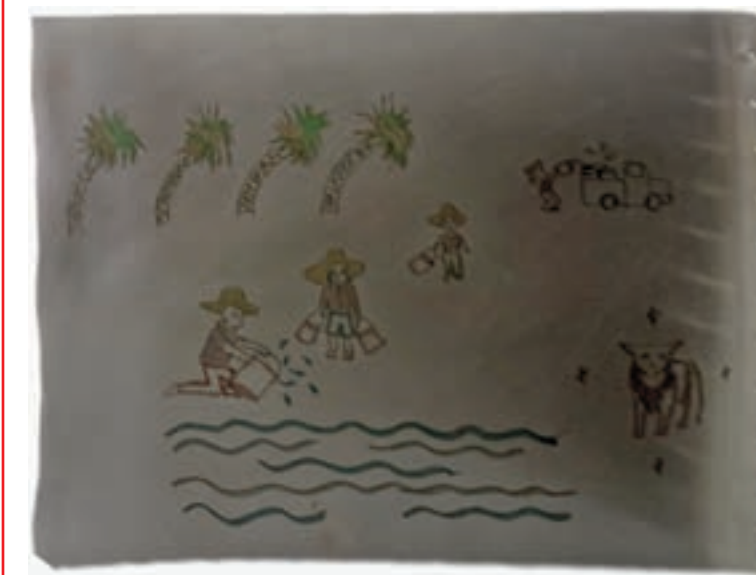
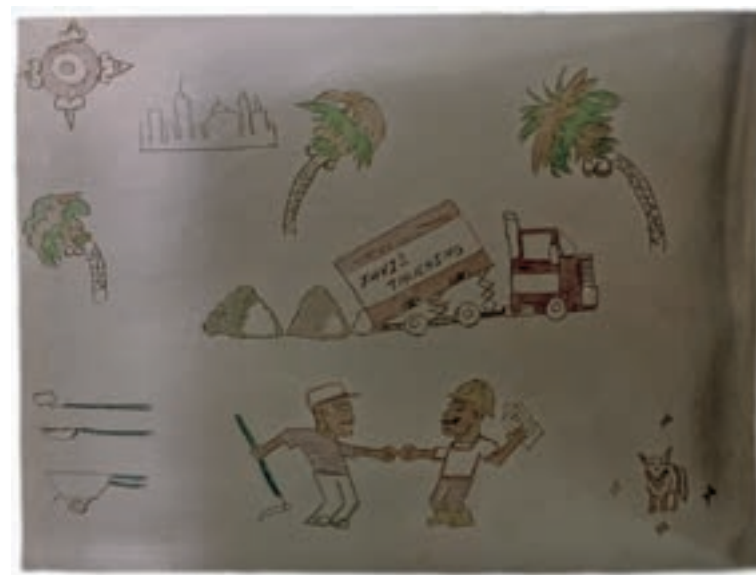
Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza, *Portal Sur, after Copán*, 2017. Steel, adobe made with soil from the Americas south of the US Border, and wood





