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*"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"*  
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**Land Akin at Smack Mellon**

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*Kiyan Williams, still from Meditations on the Making of America, 2019, HD video with sound, 26:31 min.*

*Courtesy of the artist.*

*Land Akin:* Tatiana Arocha, Kevin Quiles Bonilla, Esteban Cabeza de Baca, Rachelle Dang, Athena LaTocha, Jodie Lyn-Kee-Chow, Allison Maria Rodriguez, Christine Howard Sandoval, and Kiyan Williams

Smack Mellon (<https://www.smackmellon.org/>)

January 9 through March 7, 2021

**By SOPHIA MA**, February 2021

Land is synonymous with earth, the third rock from the sun on which we all live and call home. Yet, our historical and contemporary relationship with our home is one of abuse. The nine artists of *Land Akin* critique and augment this traumatic dynamic. Curator Gabriel de Guzman at Smack Mellon brings together Tatiana Arocha, Kevin Quiles Bonilla, Esteban Cabeza de Baca, Rachelle Dang, Athena LaTocha, Jodie Lyn-Kee-Chow, Allison Maria Rodriguez, Christine Howard Sandoval, and Kiyan Williams to discuss humankind's relationship and history with our planet.

The most direct use and link to land and earth are represented by the works of LaTocha, Sandoval, and Williams. Each takes a different approach to incorporating mud and soil as a material in their artistic practice. In LaTocha's *Bulbancha (Green Silence)* (2019), the artist dragged earth and Spanish moss onto paper from the Mississippi River near New Orleans. She created a haunting dark green abstract landscape that points out the invasiveness of modern industries on nature, and at the same time emphasizes not only the disappearance of its natural beauty, but also of the indigenous cultures. Williams similarly mine earth from places of significant personal and cultural history. The soil being flung, thrown, whipped, and smeared onto three white panels of *Meditations on the Making of America* (2019) came from the plantation and home of Williams's great-great-grandmother on the island of St. Croix. The trough where the mud was gathered is in the shape of a slave ship haul, which contains a mold of the artist's face. By embedding themselves into this earth, Williams sought to highlight the abuses upon African slaves in the United States and on the Caribbean. Sandoval handmade adobe mud for her floor drawing, *Anchor Formations—Acequia Madre* (2020). The work is paired with *CHANNEL*, a video project she developed during her residency in Santa Fe in 2016. By illustrating the topographic density with thin strips of adobe, *Anchor Formations* seems to suggest a physical manifestation of the acequia water channels that Sandoval traced with her hands and feet in the video work. Together, these works address the issues of water management, water rights, land uses, and cultural erasure.



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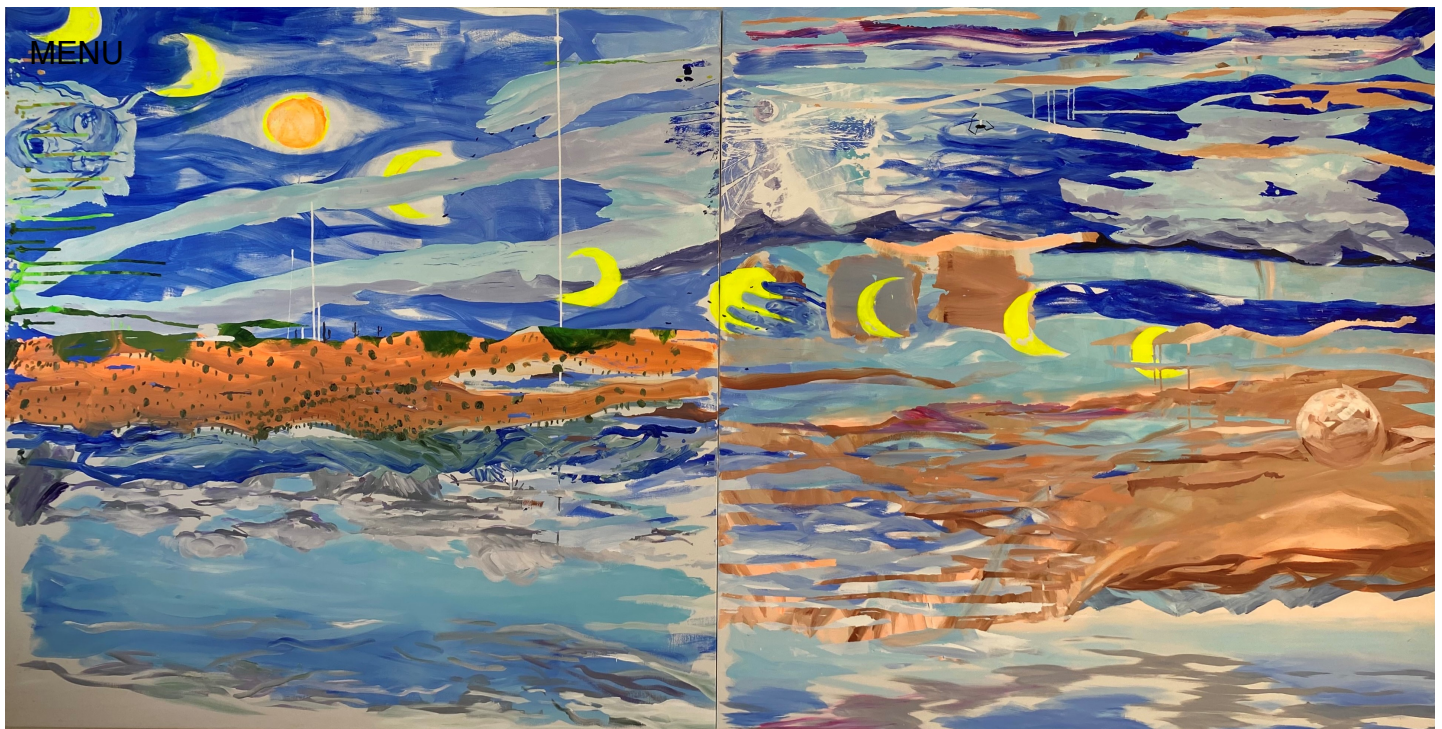






