

[00:00:06] **PAULINA ASCENCIO FUENTES**

So welcome everyone. Thank you very much for joining us in the last event of the Speaker Series of this semester. The Speaker Series is produced by the Center for Curatorial Studies, CCS Bard. My name is Paulina Ascencio Fuentes and I'm a second-year graduate student. I am very happy to introduce rafa esparza who will present on his work for about 40 minutes. And after his presentation, we will open the space for conversation for about 20 or 30 minutes. Please feel free to write comments, ideas and questions in the chat and I will make sure to voice them after the presentation.

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Last year I had the chance to visit "Nepantla" at Gamma, a gallery in Guadalajara, Mexico, my hometown. "Nepantla" was a group show rafa organized in collaboration with artist Timo Fahler. As a way to introduce rafa, I would like to talk about three aspects of that show that I consider helpful to approach his practice. The title of the show "Nepantla" is a word in Nahuatl that describes the condition of in-between-ness, a sort of like liminal cultural, social and political space for survival. This concept is familiar to people who live in the borderlands, lingering between two different cultures, like rafa, who was born in Los Angeles to a family of Mexican immigrants. In this sense, rafa's work reflects on his own identity, underlying Brown and queer processes of subject formation and exploring critical ways of contesting colonial memory. His durational, physically-exhaustive performances are also good examples of this. For "Nepantla", rafa created a shelf-like installation of adobe tiles, shaping the perimeter of the gallery as three geographical delimitations related to the United States: the Pacific coast of the country, the Panama Canal and the US-Mexico border.

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rafa learned how to work with adobe from his father, Ramón Esparza. By exercising this family-inherited skill, his work renders visible issues of labor, land and tradition. Moreover, the installation functioned as a display strategy to present both his own work and a selection of works by his artist friends from Los Angeles. In this sense, the role of the

exhibition was fluid and mutating. Artist, curator, organizer, collaborator, friend and compadre. That said, rafa has described his work as very collaborative or inherently collaborative, to which I would add sets forth the strong commitment to community building and advocacy.

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Besides this particular exhibition, rafa's work has been presented at the Whitney Biennial, the exhibition "Made in L.A." at the Hammer Museum, at MASS MoCA, and Ballroom Marfa, to name a few. Last summer, in collaboration with artist Cassils, rafa organized "In Plain Sight" a monumental collective skywriting project that spelled protest messages above ICE facilities, immigration courthouses and processing centers. More than 80 artists participated with messages to call out state sanctioned violence against immigrants. Without further ado, I give the floor to rafa to begin his presentation. Bienvenido rafa. Thank you very much.

[00:04:04] **rafa esparza**

Gracias Paulina, thank you for that introduction. Thank you, Lauren. Thank you, everyone, for being here today. I'm going to share my screen. So I put together a group of slides of projects and works that were collaboratively progressed or conceived. And the first couple of projects are, I think, precursors to this idea of working with other folks that involve family and other groups of members of my community, but not so aware of this idea of collaboration. I think some of these instances were a little bit more intuitive.

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This is a project that I did at Highways Performance Space. It was one of the first performance artworks that I did in a gallery, and it was a work that was the sort of embodied interrogation of ritual, ceremonial, community-building spaces, after my relationship to them shifted once I came out to community members, family members, friends. And so it's this work, it's this body of work where I was creating queer creation mythologies for sculptures and iconography that I was kind of like re evaluating. And in this case, it was a sculpture of [foreign language 00:05:58] , which is just a hand-carved

jade sculpture that's historicized and written about as a birth goddess. Which is distinct from how I learned about the deity in spaces of ritual and ceremony, being a deity of transformation, of purification. And so I literally kind of took my body and performed this pose while bound to this armature. And I asked my brother to help me perform this work.

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This performance existed as an object before it was activated. So it's just this kind of box that you saw at the beginning that sat on a rotating base. And then it was my brother that came in, activated the work by beginning to pull these shreds of cobijas, the blankets that were wrapped around the box. And it was important for me to invite my brother into the space, because of this kind of umbilical cord that I felt was being activated. Those bedsheets were tied to this rope, which was attached to these barbs that were pierced into my chest and the performance finishes with my brother yanking the rope off stage and with it the bits of flesh that it was connected to. And so I was also wanting to invite my brother into this space that was Brown and queer and, you know, the work was carried into an evening of of Brown, queer performance. It was called Queer communion, and it was a cast of all Brown queer artists and performers. And so wanting to be seen with this community by my brother felt very important. Again, I hadn't really even thought about him as a collaborator or what it meant to invite him into the space. All of these, like politics and questions that I started to think about afterwards, is like a more intuitive and intimate and personal kind of decision to have my brother kind of support this work.

