

Travis Boyer

SIGNAL

ARTFORUM



A fan who became a friend and an employee— and then an obsessed, disgruntled ex employee—shot and killed the singer Selena Quintanilla Pérez (known as Selena) in 1995, at a Days Inn in Corpus Christi, Texas, when the beloved “Queen of Tejano” was just twenty three, and the Texas born artist Travis Boyer was sixteen. He was a fan, too. For his exhibition at Signal Gallery in Brooklyn this summer, titled “*Ahora y Nunca*” (Now and Never), Boyer mined a long standing daydream to present an array of Selena memorabilia, including an only partially visible treasure trove of Selena related ephemera and merchandise neatly packed in six transparent storage bins (*The Boyer Family Archive of Selena Quintanilla Miscellany*, 1996–2017), alongside mysterious and richly textured original objects: vibrant saddle blankets, copper and silver hand mirrors, and luminous paintings on silk. There was a mournful undercurrent to the uncrowded installation of artworks and archival materials, but Boyer elided explicit reference to the tragic, traumatic fact of Selena’s murder—as well as the limits of conventional memorialization—to make way for a nuanced response to the wistful, generative question, “What if she had lived?”



Travis Boyer, *Astrodome Hustle*, 2017, cotton, wool, natural dyes, faux pearls, rhinestones, and sequins handwoven in Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, with master dyer and weaver Mariano Sosa Martínez at the Biidaüü Weaving Collective, 96 x 42 x 42".

At the time of her death, Selena was poised to become a pop crossover sensation. Having achieved unprecedented success as a woman in the male dominated world of Tejano music, while also bringing the Latin subgenre beyond its traditional Mexican and Mexican American markets, she’d begun recording her first English language album. She had also recently opened, to much fanfare, a pair of South Texas boutiques, which carried her line of clothing and accessories and offered corresponding services, aptly named Selena Etc. (It was the manager of her stores, Yolanda Saldivar, who killed her.) Boyer’s fragmentary, abstracted fantasy of the superstar’s survival, however, has little to do with any likely career trajectory for her as a musician or entrepreneur from this point. Instead, he draws out the quieter qualities and potentials underlying the stirring performances and flamboyant glamour of his subject—her collaborative ethos, defiant self fashioning, and love of craft and materials. Boyer’s delicate chains of association zigzag throughout the show to connect his life and art practice to Selena’s.

Carnation Bandana, 2004, is credited to the artist and Sean Slattery and identified as an image from an “amateur fashion shoot.” In it, a serious, shirtless boy models a nipple grazing “bandana,” a lush garment made from peach and coral flowers and designed by Boyer more than a decade ago. Resembling both a halter top and a breastplate, it recalls the once controversial, bejeweled bustiers handmade by Selena, but belongs to a different, distinctly queer, strain of risqué. Beneath the framed print, *Los Angeles Light Box*, 2017, a shrine like ledge adorned with silk flowers, illuminated two rare vintage slides of Selena mugging for the camera, taken by an unknown backstage photographer in 1994, with a loupe provided.

Such intimate vignettes orbited around the exhibition’s most commanding works: the handwoven equestrian blankets. These bold, distilled renderings of the singer’s most memorable performance outfits are substantial, tactile creations of wool and cotton, brightened by sequins, rhinestones, and faux pearls. The deep purple and burgundy *Astrodome Hustle*, 2017, commemorates the flare legged, crisscross topped jumpsuit she wore for her iconic final performance; the golden *Days Inn*, 2017, portentously incorporates the motel chain’s logo behind her dancing studded cowboy boots. The blankets, tossed over sculptural retail display racks, were made in collaboration with the Oaxaca, Mexico–based Biidaüü Weaving Collective, a group Boyer has lived and worked with. To consider these works as the hypothetical products of Selena Etc.—had its namesake lived to oversee its evolution—is to imagine a radical divergence from the sweatshop production mode of most celebrity branded apparel.

