To tailor a garment by “rock of eye” is to rely on the drape in the fitting process—that is, to rely on experience over mathematical measurement. Draping is a kind of drawing in space: a freehand, an intuition, a trust of materials. *Troy Montes Michie: Rock of Eye*, an early-career survey, collects the artist’s collages, drawings, and sculptures to draw the contours of body and place. The exhibition expands from his past assemblages and collages that center magazine images of the Black male body in addition to sculptural work that traces the social history and form of the zoot suit, a garment at the center of the 1943 attacks primarily on Mexican American, African American, and Filipino American youth in Los Angeles known as the Zoot Suit Riots.

Montes Michie was born in El Paso, Texas, and his practice reflects his experience growing up along the United States and Mexico border. In the gallery, repurposed images lead from figure to ground—occupying an ambiguous space between portraiture and landscape—and reveal common threads between borderland, subjectivity, and geography.

*Troy Montes Michie: Rock of Eye* is a collaboration between the Rivers Institute for Contemporary Art & Thought and California African American Museum (CAAM). The exhibition is curated by Andrea Andersson, Rivers Institute Founding Director & Chief Curator; with Jordan Amirkhani, Curator, Rivers Institute; and Taylor Renee Aldridge, Visual Arts Curator & Program Manager, CAAM. Contemporary Arts Museum Houstons (CAMH’s) presentation is coordinated by Patricia Restrepo, Assistant Curator.

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CAMOUFLAGE

Camouflage is the use of materials, coloration, or illumination to disguise, disorient, and, at times, dazzle, in order to make things hard to see. This artistic strategy is evident in Montes Mitchie’s woven works, such as Out of Sight, Out of Mind (2018) and Foreground As Background (2018). While camouflage has many functions, its relationship to military strategies of deception and armed conflict is undeniable. First practiced in the eighteenth century by British rifle units, camouflage was used extensively by the French military for trench, land, and aerial warfare during World War I, covering uniforms and weaponry to decrease casualties brought on by new tactics capable of mass death. By World War II, the British military began developing techniques for desert environments, reinforcing the imperialist and geographical impulse at the heart of military control. The invention of new strategies of deception in arid landscapes points to the ways in which camouflage is used to police “uncontrollable” lands, quell insurgency, and constrict migration.
COLLAGE

The technique of applying manufactured, printed, or “found” materials using adhesive to a surface, known as collage, has a long and rich history within the development of modern and contemporary art. The use of fragmentation and juxtaposition of disparate elements to create new images and visual relationships has tied the practice of collage to a range of revolutionary movements from pacifism and Communism to feminist and queer liberation. Collage mobilizes the cut as a tool for reinvention, and for this reason, has been put to effective use by artists during times of war and political upheaval to disrupt visual continuity and engage social fractures. Montes Mitchie’s use of collage is on display across the galleries, in works such as Distorted in the Interest of Design (2019).
MEXICO–UNITED STATES BORDER

The border dividing the United States from Mexico stretches across 1,952 miles of varied terrain, where arid desert meets fertile ground and patches of desolate land meet densely populated townships. For much of its course, the border follows the path of the Rio Grande, or the Rio Bravo as it is known in Mexico. Its boundaries were decided in 1848 when, at the conclusion of the Mexican-American War, Mexico was forced to cede half of its territory to the United States—a vast parcel of land including present-day Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and parts of Colorado that transformed the Rio Grande into the southern boundary of Texas. For many inhabitants of these areas today, interactions on this border continue to replicate historical patterns of militarization, displacement, and state-sponsored violence. Surveillance on lands that were once Mexican (and before that, indigenous), perpetually inscribes those who occupy it as “alien” or “other.”

