



View of “Beatriz Cortez and Rafa Esparza,” 2018. Center: Beatriz Cortez, *The Argonaut: after Pakal*, 2018. Photo: Ruben Diaz.

## Beatriz Cortez and Rafa Esparza

### COMMONWEALTH AND COUNCIL

A spirit of colorful vitality and heterogeneous collectivity infused “*Pasado mañana*” (The Day After Tomorrow), Beatriz Cortez and Rafa Esparza’s recent exhibition at Commonwealth and Council. Over the past year, the two Los Angeles–based artists have collaborated on sculptural installations that address the migration of bodies, symbols, forms, and building techniques in and around the Americas. For *Nomad 13*, 2017, Cortez and Esparza constructed an eight-and-a-half-foot-tall “space capsule” made of steel and adobe bricks that sheltered an array of plant species (such as corn, cactus, quinoa, chili, yerba buena, and sage) cultivated by Inca, Maya, and Aztec civilizations for bodily and spiritual nourishment. In *Portal Sur, after Copan*, 2017, the pair again employed steel and adobe bricks to build a freestanding version of the corbeled archways found in Mayan architecture. Installed on the north side of Ballroom Marfa, in Texas, the entryway reoriented visitors entering the art space to face the U.S.-Mexico border, about sixty miles away.

For “*Pasado mañana*,” Cortez and Esparza took a more unruly approach in their intervention, cutting into the gallery’s walls, bringing loads of dirt into its space, and setting up a hydroponic garden. Dirt—as a signifier of brownness and as a generative medium—was a recurring motif in the exhibition, beginning with a thick earthen layer carpeting nearly the entire floor of the gallery’s front room. Artworks were installed directly onto and around the dirt floor, which collected the anonymous traces of visitors’ movements through the show.

In their individual and joint works in the exhibition, Cortez and Esparza used a range of material and symbolic references to Mayan iconography, cosmology, and mythology, merging the ancient with the contemporary, the celestial with the terrestrial, and the sacred with the profane. In Cortez’s *The Argonaut: after Pakal*, 2018, for example, a geometric, spaceship-like steel form rises more than ten feet to frame a seat made from interlaced metal strips. The centrally positioned object is meant to evoke a petate, or floor covering traditionally woven from grass leaves, the method of its fabrication emphasizing communal strength. Drawn directly on the steel are abstracted images taken from the sarcophagus of the Mayan king Pakal—under whose rule much of the imposing city-state of Palenque was developed. Nearby, Cortez and Esparza’s *The Sky over Palenque*, 2018, contained similar references: Leafy plant cuttings in glass vases borrowed from the homes of local immigrants were hung on the wall in a pattern that echoed star constellations carved onto Pakal’s tomb. The rest of the show extended these meditations on labor, life, and death with similarly verdant works: Water lilies grew in *Trópico Nomad*, 2018, and a baby ceiba tree was planted in *Portal*, 2018.

In an expansive curatorial gesture, Cortez and Esparza also invited six queer artists of a younger generation to show their work in the space, continuing the conceit of growth. These works spun off from the concepts of community and commemoration laid out by Cortez and Esparza, presenting different ways in which the self could be represented. Fabián Guerrero and Brenzy Solorzano displayed intimate photographic portraits of loved ones, while Rubén Rodríguez wrapped clothes donated by members of the Los Angeles queer community around branches and colored pieces of wood in his installation *Abuela lessons: sow/so under the full moon*, 2018. The fluidity of identity was the overt subject of Sebastián Hernández’s video *Brown Zero*, 2016, made in collaboration with Brenda Guevera, in which layered images of video-game figures, cumbia dance circles, voguers, and laser light shows flicker against a pulsating soundtrack. Mirrors refracted one’s sense of self and space in Gabriela Ruiz’s

*Reflexión*, 2018, an acid-yellow chair and vanity covered with insulating foam and wooden spikes, and in María Maea's *From ancient matter, she takes form*, 2018, in which an orange-tree branch with two ghostly wax faces was suspended over an enigmatic arrangement of circular mirrors, polished crystals, rocks, seedpods, dried plant matter, melted candles, and green shoots planted in the dirt floor. Next to each of the younger artists' works was a three-by-two-foot hole punched out of the gallery's walls; directly underneath each gap was an adobe panel of the same dimensions onto which Esparza had painted the eyes of the artist whose work was nearby, thus creating metaphoric portraits of each artist's way of seeing. With each of these subtle references, the exhibition deftly harked back to near and distant pasts while also activating an entropic sense of futures yet to be imagined.

—Kavior Moon

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