ZANEBENNETT
CONTEMPORARY ART

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To Have and to Withhold

Colleen O'Brien

18 December 2026–30 January 2027

OPENING RECEPTION

18 December 2026, 5–7 p.m.



Colleen O'Brien working *en pleine terre*. Photo courtesy of the artist

(SANTA FE, NM) Artist Colleen O'Brien Presents Earth Paintings of the Rio Grande Watershed that Trace the River's Geology, Ecology, and Contested Future.

In February, the Department of Homeland Security announced the construction of border and barrier infrastructure along the section of the Rio Grande that runs through Big Bend National Park, one of the most ecologically diverse and environmentally significant parks not only in Texas but in all the US. For earth artist Colleen O'Brien, this development holds deep personal and philosophical implications. This ecosystem, and the larger eco-region it is a part of, has sustained human life for over 11,000 years. O'Brien fears that long-term ecological stability of the environment that shaped hers and so many others' lives may be disrupted for purported short-term political gain. A Texan imbued with her parents' love of Big Bend, **O'Brien presents a solo exhibition of site-specific earth paintings from around the Rio Grande watershed, which begins in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and ends in the Gulf of Mexico, traveling over 1,900 miles and through three US states and five states of Mexico.** O'Brien's most recent earth paintings reflect a sustained engagement across time and space with the geomorphology of the waterways that sustain life in the Rio Grande Valley. Moving natural pigment, water, and pastel over canvas secured to a geological substrate—often a boulder or riverbed—O'Brien composes paintings on site, *en pleine terre*, that record the physical surface of Earth and the conceptions of time embedded within these textures: past geological activity, current events, and the future. **The exhibition opens on the ground floor of the gallery on 18 December 2026 from 5–7 p.m.**

"**In our humanity we have an intrinsic right to water**," writes O'Brien. "**This exhibition follows the complex path of the Rio Grande through Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico through site-specific earth paintings created in the river's watershed.**" As the throughline of *To Have and to Withhold*, the watershed serves as the vehicle that imbues her canvases with site-specificity. Her process intermittently incorporates the watershed into her compositions to control opacity and to allow each canvas to absorb the minerality of local soils and the variable temperament of the water systems. The ruddish complexion of *Along Rio Chama* gives the composition its choppy energy, which captures the alluvial plains that lend the riparian zone along the Chama its disjointed appearance. "**My paintings are expressions of geomorphology and time**," writes O'Brien. In these paintings, one easily discerns the familiar crags, cracks, and pits of natural surfaces, but more elusive and rewarding is the energy of geological time—alternately turbulent and tranquil—that rises like flotsam to the surface of the work. "**My philosophy on abstract painting is that it's a series of movements within a certain time frame**," states O'Brien. "**My work is about hiking out there, driving around, wandering, finding the right rock, rubbing your hands on it, putting your hands in the dirt, listening to the water run by you. And then at the end, you're left with a record of it, the physical painting.**"

Gallery director Carina Evangelista notes, "**The earliest civilizations were formed around rivers. Human demands and geopolitical strains now condition how rivers flow through land. O'Brien's paintings form an archive of swatches of earth along the Rio Grande that serves as the lifeblood of the American Southwest. They are rectangular canvas records not just of each particular time and place, but also of what might have been drenched or parched**

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For press or image inquiries, please contact Spencer Linford at spencer@zanebennettgallery.com.