Troy Montes Michie was born and raised in El Paso, Texas, and his relation to the US/Mexico border is shaped by his own lived experiences traversing and negotiating the border—its physical, administrative, and psychological implications. The artist recalls, “… there is a constant reminder of the border wall that runs along the Rio Grande. In certain vicinities, there are checkpoints and you have to confirm your citizenship. The distinction of nationality emanates even though residents move regularly between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez.” Montes Michie’s juxtapositions of references from mestizo (Spanish for mixed race) to African American culture underscore the ways in which notions of home, space, and culture are intentionally disrupted by borders, and that the body is the ground upon which these wars continue to be fought.
FRIDA KAHLO

After three years of rigorous travel across the United States with her husband, the Mexican mural painter Diego Rivera, artist Frida Kahlo returned home to her native country physically and emotionally depleted. During this period of exhaustion, she completed her first collage, *My Dress Hangs There* (1933). Troy Montes Mitchie cites this collaged work as a realization that he could work beyond painting and expand his practice to assemblage. The work is a crowded composition filled with symbols of American capitalism and social chaos, such as skyscrapers, smokestacks, buildings in flames, and toilets on classical pedestals. At the center of the work hangs one of Kahlo’s dresses on a clothesline; although her physical body is absent, the soft slump of the garment indicates her presence.

Based on traditional garments associated with Zapotec women of Tehuantepec, the dress in *My Dress Hangs There* takes center stage. Kahlo was known for incorporating indigenous elements into her self-fashioning as a way to express her anti-imperialist politics and show solidarity with the matriarchal cultures displaced and oppressed by colonial powers. Kahlo’s relationship to these garments was complex due to privileges of class that allowed her to make choices about her self-presentation—a fact that she understood and exploited as a way of using clothing, hairstyling, and other adornments to move between and beyond conventions of gender, sexuality, race, and national origin. She stated: “In another time, I used to dress like a boy, with my hair cut short, pants, boots, and leather jacket. But when I see Diego I put on a Tehuana outfit ... I have no relationship at all with that people.”
“When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.” —Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, narrates the travels and tribulations of a young, unnamed Black man who leaves the Jim Crow American South for the excitement of 1940s Harlem. Searching for employment and community in the city, he experiences the disillusion felt by many Black Americans who took part in the Great Migration, who arrived in the urban North only to find racial discrimination, socioeconomic immobility, and police violence waiting for them. As the novel unfolds, the narrator’s experiences become infused with the surreal as a way to account for the existential crisis brought on by segregation and white supremacy and what it means to be socially invisible.

In homage to Ellison’s novel, Montes Michie titled his ongoing series of zoot suit works *When You Look at Me, You Only See My Surroundings*, inspired by a quotation from Invisible Man to address the ways in which wearers of zoot suits in the 1940s (Mexican Americans and Black Americans in particular) used the garment as a tool to reject social invisibility and assimilation into white American society.
“We lay enclosed by margins, hems, / where only we existed.” —Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera

In 1987, the Chicana feminist and queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa published Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza—a semi-autobiographical collection of essays examining the social, cultural, and psychic lives of “the new mestiza,” a transgressive and hybrid Chicanx/Latinx identity moving between the languages, countries, and cultures of Mexico and the United States. This text has deeply influenced and inspired Montes Mitchie’s artistic practice. Radical in both form and content, Borderlands claims the border between Mexico and the United States as a metaphor for various aspects of identity, whether cultural, sexual, or spiritual. In addition to being one of the first texts to center Chicanx queerness, Borderlands combines prose and poetry, history and myth, and personal stories. It mixes English, Castilian Spanish, North Mexican Spanish, Tex-Mex, and indigenous dialects to form what Anzaldúa calls “a new language—the language of the borderlands.” The text’s refusal to use a single language or offer translations forces readers to recognize the full dimensionality of the author’s experience and creates space for non-Spanish speakers to sit with their exclusion from full participation in the reading of the work.
OBSCENITY

For the collages featured in this exhibition, Montes Michie drew on archives of gay erotic pin-up magazines from the 1970s and 1980s featuring Black and brown men. Published in the wake of the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s these publications stand in flagrant defiance of the racist, sexist, and homophobic rhetoric espoused by conservative lawmakers who worked to define “obscenity” under the narrowest of terms, detach pornography from the freedoms of the First Amendment, and thus render pornography illegal.

As the courts struggled to determine a precise definition of “obscenity,” the United States Congress became overtly concerned about the growing proliferation of sexually explicit material and in 1968 authorized President Lyndon B. Johnson to appoint a special blue-ribbon Commission on Obscenity and Pornography to determine whether pornography caused “antisocial behaviors in American youth.” The Commission concluded that there was no legal justification to censor pornography and that it did not have harmful effects.

