

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in July

TRIBECA

rafa esparza

Through Aug. 19. Artists Space, 11 Cortlandt Alley, Manhattan; 212-226-3970, artistspace.org.



Installation view of "Camino." The artist rafa esparza uses adobe bricks in his work, and wants visitors to think about the ground they walk on. Credit...via Artists Space, New York; Photo by Filip Wolak.

The entrance to rafa esparza's exhibition "Camino" is flanked by two paintings. In order to face either one head on, you must stand on a small, uneven platform of homemade adobe bricks. This is a message from the artist: He's not interested in a seamless viewing experience. He wants you to think about the ground you're walking upon.

The Los Angeles-based artist may be best known for his extreme performances. For example, at Art Basel Miami Beach last December, he turned a coin-operated pony ride into a lowrider bike outfitted for his body, so that participants rode him. By comparison, his first solo show in New York is tame. It recalls his contribution to the 2017 Whitney Biennial, where he created a room of adobe bricks. That installation was more immersive; this one is conceptually tighter.

Here, a winding path of bricks connects life-size portraits of members of esparza's largely queer community. The paintings are also on adobe, referencing his Mexican heritage and accentuating his subjects' brown skin. On the walls hang renderings of L.A.'s 110 Freeway, featuring concrete tunnels and embankments. This sets up a tension over how we build society — in concert with people and the earth or with little regard for them?

A striking painting at the back depicts P-22, the mountain lion that famously crossed two L.A. freeways. Its stride and stare mimic those of the human figures, all coalescing to issue a kind of challenge: What would it take to embrace a more sustainable way of life?