

In Conversation with Elle Pérez

## Fearless Bodies and Identities in Elle Pérez' Photography

By Nan Collymore  
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Kirsten 2015, from the series Reinas (2013-2015).

Elle Pérez' photographs are striking and mysterious, depicting people and places from very different worlds. The photographer from the Bronx, New York, talked with Nan Collymore for Contemporary And (C&) América Latina about the gaze of love, the fragmentation of the body, and identity in their photographs.

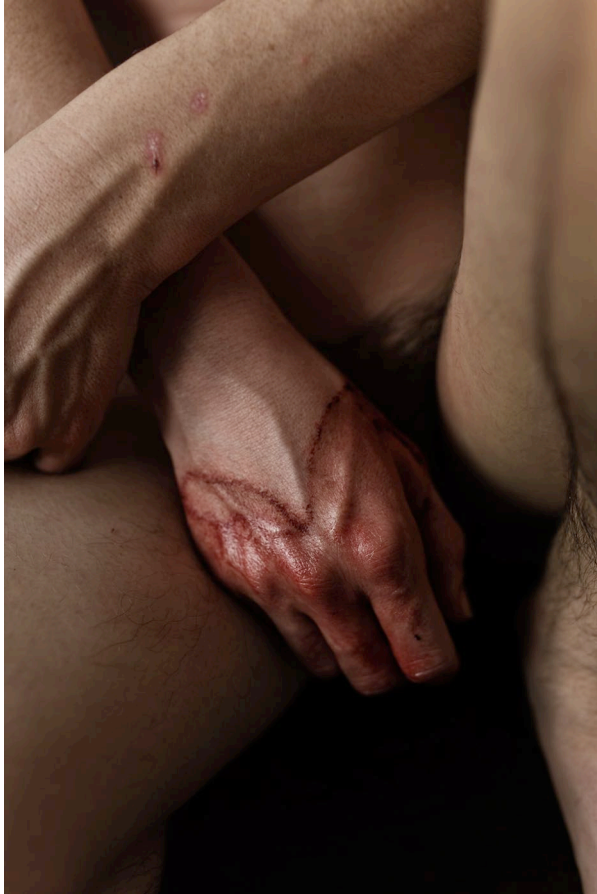
“Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted,” wrote Susan Sontag in her famous essay *On*

*Photography* (1977). “Industrial

societies turn their citizens into image-junkies; it is the most irresistible form of mental pollution”. This, decades before the onslaught of social media, before Instagram and the selfie. This is definitely not the case with Elle Pérez' work, which, though contemporary, travels through time, through America's futures and pasts. Portraits like *Ian 2017/2018* and *Kirsten 2015* are vivid and veracious, moments in the lives of those with whom Pérez is acquainted or becomes acquainted and, through that relationship, bares their soul. Whether invited into the fold through familial connections, friendship or social media messaging, Pérez elicits deep emotional states from the photos' subjects. But we are not voyeurs; we are invited into the image to ponder the light, the dark or the shifting, evanescent scene.

**C& América Latina: Tell me more about the shift from a horizontal to a vertical orientation in your photographs.**

Elle Pérez: I was talking to someone and they observed that it made sense in my previous work to use a horizontal orientation. It seemed to fit in with the theatricality of the subjects, so it made sense that it was like a film still or a theatre production. And then, when thinking about the body, the focus shifts, it makes sense that something would mimic the form of the body, the up and down movement. I thought that was pretty



Hand, from In Bloom (2015-2018). Courtesy of the artist.

astutely observed and I can't believe that I didn't see that before. (Laughs). I was grateful for them solving my mystery. I think that's an interesting way of thinking about it and it certainly feels true to my interests. I think that working with portraiture for so long, the western art historical aspects of that process have embedded themselves into my unconscious. I had been unconsciously reproducing them and that's why it felt right, because that formal change happened alongside my deepening interest in thinking about the body.