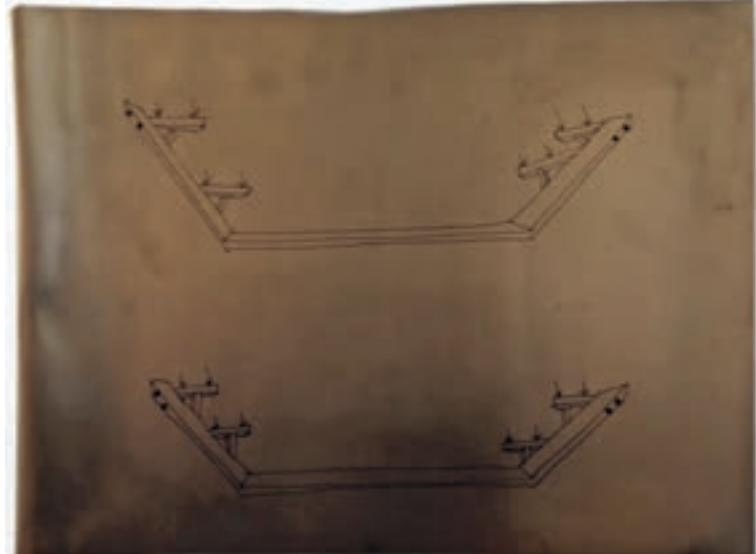
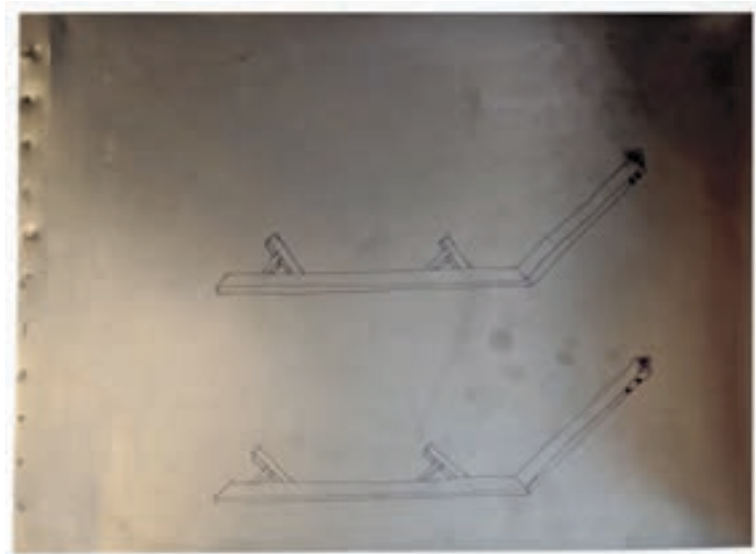
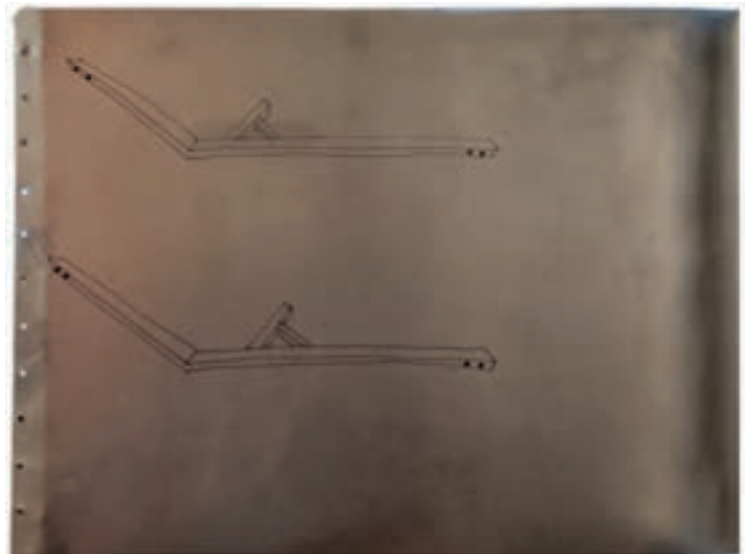
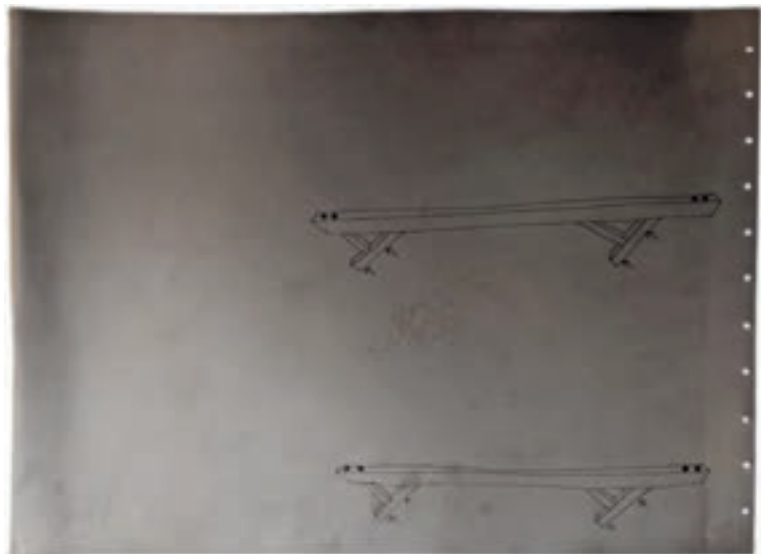
