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AT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS MUSEUM HOUSTON, A TEXAN EXPLORES WHAT IT MEANS TO LEAVE THEN RETURN HOME

by Sam Russek

"The Melting Cowboy" Photograph by Lee Thompson; Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, and Karma, New York

Over the years, the artist Will Boone has spent many hours driving to and from his two studios in Los Angeles and Central Texas. Those long journeys sparked the Houston native's interest in a phenomenon known as highway hypnosis—that zoned-out mental state in which we drive long distances without consciously thinking about it—that centers his first solo museum exhibition, "Highway Hex," in his hometown. It's a fitting concept to explore in the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston: the dim space is illuminated only by a handful of red lights, which recall brake lights in the evening along I-10.

Boone is an artist, collector (of soy sauce buckets, velvet dog portraits, and more), and a filmmaker. In "Highway Hex," which opened this month and runs through mid-February, Boone created all-new site-specific pieces focusing on how his Texas roots and his artistry fold into each other. Boone explicitly grapples with how others define Texas and how Texas wants to define itself, as in "Lazy X," a painting featuring a state trooper jacket torn into two parts and stretched horizontally across the center of the canvas. The jacket, pressed flat against the bright red bar-top resin, is reminiscent of animal hides, while its sprawling appendages create a horizon within the painting. "I find myself trying to understand where I am all the time," Boone says, an idea which frequently finds its way into his artistic practice. A city like New York had previously inspired him to stack his materials on top of each other into smaller, more compact pieces, but the long stretches between Texas and California pushed him to expand and mimic the distant skyline.

The show also works to counter outsiders' impressions of a violent Texas, referencing real and ongoing violence in and out of the state, and subverting a long history of violence in media. For instance, Boone's first full-length film, Sweet Perfume, features Leatherface—the iconic villain in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*—but instead follows the character embarking on a new journey more reminiscent of *Paris, Texas* than of the original slasher film. Several of the exhibit's paintings, sculptures, and repurposed movie props also make appearances in Boone's film, which delivers an atmospheric web of impressions and explanations of what it means to leave Texas then come back.

Texas Monthly spoke with Boone and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston curator Patricia Restrepo about his development as an artist in Houston, the history of violence in Texas, building the show's environment, and the artist's collection of items.

Texas Monthly: How do you think growing up in Houston has affected your art?

Will Boone: I moved in and out of Houston, but I was basically there until I was in my mid or late twenties. And so I think that by the time I left, I was really used to that way of life—of driving a car everywhere, moving slow, being resourceful, trying not to have a job, painting at night, having very little money, spending lots of time talking to my friends, drinking beer, and eating Vietnamese food. I lived in New York for a period of time and I never really felt comfortable there. I never liked riding the subway. I always missed driving a car. And then eventually I moved to Los Angeles and I found a part of northeast L.A. that reminded me of the north side of Houston. So that's where I live now.

TM: How did the respective infrastructures of Houston and Los Angeles factor into the exhibition itself?

WB: I was thinking about the similarities and differences between the two cities. For example, they both sort of have the same kind of sprawl. You spend a lot of time by yourself driving in a car. And I think it affects the way you think about things and the way that you look at things. Both cities feel like a layer of concrete; a veneer sitting on top of an environment that doesn't want it to be there.

Patricia Restrepo: When we discussed the possibility of the space, that idea was extremely enticing to him because I think his work is fitting in these subterranean spaces. This is the fourth time he's had an exhibition that explores thematics of what we as a culture and society decide to drive underground, both in what we hide, but also the hobbies and passions that are allowed to prosper in high art spaces, including model making, which is one of Will's interests. So upon our conversation, I was thrilled that he really wanted to embrace this opportunity as a chance to expand his practice … but also really willing to take risks, including, as you know, making his first longform video, making assemblage paintings with the objects, which he had undertaken before.

TM: Wandering around the space, I kept coming back to the film. What ideas were you trying to explore in it, and why was it the best medium for those ideas?

