



JOSÉ VILLALOBOS

JOTO FRONTERIZO | BORDER FAGGOT

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On display at the Freedman Gallery, Reading, Pennsylvania
November 5 – December 13, 2019

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Curated by Alana J. Coates

Essays by Marissa Del Toro, M.A., Emmanuel Ortega, Ph.D., and Mark A. Castro, Ph.D.

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Front cover image and opposite page: Details of *Fragmentos y Suturas (Fragments and Sutures)*, 2019, mixed-media installation, dimensions vary.





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NOVEMBER 5 – DECEMBER 13, 2019



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Manicured, 2019, mounted deer hoof leather whips, Swarovski crystals, nail polish, dimensions vary.

FOREWORD

The Freedman Gallery has had an illustrious, 40-plus year history that includes a number of important exhibitions featuring work by artists of Hispanic ethnicity as well as artists who identify as gay, lesbian or queer and create work that touches on their gender identity. Though not an exhaustive list, I am referring to the exhibitions, “Contemporary Hispanic Shrines” and “Art About AIDS,” curated by David Rubin in the late 1980s, the multi-venued “Mexicado Iluminado (Mexico Illuminated),” a major undertaking that included more than five location and more than 50 artists, curated in 2003 by Christopher Youngs, “Gender Matters, Matters of Gender,” the gallery’s first, juried exhibition organized in 2011 with works selected by Judith Tanenbaum, as well as more recent exhibitions curated by Erin Riley-Lopez, including “Becoming Male,” in 2014, “Brendan Fernandes, Seeing I” and “La Huella Múltiple” in 2015, and “André Terrel Jackson, Fashioning Identities: Remixed,” which I curated in 2018.

The work of José Villalobos adds a new voice to the ongoing and complex dialogue about masculinity, gender identity, sexual preference, ethnicity, and the reconciliation of these issues within a cultural, societal, political, familial, and personal perspective. The fact that these issues continue to be controversial in 2019, particularly in the U.S., is both perplexing and saddening.

I am most grateful to José for sharing his work with Albright College and the surrounding Reading/Berks county community. I would also like to especially thank José’s partner, Victor, for his assistance with the logistics of transportation and installation.

The gallery is also grateful to former curator, Alana J. Coates, who brought José and his work to our collective attention.

Preparator Rich Houck rendered valuable assistance in the installation of this exhibition. Kate Mishriki, registrar, and Kristy Kline, CFA administrative assistant, also deserve our gratitude, as does the outstanding crew of student gallery attendants: Athena, Kaleb, Madison, Nicole, Riley, and Seyi.

I must also recognize the good work of our colleagues in the Communications Division, designer Heidi Eckman and copyeditor Carey Manzollilo, whose assistance with marketing materials and the creation of this catalogue was greatly appreciated.

We are indebted to Marissa Del Toro, M.A., Emmanuel Ortega, Ph.D., and Mark A. Castro, Ph.D., for the thoughtful essays they contributed to the catalogue, and to John Pankratz, whose photography skills expertly captured José’s installation at the Freedman.

A full list of the members of the Visual Arts Committee appears at the end of this publication, and we remain grateful to these volunteers, led by alumnus and chair Jaap van Liere, for all their advice, advocacy, and continued support.

The Freedman Gallery also acknowledges the ongoing commitment from Albright College administration, particularly President Jacquelyn S. Fetrow, Ph.D. ’82 and Provost Karen Campbell, Ph.D., and the support of Albright faculty who continue to engage the student body with our exhibitions.

Internally, programs at the gallery are supported by The Doris C. and Alan J. Freedman Family Fund. Additional financial support is annually provided by annual donors, Albright College, and The Silverweed Foundation.

This publication was made especially possible by the generosity of Barbara and David Thun, Jaap van Liere, Matthew Garrison and Qin Huang, along with a portion of a gift arranged by Beulah “Boots” Fehr from Berks Products. Thank you, one and all.

David M. Tanner, director, Center for the Arts



Detail of *Pureza como las perlas y rosas blancas*
(*Pure Like Pearls and White Roses*), 2019,
mixed-media installation, dimensions vary.

JOTO-COWBOY: JOSÉ VILLALOBOS AND THE SUBVERSION OF MASCULINITY

MARK A. CASTRO

In a recent essay on the artist Bill Traylor, the painter Kerry James Marshall explored tensions that surround the growing appreciation of Traylor's work, and that of other black artists, by American scholars and museums.ⁱ To use Marshall's own phrasing, "aesthetic hierarchies" that have for decades regulated these artists to the margins, have begun to break down, with the generally positive result of these works and their makers enriching existing canons within the history of the art of the United States. Marshall, however, poses a series of complicating questions at the start of the essay:

"But I wonder, given the differential experience of black and white people in America historically, as well as the absence of a truly independent black philosophical system that codifies artistic values, if it is possible that even black American and white Americans observing from the same social strata see the same thing when they look at the creations of these institutionally minted "modern" black artists. Is the relevance of these artists and their work universally understood across divergent cultural contexts? Presuming the answer is no, is it likely, then, that these two populations want the same experience from artwork?"ⁱⁱ

Marshall's piece insightfully discusses these questions and their implications, moving into territory that is beyond the scope of the present essay. Nevertheless, his questions have broader repercussions that come to mind as I consider the visual artist José Villalobos.

Villalobos's works are deeply rooted in his personal history, deploying elements drawn from his experiences growing up gay within a conservative family in El Paso, Texas. His family was a part of the city's vibrant *norteño* culture that spans northern Mexico and south Texas. The shared culture that helped bind together his community growing up, also left Villalobos increasingly isolated as he came to terms with his sexuality. Like many of us, he hid or suppressed any outward signs of his difference, "I repressed them and when I did something that was considered flamboyant I was often corrected on how to act and say things in a masculine manner."ⁱⁱⁱ Villalobos's works respond to his experiences as a gay man growing up in a community imbued with its own rules governing masculinity.

That different audiences may experience Villalobos's works in different ways, following Marshall's argument, may seem unsurprising. Nevertheless, by raising

questions about these divergent experiences Marshall offers an important check to our contemporary tendency to, as he points out, dismiss such distinctions.^{iv} Similarly, part of the power of Villalobos installations are their ability to shake us out of our complacency. Incorporating activism into his practice, Villalobos reminds his audiences that acceptance is still a work in progress in our society, influenced by a multitude of factors, including race, community, class and notions of gender. In this, he belongs to an important historic tradition of artists that have sought through their works of art, and even their own self-fashioning, to challenge notions of masculinity. Finding themselves pushed to the fringes, they have not gone quietly, instead utilizing their works to confront society with their existence.