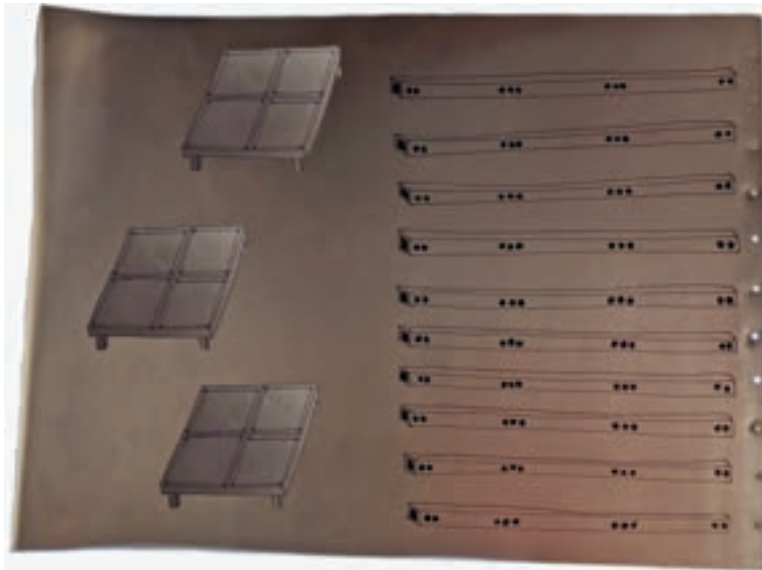
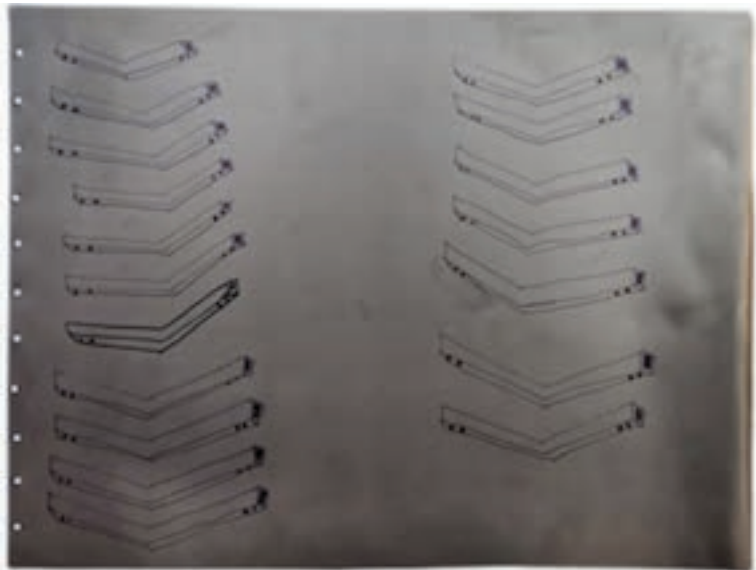
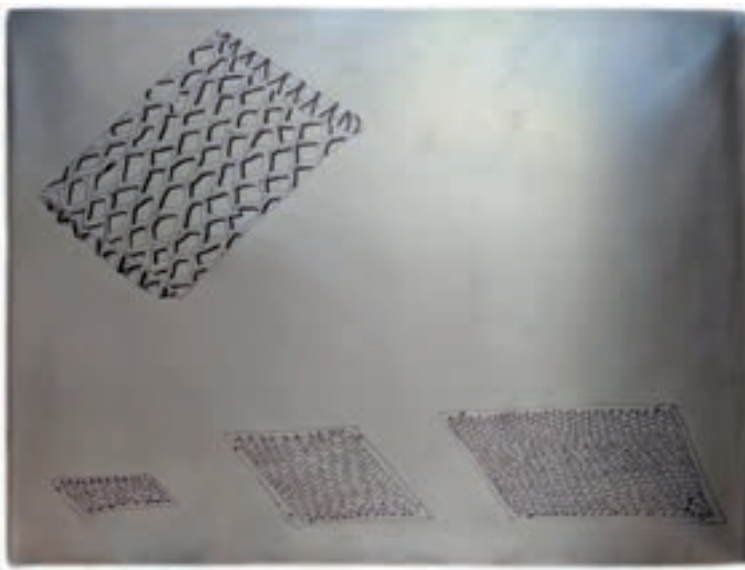
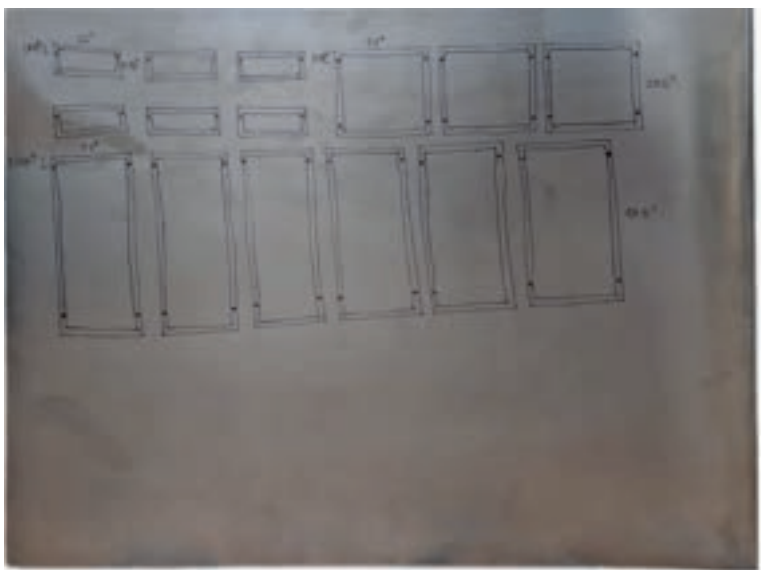
## CODEx (NOMAD 13)