WB: When I decided I wanted to show a film in the space, I was thinking about the way a TV gives off light in a room, like a bedroom with no light on. And I wanted to

have that energy in the show. I also felt like if I made a video, that would be this way to sneak in sound and then music. As I was thinking about the show this sort of narrative appeared: my own narrative of coming back to Houston to make this show and thinking about Houston. I started to think of how I could explore some of those ideas with the video. I was thinking, if the video is going to be there, I wanted there to be something happening; I didn't want it to just be abstract images. I wanted it to be a very loose narrative. And so I started to think about a character returning to Texas, specifically from L.A.—a place where people flock to in this effort to reinvent themselves. I started to think about what would it mean for me to go back and what would that mean for anyone to go back.

PR: It was important for both Will and myself that the exhibition function as a total work of art or a total environment. We really worked to create that, initially, upon the descent into the exhibition space, you recognized as a viewer that something here is different since the exterior walls aren't sheetrock. It's kind of drawing on the visual vocabulary of the stage set and a recognition of outside versus inside. So as you cross that threshold into the exhibition space, my goal, frankly, was for the space to be completely transformative and evocative of a time and place and energy that hasn't been fully harnessed in the gallery before. I think that a goal of the curator and someone who works with the institution and with the hope that visitors return regularly is that they feel like the space is made anew with each exhibition. And I think it's rare that we are afforded the opportunity to work with an artist who thinks so holistically in terms of their exhibition.

TM: How do the film and the rest of the show sort of relate to each other?

WB: Well, I collect lots of materials, and I really never know what I'm gonna use it for. Sometimes they work their ways into paintings, some in sculptures. They're things I look at and get ideas from, and so when I started to think about the movie, and the props in the movie, I decided rather than going to a house and renting props, I would try to use everything I could. And I was thinking about props, how you imbue them with meaning when they're used in a movie. Afterwards, they don't go back to being just what they were. And I was thinking about that as an interesting way of thinking of objects. So I started to play with that idea by making sculptures to use in the movie, making props, and then I actually didn't end up using some of them in the movie, but I used them in an installation.

TM: Among those are a couple items from your personal collection. How did you get the floor tile from Charles Whitman's house?

WB: It was around 2005 or something like that, and I spent a lot of time in Austin. I was hanging out at a friend's apartment, on the sidewalk in front of his place. This guy was out there and I started talking to him, he had studied to be an architect, and was working on this residential project. He told me that the home belonged to a Charles Whitman. I got him to give me the address. When I went over there a few weeks later, they had started remodeling it. So part of the house was torn down. My friend and I went in there. The original tile was still in there, though, so I rolled it up, cut it with a pocket knife, and took it out of there, a big piece of it. I took it back to Houston on the Greyhound. Eventually, I cut it up kind of into squares the size of a coaster, and I gave them out to different people.

TM: The last tile is in the show, right?

WB: Yeah. The last one is in the show. It's in the movie, too, in the pawn shop in the movie.

TM: The protagonist of your film is Leatherface, from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. But here Leatherface is a nonviolent character, which might subvert a lot of viewers' expecting something else. Do you think Texas is seen as violent by outsiders and in the media?

WB: The character is sort of this monster that acts as a personification of fear. This fear of the openness of the landscape, of the isolation and sort of harshness and violence of nature is something Lawrence Wright wrote about in his book (*God Save Texas*). He talks about this point in time where the perception of Texas and the depiction of Texas in movies shifts from a place of opportunity, like the frontier and Manifest Destiny, to stuff like *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*—this place that's lawless and mean, like ***No Country for Old Men***. And he talks about the assassination of JFK as a sort of turning point.

There's also an artist I like a lot, Cady Noland, who wrote *Towards a Metalanguage of Evil*. She talks about Texas and how, after the JFK assassination, the idea of Texas becomes almost shorthand for murder. When I read that, I really began thinking about being someone who is from Texas but left, and is looking at how the state is perceived from the outside.