There is a sense of this self-declaration in Villalobos multimedia installation *De La Misma Piel (Of the Same Flesh)* (2016), first presented at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas. A row of tooled brown leather belts hang from a wall, each printed with a Spanish language anti-gay slurs, including *pinche joto*, *mariposa*, and *puto*. Accompanying them are belt buckles resting on silky purple pillows, their faces embossed with letters that together spell *JOTO*, a Mexican equivalent of the word faggot. Although these accessories seem typical of those worn by men along both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, their embedded texts destabilizes their association with traditional notions of masculinity. This subversion of objects' meaning is at the heart of Villalobos's practice: "I protest the toxicity of machismo through the use of objects that carry a history, specifically within the Norteño culture, by deconstructing and altering them."^v The antigay slurs printed in the objects seem to have a dual function, as both a record of words that Villalobos was subjected to throughout his life, but also almost as statements of pride in his identity.

The belts and buckles, once used by men to perform their macho identity, now seem to belong to someone else. This hybrid figure, a *joto-cowboy*, recalls the European dandies of the end of the nineteenth, such as Oscar Wilde and André Gide, whose flamboyant and stylized clothes served as a veiled signifier of their gay identity. Similarly, a network of artists and writers in Mexico City in the 1920s known as the Contemporáneos (Contemporaries) dressed as dandies as a means of representing their homosexuality, while also creating a counterpoint to the hyper-masculinized culture that arose following the Mexican Revolution.^{vi} The group's works, much like their clothes, could be equally declarative of their identity and sometimes met with hostility. For the Contemporáneos, as well as



Details from installation of *De La Misma Piel (Of the Same Flesh)*, 2016, leather belts, nails, belt buckles, satin pillows, 12 x 35 x 2 feet.

for Villalobos, the discomfort their work generated is in the cause of fomenting change. In his introduction to the memoir of Salvador Novo, one the leading Contemporáneos writers, Carlos Monsivais writes,

“In order to cast off the double oppression of traditionalism and chauvinism, outdated prejudices and canons need to be destroyed... and gays, most especially, must assume André Gide’s dictum: “Live Dangerously!” which is to say, live in a way that challenges social narrow-mindedness.”^{vii}

The need for the LGBTQ community to push boundaries to foster acceptance, particularly through art, remains as true today as it was in Mexico in the twenties. Villalobos’s series *Ni Blanco Ni Dercho (Neither White Nor Straight)* (2016), suggests the lingering sense of alienation that many members of this community feel within wider American culture. The overlapping male bodies seem erotic and inviting, reminiscent of the models found the catalogs of affluent brands like Abercrombie & Fitch. Yet those same muscular bodies remind us that the acceptance in the United States, even within the gay community, is still mediated by race. As Villalobos’s title states, he is neither white, nor straight, and this can still mean a marginalized place within contemporary society.

In contrast, the installation *Forty-Nine* (2016), emphasizes Villalobos’s connection to the wider LGBTQ community in the United States. The installation features forty-nine white handkerchiefs, each with a corner stained red and each embroidered with the name and age of a victim from the mass shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, 2016. Together they both honor those who perished as individuals while pressing on the wider trauma of that night. The victims were a diverse group of people who came together in a space that should have been safe. At a distance, the uniform appearance of the handkerchiefs allows the distinct names to fall away, leaving behind a sense of collective loss that, like the tragedy itself, cuts across communities.

Villalobos returned to his subversion of symbols of masculinity in four subsequent installation and performance pieces produced from 2017-2018. In *Sin la S (Without the S)* (2017), an installation at Mexic-Arte in Austin in 2017, Villalobos included ten cowboy hats suspended from the ceiling above piles of soil, their borders decorated with layers of gold tassels that cascade downward and obscure the face of the wearer. Each hat represents a letter in the artist’s last name, with the first nine hats tasseled in gold and the final hat, representing the ‘S’, tasseled in pink. Together they press on notions of heritage, passed down in the form

of a family name, from father to son. Villalobos has discussed in interviews the pressure he felt to have children who would carry on his name, something that to his family seems impossible for a gay man.^{viii}

Included in the installation is a mannequin in fringed cowboy garb, including another hat, as well as a belt and buckle from *De La Misma Piel*. The addition of the fringe challenges the macho identity traditionally associated with the hat and what it reconstitutes in its place feels intentionally hybrid. The clothing still evokes a ‘cowboy’, but reminds us that cowboys can be flamboyant — indeed perhaps they always have been. This feels further emphasized by Villalobos’s use of text. The back of the belt is stamped *DELICADO*, or ‘delicate’, another slang term for a gay man, while across the mannequin’s back is the word *MACHO* and beneath it, obscured by fringe, *MARICÓN*, or faggot. The contrasting terms remind viewers that this joto-cowboy is all of these things — macho and delicate, a cowboy and a faggot. His physical presence in the larger installation forces viewers to acknowledge that existence with all of its assumed contradictions. Although using a visual language, *Sin la S* harkens back to the work of a number of gay artists in the United States in the mid twentieth century. Paul Cadmus’s infamous *The Fleets In* (1934), commissioned by the U.S. Navy, scandalized and angered his patrons with its allusion to a gay pickup between one of the sailors and a civilian man. In later works, Cadmus continued to challenge the prevailing notion that macho men — the kind who became sailors — could only be straight. In a similar fashion, Villalobos’s work pushes back against the idea that Norteño men must be straight, or that gay men could never be fathers.

The artist continues to explore contrasting symbols in *We Have Always Been* (2018), presented in the exhibition *We Are*, at San Antonio’s Department of Culture and Creative Development’s Culture Commons Gallery. The installation was comprised of a saddle decorated with metallic gold trim and overlapping layers of gold fringe, as well as a pair of suspended cowboy boots, their bottoms dropping away to reveal a colorful bouquet of flowers and a small green bird. Complicating the masculine connotations of these objects, Villalobos also invokes their history in material culture. Saddles and other riding gear have a history of opulent decoration that went beyond function to display a rider’s personality and status.

This sense of a longer tradition is also present in *FAG* (2018), a performance that accompanied the installation. Villalobos appears to music from a mariachi band in his modified cowboy garb, removes his belt and begins to stamp the word “MACHO” into the leather. With each letter, he recited a word or phrase that expressed hatred toward gay people, each beginning with the same letter as the one he was inscribing. Coating the tools in ink, he then stamped “FAG”

Foreground, installation of *Forty-Nine*, 2016, handkerchiefs and pigment, dimensions vary with a portion of *Fragmentos y Suturas (Fragments and Sutures)*, 2019, mixed-media installation, background.





