



## *They Cover the Waterfront*

**John Haber**  
in New York City

### *On the Waterfront and a Changing Brooklyn*

#### **Edgar Calel and Jordan Loeppky-Kolesnik**

The Brooklyn waterfront will never look the same again. At the very least, it may move inland, leaving what many call their beaches and homes behind.

So it may if climate change is real, and it is, but the waterfront has long been changing. Who knew what it took to create a great port city, and who can keep up with its changes, from the arrival of the Dutch to today? "*On the Waterfront*" lacks the star power of Marlon Brando in the film of that name, but it is more than just a warning or a historical recreation. Its fourteen artists move easily between past and present, to make Brooklyn's deep history their own. They look for evidence to old maps, human relics, DNA sequencing, and observation, because a lot can happen in a lifetime, much less over so many years.

Conceptual art can still get its hands dirty. **Edgar Calel** and **Jordan Loeppky-Kolesnik** both do—one in search of his ancestors, the other of "living sculpture." Together, they turn SculptureCenter into a repository for the earth. It may not be as spiritual an experience as they might hope, in a gentrifying Long Island City. It might in fact be a bit dry, in more ways than one. It does, though, lay the foundations for site-specific art and the long view of New York's land and sea.



#### ***Crossing Buttermilk Channel***

Curated by **Maddy Rosenberg** of Central Booking, "*On the Waterfront*" retains the gallery's focus on the **artist's book** and the confluence of **art and science**. Organized in conjunction with the New-York Historical Society, it also brings a dedication to New York history. The artists draw on the Society's collection for ideas and images, including postcards, Tiffany lamps, and *The Course of Empire*, the epic paintings by **Thomas Cole**. If Cole has you thinking big and **book art** has you thinking small, the show has room for both in the warehouse space of the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition, at the very foot of Red Hook. Step outside, and Staten Island looms ever so close. This is what the show's subtitle calls "A View from the Coast (Line)."

New York often means Manhattan, and the Society's winter shows followed **black and white artists** to Harlem. Climate change in art most often means a state of

emergency, as with **Josh Kline** at the Whitney (who pictures young, white office workers in the Financial District after the coming flood). **Duke Riley** restricts his view of the coast to plastic waste at the Brooklyn Museum, which really should get involved in a community-based show like this one. "On the Waterfront" takes instead the long view—for Helena Kauppila, the genetic code of (just maybe) the last universal common ancestor, in painterly text art with a nod to **Jasper Johns** alphabets. Others ask what change means for geography, housing, and life today. Patricia Olynyk transforms her "hybrid micro-organism" into augmented reality and a board game.

Such a history can be elusive. Olynyk has enough roots in painting to make her game an abstract tondo. Diane Lavoie turns her sources into mottled blue and brown textiles, spilling out onto the floor. Ellen K. Levy treats *The Course of Empire as Palimpsest*, a colorful abstraction of overlapping canvas and sculpture. But then Cole meant his series not in praise of colonialism, but as an allegory of decadent civilization in Europe. It was up to the **Hudson River School** and America to make it new.

Others are more literal, up to a point. Judith Eloise Hooper adopts three Brooklyn points of view for landscape on ceramics, including Red Hook. Elena Berriolo renders plant specimens in spare but brushy ink and thread. **Paul Tecklenberg** makes cement milk bottles, each with a print of the harbor. After all, the port of New York came to life when settlers dredged Buttermilk Channel, between Brooklyn and Governors Island. Still, you are more likely to think of bottled water and Riley's disposable plastics.

Some do best of all by uncanny juxtapositions, of media and of histories. Sabra Booth frames her views of the Gowanus Canal within old ship portals, Graciela Cassel sets her *Governors Island Crossing* within bright blue and slightly goofy furniture, and oyster beds for Margaret Craig become biomorphic sculpture and hanging lanterns. Clipper ships pass beneath marine organisms like stars for C Bangs, while an *Oyster Saloon* for Desirée Alvarez fills the sky, where clocks mark the passing of time. Her silky scrims and fluid colors wave amid currents of indoor air. She also solicits quotes from high-school students, although thankfully the artist remains in charge. They remind one that past and present will unfold in the future.