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So similarly, in this work that I called "El Hoyo," that functioned in the form of a triptych that was looking at different forms of violence experienced by Brown bodies, beginning in the sidewalk entrance to a gallery, Human Resources in Chinatown here in Los Angeles. I invited my younger brother to, again, to participate in this performance with me. Starting to think a little bit more about these invitations to create a presence together with another body. I had a conversation prior to this with my brother about his

relationship to police and his relationship to safe spaces, and it was sparked by visiting my folks home and seeing my younger brother carry a backpack with him and knowing that, you know, he had dropped out of high school, like at 17, at 16. And so I would always tease him, like, why are you carrying this backpack with you if you're not going or coming to school? And he shared with me that he used it for protection, that he felt like it disarmed any preconceived surveilling notions about him. He felt like if he was performing as a student, maybe walking or coming from school, he felt safer. He felt like police weren't going to harass him. And that resonated with me because I, at that point, still carried my UCLA student ID over my California driver's license, so that when I get pulled over for no reason, hopefully like them seeing my UCLA ID would do the same thing.

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So I just simply asked my brother to stand with me at a distance that made him feel comfortable in front of an audience of strangers. My brother's not a performance artist. He had never done anything like this. And so that was part of this invitation to work on this piece together. And so the action that I did was I had cut every one of my fingerprints, of my fingers, of my digits and I would swing my hands towards the entrance of the gallery that I covered in a jaguar-printed fabric and black trash bags. And so in the second part of this performance, I came into a room, I got a room that I divided into two spaces using trash bags to weave this kind of membrane. And in the first space, you found dozens of empty alcohol containers painted in flat black paint. And at the center, a family couch that I like, an abandoned family couch. And I came in wearing a mask on my face, over my face and handed out Tecate beer cans to the audience. And then I proceeded to remove all of the upholstery from this kind of domestic object, this family couch, until I left just the wooden skeleton standing. I had also rolled into the space a few frozen balls of saliva that I collected for a few days prior to the performance. It was important to have it along with the couch and the texture of the fabric and the smell of empty beer cans. All of these materials I could kind of speak to a memory or a traumatic experience that I was referencing. The saliva also functioned as a way of keeping time, like watching it melt over the course of this

action.

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The third part of this performance is an improvised movement that I did with Nick Duran. And the instruction to perform was given just seconds before we did it. The only other instruction that I had given to Nick was to come dressed in a business suit and tie. And then I whispered into their ear to approach my body and familiarize themselves with my body by first looking, looking at me and then touching and then finally tasting. And so we did that. We both did that with one another and then engaged in this tearing of each other's bodies down to the ground and then lifting each other back up. And so did this repeatedly, differently every time. To a point of exhaustion.

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And so thinking a lot about this, again, about bodies and how we experience violence and how we cope with the trauma and these ways of support and caring for one another. And so this, again, was this, is like an instance that these personal interactions I was starting to see as these ways of holding space with one another to kind of have, like these nonverbal communications that were incredibly supportive and healing to a certain degree.

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And so the first kind of major, big production project is something I did by the Los Angeles River, at this place called the Bow Tie. And it's something that I asked my father to lead. This site was the site of a sculpture called "The Unfinished," and the artist is Michael Parker. And Clock Shop, that is an organization that had been programming a lot of site-specific projects, anything from a screening to a performance to sculptures in relationship to this obelisk that was carved into the banks of the river. I was invited to come and to ponder the site and see if I could maybe propose something for it. And I remember walking on the trenches of this obelisk and seeing all of this sediment that was buried underneath the asphalt and seeing things that felt out of place like seashells and beach sand. And so it made me, it just made me think automatically of what the

river must have looked like prior to what it is now. Like this cemented channel of mostly drain water that leads to the ocean here in Long Beach. And so I grew up knowing that my father was a brick maker in Mexico, Durango, Mexico, before I ever came up to the States. And we had made adobes before, actually, in his backyard, but not for, not thinking about art making, I just kind of wanted to learn how to make bricks from him.