*Codex (Nomad 13)* contains the instructions for the construction of your own version of *Nomad 13*, a space capsule for a nomadic garden. You can make your own *Codex* and you can follow the instructions to help multiply *Nomad 13* nomadic gardens with ancient plants from the Americas for humans of the present and the future.



Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza, *Codex (Nomad 13)*, 2019.  
Steel and felt tip pens





Cut along the perforated line and attach image 6 to image 7 by stitching or taping them together so that the codex becomes one single accordion. Then fold.

In the end, the complete side with the instructions for the making of the adobe should look like this:



and the other side, which has the instructions for the construction of the steel space capsule, should look like this:



## PART TWO: EARTH AND COSMOS



## HYPERSPACE: $-100\text{KM} + \infty$

rafa esparza's *Hyperspace:  $-100\text{ km} + \infty$*  is a sculpture that honors an Olmec monument, distorted as if on the edge of a wormhole. The work is made from the artist's family's adobe recipe, mixed with basalt—the volcanic stone that original Olmec heads were carved out of. In *Hyperspace:  $-100\text{ km} + \infty$* , rafa charts the journey molten magma can travel from the depths of Earth's crust to when it erupts onto Earth's surface and the infinite journeys and forms the basalt can take as a stone. For this sculpture, rafa forecloses viewers the opportunity to visually absorb a likeness to the faces carved into the Olmec colossal heads. Instead, he sees the warped effect as a glitch that maintains the ancient portraits caught in mid-travel, never fully coming into view for our visual consumption.

This image shows the first exhibition of an Olmec colossal head in Seagram Plaza, New York, at the 1965 World's Fair. The world's fairs have historically exploited and denigrated the lives and cultures of Black and Indigenous peoples, making spectacles of their differences.



A sixteen-ton, nine-foot-tall Olmec stone head from Mexico, dating to the fifth century BC, was installed on May 18, 1965, in the plaza of the Seagram Building on Park Avenue at Fifty-Second Street, New York. The Lever House is in the background.

rafa esparza, *Hyperspace*:  $-100\text{km} + \infty$ , 2024. Adobe, steel mesh, rebar, and basalt





## ADOBE BRICKS

rafa esparza inherited adobe brick-making from his father, Ramón Esparza, but learned the process as an adult by working with his father to heal their relationship, which had been severed due to rafa's coming out. rafa and his father connected through the process of working with land and saw it as a first step toward mending their relationship. Years later, his father became an integral collaborator in rafa's projects, making adobe installations that honor ancient forms of construction, the dormant seeds and sprouting life within each adobe brick, the joy of communal labor, and the unique soil at each location where rafa has worked.

Building with adobe inside the Whitney Museum, the Getty Museum, and other art institutions opens the art world to organic materials that are precious and filled with life. *Figure Ground: Beyond the White Field* at the Whitney Museum—created for the 2017 Whitney Biennial—was made with adobe bricks. There, esparza invited a group of Brown, Queer-identified individuals, including Beatriz, to deepen the sense of community reflected in the generosity of the final installation. esparza invited his peers to contribute works to the installation, considering the possibilities of an earthen space, and resisting the social and racial exclusions typical of traditional museum galleries, favoring instead a space of inclusion.



rafa esparza (with Beatriz Cortez, Joe Jimenez, Dorian Ulises López Macías, Eamon Ore-Giron, Gala Porras-Kim), *Figure Ground: Beyond the White Field*, 2017. Adobe bricks, black lava, Flash paint, high-gloss inkjet photographs, Bondo, ancient ceramic shard, wood, paper, and single-channel audio recording









## CORPO RANFLA: TERRA CRUISER 4EVERZ

Situated in front of Diego Rivera's *Pan American Unity* mural, Karla Ekaterine Canseco, with support from Yomahra Gonzalez, helped rafa transform into a futuristic lowrider cyborg. In this final iteration of the performance they activated esparza's *CorpoRanflA: Terra Cruiser 4everz*, a sculpture made from a 25-cent pony ride transformed to resemble a lowrider bike, with various elements substituted with casts from the artist's own body. During the performance, esparza inserted himself into the sculpture, becoming a human-machine hybrid. Invited members of his community took a ride on the *Terra Cruiser* while they listened to the story of the cyborg's mission. The performance expands on esparza's engagements with the intersection of gay cruising, lowrider car cruising, and honors inter-species hybrid encounters depicted by the Mexica in anthropomorphic sculptures and drawings.



rafa esparza (assisted by Karla Ekaterine Canseco and Yomahra Gonzalez), *Corpo RanfLA: Terra Cruiser 4everz*, 2023. Live performance, San Francisco