Left: Tatiana Arocha, *Mi selva, tu selva, nuestra selva*, 2019, installation view. Archival latex print on cotton canvas, hand-painted with gold acrylic, unique print, 30' x 5'. Right: Tatiana Arocha, *Impending Beauty*, 2019, installation view. Vintage settee and armchairs, upholstered with digital prints on cotton, hand-painted with acrylic, and hand-decorated porcelain with decals and gold paint, unique pieces, settee: 39" x 71" x 27", two armchairs: 38" x 24" x 26" each. Image courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

Arocha, Bonilla, and Rodriguez demonstrate the material damage that humans have on earth. Arocha's massive and strikingly beautiful *Mi Selva, Tu Selva, Nuestra Selva* (2019, translates to "my jungle, your jungle, our jungle") records the deforestation of her native Colombia through her black and white palette. As harmful industries push into the rainforest, not only are animals such as sloths, snakes, and eagles, displaced, but also indigenous cultures like the Ticuna that share the space. For Rodriguez, this iteration of *In the Presence of Absence* (2017-ongoing) continues to point out the fragility of our existence through the recordings of extinct animals—a thylacine walking about and the mating call of a kaua'i 'ō'ō bird, as well as through hurricanes that sweep through Cuba and many other islands on the Caribbean due to climate change. As a Cuban American, Rodriguez also threads the loss of cultural and familial narratives into her work. Her videos are a way to unite with family members who have passed. Bonilla also evokes nature's destructive force—Hurricane Maria, which hit his island, Puerto Rico, in 2017. His two photographs from the *Carryover* series (2018-ongoing), taken from San Juan (2018) and Vega Alta (2019) depicts the artist wrapped in the blue tarp that the United States government issued to the island as a part of the post-storm recovery measure. This ill-conceived "protection" continues to purvey many homes on the island years later. These artists' commentaries not only speak of the harm to our shared ecology, but also the colonial traumas upon the psyche of the oppressed population.



*Esteban Cabeza de Baca, Ohkay Owingeh, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 120". Courtesy of Garth Greenan Gallery.*

Cabeza de Baca, Dang, and Lyn-Kee-Chow commune with land by exploring their own and their ancestral diaspora, who embrace the idea of home as being multifaceted. Cabeza de Baca pays homage to his family's travels between the US-Mexico border in *Ohkay Owingeh* (2020) by painting the changing moon and guiding spirits atop the plein air landscape. By submerging the colonial one-point perspective, Cabeza de Baca aims to unearth deeper spiritual connections to the earth by taking on its perspective. Lyn-Kee-Chow's performance (took place on February 20, 2021), *JunkanooHakkaMama: Send Me As You Spirit Healer* (2018), merges her Chinese and Jamaican heritage by creating *JunkanooHakkaMama*, a ritual treatment that combines local and tropical foods and flora with Jamaican Jonkanoo's festival costuming and music. Recognizing her own embodiment of both cultures, Lyn-Kee-Chow sought to reveal and heal participants' disconnection from their senses and identity. Dang explores her own decampment from Hawai'i to New York in her *Night Blooming Cereus, After Du Bois* (2021) with that of eminent scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois's travels from New York to Hawai'i. Embedding Du Bois's 1937 writing into the self-drying clay, Dang creates two life-sized stele-like plaques to commemorate his experience of Hawai'i, which echoes

her own connection to the two islands that she calls home. The artists' temporal approaches reach into the past that's no longer material, but through their work, they re-cement the experience tactilely into the present.

One could not help but feel a sadness and a deep urge to take action, from educating others on systems of oppression, colonial wrongs, ecological impacts, and decolonization of mental and physical spaces. It is moving exhibitions like *Land Akin* that help shape our contemporary thinking and inspire our next steps. Come learn from this show at Smack Mellon through its extended closing date of March 7, 2021. **WM**



### SOPHIA MA

Sophia Ma is an emerging curator. Most recently, she participated in SPRING/BREAK Art Show New York 2020 and interned for the Arshile Gorky Foundation to work on the artist's catalogue raisonné. For her graduate thesis at Hunter College, CUNY, she wrote about the life and work of abstract painter Bernice Lee Bing. Ma had also worked in development, programming, operations, and administration for the Museum of Chinese in America. Currently, Ma is conducting research on a manuscript on landscape architecture that's due for publication in Fall 2021 with Rizzoli. (Photo by Ben Ohene)

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