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And so I asked him if he would lead a team of production that would make enough adobe bricks that would pave the surface of this obelisk. And that team would consist of my family. And I was interested in being more active in this invitation and thinking about what it means to work with a group of people to make this kind of monumental artwork. Very interested in the roles that we step in and out of or that perform as family members, as siblings, as parents. And the ways that gender constructs the ways in which we relate to one another and interact with one another. I was also interested in my family collectively inheriting this immigrant labor, that would die with my father if he had not shared this with us. And also thinking of ways as a family, we connect with land in a city where we literally like, don't ever see, like, dirt or don't really visit rivers. So we set up the station just maybe 50 feet away from the obelisk. I used the original recipe that my father taught me and procured all of the materials without paying for them. Adobe brickmaking is a common practice in my parent's hometown. It's how people still build their homes. All of the materials are readily accessible to them. Dirt that has a percentage of clay content in it already, horse dung, hay and water. And so we use recycled water from the L.A. River to mix all of the adobe. And we amassed something like fourteen hundred bricks and so we transported all of the bricks over to the obelisk.

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And in the middle of this process I started to think about this idea of the more material that you amass, the possibilities of what you can make with it also grew. And so I had the thought that what we were building was a platform, this adobe platform. And so, I had this idea of performing on top of it. There's so much going on in the city. I remember a lot of stuff that I was missing out on and I remember there is a performance

at Highways Performance Space and it was a movement piece by Rebeca Hernandez, dancer, choreographer, who was working with Carolina Caycedo in a show that was about the dimming of rivers, that were making these bodies of water inaccessible to the indigenous people that had been accessing them for centuries. And so I invited Rebeca to the site to maybe consider that same movement alongside an actual body of water that also has its own fraught history, in terms of how it arrived in Los Angeles. And once the surface was paved, we did a performance on top of it. And so there was this mirror that you see in the foreground, I used to bounce sunlight that was coming from the sun setting, back to this Mylar mirror that is hanging in this non-functional electric tower that you see in the background. And so gesturing towards this symbol of power, this kind of ancient monument and creating like a parallel of timekeeping by refracting the sunlight. And so I held this kind of triangulated reflection during Rebeca's performance. And then she did the same during my performance.

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And so now this idea of a platform. And this idea of brown matter or working with brown matter kind of starts to take shape in this next project where, along with my compadre and my father, we, and my friend Mario Capena, we built on site at the same location at the Bow Tie these two intersecting adobe walls that meet at this peak. So that when you look at it from a distance, it has like this kind of simplified silhouette of a house. I was wanting to kind of carry over its history or my personal history, my family's personal history of this material, this building material into this new structure. And the structure had the function of being a rotating installation that was up for a year. I was thinking of growing up in Los Angeles and visiting the L.A. River. That was the site of cultural production by many, like taggers, graffiti artists. The entire banks of the L.A. River was just like covered in really beautiful graffiti for miles and miles up until 2007 when the Army Corps of Engineers came in and buffed everything out and it remains buffed out. But so I wanted to kind of invite that activity alongside the banks of the river on this structure that was a curated site, but also was an open, sentient space for anyone to use as they wished.

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We would invite two artists to come in and negotiate how to use the space, whether they wanted to collaborate together, or divide it up. This is the work of Iris Hu and Sarita Dougherty. And so we invited folks that used the site, that do graffiti and that tag here, people that have like a traditional, more traditional studio painting practice, sculptors. We had like a mural collective. Very interested in bringing people from the surrounding community into the space as a way to kind of build a relationship to it. This is like a big, open industrial park and conversations about its future, of it being developed, were these murmurs that I was hearing, and wanting to find a way to kind of build a relationship to the space from the surrounding community felt important. So over the course of the year, we invited over 500 folks into the space. So we would bring two artists in one month. They would work on their mural for a month, and then we would have an unveiling of the work. Their work would be on display for another month. And then the following month, a new duo of artists would come in and work directly over the work. So we wouldn't clear it, we wouldn't buff anything out. It would just be this kind of amassing, a collection of images. And in a sense, also a conversation between each artist.