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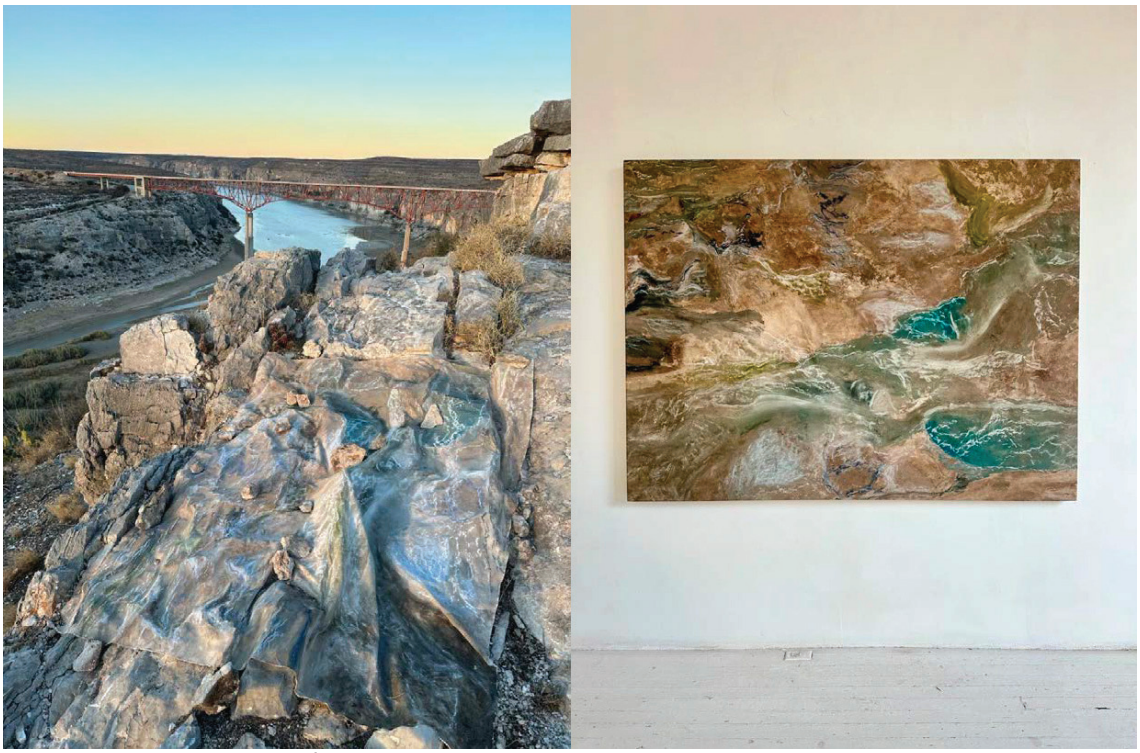
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in the dysregulation of natural cycles. Each painting is a *frottage* of rock and soil—a rubbed imprint of what might be fragile or what remains fertile in her ongoing portraiture of the literal surface of the earth."

"The arroyos, rivers, and ecological subjects of O'Brien's abstracted landscapes are often taken for granted, abstracted through the lenses of media and the lobbying of private industry. O'Brien's paintings present to our imagination a different abstraction of these critical life sources, wherein time and intervention become primary considerations in experiencing the work but also in understanding the future of the Rio Grande and the life it supports," Spencer Linford, gallery director of communications, marketing, and publications. **Across fifteen paintings, *To Have and to Withhold* presents a tidal flux of ideas surrounding the territoriality and the morality of preservation.**

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Colleen O'Brien, b. 1990, is an earth artist working in natural pigments and local clay. Since 2012, O'Brien has participated in numerous group and juried exhibitions and has had twelve solo exhibitions. She was a participant in the 2012 field season of Land Arts of the American West. In 2024, she was an artist in residence at Big Bend National Park. Her current research-driven work unfolds outside, on-site, and employs soil, site-specific substrates, and local abiotic elements to record and explore geomorphology and time. Her practice has led her to live and work within communities along the Rio Grande in both New Mexico and Texas. Her work is held in several private and corporate collections across the US, particularly in the Southwest. She holds a BFA from Texas Tech University.



COLLEEN O'BRIEN | *At the Mouth of the Pecos, Langtry, Texas*, 2026. Soil, water, and pastel on canvas, 60 x 80 in (152.4 x 203.2 cm)

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COLLEEN O'BRIEN | *Rio Chama, Abiquiu, New Mexico*, 2026. Soil, water, and pastel on canvas, 60 x 80 in (152.4 x 203.2 cm)



COLLEEN O'BRIEN | *Rio Pueblo de Taos, Ranchos de Taos New Mexico*, 2026. Soil, water, and pastel on canvas, 40 x 30 in (101.6 x 76.2 cm)

Photography courtesy of the artist

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