



HOW ESTEBAN JEFFERSON BROUGHT THE BROOKLYN BANKS INDOORS



The Brooklyn Banks have been replicated in video games that include Skate 3, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2, Tony Hawk's Underground, Thrasher: Skate and Destroy, and Session: Skate Sim.

The spot underneath the Manhattan side of Brooklyn Bridge is one of skateboarding's most famous spots, its history within skating going back to the 1970s, with each generation having their own special connection to it. From the Bones Brigade skating it in 1985's *Future Primitive*, to the tricks over the wall in the early 1990s, Jamie Thomas' opening line in Toy Machine's 1996 video *Welcome to Hell*, skating through the whole spot, everything Zered Bassett has done there from the 2000s to recently and finally Tyshawn's nollie flip crook for Instagram down the reopened nine-stair rail. While there have been moments where they have been skateable, the Brooklyn Banks have been closed to the public for the past fifteen years.

The Banks lay the backdrop and the location of the New York-based artist Esteban Jefferson's new solo show aptly titled *Brooklyn Banks*. A show that uses paintings, video footage both shot by Esteban himself on 16mm and found of skateboarders at the spot to showcase the use and the lack of use of the space. *Brooklyn Banks* chronicles the story of Esteban and his friends with the spot from a summer a few years ago that the spot was skateable thanks to a hole in the fence to the desolate wasteland, closed with an ecosystem of weeds growing between the bricks, that it has become.



Monster Children, January 2025

Tanya Leighton

Congratulations on the show, the work is incredible. How are you feeling now it's done?

I'm happy it's up! It starts to become a lot of super late nights and my sleep schedule gets all messed up while I'm working on a show. I'm readjusting to real life again.

How long were you working on the show for?

It was between six or eight months making the paintings, but I'd been thinking about the ideas for this show for years. Originally, I was supposed to have a show a year from now. Last spring the gallery called me telling me the person who was scheduled to have a show right now needed more time and asked if I wanted to push my show up. I really wanted to, but it made it a super tight deadline and the last year was tough.

Was your idea originally to do a show about the Brooklyn Banks before they asked to push the show forward?

I've had the idea to do a show about the Brooklyn Banks for a long time. Most of the paintings in the show are based on photos that I shot there seven or eight years ago. I thought I wouldn't do it because they are now in the process of reopening the banks and the reason I wanted to do the show is because it hinged on the idea of it being a public space that the city has shut down for no reason. So, if the banks are fully functioning, in my mind it feels like an unnecessary show. It was an idea that I was like, that's a shame, I guess I won't get to do it. Then when they told me I could have a slot a year earlier, I realised it could be perfect timing to have a show about the banks while they are in this phase where they are working on reopening them, but they aren't really open yet.



What is your relationship to the banks?

I'm from New York and when I started skating in 2004, they were in the process of reopening the banks after closing them initially in the early 2000s. They were doing all these big *Back to the Banks* contests and an early skate memory for me is going to the contest. I would have been fourteen or fifteen and had never been there before. It was wild for me to think that this place that was so cool is under one of the most famous landmarks in the world. From there my friends and I would skate the banks all the time until they closed them.

As skateboarders we have strong connections to spots, I can even use myself as an example here, I live in Australia and have never been to New York and still feel excitement when I see people skate the nine stair at the banks now it has been reopened. Why do you think skaters so strongly idolize geography?

We form a lot of memories at these places and there is something special too about using spaces that are decrepit otherwise. We get extra upset about these buildings and plazas that are really rundown closing, because we use them. Most people value newness more than skateboarders do. A lot of the time people with money see an old park, think it is desolate and build a big condo on it but there is actually a lot of life happening in these spaces that isn't politically empowered.

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This is your first body of work heavily influenced by skateboarding and whenever a skateboarder makes art related to skateboarding it has the possibility to be thrown into “skate artist” territory, was that something you were conscious of or thinking about with the show?