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And so there's a link to this video, I'm not going to play because I'm afraid that it'll freeze, but Casey could maybe share the link in the chat and if you could just maybe put the volume down while you watch it. This performance is titled "Bust. A Meditation on Freedom," and though it's me ensconced in this concrete column up to my chest, it's something that was manifested with the help of friends and family members. And so I am very much thinking about this question of the invitation, when it begins to extend beyond the people that I'm like working with into the folks that I'm inviting to be with me during the performance. So this performance was unsanctioned, happened catty-cornered to the men's central jail here in Los Angeles, which is the largest in the country, in response to a lot of videos that were going viral of young black men being killed by police. And also informed by my own relationship to being surveilled and harassed by the Los Angeles PD. With the help of my family and friends, I got myself into

this concrete pillar and then proceeded to chisel my way out.

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I was thinking a lot about my fear of being pulled over, and again, harassed or handcuffed for no reason, and being blindsided by that when it happens. And so situating a space where I could see the police encounter me if they did approach me, and being surrounded by a group of people that wouldn't just be these passive observers, but potential allies, and definitely a support group. There's also aspects of this location, the architecture of confinement that I wanted to make visible to the people that came here. There are speakers that you probably can hear when you play it loud, where it's like the roll call of names. The speakers are used to inform visitors in case they step out of the waiting room, that the people that are incarcerated there to visit are ready to be seen. And so what you have is like this kind of like a public recital of all of these names, a lot of them Spanish names that are projected out into the public, kind of a portrait of the bodies that are held at that jail.

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And so, furthering this idea of a brown space is this project that I did at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions and continue to work at the Bow Tie. And together with two young brothers, Danny and Jimmy Rivas, and my friend Mario Capena, we built six thousand adobe bricks and used them to build this brown rotunda in a gallery space that took up the entire span of the gallery. And whereas in [foreign language 00:31:35] we were interested in inviting artists to create images on the surface of the walls here. I was thinking about bodies performing in the space, and so I was also thinking a lot about labor, visibilizing in the labor. So for the course of my residency there, we worked, we just made the bricks, transported them to the exhibition space and built up these walls. The space was always shifting, always someone working in the space. The space only existed like this for maybe a weekend before we started to break it down again. And in the midst of it being built up, held a program of a lot of events. "Michelada Think Tank" created a conversation regarding institutional racism. There was a danza Azteca practice that I invited my troupe to do in the space. And then there was an evening of

performances that I also co-organized with Shoghig Halajian, who was one of the curators at the time. And so interested in inviting Brown, queer performance artists or performers to consider the space and the work that they would do in relationship to this architecture.

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This is yet another iteration of building these brown architectures. This is at the Whitney Museum, for the Whitney Biennial in 2017. And feeling again, just considering these different aspects of invitation, of inviting a community into these spaces. And thinking about not only the idea of discourse and what it has looked like and felt like in terms of group shows, and the conversations that are held in spaces and the sort of discursive relationship between objects, but wanting to be very active in the role of practicing the making of this discursive site. And so was able to allow for, or to budget in resources to have folks come to New York and to be there to install their work. It just felt important for each person to be there, and to restore their work, and my experience of us speaking and us sharing space here together felt very important. Like hearing ourselves speaking Spanish and having that be something that was part of this work felt very important.

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The show at Ballroom Marfa, "Tierra, Sangre, Oro" becomes... You'll notice how the adobe work is like building on itself. I'm learning a lot in these different ways in which the work is moving through institutional space. At the Whitney I was starting to feel uneasy about replacing the white cube with the Brown cube and instead wanted to use the adobe differently here. I'm able to extend the amount of time that I share with the community of artists that I invite into this exhibition. And we together consider how the other adobe could function in relationship to the work that they're imagining. And so it's more conversational. I'm not just proposing a space that will hold their objects, but our practices are literally leaning up against one another. We're in each other's materials, literally. Literally in each other's work spaces. The adobe could function as some kind of armature or podium for a sculpture. Or literally a wall that's built for a photograph. I have a few more projects that I want to go through.