GIFT OF THE ARTIST TO THE ANCIENT  
OBJECT LABELED AS HUMAN HEAD  
EMERGING FROM MONSTER JAWS,  
ONE MIGRANT TO ANOTHER,  
IN MEMORY OF YOUR TRUE NAME  
AND YOUR LAND

Beatriz Cortez's *Gift of the Artist to the Ancient Object Labeled as Human Head Emerging from Monster Jaws, One Migrant to Another, in Memory of Your True Name and Your Land* was on display at Williams College in 2023. The work engages with the sacred nature and cultural content of a spectacular looted tenon, obtained by Williams students during an expedition to Honduras and Belize in 1970–71, as part of the Lyceum of Natural History. It speaks to the forced migration of ancient objects and imagines a way to honor this object by removing it from a cabinet of artifacts and placing it on a structure that gestures toward ancient forms and abstraction.

This work engages with the idea that ancient objects hold cultural and spiritual value for contemporary Maya communities, both in their places of origin and in the diaspora. On top of the sculpture, a 3-D print of the ancient object held at the Williams College Museum of Art is displayed, further marking its absence, as the original ancient stone was not allowed to travel to New York for this exhibition.



Unknown, Human Head Emerging from Monster Jaws, n.d. Stone

next pages:

Beatriz Cortez, *Gift of the Artist to the Ancient Object Labeled as Human Head Emerging from Monster Jaws, One Migrant to Another, in Memory of Your True name and Your Land*, 2022–23. Steel. Detail above

Beatriz Cortez, *Gift of the Artist to the Ancient Object Labeled as Human Head Wearing a Peaked Headdress, One Migrant to Another, in Memory of Your True name and Your Land*, 2022–23. Steel





## CABEZA DE JAGUAR (MONUMENTO #47)



Beatriz Cortez's *Cabeza de Jaguar (Monumento #47)* recreates in steel a multispecies head, speculated to be a jaguar, originally carved in stone and looted from present-day El Salvador in 2015. Recreation and reinterpretation become a gesture of longing—a way to create memory from the fragments and records of the absent object.



Beatriz Cortez, *Cabeza de Jaguar (Monumento #47)*, 2022.  
Steel and patina



## ALTAR DE KAQJAY

*Altar de Kaqjay*, a collaborative work made by Beatriz Cortez, Kaqjay, and FIEBRE Ediciones, was inspired by the ancient Altar of Kaqjay, which was found inside a home near the town of Patzicía in Guatemala. The large-scale stone altar, made by the ancestors of this Kaqchikel community, was carved on all four sides with figures of speculative creatures and animals. This work was based on the belief that ancient objects should remain where they were placed by the ancestors, while their ideas, spirituality, and cultural significance should travel to the places where the Kaqchikel people, the Maya, and others who share their ancestors now live.

In this installation, the altar is reconfigured in steel and photographed next to another iteration of the work made in paper, which is included here as an insert that can be assembled into a small model of the altar.



Unknown, Altar de Kaqjay, n.d. Stone

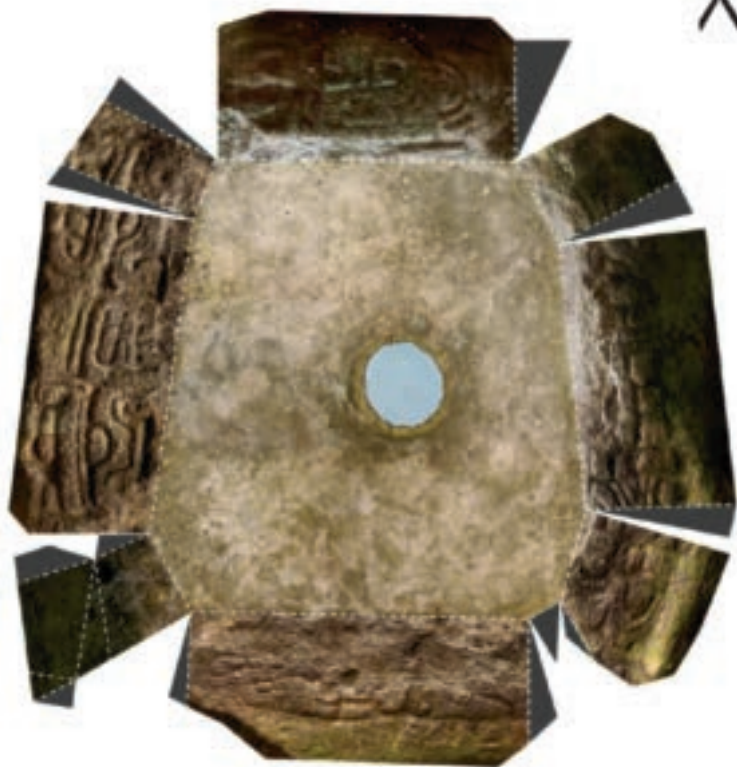
next page:

Beatriz Cortez, Kaqjay, and FIEBRE Ediciones,  
*Altar de Kaqjay*, 2021. Steel











The Altar of Raqay was carved on its four sides with figures of serpents, alligator, Casas and Chach, celestial, land, and aquatic symbols, all of them brings protective of the areas of the cosmos of the underworld, of the land, the sky, and the water. Ancient people that lived at this site during the classical period (200-900 C.E.) placed the altar in the middle of the mountains of the Plaza II, a sacred space dedicated to water.







