

# Graduate Fine Arts Lecture Series: rafa esparza on method, material, and the meaning of community

“In all of his creative experimentation, esparza strongly embraces a fearless decolonial politic; he is not afraid to mix “fine art” with organizing or mutual aid work, he prioritizes accessibility, and he speaks up for himself and others about the visceral violence of empire.”

**Vanessa Perez Winder**



*rafa esparza, building: a simulacrum of power (2014), installed alongside the Los Angeles River*

In this work, esparza covers the pre-existing obelisk work by Michael Parker along the river with adobe bricks made in collaboration with his brothers, sister, and parents. Pictured here, the work culminated in an evening of durational performance by esparza and artist Rebecca Hernandez.

VOL.7





institutional bureaucracy, and that these spaces may feel unwelcoming or inaccessible to working class people of color. While he often works to subvert these limitations within institutional sites, he also notes the vastly different experiences that transpire when his works come to life on the streets of Los Angeles or somewhere like a friend's backyard, amongst "brown queers," and other Black, brown, and Indigenous folks in his community. As he spoke, I reflected on our responsibilities as socially and politically engaged artists and cultural workers, and considered the tenuous relationship I often feel with both the 'capital A' art world and with academia, as I interrogate where my own work should live and who it is really for.

esparza began his talk by discussing some of his personal and artistic origins. He noted the generative impact that East Los Angeles College (ELAC) had on his practice. He studied art at ELAC for seven years shortly after high school and before eventually transferring to UCLA, where he received a BFA in Studio Art. During his time at ELAC, esparza forged relationships with many Indigenous elders who shared their knowledge, began organizing



**rafa esparza, *Tezcatlipoca Memoirs: Sun Chaser* (2011) at Highways Performance Space, Santa Monica, CA**

As a part of this performance, esparza sat tied to a self-constructed box covered with bed sheets for over an hour and asked his brother Beto to unravel the sheets.

on campus and in the community, started learning about (de)colonization, and came out as queer to friends and family. During that time esparza also discovered the work of East L.A. Chicano performance art group Asco (active between 1972–1987), mostly through word of mouth—a form of oral history. Inspired by Asco’s legacy, esparza began to make works and orchestrate actions that re-evaluated relationships to history, community, and the city, in spontaneous and public forms.

By including participation from fellow makers, performers, and audience members, esparza challenges a Western-colonial conception of artistic authority and instead allows his art to be inclusive, collaborative, and collectively experienced. As intimate examples of this practice, esparza shared several works made with his younger brother Beto and his father Ramón. Although these collaborations initially arose from a practical need for help realizing aspects of his projects, esparza shared how these experiences restructured his relationship to his family members and became a mode of familial healing. He shared how special and tender it was to have Beto as an active participant in works like *Tezcatlipoca Memoirs: Sun Chaser* (2011) at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, acknowledging it was his brother’s first time witnessing him within a brown queer space; and again as one of his collaborators in *El Hoyo* (2013) at Human Resources LA, which explored themes of masculinity, collective familial trauma, violence, and criminalization.



**rafa esparza, *El Hoyo* (2013) at Human Resources, Los Angeles, CA**  
Pictured here as part of this emotional and cathartic performance on generational trauma, esparza strips an old family couch to its bare structure.

In contrast, esparza told us how his relationship with his father had actually become quite strained due to his coming out, and that they did not speak much to each other for a while afterwards. Some time later he first asked his father, a former brick-maker in Mexico and an immigrant laborer in the U.S., to teach him how to build adobe bricks. In establishing a new kind of patrilineal tradition, esparza said that he was able to communicate and relate to his father in a newfound way. Since then, esparza has collaborated with his father—alongside many other artists and performers—in works like *building: a simulacrum of power* (2014) installed alongside the L.A. River, *Tierra* (2016) at the Hammer Museum's biennial *Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only,* and *Figure/Ground: Beyond the White Field* (2017) at the 2017 Whitney Biennial. Inherently a laborious and time consuming endeavor, esparza's adobe brick works have always necessitated the participation of others, including fellow artists, performers, friends, family, acquaintances, mutual connections, and youth, to whom he has passed on his knowledge. When exhibited, these bricks have often served as terrain on which to mount the work of other Black and brown artists whom esparza knows and loves.