That’s the kind of quixotic speculation encouraged here. For Boyer, Selena’s death is associated with another Texas dream cut short, the democratic governorship of Ann Richards. She was defeated after one term by George W. Bush, marking the beginning, as the artist’s press release reads, of “the gradual dissolution of a vision of continental economic solidarity and cultural inclusiveness,” which culminate, you could say, in the hysterical wall building rhetoric of today. In light of this, the artist’s anti dystopian vision, articulated through bittersweet handmade works and personal archives, is a welcome testament to the power of creative fandom, and to the seismic import of a Selena scale hero.

—Johanna Fateman

THE NEW YORKER

ART GALLERIES—CHELSEA

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In his confident solo début, Boyer, a young Texas-born, New York-based artist, gives painting on velvet a good name in a series of burnished-looking, loosely geometric abstractions. These are exhibited alongside a group of unstretched cyanotypes on indigo silk, printed—using natural light in outdoor locations from Fire Island to Joshua Tree—with the silhouettes of belts collected from the artist’s friends and lovers. Tensions between luxury and kitsch, delicacy and swagger, and intimacy and threat are palpable. More contrived is a selection of sterling-silver neti pots and doorknobs, embellished, Southwestern style, with belt buckles. These are heavy-handed invocations of thresholds and interiors, from the bodily and the architectural to the erotic. Through Dec. 15.

— *The New Yorker*

FASHION

This Brooklyn Artist Paints Selena as a Fashion Entrepreneur

BY RACHEL HAHN

June 16, 2017

When you think of the late Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla-Pérez, maybe it's her risqué onstage costumes that first spring to mind, or even flashes of Jennifer Lopez's portrayal of the pop star in the 1997 biopic *Selena*. While Selena's penchant for sequined bras and bedazzled jackets earned her the unofficial (and somewhat reductive) moniker of the "Tejano Madonna," textile artist Travis Boyer's new exhibition "Ahora y Nunca" (showing until July 9 at the Bushwick gallery Signal) emphasizes a critically undervalued aspect of Selena's legacy: As the head of Selena Etc., a small South Texas chain of boutiques and salons that housed her personal clothing line, Selena was a bona fide entrepreneur. Sewn within the seams of Selena Etc.'s business-like dresses and glossy suits was an aspiration of the late '90s, a dream that she hoped would cross borders, cultures, and socioeconomic divides.

Texas-born Boyer had been a Selena fan since he was a kid (she died when he was just 16), but as an adult artist his collection of Selena-brand clothing, catalogs, and memorabilia rapidly expanded over the months he spent in Norway for an artist's residency. Feeling disconnected from his roots, Boyer went deeper into the cult of Selena fandom. He found himself staying up late browsing Selena-branded items on eBay and Instagram. For the exhibition, he's neatly displayed his substantial collection in clear plastic bins in the gallery's back room, evoking the feeling of an artfully formalized storage unit.



Travis Boyer, Install shot of *Ahora y Nunca* Photo: Timothy Doyan / Courtesy of SIGNAL Gallery

This vast archive of Selena material served as inspiration for the original paintings and sculptures of “Ahora y Nunca,” which translates to “now and never.” The objects Boyer created stem from his vision of an alternate historical timeline beginning just before Selena’s death in 1995, after which her clothing line and boutiques began to taper off. Boyer imagines a world in which Selena’s brand lives on, citing Jessica Simpson’s career trajectory from pop star to commercial shoe ambassador as a path that Selena might have naturally followed. Boyer collaborated with the Oaxacan Biidaüü Weaving Collective to create a set of luxurious hand-woven equestrian blankets that each depict one of Selena’s signature stage outfits.

As a brand, Selena Etc. seemed to anticipate a more unified North America through mature business-casual designs: As Boyer describes the four dresses from Selena Etc.’s 1996 collection that he’s displayed on dress forms loaned from the Met Costume Institute, he’s quick to connect the fashions to larger political and cultural forces at play at that time. Ann Richards, then the governor of Texas, had assembled the most gender and ethnically diverse cabinet in the state’s history. The build up to NAFTA, meanwhile, led some to believe that the United States and Mexico would soon enjoy open commerce and borders along the same lines as countries in the European Union. As Boyer describes it, the general sense was that there would be “a NAFTA dollar . . . [and] that all of this commerce, entrepreneurship, and collaboration” between Mexico and the United States was going to take place.