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So, I also started to think about how adobe is becoming a place where I gather people around to have these conversations about culture, about the exclusive nature of the mainstream art world. And I was invited to do a performance for this really big initiative in Los Angeles called PST LA/LA and it's like a city-wide, or kind of like a Southern California-wide exhibition that's showcasing the work of Latin American and Latinx artists in the US. And so I used my body in this project as literally as a canvas, as a space to gather a group of artists around and work together to kind of create an artwork that speaks to... I would call it like a canon that was making me feel really uneasy, seeing like these tropes or a set of aesthetics, or these histories begin to formalize under a canon through some of these exhibitions. So, looking at something like a lowrider car and wanting to unsettle this process and think of the ways in which we assimilate and inherent art into the way that we experience culture, maybe outside of these institutions and frameworks. And so I invited Mario Ayala, who's a painter, and Daniel Melendez, Fabian Guerrero and Paul Marcus Rodriguez, Sebastian Hernandez, to together, kind of like transform my body into a low rider car that gets photographed and documented at places that are at the intersection of popular gay parts and sites where cars cruising also happened in Los Angeles. This was also followed by a performance at the Mayan Theater where Sebastian and I greeted people that were coming into the space and allowed them to photograph us just the way that you would photograph a car at a lowrider car show.

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And so this project "De La Calle", I start to lean into these other ways of collaborating with folks. This one through a more performative prompt. I was invited by the ICA to envision an exhibition in their project room. And so what I do is I use the budget and resources towards supporting this guerrilla performance that happens at a thoroughfare market in the fashion district called the Santee Alley. And I'm inviting a cast of fashion designers, sculptors, visual artists, queer nightlife performers. This was happening amidst a very polarized kind of like context where space was incredibly politicized and

contested with the ongoing gentrification and the efforts by community members and organizers to combat it. And so the people that I invited had these very strong ties to this market, had shopped there, vended there, and went there to put together looks that they used to perform. And so this performance was unannounced, wasn't publicized on a website, and that was intentional and explicit in my conversation with the ICA. It is important for the shoppers that come here every weekend to be the intended audience for the work. And so it was important to not invite a traditional art audience into the space. So everyone will perform their outfit, basically, that they designed. The gallery room at the ICA was used as a workroom. I set up a sewing machine, work tables and materials requested by all of the artists for them to be able to make all of the different looks that they performed in at the Santee Alley.

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So I'll go through these and then end with one more piece. But "Nepantla" is the show that Paulina mentioned in the introduction. This is a project that I organized, co-organized with Timo Fahler. And we both got invited to envision this project at Gamma Gallery in Guadalajara. And, having this be like my first time working in Mexico, I felt it necessary to kind of bridge this conversation about what it meant for us as Mexican-Americans, first-generation, coming to Mexico to exhibit our work. Having ties to different parts of Mexico and having our own fraught relationship to the US as Brown first generation artists. And so what we did is created the space integrating his materials and mine, but also incorporating land and using the contours of these kind of borders between Mexico and the US, but also other borders beyond that that are important, kind of like political borders that we wanted to present in the space. And so, what you have is these panels that create this kind of third space, this liminal space that we call "nepantla", that is neither one thing or another. And we invited a group of artists to showcase or work alongside ours. We also invited an artist from Guadalajara to perform with us for the closing.

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This is the last project that I wanted to share with you all. It's a project that I organized

with Alfonso Gonzalez Jr. and it's called "Los Angeles Fonts". And the idea came from me visiting him, having a studio visit, and then coming into his backyard and seeing what an amazing resource his backyard is. And we had been having conversations about our works and the aesthetics that we're using, the language and the histories that we're pointing to when we're painting or when we're sculpting and how those change when they leave these spaces that they're oftentimes made. In these backyards that are a very kind of like part of the Los Angeles suburban landscape. And so thinking of artists like Lauren Halsey, for instance, whose MoCA installation a couple of years ago was made in her grandmother's backyard, and wanting to kind of like have these conversations about how the work is received, how it's contextualized, the conversations, how they evolve. And so what we did is we had a couple of carne asadas, barbecues, in Alfonso's backyard and invited this group of artists to just kind of like hang out with and sit and have conversations, these conversations that we had about the politics of a backyard space. A lot of us grew up going to parties in these backyards. And so what it means for us to be in these places that are so generative for our understanding of public space and how we enter more traditional art spaces.

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And so those conversations were recorded and as a kind of document, and then we collectively decided to bring our artworks into this backyard. So, again, the intention around inviting an audience to experience a work was by word of mouth. We all agreed to not publicize or share on social media and to just kind of by word of mouth. This is in East L.A, so again, the conversation around gentrification is still ongoing and the fight against gentrification is still ongoing. So wanting to make art in our spaces and still be respectful towards the ongoing efforts to slow down gentrification. Thank you.

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Questions and comments not transcribed.