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CAMH TRAVELS A HIGHWAY TO HELL WITH 'WILL BOONE: THE HIGHWAY HEX'

by Molly Glentzer



"The Melting Cowboy," a recreated video set, is among works on view in "Will Boone: The Highway Hex" at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, up through Feb. 16.

"The Highway Hex" provides a good theme for Will Boone's first solo museum show, bringing him home to Houston after about a decade in New York and Los Angeles. He's been such a success, he no longer needs to install other peoples' art to pay his studio rent, although he still has a lot of road ahead.

"I find myself trying to understand where I am all the time," he says. "This is a huge step forward."

Embracing the opportunity, he created a new body of work for a space he knows well, the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston's subterranean Zilkha Gallery. It conjures the physical and psychological landscape of that 1,500-mile stretch of I-10 between Houston and Los Angeles, which Boone has traveled often.

The title refers to zoning out while driving long distances, sometimes called highway hypnosis, or white line fever. The show, however, is a horror-flick-blood red and black fever dream. You probably would not want to be stuck on the road in Boone's head, but it's a wickedly atmospheric place to visit.

Sound and shifting light emanate from a large screen where Boone's first-long-form video plays. "Sweet Perfume" has a loose narrative that imagines a kinder, sweeter Leatherface from "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre" (Stephanie Boone, his wife), who pawns her chainsaw to get home to Texas and take care of family business.

Boone does not expect many museum visitors to sit through the 54-minute video. And frankly, that might hurt your eyes. Boone shot the piece with low-tech VHS news cameras before transferring the footage digitally.

The intentionally raw-looking video performs like a frenetic light sculpture, also creating a jumbled soundtrack for the show, filling up empty space like the noise of a TV that runs continuously. “Maybe you catch something funny, or a nice song, or a pretty sunset,” Boone says.

The video also becomes a vessel for the show’s objects, creating a mythology that gets elevated once they’re ensconced in a museum: Props and sets become sculpture and installation.

Smartly, all of the show’s objects function as vessels of one type or another, including three refined, even elegant sculptures that reveal Boone’s minimalist leanings: “The River,” a 240-foot long black box with red neon inset along the entire stretch; “Resting Place,” a truck seat-inspired bench where it’s okay to sit and watch the video; and the sad-funny “A Picture of Me (Without You),” a plywood jukebox full of cassettes by George Jones.

Then there is the installation, “The Melting Cowboy,” a garish, hybrid pawn shop and bar fusing two of the video’s sets into the kind of surreal, dangerous environment a traveler might find out in the desert. It holds the painting “Family Tree,” collaged with pictures of famous tough guys and mean-looking dogs — although the painting is easy to miss because it blends in so well other pictures tacked onto the wrinkly foil wall.

Four other paintings, the show’s most intense eye magnets, are abstract landscapes that incorporate symbolically charged found objects. A moving blanket, for example, is embedded into “The Traitor,” which evokes a horizon-eating sun.