Selena Etc. Inc. officewear from circa 1996 Photo: Timothy Doyan / Courtesy of SIGNAL Gallery

Selena’s stately silhouettes, prim gold buttons, and satiny suits (which Boyer believes were inspired by the outfits that Cybill Shepherd’s chic lady PI character wore in *Moonlighting*, Selena’s favorite TV show) give the impression of a “professional, self-determined woman uniform.” In choosing to sell this image as opposed to the steamier one she embodied on stage, Boyer believes that Selena was attempting to meet the needs of the borderless professional working women, Tejana entrepreneurs like herself.

Boyer describes himself as a “feelings hoarder” and his collection of Selena Etc. clothing and memorabilia is not motivated so much by any sense of nostalgia or sentimentality. Rather, he’s interested in sharing “evidence of a different American reality that was very inspiring to me,” one that we could still inhabit if we tapped the transformative potential of objects and clothing. Clothing, according to Boyer, has “this kind of beautiful, transferable ambition, and in some ways when you put on something, you become that thing.” Walking through “Ahora y Nunca,” it seems that all we need to do is pull our Selena Etc. suits out from storage, steam out the wrinkles, and prepare to do the work necessary to yet again achieve that dream of cross-cultural unity. It was, as Boyer describes, “temporarily foreclosed upon for a number of reasons, including her death, including these unfortunate political reasons, but it’s still there. It’s still a possibility.”



Journal



28/07/14 • Interview : Heather Jones

Interview: Travis Boyer

Travis Boyer's evocative abstract paintings, cyanotypes and relational performance works have long engaged audiences and broken down barriers between the private and the public, the intimate and the unknown. The Texas-born, New York-based artist recently traveled to Stavanger to participate in a residency at Frida Hansens Hus, and currently has an exhibition on view at Studio 17. Below, Boyer answers a few of our questions about his influences, drives, and experience of making work in Stavanger.



Heather Jones: I understand that you grew up in Ft. Worth, Texas and received a BFA from the University of North Texas before going on to earn an MFA from Bard College in New York. Can you tell us a bit about your background and how you first came to be involved in art?

Travis Boyer: It is a very broad question so I will offer an anecdotal story. When I was a teenager, a big art foundation called the Barnes Collection came to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth. It was a big deal that temporarily bolstered the local art scene. I ended up helping a textile artist paint silk scarves and woven things that were for sale; I learned a lot about textiles and art that summer and I suppose on some level, twenty years later, I'm still making scarves.

HJ: You're currently participating in the residency program at Frida Hansens Hus and have a project, *Sunshine on a Greased Pearl*, on view right now at Studio 17 in Stavanger. Viewers can see paintings of abstracted forms, photo emulsion negatives of belts, and a sterling silver *Tequila Netipot*. What can you tell us about the works in this exhibition and how they relate to each other?

TB: For the most part these are themes I have been working with for the past two years. The velvet paintings in this show are the most experimental and a growing aspect of my practice.

HJ: You've participated in exhibitions from New York to Amsterdam, Mexico to Belgium, and now Norway. Looking through some of your past exhibitions, a lot of your artworks and installations are site-specific. Do you often work in response to your current place, and did the geography and culture of Stavanger in anyway influence this exhibition?

TB: Stavanger has become very near and dear to me at this point. I now have a lot of friends here and plenty of folks to say hi to on my walk from Frida Hansens Hus to the Kunstsenter but in terms of how Stavanger has inscribed itself onto my artwork – I spent two weeks in June very jetlagged and also having trouble adjusting to the sunny nights. I would sort of sleep walk around the town and especially down to the docks at Paradis in the very early hours of the morning. I would chat up road workers and learn my way around the city. The stillness of the water and strange luminosity on those nights was very surreal and the level of privacy you feel as a foreigner in an empty coastal town with pink sky and water is something quite special.

