

# RUBY CITY



Alana Hernandez, Image courtesy of Print Center New York. Photo by Argenis Apolinario.



José Villalobos

## **Collapsing Structure, Performing Gender: The Multidisciplinary Practice of José Villalobos**

By Alana Hernandez

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Throughout their dynamic and multidisciplinary practice, José Villalobos (b. 1988, El Paso, Texas) interrogates and deconstructs aspects of gender and masculinity within the United States / Mexico borderlands. Working across sculpture, photography, video, and performance, Villalobos repurposes culturally significant objects that echo their upbringing within the border region. By interrogating these symbols of traditional masculinity, Villalobos calls attention to the rigid and conservative patriarchal roots of their evangelical Mexican upbringing and the cultural mores of West Texas, both of which often stand in stark contrast to their own identity as a queer, Brown person.

At the core of Villalobos's practice is an interrogation of the sociohistorical legacies and enduring pressures of ranching and rodeo culture across the South and Southwest. These spaces, steeped in machismo, demand rigid gender performance and often erase or endanger queer and nonconforming bodies. Yet Villalobos highlights the contradictions within these cultures: the spectacle and flamboyance of rodeo fashion, for example, that employs glittering buckles, rhinestones, and theatrical flair, suggests an aesthetic that edges toward camp, even while the culture itself remains profoundly hostile to queerness. By emphasizing this dissonance, Villalobos reveals the instability of these cultural codes and the violence that underpins them.

# RUBY CITY

Central to Villalobos's oeuvre is the act of transformation. Here, within the exhibition at Ruby City, we see one example. In *El ardor era como el que sufrió Carmelita Torres al cruzar la frontera de Ciudad Juárez y El Paso* [The Burn was Like the One Carmelita Torres Suffered When Crossing the Border of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso] (2023), a cowboy hat—an enduring symbol of stoic masculinity—is set aflame, reimagined as a vessel of rebellion. Elsewhere in their practice, boots fold under the weight of embellishments and embroidery, their structural integrity undermined by embellishment. Belts, typically symbols of authority, become fragile talismans oscillating between protection and vulnerability. These altered objects embody the tension Villalobos experienced growing up queer in a deeply conservative religious household: what was supposed to uphold order and structure collapses under the weight of otherness.



*Synthesis & Subversion Redux*, Linda Pace Foundation, Ruby City, San Antonio, TX. Jorge Villareal, photographer.

# RUBY CITY

Another key element in Villalobos's work is the act of mirroring. By incorporating mirrors, reflective surfaces, and ropes that tether or frame the viewer, Villalobos implicates audiences in the very systems they critique. *En la reflexión del machismo I* [In the Reflection of Machismo I] (2024), asks viewers to stand before an intricately designed mirror, molded in the shape of the decorative embroidered patterning found often on western shirts. In so doing, Villalobos references the ostentatious fashioning of western clothing and design. Onlookers are confronted with their own reflections, drawn into a kind of inadvertent cosplay. The embellished flair on top of shirts, boots, and jeans that inspired this design now becomes a glittering object itself. In this work, the audience is forced to consider their own participation in or distance from the performance of masculinity. How are we dressed? What identities do we perform or “cosplay” in everyday life, knowingly or not?



*Synthesis & Subversion Redux*, Linda Pace Foundation, Ruby City, San Antonio, TX. Jorge Villareal, photographer.

Villalobos's work resonates with performance studies and queer theory, echoing José Esteban Muñoz's insistence in *The Sense of Brown* that racialized and queer subjects are always already performing within and against dominant scripts of gender, race, and nationhood. Muñoz anchors this insight in his theory of disidentification which he describes

# RUBY CITY

as, “the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate with such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.”<sup>1</sup> In this way, Villalobos’s mirrors do not merely reflect; they stage the audience as participants in a larger performance of gender, exposing how identity itself is constructed, enacted, and policed.