Details of *Fragmentos y Suturas (Fragments and Suturas)*, 2019, mixed-media installation, dimensions vary.



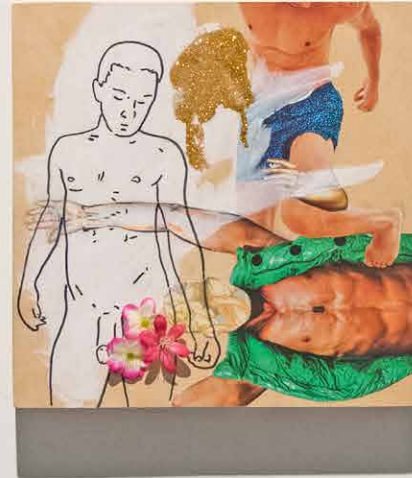
Details of *Fragmentos y Suturas (Fragments and Suturas)*, 2019, mixed-media installation, dimensions vary.



on his forehead, while reciting the words “Fag. I wear it proud on my skin. Or do I?”^{ix} The performance, although with some trepidation, seems a rejection of the toxic masculinity that seeks to demonize and belittle gay men. When considered in conjunction with the objects in the installation it also reveals the hollowness of these recriminations. Just as elements in *Sin la S* insisted on the existence of a gay cowboy, who can be both macho and *maricón*, this installation and performance suggest that such figures are embedded within the region’s material traditions that produce these objects.

The imagery of Villalobos’s installations expands in *Cicatrices (Scars)* (2019), presented at the Presa House Gallery in San Antonio. The artist’s signature cowboy hats are now literally deconstructed, their brims disengaging from their caps, but remaining connected by gold chains woven with pearls. The resulting space between them reveals a white rose that further softens the hat’s macho connotations, but also acts as an ironic symbol of mourning – perhaps for the death of the toxic masculinity they embody. Boots also reappear, this time cast in glycerin mixed with rose and lavender oil. Although their scent and material imply a similar softening, this is disrupted by lengths of barbed wire embedded within the structure of the boot. Unlike the hats that separate to reveal something soft and inviting, the interior of the boots reveals something sharp, as if to imply the pain they will cause to those that wear them.

The artist also includes two sets of objects that touch upon similar themes of appropriation and change. In *Manlcured* a set of wall mounted deer hooves, their nails painted vibrant colors, are strung with leather whips. Like the other works in the installation they seem to evoke a sense of discord; the deer hooves are



in a sense harnessed, able to be pulled or struck by the attached leather, yet the colors feel whimsical. This discordant tone carries over in to *En Paz Descanse Tu Libertad (May Your Freedom Rest in Peace)*, a lacquered white coffin with gold fittings accompanied by a bouquet and wreath of white flowers. The interior is upholstered in white fabric, including a pillow with the work’s title embroidered in gold and black thread. A single cowboy hat and rose rest in the interior in place of a body. There is again an understandable sense of loss, but loss of what? Is it the toxic masculinity embodied by the hat, soon to be sealed in its coffin and buried? Or, more precisely, the freedom of others to exercise it over us?

As Villalobos’s installations continue to evolve, their imagery has become more complex and subtle, as the current of retrospective of his work will no doubt bring further into focus. His aim to challenge the culture of toxic masculinity, one that has inflicted so much pain on Villalobos personally, remains a thread woven through all of his work thus far. To return to Marshall’s questions from the start of this article, viewers of Villalobos’s work who have, like the artist (and indeed this author), been subjected to the trauma of being called a *maricon* or a faggot, will undoubtedly experience the work differently than those who have not. This in no ways lessens its impact; instead, it expands it. Villalobos installations and performances vividly convey the emotions of his experiences, allowing viewers to feel something of their pain. The resulting catharsis is empowering. Villalobos’s works remind us not only of the trauma or shame that he and many members of the LGBTQ have been forced to endure, but perhaps more importantly, the moments when they were able to reject it.



Marshall, Kerry James. “The Beatitudes of Bill Traylor.” *Hyperallergic*. <https://hyperallergic.com/463285/the-beatitudes-of-bill-traylor/> (accessed September 30, 2019). This essay was originally published in the catalogue for *Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor*, exhibited at the Smithsonian American Art Museum September 28, 2018 – April 7, 2019.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Castro, Leslie mood. “Deconstructing Machismo (and Then Some): A Chat with Jose Villalobos.” *Glasstire*. <https://glasstire.com/2019/09/02/deconstructing-machismo-and-then-some-a-chat-with-jose-villalobos/> (accessed September 30, 2019).

^{xi} Marshall 2019.

^{xii} Villalobos, José. “Statement.” *Works by Jose Villalobos*. <https://www.josevillalobosart.com/statement.html> (accessed September 30, 2019).

^{xiii} For an overview of the Contemporáneos, see Castro, Mark. “Tales of the City: The Contemporáneos and Modern Mexican Art.” In *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950*, edited by Matthew Affron, Mark A. Castro, Dafne Cruz Porchini, and Renato González Mello, 311-19. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2016.

^{xiv} Novo, Salvador. Introduction to *Pillar of salt: an autobiography, with 19 erotic sonnets*, 24. Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2014.

^{xv} Aquino, Marco. “Hitting a High Note: San Antonio Artist Jose Villalobos Earns a Hefty Grant from the Esteemed Joan Mitchell Foundation.” *San Antonio Current*. <https://www.sacurrent.com/ArtSlut/archives/2019/01/17/hitting-a-high-note-san-antonio-artist-jose-villalobos-earns-a-hefty-grant-from-the-esteemed-joan-mitchell-foundation> (accessed September 30, 2019).

^{xvi} Rubin, David. “Feminizing Male Stereotypes.” *VAS: Visual Art Source* <http://www.visualartsource.com/index.php?page=editorial&pcID=22&aID=4828> (accessed September 30, 2019).

Dr. Mark A. Castro is the Jorge Baldor Curator of Latin American Art at the Dallas Museum of Art. Prior to taking this position, he held several posts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, including Consulting Curator for Latin American Art. There he worked on several groundbreaking exhibitions, including the internationally acclaimed *The Arts in Latin America, 1492-1820* (2006), *Journeys to New Worlds: Spanish and Portuguese Colonial Art from the Roberta and Richard Huber Collection* (2013), and *El Greco In Focus* (2016). Most recently, he was one of four curators for *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950* (2016), which traveled from Philadelphia to Mexico City and Houston.

Ni Blanco Ni Derecho (Neither White Nor Straight), 2016, mixed-media on three wood panels, 12 x 12 inches each.