# ALTAR DE KAJAY

Kajay



Ri ruchi kib'ojoy, kika', kichuxtäq ri ojer qatit, qamama' kixolon ki chupa ri poqolaj, chupa ri kulewal ri maya winaqi'. Chi kijuunal re chuxtäq re nikik'ut ki, nikijunamaj ri kik'u'x rik'in ri kik'ux ri winaqi'. Ke k'a ri' toq ri ojer samajib'äl, etz'anib'äl, xuklib'äl nikipo ki, yeyakatäj, nikinuk' ki wakami, chuwa täq kochoch ri maya winaqi'.

Ronojel k'o ruk'u'x; ri qak'u'x nuya quchuqa', nuya qak'aslem. Ja ri qak'ux k'wayon qichi' chupa ri qak'aslem, chupa ri qasamaj, qonojel; keru ri ojer, keru wakami. Ri atit, ri mama', ri säq kiwi', ri säq kijolom, ek'o chiqak'u'x, po mänxeta ri, chuqa yeqanataj toq ri ojer kisamajibal, ri kewan ki chuxe ulew, yetuk'ulun, nikik'ut ki'.

Ri ruchi taq b'ojoy, abäj e k'o chwarochoch ri ma' Toribio xkik'ut ki chwach ri rumama', ri rutata', chwach rija' toq yetikon, toq nikisamajij ri ruwach'uleu. Ri xuklib'äl richin kaqjay –ruk'u'x ya', ruk'u'x j'äb', ruk'u'x palo'– rachib'ilan ch'aqa chik ojer ab'äj, xkik'ut ki chuwäch ri ma' Julián, chuwarachoch, chila Cerritos Asunción. Ri abäj eyakon chuxe' jun che', chuwarochoch ri ma' Gabino, enuk'un achel toq xkik'ut ki'. Wakami rija xerub'onij, yeruch'äjch'orisaj, nikikot ma xeok retz'ab'al ri ruwajay. Ri saqil nisipäx chi re ri ruwach'ulew, chikiwäch ri ojer, chikiwäch ri k'ak'ak' xuklib'äl, janila keqalen; chi kiwäch re xuklib'äl re yenatäx ri rajawal juyu', ri ruk'ux kaj, ri ruk'u'x ulew, ri qatit, ri qamama'.

Ojer tichap pe kinataxik ri qatit, ri qamama'. Konojel re abäj yeqak'u't wawe achel retal ri nimaläj k'aslem. Re chuxtäq yeqak'u't wawe, junan keqalen rik'in ri ojer kitzij ri qatit, ri qamama'. Konojel re chuxtäq re etz'uqun chupa ri k'ayewal, chupa ri kikotem kichajin, kina'on ri winaqi, ri tinamit. Re samaj ni qak'u't, xchojmir, xunuk' ri achiel jun nimaläj uchuq'a, jun nimaläj k'u'x nitikir nutäkmayij ronojel k'ayewal, ronojel chaponik.

The lands that we, the Maya, inhabit are filled with fragments and objects that reveal themselves and are linked to men and women through their *k'ux*. Those objects that were once used in kitchens, in workshops, in cultivation fields, in ballgame courts, in altars and ancient temples, in ancient time, take life in our backyards, kitchens, and in our altars, the Maya of the twenty-first century.

The ancient objects relate to others, just as human beings do, through their *k'ux*, which everything that exists holds. *K'ux* is the force that bonds life across time and space; in these Maya lands, the new generations find our place not only in our memory but also through the voices of the objects that come out from Earth to meet with us, the humans.

The fragments that are in the garden of don Toribio's house allowed themselves to be seen by his grandparents, his father and mother, and later also by him, while he cultivated his lands. The Altar of Kaqjay—*ru k'ux ya', ru k'ux jäb, ru k'ux palo'*—and a tenon sculpture with a face emerging from its jaws, decided to reveal themselves to don Julián in his home's backyard, in what is now the village of Cerritos Asunción, Patzicía. The tenon sculptures under the lemon tree at don Gabino's house were placed in the same orientation as when they emerged; now he paints and bathes them to keep as decorations. The candle offerings in the altars created by ancient peoples or in the ones that people create today with the ancient objects keep the memory of the life of the beings that have inhabited Earth.

