RUBY CITY

Seyde Garcia

Juan Carlos Escobedo. Photo by Galya Feierman

An interview with *Synthesis & Subversion Redux* artist Juan Carlos Escobedo
By Seyde Garcia
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Curated by Elyse Gonzales, Director of Ruby City, and Mia Lopez, Curator of Latinx Art at the McNay Museum of Art, *Synthesis & Subversion Redux* marks an important milestone in the narratives told by a new generation of immigrant voices in the United States at a time when it's urgent to listen to the stories of those living through this complex political and economic era. This exhibition—which follows a donation from the estate of the late curator and educator Frances Colpitt—feels both timely and necessary. Inspired by the original 1996 *Synthesis and Subversion* exhibition curated by Colpitts, it builds on foundational conversations about identity, culture, and resistance through contemporary eyes.

I am especially honored to be invited to speak with Juan Carlos Escobedo, one of the artists included in *Synthesis & Subversion Redux*. His work isn't unfamiliar to me—last year, at the Contemporary Art Month Perennial, one of his fashion-inspired pieces caught my attention. At first glance, it seemed to be purely a cardboard shirt with a sarcastic and funny description, but it slowly revealed a landscape evocative of the El Paso–Ciudad Juárez border, embedding memory and geography in garment form.

If we, as human beings, are shaped by the places we come from and the spaces we inhabit, I found Escobedo's decision to channel that legacy through fashion—an art form often dismissed as superficial—clever, transforming it into an assertion of identity and creativity.

Born in El Paso, Texas, in 1985, Escobedo is an artist and educator whose work explores his lived experiences as a queer, brown person raised in the socioeconomically challenged U.S./Mexico borderlands. His work confronts residual class and race shame, navigating a predominantly white, hierarchical United States where privilege often aligns with light skin and middle-to-upper class status.

In my conversation with Escobedo, we examined the topics of identity, material culture, his personal practice, and camaraderie with other San Antonio-based artists. What follows is an excerpt of that conversation.

Seyde Garcia (SG): How did you come up with the idea of the cardboard clothing?

Juan Carlos Escobedo (JCE): In undergrad, I worked mostly with traditional oil on canvas, but something about it never sat right with me. Beyond the tedious practicalities—stretching canvas, gessoing—I felt that painting wasn't the best medium to

capture the hazy, overlapping, and elusive nature of dreams and memories, which were central to my work at the time. I wanted to break away from the rectangle, from the expected.

That led me to experiment with painting on paper and then on cardboard. Cardboard intrigued me because it was accessible, easy to manipulate, and had sculptural potential without needing to fully commit to sculpture. I liked that it could be flat or dimensional, fragile or sturdy—it aligned with the fluid, unstable qualities of memory.

In grad school, one project shifted everything: a class assignment to recreate a childhood home. I rebuilt the trailer I grew up in out of cardboard. Despite prior objections, my peers and professors responded enthusiastically. That reaction confirmed for me that there was something powerful in this material when paired with personal, intimate spaces.

After grad school, I started breaking down the large installations into smaller components. One idea I still hold onto is to reconstruct my childhood trailer and fill its interior with miniature landscapes of Ciudad Juárez. Unable to build at that scale, I started making small house-like shelves and objects, storing them in a closet until they overtook the space. I clipped them to hangers out of necessity, and that sparked the idea: what if these could be worn? Could clothing carry these memories and spaces, literally and metaphorically?

I saw one of the hanging cardboard pieces and thought: this could be clothing. In 20 minutes, I fashioned a makeshift trench coat out of them. Soon after came a shirt, shoes—an impromptu, wearable archive of personal spaces. Inspired by old Sears catalog descriptions, I invented a fictional fashion line called By J.Esc, a play on J.Crew, to frame these works. It all came together to carry the memories, environments, and histories of home on the body, accessible, everyday forms to house intangible, often fragmented experiences.

SG: When did you create the first cardboard piece? And how has the project of J.Esc clothing evolved since then?

JCE: The first cardboard piece I made was in 2017, and I just kept going with it. At first, people thought it was interesting, but they'd always ask, "Why cardboard? Why houses?" It wasn't until 2020 or 2021, during that massive winter storm, that something shifted for me. I remember hearing—and I'm sure it was true—that some of the wealthier neighborhoods in San Antonio still had power while other areas went without for two weeks. It made me so angry because it's always the same story: money talks, resources flow where the wealth is, and the rest of us get left behind.
I was sitting there freezing, wondering what I could possibly do. I wasn't going to protest in the streets, so I turned inward and thought about materials. What's something like cardboard—humble, overlooked—but completely unquestioned? That's when I landed on white paper. No one ever asks "Why white paper?" It's invisible in its normalcy.