HJ: In general, your work seems to blend boundaries between abstract painting, figuration, textile work and performative events...including a recent performance *Cobras Loving Cobras Loving Drawing* at Rogaland Kunstsenter. Do you see these as separate approaches, or all part of the same artistic practice?

TB: My work is really inclusive – the paintings are gently participatory in the way that you are drawn to touch them, and how they relate to the body. The cobra drawings are the third variation I have performed based on a drawing exercise that Amy Sillman would do with me and the other Bard painters in grad school. I like generative group activities and think about them as being a socio-kinetic form of art. Sort of like relational aesthetics except socio-kintecis does not attempt to settle into some moralizing or utopian idea that comes from the artist; it is about the activity being really legible in such a way that you as a participant can take it or leave it, project onto it or ignore it. It takes on multiple interpretations without needing to anticipate what those might be. For example, here in the kunstsenter the cobra drawings seemed to be more about interrupting normal social barriers. I don't think Norwegians are especially touchy-feely and so it was profound to touch and be touched in an art context. The drawings are great but I think the artistic byproduct here was goosebumps-But I could be wrong.

Travis Boyer has a forthcoming exhibition at Johannes Vogt Gallery this November. To learn more about the artist, visit the artist's page, here (<http://www.vogtgallery.com/index.php?/artists1/travis-boyer/>).

ARTSY

Why Legendary Pop Star Selena Is This Artist's Role Model

● Scott Indrisek Jun 14, 2017 2:17pm



Detail of Selena slides in "Ahora y Nunca." Courtesy of SIGNAL.

Travis Boyer is best known for lush, tactile paintings on velvet, or semi- abstract works that utilize dyed and processed silks. But in recent years, he's been finding a creative outlet in an unexpected place: the legacy of Selena Quintanilla- Perez, the multi-hyphenate Mexican-American celebrity whose murder in 1995 catapulted her to new levels of posthumous stardom (cemented by a 1997 biopic starring Jennifer Lopez).

Boyer was 16 years old and living in Texas when Selena was shot by the manager of her fan club. In recent years, he's become part of an Instagram- connected community of enthusiasts who collect, trade, and hunt pieces of Selena memorabilia, from commemorative drinking cups to personal photographs and items from her eponymous fashion line. The pop star, and the Tejano music community she was an integral part of, "was a big part of my youth," Boyer affirms. "Q is something that really inspired me as a teenager—just as other artists of my same generation might reference a riot grrrl scene."

"Ahora y Nunca," an exhibition currently on view at SIGNAL in Bushwick, Brooklyn, brings a collection of the artist's Selena bounty to the gallery, might be floating in the air, but Boyer is sincere about his affection for the late pop star, whose envelope-pushing, cross-border career he sees as something of a model for his own.

Like Selena herself—who sold branded clothes via a Texas boutique, Selena Etc.—Boyer has grown up traveling, and making work, between Mexico and the United States. He posed his exhibition as the culmination of a thought experiment: "What if Selena Etc.—and this economy it was pointing to—had gone exactly right?" What if, Boyer mused, the pop star's shop had evolved into something more like high-end, art-world-friendly boutiques like Colette or Agnes B.?



Installation view of "Ahora y Nunca." Photo by Timothy Doyon. Courtesy of SIGNAL.

The realization of that daydream was circuitous. “All of the fanciest, aspirational fashion lines, like Hermes and Polo, have this equestrian mystique,” he says. And so Boyer’s Selena-tribute ended up taking the form of a series of wool horse-blankets—created by weavers in the Mexican town of Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca—which feature silhouettes of the singer’s legs, adorned with shoes from various points in her career. In one, her sparkly footwear is based on what she wore at a concert in the Houston Astrodome. Another, more morbid, weaving replicates the costume that Selena’s wax mannequin sports at Madame Tussaud’s. That particular horse blanket is bedecked with the logo of Days Inn, the economy hotel chain where Selena was shot to death in Corpus Christi, Texas. “It’s about resurrection, or transcending death,” Boyer offers. “Selena is the ghostest with the mostest; she does a lot of work from beyond the grave.”