Rosenberg collaborates with Susan Rostow on a miniature theater and study room for Brooklyn's history. Rostow's sculpture takes its place in stage sets akin to dollhouses, but with early Brooklyn architecture, while Rosenberg's vintage maps become a jigsaw puzzle awaiting completion. Heading home, I crossed by Brooklyn ferry, packed with parents and small children heading back from the beach. It took me through Buttermilk Channel, past gentrification in Brooklyn and Long Island City along the way. Climate, one can safely assume, was on no one's mind, nor art. There will be puzzles for those children when they grow up all the same.

### **Dirty hands**

Edgar Calel responds to two quite different sites. He fills the large main room with rolling hills of pebbles, boulders, and dry earth. One can gauge its dimensions by circulating around it—and, in the process, gauge the dimensions of the space. It may be at its best when the gallery opens, as a worker rakes the floor to all sides in the act of tidying up, as if tilling the soil every day. He has just finished setting out small flames here and there, like opening a bar for the evening, but for your eyes and spirit only, not for drinks. Calel speaks of sculpting in "rock, soil, and fire."

He recreates a site as well, in the foothills of Guatemala, his native country. He prefers to remember them not by an older name, Chi Xot, in memory of his

ancestors. For him, it is a living memory, and others still make the pilgrimage in search of the B'alab'aj, or Jaguar Stone, which lends its title to the work. They come to pay tribute to the dead, to give thanks, and to ask for their help. You need not believe a word of it to give thanks, too. It leaves the more literal, **image-heavy tributes** to a **Latin American heritage** at MoMA PS1, a few blocks away, in the dust.

The mounds grow taller in a small room to the side. These are hedges, and they form an **X**. Jordan Loeppky-Kolesnik has emerged through the "In Practice" series of emerging artists, solicited through open calls. While normally that series gets the basement tunnels for a group show, one can imagine this art dredging them, for the



first time since **Maya Lin** converted the former trolley repair shop in 2001. Set in near darkness, as *Parasympathetic Fever Dream*, it could conclude Calel's dream as well. It is at once emblematic and alive.

Maybe you are still wary of *they/their* as singular pronouns, but Loeppky-Kolesnik has every reason to claim them. This artist

may deny or identify with both genders, but also living earth. Yet the work has its own strict, unnatural rhythms. The darkness turns day into night, and light returns only when the rest of New York takes its daily rest. The work also brings a clinical detachment to its rhythms. Monitors display what I can only presume are air and soil temperature, as distant from the air and soil outside as Chi Xot.

This is not the first time that **conceptual art** dallied with the art object or that land art asserted its own rhythms. **Agnes Denes** has covered a pyramid with earth in Socrates Sculpture Park, two miles north, like a monument to death and life. Nor is this art's first roomful of dirt. **Walter de Maria** still has his *New York Earth Room* with the Dia Foundation in Soho, as a cross between earth art, installation, Minimalism, and a mess. It defies visitors with its bare white wall and thick black soil. It became something of a joke from the time it settled in, in 1977, but its aroma lingers in the senses and the mind.

It takes serious maintenance, too. The rakers and monitors at SculptureCenter have it easy. Where De Maria is determined to stand outside time, Calel and Loeppky-Kolesnik immerse themselves in present memories, and that takes a back story that you may choose not to read. They are less sensual than de Maria as well. Can they still have their fever dreams? Art does not often take such care to dirty its hands.



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*"On the Waterfront" ran at the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition through April 23, 2023, thanks to Central Booking and the New-York Historical Society. Edgar Calel ran at SculptureCenter through August 7, Jordan Loeppky-Kolesnik through June 19.*