Yeah, that is what I really didn't want to happen. Something that I think is great about skateboarding is how many skateboarders do creative things that aren't just the act of skateboarding itself. My main thing skateboarding for the last twenty years has been filming and making skate videos. There are so many great skate photographers and skate artists, but there is also a lot of bad skate art. I felt like I had a unique opportunity as I am a painter and have had other shows that don't have anything overtly to do with skateboarding. So, the idea that I could make a show about skateboarding but wouldn't be relegated to “skate art” but be taken seriously as an art show that happens to be about skateboarding, was something I am grateful for.



Totally and it doesn't come across as “skate art”, especially knowing the majority of your art isn't about skateboarding.

I was thinking about other paintings I have made actually and the influence of skateboarding there sometimes. I made these paintings of this skate spot, but it was of this monument that was graffitied but the way I was looking at it was influenced by skateboarding, I wouldn't pay attention to that statue if I didn't know it as a skate spot.

I noticed that painting, but I think it is one where if you know you know, it isn't overtly about the spot.

Yeah, totally. Maybe that's where I started feeling comfortable in general when I made that painting and started thinking about maybe exploring related elements to skateboarding.

Are you hoping that the paintings, video footage and the sculpture can give the non-skateboarder a window into what our world is like?

Yeah, and that is something that is a common thread through all my shows, using paintings but also trying to use other elements to give a sense of the space. The artist Robert Smithson had this idea about “Site/Non-Site” he would make sculptures that were metal boxes with rocks from Arizona in them and then show them in New York, he would call that the Non-Site. It was this idea that you were sort of being teleported to Arizona by seeing that. I am interested in doing the same thing in a sense by using sculptural and video elements to bring some of the environment of the place I'm referencing into the gallery. In the past I did a show about a museum in Paris called the Petit Palais and they had these marble floors in there and for the show I had them install linoleum marble floors to try and reference the real ones to give a sense of the feeling of the architecture. I have worked with friends to work with sound elements that also bring in what it feels to be in the space.

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Can you talk more about the sound element?

Yeah, I filmed a fifteen minute 16mm film of the banks through the fences, from the start of summer to when the leaves started to change. I wanted to show the dynamic of all this wildlife, trees and weeds that have been growing there for fifteen years since the space closed down. It hasn't been maintained and there is a really flourishing floral environment there. I wanted to show that life behind the fences and give the sense there is so much potential in this space that is unrealised by the city closing it, but also if they just opened it and let it be as it is, it is kind of beautiful. My friend Doug Hock made the score for the film with his friend Mike Bloom. He came up with the idea to record the sound from underneath the bridge, the droning sounds of cars driving above, to simulate what it is like under the bridge. We were talking about how skateboarders are pushed by the city to these areas under bridges, you can see that with the banks as well as the skateparks in Astoria and LES.

That's a really interesting way of putting it because it is true, under bridges are usually a no-go zone, unoccupied for the most part, and cities push us under there in those unused spaces.

Totally, Doug was talking about it in the way of bringing non-skaters into the experience of being under there. This constant sound is something we don't even think about because we are so used to it, but it might be a little jarring to other people or put you in a very particular place.



The sculpture really caught my eye, did you use real bricks from the banks for it?

No, those bricks were sourced, there are people who sell vintage bricks and we tried to get them as close to the original bricks. I worked with Francis Louvis on the sculpture, he does freelance fabrication work, and he designed all the technical elements. I had a loose idea of what I wanted and how I wanted it to look but I didn't know how to actually make it. I sent him a sketch I made that showed this brick bank with a wall on it. I was like I want to make this, and I want the armature of it to be visible, so it looks like the banks, but so it also looks like a sculpture. We went to the banks multiple times and had to deal with the problem that the fence was up so we couldn't take any actual measurements. We figured out ways to roughly measure things. Then he made this super detailed plan with a steel armature and with banks of vintage bricks, which were time accurate.