FRINGES OF QUEERNESS: JOSE VILLALOBOS' DE/RECONSTRUCTION OF THE NORTEÑO MARICÓN BODY MARISSA DEL TORO

“Sand mounts the mesquite. The horizon shimmers and rises before the eyes. Implacable shadows of clouds clothe the earth in dotted veils. Earth smells fill the air. A rainbow spills into a mirror of itself. Thickets of snakeweed blaze in clustered yellow blooms. Everything is blasted by an alkaline wind.”¹ – Carlos Fuentes

Upon landing I could feel the Texas heat encase the plane, like the embrace of a warm blanket. I was back in El Paso, a city informed by the heat of the Chihuahua desert. A city split in half by the Franklin Mountains and divided by El Rio to its sister city in the south, Ciudad Juarez. Recent decades have casted these sister cities as dangerous, where violence towards women and gang activity proliferated. More noticeably, the border city has been a refuge for immigrants escaping the Mexican revolution in 1910 or for Central American migrants fleeing their countries of origin in search of a better life in 2019. Intermixed between these narratives, the borderland has also been a site for queer desire. Since the 1950s Mexican border cities were cited as a place for vices and nightlife experiences that offered a haven for queerness to exist.² Cruising was a silent affair in between the alleys and streets of El Chuco but the rise of queer bars such as the Old Plantation and Pet shop allowed sexual and sensual expression to persevere more publicly.³ However, the recent domestic terrorism on August 3, 2019 has forever changed El Paso into a site of collective loss and pain. Xenophobia and hatred towards immigrants, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans was enacted by a white supremacist emboldened by the racist and hate filled beliefs of the current U.S. leaders and administration. Despite the horrendous actions, El Paso continues to be a city willing to give what it can share and welcome those who seek refuge.

From the airport I headed straight to the El Paso Museum of Art (EPMA) for the opening of the fifth Transborder Biennial exhibition. Occurring every other year since 2010, the biennial is a collaboration between EPMA and the Museo de Arte Ciudad Juarez (MACJ) celebrating the art from the U.S.–Mexico boundary. Selected artists explore the conditions that breathe life into the border, reflecting on themes that persist throughout the region — immigration, hybridity, and borderland consciousness. The 2018 exhibition included thirty-two artists or

collectives from the Western U.S.–Mexico border of San Diego and Tijuana to the Eastern edge of Brownsville and Matamoros.

Roaming the gallery, I explore the works carefully. I turn around and encounter an art piece embodied in a figure dressed in an all-white vaquero outfit complete with a white cowboy hat and fringed brim that obscures the figure's face. Fringes are vital components in vaquero fashion, traditionally they were used as a functional element on shirts but contemporaneously they are seen as elements of swagger that emphasize fashionable appearance. I instantly recognize this as the signature of El Paso-born and San Antonio-based artist, Jose Villalobos. The excitement and anxiety, which often look and feel the same way, of showing his work in his hometown surrounded by family was visible. His work had transformed since our days at University of Texas at San Antonio, where we briefly overlapped during our respective degree programs, his BFA in art and my MA in art history. Since leaving Texas in 2016, I kept tabs on the evolution and growth of Villalobos work through Instagram posts, art reviews, and chats from our mutual Texas art connections.

I catch his eye and he saunters over to me where we catch up next to *Sin la S / Without the S* (2017–2018) an installation of floating fringed sombreros hovering off the ground above piles of tierra. Visual embodiments of ghostly bodies, each fringed sombrero is encrusted with a flamboyant jeweled letter that spell out Villalobos, his last name — except the last letter is missing. The pink tasseled sombrero hangs without a jeweled letter, remaining incomplete, unfulfilled, and different from the other traditional sombreros. The pink tasseled sombrero symbolizes Villalobos' queerness that breaks with heteronormative tradition and failure to marry a woman and have children. By being gay, un maricón, un joto, y una mariposa he breaks with familial expectations of being a man.

Up close, the whiteness of his outfit is radiant. I can't help but notice the symbolic purity as a gesture where the reality of his queerness is seen as the moral antithesis, especially in the space of the museum defined by a history of ivory tower exclusivity. Villalobos' personal feelings of showing work in his hometown adds another layer to his queer brownness penetrating the white cube space that he once visited as child during a field trip. In a predominately white mainstream culture, brown kids rarely see themselves in main spaces and for Villalobos his participation in the museum exhibition was an accomplishment that he never thought possible. After we say our goodbyes and he walks away I catch the words “Macho Maricón” on the back of his shirt. As he continues to walk away the shiny, gold embroidered words radiate against his white shirt look like a bright neon sign emphasizing his presence and defiance as a maricón.

Colloquially known as a homophobic slur and slang for “faggot,” the history of maricón goes as far back as the Porfiriato period of 1901 in Mexico-City. In his theory of mariconography, Robb Hernandez narrates the historical police raid and scandalous arrest known as El baile de los cuarenta y uno or Los 41, where forty-one men described as homosexual were caught during a cross-dressing ball.⁴ Monsiváis noted this event as “the invention of the homosexuality in Mexico” because no one had publicly mentioned it in Mexico until then.⁵ The scandal resulted in newspapers labeling the arrested men as “maricón” and visual renderings of the incident, drawn up by the renowned printmaker José Guadalupe Posada, depicted the figures as effeminate “contained by heteromasculinist authority and a machista disciplining gaze.”⁶

Raised in the border between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, in a strongly religious Christian/Pentecostal household, prescribed notions of gender meant a particular type of restriction situated in a distinct borderland experience. This coupled with

Villalobos' Tejano/Mexican American identity, machismo is weaponized as the means to police and silence his queerness.⁷ Villalobos grew up embedded in a culture of vaquero and norteno identity, an identity that originated around 19th century northern Mexico and flourished in the Southwest U.S. Growing up he saw his father and tios wear the traditional vaquero accoutrements of boots, belts (hand polished buckles for special occasions), and hats. The vaquero and norteno identity embeds a cultural and familial pride a la madre tierra for those who wear its fashions but it also instills a sense of power and parameters of masculinity that remains homophobic to individuals who exists outside of its cis-hetero and traditional machista expectations. In his “Macho Maricón” outfit with exaggerated details of fringe and glittered boots, Villalobos is subverting the traditions of his clothing and body to perform a queerness that is usually met with hostility and homophobia from a culture influenced by a patriarchal showmanship of traditional machismo.

