

ARTFORUM

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Travis Boyer, *Astrodome Hustle*, 2017, cotton, wool, natural dyes, faux pearls, rhinestones, and sequins handwoven in Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, with master dyer and weaver Mariano Sosa Martinez at the Biidaüü Weaving Collective, 96 x 42 x 42"

A fan who became a friend and an employee—and then an obsessed, disgruntled ex-employee—shot and killed the singer Selena Quintanilla-Pérez (known as Selena) in 1995, at a Days Inn in Corpus Christi, Texas, when the beloved “Queen of Tejano” was just twenty-three, and the Texas-born artist Travis Boyer was sixteen. He was a fan, too. For his exhibition at Signal Gallery in Brooklyn this summer, titled “Ahora y Nunca” (Now and Never), Boyer mined a long-standing daydream to present an array of Selena memorabilia, including an only partially visible treasure trove of Selena-related ephemera and merchandise neatly packed in six transparent storage bins (The Boyer Family Archive of Selena Quintanilla Miscellany, 1996–2017), alongside mysterious and richly textured original objects: vibrant saddle blankets, copper and silver hand mirrors, and luminous paintings on silk. There was a mournful undercurrent to the uncrowded installation of artworks and archival materials, but Boyer elided explicit reference to the tragic, traumatic fact

of Selena's murder—as well as the limits of conventional memorialization—to make way for a nuanced response to the wistful, generative question, “What if she had lived?”

At the time of her death, Selena was poised to become a pop-crossover sensation. Having achieved unprecedented success as a woman in the male-dominated world of Tejano music, while also bringing the Latin subgenre beyond its traditional Mexican and Mexican-American markets, she'd begun recording her first English-language album. She had also recently opened, to much fanfare, a pair of South Texas boutiques, which carried her line of clothing and accessories and offered corresponding services, aptly named Selena Etc. (It was the manager of her stores, Yolanda Saldívar, who killed her.) Boyer's fragmentary, abstracted fantasy of the superstar's survival, however, has little to do with any likely career trajectory for her as a musician or entrepreneur from this point. Instead, he draws out the quieter qualities and potentials underlying the stirring performances and flamboyant glamour of his subject—her collaborative ethos, defiant self-fashioning, and love of craft and materials. Boyer's delicate chains of association zigzag throughout the show to connect his life and art practice to Selena's.

Carnation Bandana, 2004, is credited to the artist and Sean Slattery and identified as an image from an “amateur fashion shoot.” In it, a serious, shirtless boy models a nipple-grazing “bandana,” a lush garment made from peach and coral flowers and designed by Boyer more than a decade ago. Resembling both a halter top and a breastplate, it recalls the once-controversial, bejeweled bustiers handmade by Selena, but belongs to a different, distinctly queer, strain of risqué. Beneath the framed print, Los Angeles Light Box, 2017, a shrine-like ledge adorned with silk flowers, illuminated two rare vintage slides of Selena mugging for the camera, taken by an unknown backstage photographer in 1994, with a loupe provided.

Such intimate vignettes orbited around the exhibition's most commanding works: the handwoven equestrian blankets. These bold, distilled renderings of the singer's most memorable performance outfits are substantial, tactile creations of wool and cotton, brightened by sequins, rhinestones, and faux pearls. The deep-purple and burgundy Astrodome Hustle, 2017, commemorates the flare-legged, crisscross-topped jumpsuit she wore for her iconic final performance; the golden Days Inn, 2017, portentously incorporates the motel chain's logo behind her dancing studded cowboy boots. The blankets, tossed over sculptural retail-display racks, were made in collaboration with the Oaxaca, Mexico-based Biidaüü Weaving Collective, a group Boyer has lived and worked with. To consider these works as the hypothetical products of Selena Etc.—had its namesake lived to oversee its evolution—is to imagine a radical divergence from the sweatshop production mode of most celebrity-branded apparel.

That's the kind of quixotic speculation encouraged here. For Boyer, Selena's death is associated with another Texas dream cut short, the democratic governorship of Ann Richards. She was defeated after one term by George W. Bush, marking the beginning, as the artist's press release reads, of “the gradual dissolution of a vision of continental economic solidarity and cultural inclusiveness,” which culminate, you could say, in the hysterical wall-building rhetoric of today. In light of this, the artist's anti-dystopian vision, articulated through bittersweet handmade works and personal archives, is a welcome testament to the power of creative fandom, and to the seismic import of a Selena-scale hero.

—Johanna Fateman