**rafa esparza, *building: a simulacrum of power* (2014), installed alongside the Los Angeles River**

In this work, esparza covers the pre-existing obelisk work by Michael Parker along the river with adobe bricks made in collaboration with his brothers, sister, and parents. Pictured here, the work culminated in an evening of durational performance by esparza and artist Rebecca Hernandez.



rafa esparza, *Tierra* (2016) at the Hammer Museum's biennial *Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only*

Actually, it seemed that for every single work he spoke about, esparza had at some point graciously requested the inclusion of chosen kin, and/or actively celebrated them, while also embracing the potential for transformation by public participation. This is illustrated in the aforementioned works and again in many others, including hybrid performance-sculpture *Corpo RanfLA: Terra Cruiser* (2022 and 2023), first made with welding help from fellow L.A. artist and friend Karla Canseco for Art Basel Miami 2022. The sculpture, made by repurposing an old quarter-cent mechanical pony ride, has since been re-customized and is now part of the current *Sitting on Chrome* exhibition. In another example of esparza's deep commitment to community and collaboration, *Sitting on Chrome* was originally conceived by SFMOMA as a solo show, but esparza asked L.A. artists and friends Mario Ayala and Guadalupe Rosales to formally join him. There was a genuine, generous, and non-hierarchical approach to how the artist spoke about all of these experiences—which have ranged from playful to deeply emotional—that can be quite rare to encounter. It made me think hard about how to better develop my own praxis around love, solidarity, and the sharing of power and opportunity. While esparza spoke tenderly, with soft eyes and a smile, about how he had been changed and touched through his work with others, I thought about how many people he had touched and how many lives he had changed over the years, counting myself amongst them, even if indirectly.



**rafa esparza, *Corpo RanfLA: Terra Cruiser*, performed in the parking lot of Art Beyond Survival, Los Angeles, CA on April 22, 2023.**

Photo courtesy of Vanessa Perez Winder.

In this performance, esparza physically inserted himself into his constructed sculpture of a lowrider bike in motion, becoming a machine-human hybrid. He invited select members of his community to physically 'ride' him as they wore headphones to hear him tell a story about a creation and the passage of time.

Entwined with the social aspect of esparza's work is a deliberate engagement with the materials he uses. Adobe, for example, contains indexical traces of brown life and labor, allowing the artist to reference personal and collective memory and histories of exploitation, and to address and steward the land while tending to the relationships forged during construction. In more recent works exploring chrome, automobile, and machine technologies, esparza nostalgically references personal and public lowrider histories and imagines possibilities for their evolutionary futures. When working in performance and using corporeality as a medium, esparza's body becomes a site of critical brown queer resistance and reclamation, in spite of colonial and contemporary violences inscribed onto the body. The specific sites that esparza chooses for these public works hold equal importance to their

constitutive materials; a practice that allows him to re-interrogate cultural memory through materiality and land, and that represents a profound engagement with time and place in Los Angeles. For example, esparza shared how he chose to stage a performance like *bust: a meditation on freedom* (2015) just outside of the L.A. County Jail, allowing the work to be read within the context of the architectures of oppression, the surveillance and criminalization of working class communities, and the impact of community support and advocacy in liberation.



**rafa esparza, *bust: a meditation on freedom* (2015), performed just outside of the Los Angeles County Jail lot, Los Angeles, CA.**

In this performance, esparza had friends and family assist him in burying most of his body in a column of concrete, gravel, and plywood. Using a hammer to chisel away at the material, he worked on slowly 'busting' himself out.

In all of his creative experimentation, esparza strongly embraces a fearless decolonial politic; he is not afraid to mix "fine art" with organizing or mutual aid work, he prioritizes accessibility, and he speaks up for himself and others about the visceral violence of empire. I've seen many major institutions eager to co-opt radical language and works by "marginalized" artists without implementing much internal change. Having followed esparza's work for a while now, I believe he moves through this contemporary moment while staying true to his concerns and his people, a testament to his own authenticity. esparza is truly a dynamic force in the art world today, who so many of us students can learn from as we come into our professions. I am always looking forward to seeing what he comes up with next.