Boots, belts, and sombreros are objects of power that fashion the Tejano male body into a performance of masculinity and machismo. The root of Villalobos work lies in the performativity of his identity. His body becomes the vessel in which he de/reconstructs a sense of toxic masculinity and traditional machismo rooted in his borderland and norteno identity into a challenge for acceptance and equality of his queerness. His accoutrements are proud connections to his heritage but also reminders of the hate and homophobia that he has had to endure. There is a wavering pulse between pride and harm within these objects. This is most notable in his piece *De La Misma Piel / Of the Same Flesh* (2016) composed of leather belts engraved with Spanish slurs, such as “maricon” and “mariposa,” and polished belt buckles that spell out the word “joto.” These objects are presented with care and importance, the belt buckles are delicately



displayed on lavender satin cushions while the belts hang off the walls. These objects are what make the norteño identity visible but the engraved slurs remind us of the oppressive nature of its machismo counterpart.

The sense of oppression and harm is further escalated in Villalobos' video performance *Manos de Hombre / Hands of a Man* (2018) and documented performance *Cultural Reminders* (2019). In *Manos de Hombre* with a sewing needle in hand he threads the word “hombre” into the soft brown skin of his palm and then unthreads the red fiber to begin the process again. Repeatedly piercing his skin with needle and thread he creates a constellation of bloody marks that leave a shadowy reminder of the lesson he must learn: sé un hombre – be a man. *Cultural Reminders* documents the performative process of Villalobos having the top of his feet tattooed with the stitching designs from his boots. Permanently engraving his body with the stitch patterns as a physical reminder of his cultural ancestry. The act in which Villalobos causes harm to his body is evocative of self-flagellation, commonly associated as a form of self-discipline and control in Christianity but also of sexual gratification in BDSM culture. These performative acts of self-flagellation reinforce norteño cultural elements into his body but also conjure discipline for his failure to adapt to the heteronormative constructs of Tejano masculinity. Yet, they also highlight his strength and resilience to withstand the scrutiny of his identity as a brown queer man.

The self-flagellation or self-harm of his brown body is evident in several of his 2018 performances such as *Sin Los Callos en la Mano/Without Calluses on my Hand, FAG*, and *La Carga de la Tradición*. Through his performative body actions Villalobos demonstrates his battles with acceptance/rejection of cultural expectations and his queerness. In *Sin Los Callos en la Mano* he undresses, removing his vaquero armor, and reveals his half naked body as he kneels on a pile of tierra – almost in a pose of atonement. He picks up a leather belt sewn with the words “Las manos de un hombre no deberian ser suavécitas como este piel (The hands of a man shouldn't be soft like this skin)” and begins to flagellate himself, beating his back with the derisive statement. Several of the threaded letters are distinctly colored pink spelling the word “marica,” another Spanish slur for “sissy/faggot.” At the end of the performance he redresses, composing himself again in the vaquero armor that conceals and denies his “marica” self.

This performance brings to mind the labor and expectation of labor from brown bodies. In the early 1940s the United States government initiated and entered into an agreement with Mexico to establish fair labor treatment and living conditions for Mexican workers or braceros. This agreement became known as the Bracero program and lasted until the early 1960s before it was terminated by the U.S.⁸ Throughout this nearly twenty year agreement the lives of many Mexicans were reduced to the treatment of livestock. Packed in trailers and sent for examination before being “hired,” their bodies were checked for callouses as a sign of strength and ability to withstand the harsh labor conditions. Only strong appearing bodies, ones that could withstand the

Macho Maricon (Macho Fag), 2017, altered western wear, dimensions vary.



Documentation of performance by José Villalobos at the Freedman Gallery, November 5, 2019.

backbreaking work would be accepted and allowed to cross the border while weaker appearing bodies were sent back. Soft hands and minor physical flaws were a sign of weakness that would not be tolerated or accepted. The mantra in Villalobos' performance is a reverberation of this mindset, internalized as a cultural virtue, in which the body — the hands must be strengthened with callouses in order to survive in the U.S. Callouses are what make the brown body viable to exist in the land of the free.

Villalobos most recent performance *Almas Frágiles / Fragile Soles* (2019) at the McNay Art Museum moved his work from personal homophobic attacks into the wider culture of homophobia that he has encountered. Dressed in a resplendent white charro outfit with gold stitching and fringed sombrero, he walked down a runway smashing clay sculptures shaped like the soles of cowboy boots. At the end he removes his jacket and vest, then violently begins to beat his chest where red stains permeate his buttoned white shirt.

As he kneels to the ground he grabs a blade with the words “fuck you” attached to a ribbon from his back pocket, making a slit in his shirt he pulls a bloody mass — a liver — and stabs it into the ground. His outfit evokes an image of Vicente Fernandez, “El Rey de la Música Ranchera,” whereas his performance challenges Fernandez's recent machista and homophobic statement on refusing a liver transplant from a homosexual.⁹

Via his expressive bodily acts and performances Villalobos deconstructs the homophobic reality of Tejanidad and norteno culture. He reconstructs and challenges brown masculinity to unashamedly embrace a queerness that has always been hidden underneath. Through the fringes of his queerness he transforms the violence of suppression into a future being and state where the queer brown body is visible without expectations or preconceived notions.

¹ Fuentes, Carlos. *The Old Gringo*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, p. 16.

² Hernandez, Kris Klein. “This Borderland Called My Sexuality: Excavating Queer Nightlife of the American Southwest Through the Lens of Intersectionality.” *The Postcolonialist* 2, no. 2 (2015). <http://postcolonialist.com/culture/borderland-called-sexuality-excavating-queer-nightlife-american-southwest-lens-intersectionality/>.

³ El Chucho is the nickname for the city of El Paso connected to a shorthand term for Pachucho, a Chicano / Mexican-American culture and identity with origins in El Paso.

⁴ In his essay, *Drawing Offensive/Offensive Drawing: Toward a Theory of Mariconography*, Robb Hernández describes the cultural theory of mariconography as the contestation and reclamation of the term maricón through “oppositional rereading and image productions.” Hernández, Robb. “Drawing Offensive/Offensive Drawing: Toward a Theory of Mariconography.” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 39, no. 2 (June 2014): 121–52. <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlu020>.

⁵ Monsiváis, Carlos. “Los 41 y La Gran Redada.” *Letras Libres*. Letras Libres Internacional, April 30, 2002. <https://www.letraslibres.com/mexico/los-41-y-la-gran-redada>.

⁶ Hernández, p. 134.

⁷ Machismo is a term that is a popular reference for Mexican, Mexican-American, and Latino gender identity; traditionally seen as a negative stereotype surrounded by hyper-masculinity, violence, and sexualized behavior. According to an article by G. Miguel Arciniega, Zoila G. Tovar-Blank, Terence J. G. Tracey, and Thomas C. Anderson, they examine their study of machismo as a construct of both negative and positive aspects. The negative being attributed as traditional machismo, “aggressive, sexist, chauvinistic, and hypermasculine,” and the positive associated with caballerismo, “nurturing, family centered, and chivalrous.” The conclusion of their study ends with a Mexican proverb: “Un buen gallo en cualquier gallinero canta,” which they translated, as “a good man will be a good man in whatever context he finds himself.”