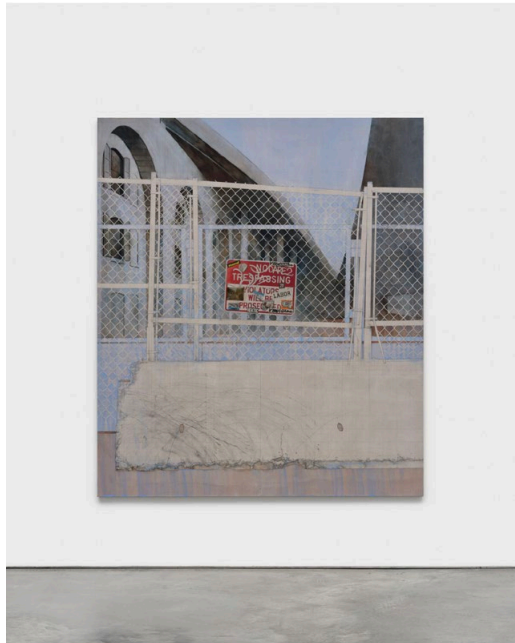
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A lot of your previous work explores matters of race, identity, and the legacies of colonialism. Your other works explore serious issues that impact a lot of people, this work explores the Banks, which still touches on identity, being a location people group together and means something to a lot of people, including yourself. But it is a shift from your past work, did you find similarities between this and your previous work?

When I was getting ready to make the show, I was thinking about that. I thought it would be good for me, personally, to do a show that was more about my friends and our experience that's not such a macro serious topic. It is also still important even if it is a smaller story, and I think there are similarities in what I tend to be interested in. Every show I do, usually centres around a place and how a subculture or minority of the population may interact with that space. Older work I've done, especially work I made about the Petit Palais museum, was about how there were sculptures in the lobby that were really fucked up, but most people weren't paying attention to them. There are themes that carry through all the shows I have had and there is also a more obvious way where this show is a departure from the broader themes that most of my shows have been about.



It is interesting the way you bring up that about the previous show with the things people may look past because that is sort of what is happening with this show where you're taking this space being the banks and highlighting it in its own context that is only really seen by skateboarders. It really does feel like a continuation of that theme when you put it like that.

Yeah, I think you phrased it perfectly. That is the element that goes through everything that I have professionally done but I was also intending for this show to be a departure in some ways, because I thought it would be nice to do something a little different, less heavy, and more personal. It gives people a fleshed-out version of what my background is. In a lot of my paintings, I am positioned more as a silent observer, and I felt like there was more of me in this show.

Your parents are both architects, do you think that has influenced the way you approach your art and especially the way you paint?

Yeah, definitely. With the grid too; architects draw on grid paper all the time and think about space in that way. I grew up at my parents' office for the most part while they were working, so I am so familiar with seeing architectural renderings and grids used to build visual space.

Yeah, I'm curious about the grids in the paintings, there is no attempt to hide them, did that come from the architectural influence?

It came from the way I work from photos that I shoot, the grid is a pretty standard way of transferring a small photographic image to a larger scale, you grid out the photo and you grid out the painting proportionally. I used to try and finish the paintings completely, but I would get bored and lose momentum. In grad school I stopped finishing every square inch of the paintings. I would just paint one part of it and decide that it's done; I went with that. There is a point to that: the reason I would be losing momentum and getting bored is because the shit was boring. I don't want to paint a whole background that is irrelevant to what the painting is about.

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I started thinking more about painting one section of it coming out of the grid as highlighting this photographic composition or implied bigger composition which is actually what's important about it. The grid functions a little metaphorically, implying this image is from a photograph and this one thing that is painted is actually what matters and all this other stuff is not that relevant. I try to focus on the paintings by building up layers and each layer of finish is more important. I spend a ton of time on the more architectural drawings now, that takes forever; relative to the drawings the painting part doesn't take that much time. The painting part is always the most fun and is always to me the thing that matters. The whole reason I want to make some paintings is because there is an element of a photo I've shot that I think is important or worth highlighting through painting.

Do you have anything you want to say about the work to wrap this up.

I hope people will enjoy the show and I am excited to skate the banks when they re-open sometime soon.