Right now I'm working on a couple of new images, from this past weekend. There's something about the way the tight frame works with the figure that is familiar, like the pictures of my partner, Ian, who I collaboratively photograph, and also with close friends. They become very familiar over time. I made a picture of Ian that I haven't shown: there's an arc that has a circular composition to it and then part of the circle completes outside of the frame; and because of the way that I travel around it, it circles out and around in a way that I find dynamic and I haven't made a picture

like that before. I find it really fun to do that, to figure out the different ways to image different parts of the body.

**C&AL: Could you say more about the fragmentation of the body in your still and video work?**

EP: I think it comes from the way that you look at someone you love. At first, when they're new to you, and then how you look at them when you've known them for a long time. There's something about plainly seeing someone initially and then, after you get to know them for a while, they become almost like a hologram, you interact with them, you get these threads, you don't necessarily see them as they truly are, unless you haven't seen them for a while. This happens to me mostly with my parents. So every four or six months, when I see them again, I am able to really look at them. In the beginning of the day I can see how they've aged but by the end of the day I'm back to knowing them as familiar faces. Photography can really facilitate that idea of plainly seeing because of how concerned it can be with precise detail.



Untitled, Baltimore, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

**C&AL:** The images are so private, with Ian's nipple it's anatomical, historical and gendered so; maybe a nipple is never just a nipple.

EP: I just finished reading *King Leopold's Ghost* by Adam Hochschild, about the atrocities committed in the Congo Free State by Belgium's king. It was interesting to me how photography, specifically of terrorized people and their mutilated bodies, was utilized by those fighting against the atrocities, and how others used photographs of the lush landscape and orderly

portraits to create pro-imperial propaganda. And I'm thinking about how much imagery of bodies has been made for the purpose of subjugating people. That history's relationship to contemporary imagery is what I strive toward, being wholly aware of and in some kind in control of my work.

Thinking again about my partner's nipple and where it lives in a broader history of images, I remember seeing the Harvey Cushing Brain Tumor Registry while I was at Yale. The registry contains between ten thousand and fifteen thousand photo negatives

of brain-tumor patients before and after surgery. And they are absolutely astonishing, vulnerable portraits. The images are so aesthetically beautiful and have an unsettling tension because you know that they're being made for the pseudo-scientific purpose of documenting deformity. So when I make this image of my partner's beloved nipple, which represents for him a claiming of himself, I also personally desire to have the same marks for myself one day as a result of my own top-surgery, I am interested in how it troubles and flirts with that complicated history of imaging.



Warm Curve, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

**C&AL:** I'm interested in the construction of identity; does it exist already or are you constructing together?

EP: I think in certain moments, yes, it's there in the wrestling photographs, those were very much about

providing an additional layer of validation to a performed identity. Photography in that instance helped take the wrestler's goal of performing their character's identity convincingly to another level because it allowed for a different type of "reality" – one that the photograph can construct – to be introduced. And I also think of this in regard to my images of and with my partner Ian. There are multiple negotiated layers of construction within every image after it is made, such as how he feels about the photograph, how I feel about it, whether or not it works simply as a photograph, and the different ways that power is negotiated. It's definitely a collaborative process of constructing the image together because they wouldn't exist without him.

**C&AL: How do you examine your own identity in your work?**

A lot of media narrative about the hurricane in Puerto Rico was about getting relief in as soon as possible. It was a strategic use of a certain type of narrative. Its like what Gayatri Spivak says about "strategic essentialism" and how sometimes it is politically useful to lean into essential myths to accomplish something purely for the sense of accomplishment, not to use it as a truth, but to help achieve something. Puerto Rican citizenship is problematic and raises compacted feelings about what citizenship is.



There's an endless oscillation between these identities, they're the same today and I don't know what I'll be in three years time. I've become very fond of the and instead of the or. That space is how identity is born and a way to remain expansive and, simultaneously, acknowledge there are some facts about my experience in the world and I don't want to act as if they don't exist, because they do.

*Elle Pérez is an artist from the Bronx, New York, who teaches photography at Harvard University and is Dean at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Pérez' work will appear at PS1 MoMA until September 3, 2018.*

*Nan Collymore is a British writer and artist, based in California*