Equally important is Villalobos’s role as an alternative historian. Through his use of cowboy imagery, ranching traditions, and material culture tied to Mexican American labor, Villalobos points to suppressed or neglected histories—particularly those surrounding the Bracero Program (1942–64). One such work that underscores this history is the looping video *El polvo se humedecía y se deslizaba sobre sus rostros como velo de novia* [The Dust Moistened and Slid Over Their Faces Like a Bridal Veil] (2023). In it, a veil wafts over the artist’s face, recalling the chemicals sprayed directly onto braceros, whose bodies were deemed “unclean” before entering the United States. Although officially “justified” as a sanitary measure, this cruel act of fumigation also symbolized a racialized desire to purge workers of perceived excesses—dirt, germs, and implicitly, any traits that unsettled dominant norms of masculinity, sexuality, and cultural identity. The Bracero Program—long narrated through the lens of productivity, exploitation, and heteromascularity—thus carried within it an unspoken mandate of regulation: to sanitize not only bodies but also possibilities of queerness.

By restaging this imagery in a performative manner upon their own body, Villalobos underscores how the logic of “cleansing” endures. Just as braceros were chemically purified to meet U.S. expectations, conservative religious frameworks often cast queerness as a stain to be erased, a contamination to be corrected. In response, Villalobos insists on the presence of queer braceros—figures absent from dominant histories—reframing labor sites not only as arenas of exploitation but also as spaces of intimacy, desire, and gender nonconformity. Performance for Villalobos is both testimony and defiance: through ritualized gestures—adorning their body with altered cowboy gear, enduring physical strain, or exposing vulnerability in public—Villalobos weaves personal memory with collective history, embodying the violence of silencing while refusing its dominant grip. In this way, their work reveals how narratives of cleanliness and purity, whether through government fumigation or religious doctrine, continue to seek the erasure of queer life, even as that life persists.

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<sup>1</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11; and José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong’o (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 68.

# RUBY CITY

In a broader sense, Villalobos's practice engages urgent contemporary issues: escalating attacks on LGBTQIA+ rights, persistent anti-immigrant rhetoric, and systemic racism in the United States. Their work critiques these conditions while offering counternarratives that affirm dignity, self-determination, and resilience. By queering the symbols of machismo, turning mirrors back on viewers, and unearthing hidden histories of labor and desire, Villalobos employs their art as a tool of critique, endurance, and cultural reimagination.

Ultimately, Villalobos's oeuvre insists on queerness not as deviation but as central to the cultural fabric of the borderlands. Their work reveals how objects, traditions, and histories can be transformed, destabilizing categories that have sought to confine identity while extending an invitation to reimagine masculinity, history, and belonging in ways that embrace multiplicity rather than suppression. By weaving together the patriarchal force of an evangelical upbringing, the violence of national policy, and the contradictions of cowboy culture, Villalobos demonstrates that what was once framed as impurity can instead become a source of power, creativity, and survival.

*Synthesis & Subversion Redux* is on view at Studio in Chris Park through September 28, 2025. For more information visit [www.rubycity.org](http://www.rubycity.org).

**Alana Hernandez** is Senior Curator at the ASU Art Museum, where she leads the curatorial team and oversees the exhibition program. In her curatorial practice, Hernandez co-creates and develops relational projects and exhibitions that amplify intersectional and multifaceted interpretations of Latinx art. Most recently, she curated *José Villalobos: Rough Rider and Muddy Terrains: Mariana Ramos Ortiz + Estephania González* at the ASU Art Museum. Hernandez has organized exhibitions and artist projects with Carolina Aranibar-Fernández, Sam Frésquez, Luis Rivera Jimenez, Alejandro Macias, and Sarah Zapata, among others. She is currently at work on a major retrospective of Carmen Lomas Garza.

**José Villalobos** (b. 1988, El Paso, TX; lives San Antonio, TX) confronts machismo and homophobia in performance, installation, and multimedia works. He embraces cultural practices and symbolism often associated with masculinity—cowboy boots and hats alongside machinery, tools, and trucks—and skews their meaning. He recalls his own lived traumas through corporal performance and activations, contending with violence and resilience.