⁸ “Bracero History Archive.” Bracero History Archive. Accessed September 11, 2019. <http://braceroarchive.org/about>.

⁹ In an interview with the Spanish newspaper, *El Universal*, Vicente Fernández said that when the doctors informed him he needed a liver transplant, he didn't want to get a liver from a gay donor or a person that was a drug addict.

Marissa Del Toro is the DAMLI Curatorial Fellow at Phoenix Art Museum. She previously held positions at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and the Getty Research Institute. Originally, from Southern California, she earned her BA in Art History from the University of California, Riverside. Del Toro graduated from the University of Texas at San Antonio with her MA in Art History focusing on the modern and contemporary art of Latin American and U.S. artists. She centers her practice on the promotion and advocacy of diverse narratives within art.

OF COWBOY BOOTS, HATS AND LIMINAL FRINGES; VILLALOBOS SCULPTURAL WORK AND THE ART OF SUSPENDED CATEGORIES

EMMANUEL ORTEGA

“I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing” – Gloria Anzaldúa

In José Villalobos installation titled “Sin la S” (2017), we see, amongst various art objects, a series of ten *sombreros de vaquero* (Mexican cowboy hats), nine with golden tassels all surrounding one decorated with pink fringes. The position of this last object defines, not only the meaning of the installation, but it situates Villalobos’ sculptural work in a suspended liminal space that defies identity categories and artistic definitions. Each hat has a name written with *nopal* seeds and resin representing the generations of men passing on his last name. The pink hat, Villalobos explains “represents me, VILLALOBO minus the S... because my family has hopes of me being with a woman some day and having a child with her and passing on the last name and bloodline.” The pink hat inhabits a hovering space that hides much more than it reveals. Similarly to his deconstructed *botas vaqueras* (cowboy boots) of the installation “We Have Always Been” (2018), the hats conceal an artistic impulse that can only be explained by a process of transformation and self-exploration. Villalobos sculptures are not romantic commentaries of queerness in the Borderlands, but they symbolize a process that seeks to re-define Latinx queer art outside the restriction of the periphery-center dynamics in which the cannon of art functions. In other words, being a queer artist from the Border places Villalobos’ oeuvre in a similar state as *lo que se ve no se pregunta*, which can only find meaning in deconstructed objects that simultaneously hide and reveal a process of being from the Borderlands, but not belonging to them.¹

Gloria Anzaldúa in her seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) wrote, “I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue – my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.”² The powerful words of Anzaldúa resonate with many immigrants that inhabit the U.S. Mexico Border. The need to belong as they find themselves in a state of “suspended” identity due to political

boundaries and hegemonic cultural restrictions found its voice in the powerful words of this Chicana writer. The determined writings of Anzaldúa defined a generation of intellectuals that begun to construct Chicana identity within this liminal space; *Ni de aquí ni de allá* (nor from here nor there).

However, liminality, as defined by Victor Turner, is not a fixed category, or in this case, an essentialist identity marker. For anthropologist Victor Turner, liminality must be understood as a *process* where individuals re-evaluate their role as part of a larger society by scrutinizing the cultural values that shaped their identity.³ By definition, liminality should place us beyond binary states of being; beyond the grey area in which many of us find comfort; beyond the golden tassels of toxic *macho-linity* into the pink fringes of society. In other words, being Chicana, and from the Border is not a romantic periphery nor an undermined center, the Borderland state-of-being, as defined by Villalobos’ sculptural work, is a liberating liminal process that helps define much more than these fixed categories of identity.

In an article for the *Texas Observer*, Villalobos explains the conditions of always making art and never feeling vindicated; “Even though I’m making this work and trying to break these barriers between machismo and being gay, there’s still that reminder that this is what it is. It’s always going to be. It’s always going to be. It’s a cultural thing.”⁴ One of the main principles behind the idea of liminality is to understand the processes that are transforming you as a person and member of any given culture. Thus for Villalobos, to make, perform and exhibit art, is to understand and transform the patterns that shape his identity as part of a patriarchal border Latino society. Villalobos’ sculptural work is thus a window into the articulation of his personal transformation.

Installation view of *Sin La “S” (Without the “S”)*, 2017, sombreros, fringe, tulle, soil, resin, seeds, dimensions vary.



For instance, in *Cicatrices* (2019), he crafted a series of *botas* made out of rose and lavender scented soap allowing you to partially see what's inside of them. He inserted fragments of barbed wire and knives making a commentary on the violence and painful transition that one, who sits outside the golden fringes, must go through when wearing and performing these extraneous gender identities. A year earlier, he deconstructed another *bota* for "We Have Always Been," this time, the sole breaks free from the restrictions of the rest of the shoe to expose a series of blooming flowers. As such, the *vaquero* boot, for Villalobos, is more about a fluid liminal transformation as supposed to a static "in-between" state of existing. His *botas* and *sombreros* do not represent final re-appropriated artworks of western-wear, instead, they bare the painful process of putting them on, taking them off, and blossoming while wearing them.

So where is one to place Villalobos' sculptural composition if not in a suspended space? What categories would allow us to make sense of his art? I suggest that instead of continuing to imagine the Border as a provincial site, far away from

the art centers of New York and/or Los Angeles, we let artists like Villalobos, who work on the pink fringes of the art world, be recognized by the integrity of their liminality. To encounter one of his sculptures in a TX gallery or museum should be an opportunity to displace our expectations of artistic hierarchies and to exercise contemplation as an extension of the process presented in front of us. To grasp Villalobos' sculptures is to immerse oneself into the liminal process of a man that seeks to expose the painful course of his journey as an artist and human being; is to interrupt one's expectations on the condition of being from the Border; is acknowledging that objects like his *botas* and *sombreros* can exist outside the centers of the art world; and more than anything, his sculptures are an opportunity to exist for one minute in the suspended liminal space from which the pink fringes will eternally float.

¹ *Lo que se ve no se pregunta* (roughly translated as don't ask if its obvious), is a phrase that became popular after Mexican singer songwriter Juan Gabriel used it as a response to a reporter from Univision that questioned his sexuality on TV.

² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: the New Mestiza = La Frontera*. (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).

³ Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

⁴ Michael Agresta, "The Clothes that Make the Man," *The Texas Observer*, June 24, 2019. Accessed September 7, 2019 <https://www.texasobserver.org/the-clothes-that-make-the-man/>

Emmanuel Ortega (Ph.D., Art History, University of New Mexico) is a curator, podcaster and a visiting professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Ortega has lectured nationally and internationally on the topics of images of *autos-de-fé*, nineteenth-century Mexican landscape painting, and visual representations of the New Mexico Pueblo peoples in Novohispanic Franciscans martyr paintings. In 2015, Ortega partnered with the Museo de Arte Religioso Ex-Convento de Santa Mónica in Puebla México to curate two art exhibitions based on recently restored paintings from their collection, one of which is now part of their permanent galleries. In addition to his scholarly work, he co-hosts the popular podcast *Latinos Who Lunch*.

Botas: #6 & #7 (Boots: #6 & #7), 2019, glycerin, boot soles, barbed wire, rose and lavender oil, each 10 x 12 x 6 inches.





F-A-G, 2019, ceramic, leather, paint, 7 x 7 inches.



Manicured, 2019, mounted deer hoof leather whips, Swarovski crystals, nail polish, dimensions vary.



Skin and Within, 2015, ceramic with mixed-media, dimensions vary.



Hebillas (Buckles), 2019, leather whips, graphite and gold leaf on four wood panels, 12 x 26 inches.

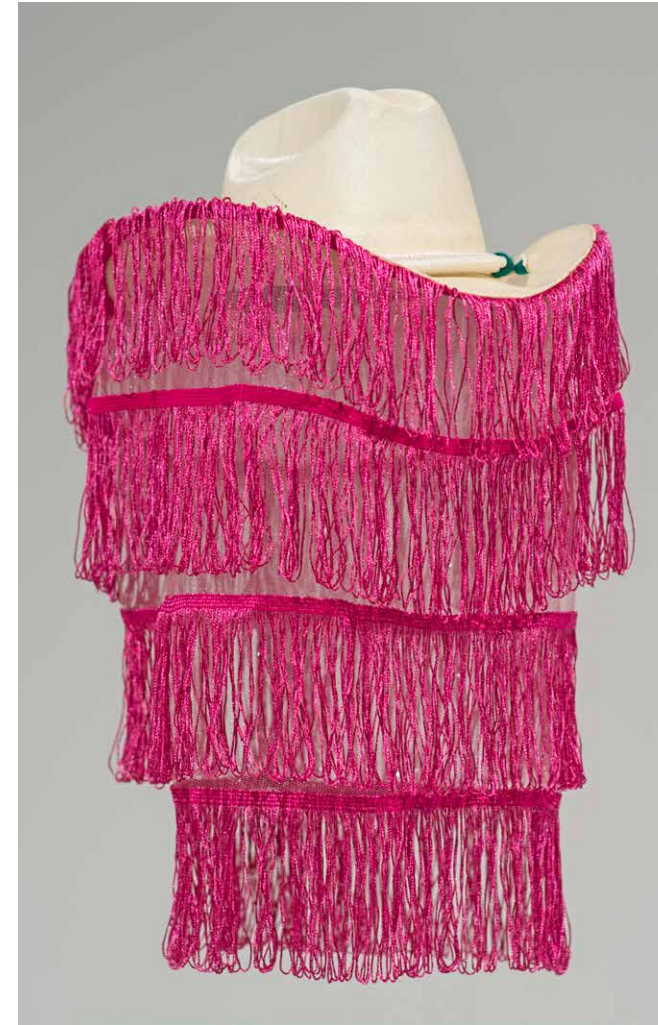


De La Misma Piel (Of the Same Flesh),
2016, leather belts, nails,
belt buckles, satin pillows,
12 x 35 x 2 feet.





Chain Hat with Western Wear, 2018,
cowboy hat with chains and unaltered western outfit, dimensions vary.



Macho Maricon (Macho Fag), 2017, altered western wear, dimensions vary.



Pureza como las perlas y rosas blancas
(Pure Like Pearls & White Roses) 2019,
 mixed-media installation,
 dimensions vary.