These links with the *long count calendar* and with space are continuous. We present this object because it has the same importance as the tales of our grandparents, knowing that they have been nurtured by personal and collective spiritual needs. We gathered all this laying a giant body that follows the same path as migrants do, round trip, breaking borders, and jumping maps.

Las tierras que habitamos los mayas están llenas de fragmentos y objetos que se muestran y se vinculan a los hombres y mujeres a través del *k'u'x* de cada uno/a. Aquellos objetos que fueron usados en las cocinas, en los talleres, en los campos de cultivo, en los patios de juego de pelota, en los altares y templos de los antiguos, en el tiempo antiguo, toman vida en nuestros patios, cocinas y en los altares de nosotros los mayas del siglo XXI.

Los objetos antiguos se relacionan, al igual que los seres humanos, a través del *k'u'x*, que todo cuanto existe posee. *K'u'x* es la fuerza que vincula la vida a través del tiempo y el espacio; en estas tierras mayas las nuevas generaciones encontramos un lugar no solo en la memoria, sino también a través de la voz de los objetos que salen de la tierra para encontrarse con nosotros, los humanos.

Los fragmentos que están en el jardín de la casa de don Toribio se dejaron ver ante sus abuelos, padre y madre, y más tarde también ante él, mientras cultivaba sus tierras. El Altar de Kaqjay –*ru k'u'x ya', ru k'u'x jäb', ru k'u'x palo'*– y una espiga con un rostro emergiendo de las fauces, quisieron mostrarse ante don Julián en el mismo patio de su casa en la actual aldea Cerritos Asunción, Patzicía. Las espigas bajo el limonero de la casa de don Gabino fueron colocadas de la misma manera en que se enseñaron; ahora las pinta y baña para mantenerlas como adornos. Las candelas ofrendadas en los altares creados por los *antiguos*, o en los que la gente crea actualmente con objetos antiguos, mantienen el recuerdo de la vida de los seres que habitan la tierra.

Estos vínculos con el tiempo largo y con el espacio, son continuados. Presentamos este objeto porque tiene la misma importancia que los relatos de nuestros abuelos, sabiendo que han sido alimentados por necesidades espirituales singulares y colectivas. Conseguimos todo esto tendiendo un cuerpo gigante que hace el mismo camino del migrante, de ida y vuelta, rompiendo fronteras y saltando mapas.



## ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

**Beatriz Cortez** (b. 1970, San Salvador, El Salvador; lives and works in Los Angeles and Davis) is a multidisciplinary artist whose work explores memory, movement, and migration, as well as the experience of simultaneity, multiple temporalities, and speculative imaginaries. Her work explores untimely time-traveling forms of communication and community building. Her sculptures function as metaphors for long temporalities, nomadism, and multiplicity. Her installations construct possible interventions in the chronological order of time and nonhuman temporalities and perspectives. Her collaborations with others explore the emergence of collective subjectivities as well as transborder and transtemporal forms of being. She teaches sculpture at the University of California, Davis.

**rafa esparza** (b. 1981, Pasadena; lives and works in Los Angeles) is a multidisciplinary artist whose work reveals his interests in history, personal narratives, and kinship, and his own relationship to colonization and the disrupted genealogies that it produces. Using live performance as his main form of inquiry, esparza employs site-specificity, materiality, memory, and what he calls (non)documentation as primary tools to investigate and expose ideologies, power structures, and binary forms of identity that establish narratives, history, and social environments. esparza's recent projects are grounded in laboring with land and adobe-making, a skill learned from his father, Ramón Esparza. In so doing, the artist invites Brown and Queer cultural producers to realize large-scale collective projects, gathering people together to build networks of support in and outside of traditional art spaces.



## CREDITS

p. 39: Courtesy of the artists and Commonwealth and Council; UCR Arts.  
Photo: Nikolay Maslov

pp. 40–41: Courtesy of the artists and Commonwealth and Council;  
Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles. Photo: Gina Clyne

pp. 43, 44–45, 47: Courtesy of the artists and Commonwealth and Council. Photo:  
Ruben Diaz

pp. 49, 50–51: Courtesy of the artists and Art in Residence, Antelope Valley.  
Photos: Beatriz Cortez (p. 49) and Josué Guaján (pp. 50–51)

pp. 53, 54–55: Courtesy of the artists and Clockshop. Photo: rafa esparza

pp. 57–59: Courtesy of the artists; don Manuel Rodríguez; and Ballroom Marfa.  
Photos: Alex Marks

pp. 61 (gatefold), 62: Photos: Courtesy of the artists

p. 65: AP Images / Dave Pickoff

pp. 66–67: Photo: artist composite / rafa esparza

pp. 70–71: Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council;  
the Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo: Bill Orcutt

p. 73: Courtesy of the artist and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo:  
Myleen Hollero

p. 75: Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council; the Williams College  
Museum of Art. Photo: Phillip Byrne

pp. 76–77: Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council;  
the Williams College Museum of Art. Photo: Bradley Wakoff

pp. 78–79: Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council. Photo: Paul  
Salveson

p. 81: Courtesy of Kaqjay. Photo: Antonio Medina

pp. 82–83: Courtesy of the artists and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions.  
Photo: Yubo / OfPhoto Studio, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions

Insert: Courtesy of the artists and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. Photo:  
Antonio Medina

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the artists and their teams for sharing their practices with us. We thank Kibum Kim and everyone at Commonwealth and Council for their advice and support, without which this project would not be possible.

We also want to thank the Williams College Museum of Art, specifically Beth Fischer and Lisa Dorin, who offered their knowledge and technology to create a 3D print of *Human Head Emerging from Monster Jaws* (pages 75–76), with printing and finishing by the Makerspace at Williams College, for loan during this exhibition.

Beatriz Cortez and rafa esparza would like to acknowledge the contributions and collaborations of Kaqjay and Comunidad Kaqchikel de Investigación in Patzicía, Guatemala; FIEBRE Ediciones, a collective formed by artists Carla Lamoyi and Antonio Medina; rafa's father, Ramón Esparza, rafa's brother Alberto Esparza and all of rafa's adobe brick collaborators; Beatriz's mother, Beatriz Antonia Cortez, and our studio teams, including Yomahra Gonzalez, Tatiana Guerrero, Phillip Byrne, and Ricardo Urrutia. Also, much gratitude to Daniela Lieja Quintanar, Douglas Carranza Mena, and Lisa Dorin, and the following institutions: the Williams College Museum of Art, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, the High Line Plinth, and our gallery, Commonwealth and Council.

The presentation of *Beatriz Cortez × rafa esparza: Earth and Cosmos* is made possible by support from Liana Krupp, as well as by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

The project was supported, in part, by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant.

Americas Society acknowledges the generous support from the Arts of the Americas Circle members: Amalia Amoedo, Almeida e Dale Galeria de Arte, Estrellita B. Brodsky, Virginia Cowles Schroth, Emily A. Engel, Isabella Hutchinson, Carolina Jannicelli, Diana López and Herman Sifontes, Elena Matsuura, Maggie Miqueo, Antonio Murzi, Gabriela Pérez Rocchietti, Marco Pappalardo and Cintya Poletti Pappalardo, Carolina Pincirolì, Erica Roberts, Patricia Ruiz-Healy, Sharon Schultz, and Edward J. Sullivan.



*Beatriz Cortez × rafa esparza: Earth and Cosmos*

Organized by the artists, with exhibition coordination by Sarah Lopez

Americas Society  
January 29–May 17, 2025

Americas Society  
680 Park Avenue  
New York, NY 10065  
[www.as-coa.org](http://www.as-coa.org)

Founder: David Rockefeller †  
Chairman: Andrés Gluski  
President and CEO: Susan Segal  
Treasurer: George B. Weiksner  
Vice President, Public Policy Programs and Corporate Relations: Ragnhild Melzi  
Director and Chief Curator of Art at Americas Society: Aimé Iglesias Lukin  
Assistant Curators of Art: Sarah Lopez, Tatiana Marcel  
Assistant Curator of Public Programs: Carla Lucini  
Head Installer: Diana Restrepo  
Art Handlers: Ian Couch, Jesus Benavente, Gabriela Gomez Mestre,  
John Peery, Jonathan Sims  
Director of Institutional Engagement: Michelle Maydanchik  
Gallery Attendants: Michelle Li, Daniela Manrique

#### Publication

Americas Society exhibition series editors: Aimé Iglesias Lukin and Karen Marta  
Associate editor: Tatiana Marcel  
Project manager: Todd Bradway  
Designer: Garrick Gott  
Copy editor: Flatpage

Printed and bound by GHP, West Haven, CT

Printed on Finch Fine Bright White Smooth Text 80 g/m<sup>2</sup>  
Typeset in Basis Grotesque and DTL Dorian

Publication © 2025, Americas Society  
All texts © 2025, the authors  
All artworks © 2025, the artists

ISBN 978-1-879128-60-6  
Library of Congress Control Number: 2024951317

Printed in the United States

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher. The publisher gratefully acknowledges permission granted to reproduce the copyrighted materials in this book. Every effort has been made to contact copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material. The publisher apologizes for any errors or omissions and would be grateful to be notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this publication.

**ART**/AMERICAS  
SOCIETY