However, a great many Americans, especially those in the so-called “Silent Majority,” were appalled by what they saw as the immorality of student-led liberation movements of the decade. Soon after he assumed the presidency in 1969, Richard Nixon appointed four new justices to the Supreme Court, dramatically shifting the overall makeup of the court. Two cases, *Miller v. California* (1973) and *Paris Adult Theater v. Slaton* (1973), which sought to suppress sexually explicit books and moving image, allowed Justice Warren Burger to shape a new and narrower definition of “obscenity,” writing that a work could be deemed obscene unless it had “serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”
Self-fashioning is an exercise in liberty and individuality. Dress can signify a person's age and origins, as well as the communities they belong to. Dress also has the power to obscure and make visible bodies that might go unnoticed. Beginning in 2018, Montes Mitchie's work began to focus on the social history and form of the zoot suit.

As early as the 1930s, the zoot suit became synonymous with burgeoning jazz culture among Black and brown youth, from Harlem to Los Angeles. More relaxed and flamboyant than a traditional tailored suit, the zoot suit featured an oversized jacket with sprawling lapels and exaggerated shoulders worn with high-waisted balloon-leg trousers made from vibrantly colored fabrics. Often worn with a wide brim felt hat, the zoot suit extended the wearer's silhouette in space, granting them a powerful visibility in public. By the 1940s, the zoot suit style had become popular with Chicano/a youth in Los Angeles. Known as pachucos/as, this community of Mexican Americans adapted these garments as a form of resistance to American assimilation, with men incorporating chains and pompadour hairstyles into their fits and women wearing zoot suit jackets with short skirts, huarache sandals, and red lipstick. Pachucos'/as' distinct clothing, inventive language, and embrace of jazz resulted in a powerful counterculture that became criminalized in the wake of the Zoot Suit Riots—a series of riots in Los Angeles in June of 1943 set off after a group of World War II white servicemen alleged that they had been attacked by Chicano/a youth. In retaliation, servicemen hunted people of color adorned in the zoot suit style over a series of days, causing extreme racialized violence between the two groups.
Open Book, 2020
Cut paper, cut clothing, graphite, grease pencil, acrylic, polyester thread and ink on linen
Courtesy of Peter Lutz
LEFT TO RIGHT

**El Destierro/ That Which Abides** (Exile/ That Which Abides), 2019
Found photograph, cut paper, tape, papier-mâché, canvas, cut clothing, graphite, wax crayon, and acrylic on woven magazine pages
Collection of Dr. Michael I. Jacobs

**Amerikan Boogie**, 2017
Wood, paper, magazine cut-outs, shoe, and acrylic on clipboard
Courtesy of the Kon Leng Gien Trust

**Piensa en Mi**, 2017
Paper, photographs, clothing, and acrylic on masonite panel
Sophie Morner Collection
LEFT TO RIGHT

**This Body is Not a Fortress #6**, 2019
Cut paper, acrylic, ink, wax pencil, and tape on paper weaving
Courtesy of the Easton Capital / John Friedman Collection

**This Body is Not a Fortress #5**, 2019
Cut paper, acrylic, ink, wax pencil, and tape on paper weaving
Courtesy of the Easton Capital / John Friedman Collection

**This Body is Not a Fortress #1**, 2019
Cut paper, acrylic, ink, wax pencil, and tape on paper weaving
Courtesy of the Easton Capital / John Friedman Collection
Borderwalk/ This Thin Edge of Barbed Wire, 2019
Found photograph, cut paper, tape, papier-mâché, cardboard, cut clothing, belt, ink, graphite, wax crayon, and acrylic on woven magazine pages
Courtesy of James Keith Brown and Eric Diefenbach

Untitled (Disrobe), 2020
Ink, grease pencil and polyester thread on magazine paper
Collection of Jérôme Bernard and Chad Heap
Was the Beautiful Woman in the Mirror of the Water You or Me?, 2022
Paper, acrylic, ink, graphite, watercolor, conte, grease pencil, cut clothing, belt, hangers, garment bag, zippers, and polyester thread on sewn canvas panels
Courtesy the artist and Company Gallery, New York