It also reflected something personal. Even though the people in my neighborhood kept their homes neat, clean, and took pride in their spaces, you could still see the makeshift nature of it—people doing the best with what they had. The aesthetic was shaped by culture and necessity, not by inherited wealth or an architect's blueprints. That contrast [...] started to resonate with people. They recognized the white house, the white material, and through that, they began to understand and validate the brown, janky parts, too.

For years, people would ask if I was going to introduce color, and I'd be like, we are literally talking about color—it's just not the color you want to see. Eventually, I did start bringing color in—partly because I wanted to, exploring things like sky and sun in the landscapes I was building—but also, honestly, because part of me was trying to be more palatable. There's this American ideal of Latinx culture being loud, colorful, vivacious, entertaining—and that says more about capitalism than culture. Capitalism not only creates socioeconomic inequality but also racial ones. This romanticization of our culture isn't about true understanding; it's about making us entertain[able] enough to be consumable.

SG: How does the idea of incorporating new materials and colors like blue and yellow to some of your most recent pieces fit within your body of work? I understand that this change came after your residency in Berlin during the summer of 2024.

JCE: The idea for the new pieces—like the big sun, the blue, the yellow—came after Berlin. I'm still figuring out the connection between the materials and the subjects. Before, I was working with found cardboard, materials tied to brown spaces and bodies. There was a clear relationship: brown, discarded, textured versus clean, store-bought, white materials representing white or white-adjacent spaces.

Now, with these new works—like the eclipse mask or the blue jacket—I'm using materials that are ironically harmful to the environment: plastics, tapes, things I buy rather than find. It feels like a contradiction because I've always been interested in nature. Lately, I feel a growing pull towards mysticism—not spiritualism exactly but acknowledging natural phenomena as something that affects our bodies. Material-wise, I'm aware of the disparity between what I'm trying to portray and what I'm using to do it. Maybe acknowledging that contradiction is the first step.

I've also tried using fabric, since people often suggest it because of my interest in clothes—I love how clothing shapes bodies and communicates unspoken messages. But fabric didn't feel right in the artwork. Sarah Fox taught me a technique using saran wrap and clear tape to mold body parts, and it clicked. It's simple, instinctive, and gives me control. For now, I'm still exploring. Maybe eventually I need to consciously address these materials' environmental implications, but for now, I'm sitting with the tension.

SG: How important are concepts as decolonization and identity in your work?
JCE: In these conversations, the question of identity inevitably surfaces. Words like "mestizo" carry complicated, colonial histories, invented to categorize and control. In English, there isn't even a word that captures this in-betweenness. I often just call myself brown, queer, and Mexican, because to claim anything else feels like trying to fit into a system built by and for someone else.

Especially in the borderlands, the experience is one of perpetual liminality. Neither fully here nor there, and we are often expected to perform identities for institutions or audiences. What I've learned through these conversations and projects is that there's power in non-categorization. Not as an escape, but as a refusal to be boxed in by colonial, racial, or cultural expectations. It allows us to move between spaces with empathy, to witness, to share, and to create without having to prove or translate ourselves.

SG: At the opening of *Synthesis & Subversion Redux*, you mentioned that, together with Audrya Flores and Sarah Fox, you formed the HEXAS collective. What does this project mean to you?

JCE: The landscapes we inhabit are being stripped of their histories, paved over for Buc-ee's and suburbs. Our documenting of these places — noticing where pentacles hide, or where nature breaks through concrete — is a small act of resistance. Not to reclaim something pure, because we are products of colonization too, but to acknowledge what remains beneath.

In these times, community means more than academic or institutional validation. It's about finding people you can speak yourself with. It's about walking, noticing, sharing small pieces of magic and grief and memory. That's what HEXAS is for me.

Synthesis & Subversion Redux is on view at Studio in Chris Park through September 28, 2025. For more information visit www.rubycity.org

Juan Carlos Escobedo (b. 1985 El Paso, TX; lives San Antonio, TX) uses cardboard to create fantastical clothing items that feature intricate architectural renderings of homes and landscapes. His work addresses his experience of race and class on the border and throughout the United States, using cheap, ephemeral material as a conduit for larger considerations of socioeconomic discrimination and prejudice.

Seyde Garcia (b.1991, Nuevo Laredo, MEX.) A border native from Nuevo Laredo, García has spent 16 years championing the arts as a storyteller, literature promoter, and actress. She writes for publications in Northern Mexico and Texas, exploring art's role in community life. Her mission is to connect art, artists, and audiences through inclusive, joyful experiences. She also works in HR in the manufacturing sector, leading social impact initiatives in STEM education.