At SIGNAL, the series of horse blankets are displayed on purple, powder-coated racks, some of which are mounted on plinths whose surfaces are covered with tufted, dyed silk swaths, resembling the texture of a piñata.

“I imagine the sculptures as these angelic Valkyries that are flying into a situation, to make decisions on the battlefield and clean things up,” Boyer adds. “If things got really bad you could just call the ghost-army of Selenas to intervene on behalf of good.”

This might all sound incredibly esoteric and inward-facing—and it is—but the artist’s enthusiasm for Selena points to something larger than an idiosyncratic outpouring of fandom. Partly, it’s about nostalgia for a political and cultural climate where Mexico and the United States enjoyed a sense of exchange and interplay. It recalls a world in which no Donald Trump had yet arrived to deride Mexicans as “bad hombres” who are “pouring into” our country, best kept out via a fantastical wall that Mexico (or solar power) would somehow pay for. Boyer fondly remembers the 1990s in Texas, when it was possible to pass between the two countries with little more than a driver’s license, and where many thought NAFTA (passed in 1994) would be akin to “the European Union, this continental, economic solidarity.”



Installation view of "Ahora y Nunca." Photo by Timothy Doyon. Courtesy of SIGNAL.

But Boyer's show is also about the freedom to engage with what excites or moves you, independent of any anxieties about one's right to do so. "Selena and the Selena Etc. store was producing their line in Monterrey, Mexico, and going back and forth to the U.S.," Boyer says. "I've actualized this in my own life, going back and forth to Taxco and Oaxaca and producing artwork with these communities, as well as back home. It's really liberating not to feel that you can't do that unless you actually are Zapotec or live in a Zapotec community. Selena's world opened up the possibility that that's not important—you can traverse these two things, they have more in common than you think. Her way of living was an example of a new kind of person, a new kind of creative entrepreneur."

Indeed, Selena's legacy is a rich example of unpoliced cultural cross-pollinations. Tejano music itself was born of an intermingling of German and Czech polka with indigenous Mexican musical traditions. One of Selena's main back-up performers, Don Shelton, was—in Boyer's words—a "black gay leather-daddy bear" who didn't really speak Spanish. Selena herself, he adds, borrowed from a plentiful sea of references, from Madonna's "Truth or Dare" tour to the 1980s television show *Moonlighting*. In recent years, Selena's persona has been happily borrowed by the drag community. The "ghostest with the mostest" has, in death, become a free-floating symbol: a little something for everyone.



Portrait of Travis Boyer by Scott Indrisek.

For Boyer, that means that Selena can be a kind of portal through which he can access the unexpected: A new way to be a contemporary artist. He praises the singer's own "photographic memory for pop culture," her willingness to appropriate or absorb. And Boyer also revels in the ways in which she turned happenstance into minor genius. "There's a famous story about Selena's asymmetrically embellished bra, a signature look," he says. "One side's covered in rhinestones, the other only partially. The truth is, she's making these clothes in a bus, on the road—and she ran out of rhinestones. But it becomes avant-garde in this way. When doing artwork myself—giving myself the permission to say, 'Shit, I ran out of rhinestones'—that's the thing. It's an approach, a methodology."

By rebooting the contemporary possibilities of Selena and her fashion business in the context of a gallery, Boyer fancies himself an occupational realist. By that he's referring to artists, like Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose conceptual practice involved laboring in often unglamorous fields—like the sanitation industry. Boyer's not willing to go that far—"no garbage pick-up" for me, he jokes—but he's still invested in the "imaginary economy" of his self-invented Selena 2.0.

"Considering my skills and experience I'd much rather be designing a fancy equestrian line," he says. In a world in which Selena was still alive, "I imagine Travis Boyer would be an ideal artist for that collaboration. She'd probably be reaching out to me—instead of the reverse!"