

PRESS RELEASE

ESTEBAN JEFFERSON

May 25, 2020

January 14 – February 25, 2023

303 Gallery, New York



303 Gallery is proud to present *May 25, 2020*, Esteban Jefferson's first solo exhibition with the gallery. The exhibition's title refers to the date of the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, and the beginning of a series of ongoing protests denouncing police brutality and racial injustice which immediately ensued in cities around the world. A life-long New Yorker, Jefferson's latest works consider the related symbolism of flags and toppling of equestrian monuments in New York, through the lens of racial and colonial legacies. Through repeated visits to sites of protest, from small interventions like flags taped to a stop sign to large-scale vandalism of well-known colonialist monuments, Jefferson tracks the lifespan of the 2020 protests. On view will be three pairs of paintings made in the artist's distinctive investigative style, contrasting meticulously rendered subjects with muted surroundings, as well as a video work and a series of 4x6" photographs.

The exhibition includes works from the artist's ongoing series examining the controversial 1939 bronze of Teddy Roosevelt in the lead-up to its removal from the American Museum of Natural History in January 2022. Portraying Roosevelt on horseback flanked on either side by solitary, unnamed Black and Indigenous figures, the activists long denounced the sculpture for the racist implications of its hierarchical composition. In one of the canvases on view, scaffolding dominates the frame like an absurdist privacy screen, underscoring an air of vulnerability in anticipation of the monument's dismantling. A second painting shows the deconstruction underway. The torso of Roosevelt already excised, workers stand upon the remaining Black and Indigenous figures as they prepare for the entire sculpture to be craned away for eventual relocation in North Dakota. Between the two canvases, a recorded Zoom meeting of the Landmarks Preservation Committee of New York plays on a loop on a CRT monitor. The voices of the various commissioners echo through the gallery, debating the merits and flaws of the Museum's attempt at correcting its history.

A couplet of paintings jointly chronicles the ebb and flow of graffiti on the statue of George Washington at Valley Forge at Brooklyn's Continental Army Plaza, located at the foot of the Williamsburg Bridge. In *November 11, 2020 (2022)*, Jefferson spotlights the proliferate graffiti and neon orange traffic cones adorning the granite base. A

second work revisits this location, revealing an ineffective attempt by the city to undo these irreverent modifications. Together the vignettes record both a timeline and a layered dialogue between systems of authority and a public defying control.

Flags displayed in and around Manhattan public housing developments form the basis for a third pairing of canvases, presumably placed by residents as assertions of self-expression and identity. Delineated in crisp detail, the fleshed-out realism of the flags' depiction is further heightened by their gridded architectural surrounds. Penciled traces of trees, asphalt and public housing architecture remain as just that, outlines articulated up to the point of legibility but not a beat further, eliciting a sense of place without allowing the setting to overtake the scene. Attention for both artist and viewer is fixed squarely on the banners themselves: the Pan-African flag, Puerto Rican flag, and African American flags, emblems of community, pride, and resistance.

The Latin roots of the word *protest* translate as *to bear witness*, an apt distillation of Esteban Jefferson's approach to artmaking. Memorializing acts of self-determination and defiance of selective historical narratives alike, Jefferson speaks to both the challenge of and the catharsis in confronting ideological power.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Esteban Jefferson was born in New York City in 1989. He received his BA and MFA from Columbia University. In 2019, he presented a solo exhibition titled 'Petit Palais,' at White Columns, New York. Recent group exhibitions include 'Art on the Grid', Public Art Fund, New York (2020); 'ESTAMOS BIEN: La Trienal', El Museo del Barrio, New York (2021) and 'Open Call', The Shed, New York (2021). Jefferson lives and works in New York City.

CONTACT

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Images: 1) Esteban Jefferson, *November 11, 2020* (2022). Oil and graphite on linen.
Photo: Dan Bradica.