LEFT TO RIGHT

Phases, 2020
Cut paper, book cover, photographs, wire hanger, cut clothing, graphite, grease pencil, polyester thread and acrylic on linen
Courtesy of the artist and Company Gallery, New York

Just Above My Head, 2016
Collage, glove, book end, broom handle, chain, tape, grill, and acrylic on wooden panel
Courtesy of the Kon Leng Gien Trust
LEFT TO RIGHT

**Portrait**, 2015  
Magazine collage, hair, glove, acrylic, rope, plexiglass, and tape on wooden panel  
Courtesy of the artist and Company Gallery, New York

**Disruptive Patterns**, 2017  
Paper, photographs, clothing, magazine cut-outs and acrylic on wood panel  
Courtesy of the collection of Racquel Chevremont

**Homeward Bound**, 2017  
Paper, photographs, clothing, magazine cut-outs, and acrylic on wood panel  
Courtesy of the collection of Mickalene Thomas
O P P O S I T E  W A L L
L E F T  T O  R I G H T

**Stance/Pose**, 2020
Cut paper, photographs, belt, cut clothing, graphite, grease pencil, polyester thread and acrylic on linen
Courtesy of the artist and Company Gallery, New York

**America is Woven of Many Threads #1**, 2019
Graphite, colored pencil, grease pencil, and polyester thread on magazine paper
Courtesy of Jeffrey Lee

**Untitled (Feeling Blue)**, 2020
Cut paper and polyester thread on magazine paper
Collection of Jérôme Bernard and Chad Heap

**America is Woven of Many Threads #3**, 2019
Graphite, colored pencil, grease pencil, and polyester thread on magazine paper
Gardy St Fleur Art Collection

**Distorted in the Interest of Design**, 2019
Cut paper, graphite, colored pencil, grease pencil, and polyester thread on magazine paper
Collection of Gregory R. Miller and Michael Wiener
LEFT TO RIGHT

Los Atravesados/ The Skin Of The Earth Is Seamless (The Mishevians/ The Skin Of The Earth is Seamless), 2019
Found photograph, cut paper, tape, papier-mâché, canvas, cut clothing, belt, ink, graphite, wax crayon, and acrylic on woven magazine pages
Collection of Spaghetti Western

Untitled (Stripes), 2019
Graphite, grease pencil and colored pencil on woven paper
Private Collection
**Out of Sight, Out of Mind**, 2018
Magazine pages, inkjet prints, clothing patterns, fabric, graphite, acrylic, colored pencil, and tape
Collection of Noel E.D. Kirnon

**Far from the ground where I was born**, 2019
Series of tacuche’s (blazers) made from cut paper, hangers, found photographs, tape, cut clothing, belt, ink, graphite, garment bag, shoes, acrylic, and woven magazine pages.
Collection of Arthur Lewis and Hau Nguyen
RIGHT

**Pachuco Composition #2**, 2016  
Paper, belt, sewing patterns, magazine collage, photograph and acrylic on stone cutting board  
Collection of Philip Aarons and Shelley Fox Aarons, New York

![Pachuco Composition #2](image)

OPPOSITE WALL

**Tacuche #1** (Suit #1), 2018  
Clothing fragments, steel, wood, shoe fragments, wire, tape, and hanger with zoot suit jacket  
Private Collection

![Tacuche #1](image)

**Tacuche #4** (Suit #4), 2019  
Clothing fragments, shoe fragments, and hanger with zoot suit jacket  
Courtesy of the artist and Company Gallery, New York

![Tacuche #4](image)
LEFT TO RIGHT

**Foreground As Background**, 2018
Paper, photographs, clothing, and acrylic on wood
Courtesy of the Jenkins Johnson Collection

**El Pasiente** (The Patient), 2018
Paper, photographs, clothing, postcard, and acrylic on wood
Courtesy of the Kon Leng Gien Trust

**In My Pocket**, 2018
Paper, photographs, clothing, and acrylic on wood
Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody

**Paisano** (Fellow), 2018
Paper, photographs, gloves, shoe fragment, and acrylic on wood
Courtesy of Antoine Drye and Jacqueline Moline