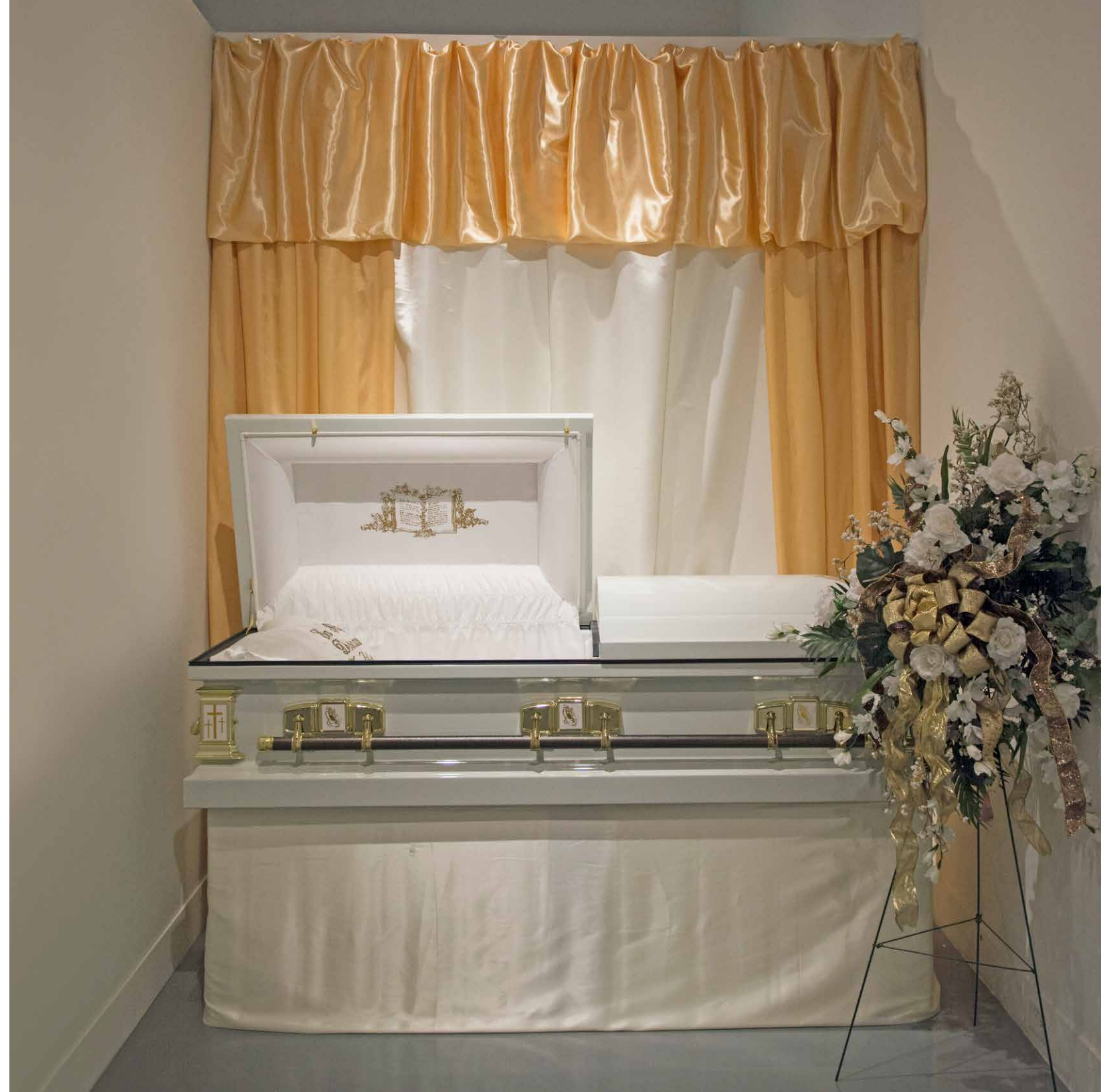


Cultural Reminders, 2019, twelve color photographs
 on glass squares documenting performance,
 each 8 x 8 inches, photos courtesy of
 Jenelle Esparza/Presa House Gallery.

Cultural Reminders, 2019, performance
 documentation, single-channel video,
 courtesy of Jenelle Esparza/Presa House Gallery.



Lagrimas Avergonzadas (Embarrassed Tears), 2018, mixed-media installation with performance costume, dimensions vary.



Photos above: *We Have Always Been*, 2018, mixed-media installation with altered saddle, boot, dimensions vary.
Photo on right: *En Paz Descanse tu Libertad (May your Freedom Rest in Peace)*, 2019, mixed-media installation, dimensions vary.



Documentation of performance at the Freedman Gallery, Albright College, November 5, 2019, images courtesy of John Pankratz.



Almas Frágiles (Fragile Soles), 2019,
altered Charro attire, boots with clay soles, "Fuck You" knife with ribbon, dimensions vary.

A Las Escondidas (Hide and Seek), 2019, performance documentation, single-channel video, 5:32 minutes, video courtesy of Kris Serold.

Almas Frágiles (Fragile Soles), 2019, performance documentation, single-channel video, 3:40 minutes, video courtesy of McNay Art Museum.

Fag, 2018, altered western wear worn for performance, dimensions vary.

La Carga del la Tradición: Actuación (The Weight of Tradition: Performance), 2019, excerpt from performance documentation, single-channel video, one minute, courtesy of Kris Serold.

La Carga del la Tradición: Botas (The Weight of Tradition: Boots), 2018, concrete filled leather boots, rope, metal clasp, dimensions vary.

Manos de Hombre (Hands of a Man), 2018, performance documentation, single-channel video, 2:25 minutes, video courtesy of the artist.

Sin Los Callos en la Mano (Without Calluses on my Hand), 2018, leather, waxed cord, soil, hammer, makeshift knife, 1 x 2.5 x 4 feet.

Fragmentos y Suturas (Fragments and Sutures), 2019, mixed-media installation, dimensions vary.

Forty-Nine, 2016, handkerchiefs and pigment, dimensions vary.

Botas: #6 & #7 (Boots: #6 & #7), 2019, glycerin, boot soles, barbed wire, rose and lavender oil, 10 x 12 x 6 inches.

Ni Blanco Ni Derecho (Neither White Nor Straight), 2016, mixed-media on three wood panels, 12 x 12 inches each.



ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Jose Villalobos juxtaposes distress with a feeling of comfort deriving from patriarchal and religious social structures which marginalize gay identity. Using found objects, he manipulates material through the context of self-identity as he examines gender roles within family culture. He demonstrates that dismantling traditional modes of masculine identity center an interstitial space where materiality softens the virility. In his work, Villalobos protests the toxicity of machismo through the use of objects, specifically within the Norteño culture, that carry a history by deconstructing and altering them. Although new forms are created, he demonstrates the battle between the acceptance being a maricón and assimilating to the cultural expectations.

JOSE VILLALOBOS

www.josevillalobosart.com
Bachelor of Fine Art, 2016
University of Texas at San Antonio

RESIDENCIES

2020 – Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptors Residency, New Orleans, LA
2019 – Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts, New Castle, ME
2017 – Changarrito Residency, Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, TX
2016 – Artist Lab Residency, Guadalupe Cultural Arts, San Antonio, TX

AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

2019 – Artist Foundation Finalist, San Antonio, TX
2019 – Contemporary Art Month Award, San Antonio, TX
2018 – Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptors Grant, New York, NY
2016 – Artist Lab Fellowship Grant, San Antonio, TX
2010 – First Place, Trinidad Sanchez Border Lines Poetry Award, San Antonio, TX

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, TX
The City of San Antonio, San Antonio, TX
The University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX

SOLO/TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2019 – Joto Fronterizo (Survey Exhibition), Albright College, Reading, PA
2019 – Sequenced. Vertigo Performance Series, Waterloo Center for the Arts, Waterloo, IA
2019 – Entre Fibras Culturales/Between Cultural Fibers, Strut Gallery, San Francisco, CA
2019 – Fragmentos y Suturas, South Texas College, McAllen, TX
2019 – Gay as an Accessory, Space HL Gallery, Houston, TX
2019 – Cicatrices, Presa House Gallery, San Antonio, TX
2018 – Lost, Found, and Reconstructed, Clamp Light Contemporary, San Antonio, TX
2017 – Flamboyant Ego (Changarrito Exhibit), Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, TX
2016 – De La Misma Piel, Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, San Antonio, TX
2015 – Skin and Within, Clamp Light Gallery, San Antonio, TX

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Suzanne Palmer, LL.M., assistant professor of economics and business; pre-law advisor
Archie Perrin, Ph.D., professor of art history and German
Jane Runyeon, artist, community member
Scott Schweigert, curator of art and civilization, Reading Public Museum
Robert Seesengood, Ph.D., associate dean of first-year and general education, professor of religious studies
Barbara Thun, artist, community member
Kristen T. Woodward, M.F.A., professor of art
Kaleb Murdock, Albright student and gallery attendant
Oluwaloseyi Olugbodi, Albright student and gallery attendant

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Karen A. Campbell, Ph.D., provost and vice president for academic affairs

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Kristy Kline, administrative assistant, Center for the Arts
Rich Houck, preparator
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Freedman Gallery is located at 13th & Bern Streets, Reading, Pennsylvania 19612. Gallery Hours are Tuesday-Friday 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sunday 1-4 p.m. The gallery is closed on Mondays, holidays, breaks and summer.

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ALBRIGHT
Freedman Gallery