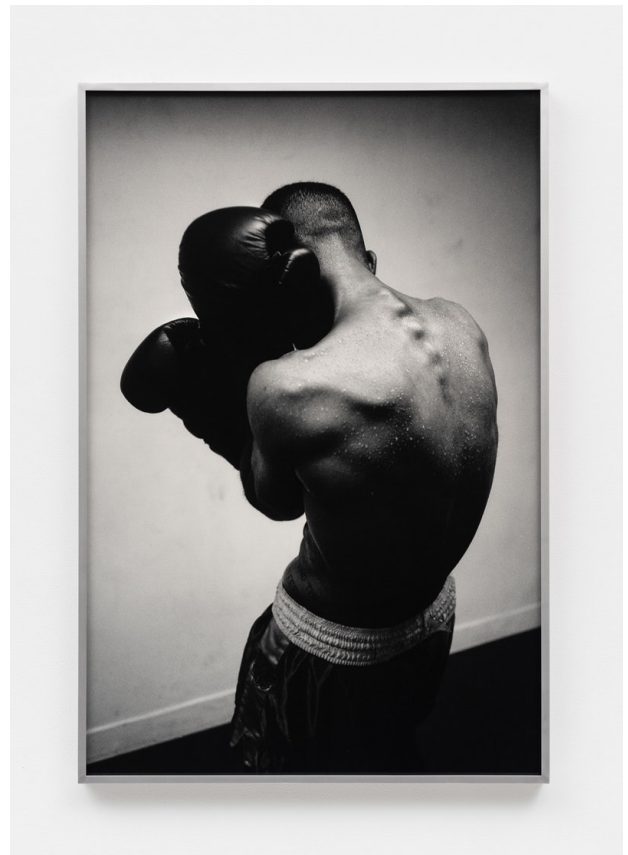


**ArtSeen**

# Elle Pérez: *guabancex*

By **Zach Ritter**

“Don’t want to go out in the rain. I kind of like it. / If this is dying, I guess I kind of enjoy it. I shouldn’t / But the light is just too good at the end of the world.” These lines from Elle Pérez’s poem ask us to consider how we might continue finding beauty, pleasure, and meaning with the specter of civilizational ruin lurking behind us. The poem accompanies *guabancex*, Pérez’s new exhibition of photographs and collages, and the new work seems poised to provide us with something that is, if not an outright answer, then perhaps an example of how we might respond. Pictures of a boxer’s body posed and contorted, of light illuminating the depths of a cave and the character of its rock formations, of the radiant and shimmering surfaces of plastic, water, and steel, are all self-sufficient in their descriptive beauty. The large collages show us the life of the mind in three dimensions, as we track Pérez’s thinking through post-it notes, to-do lists, photocopied book pages, and images of their work alongside those we can presume they value (Eugène Atget, Nan Goldin and Wolfgang Tillmans, for example). These arrangements, seemingly self-conscious and unguarded in equal measure, suggest a space of experimentation where ideas are spliced together, tested and examined—where a new way of thinking, and of feeling, might be gleaned from the wealth of material they offer us.



Elle Pérez, *john shadowboxing I*, 2023. Digital silver gelatin print, 39 × 26 inches. Edition of 5 plus II AP. Image courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse

With one exception, Pérez’s sixteen photographs (all 2023) are black and white and coarse with grain. Their exactitude, whether in rendering the beads of sweat trickling down a boxer’s back in *john shadowboxing I*, or in the minute folds of a tarp set behind a chain-link fence in *street night fence*, is never undermined by the tactile, almost chiaroscuro-like shadows. They signal a departure from Pérez’s previous work, which rarely made use of such brooding atmospherics.

The pictures they included most recently in *Devotions* at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2022–23, or in *The Milk of Dreams* at the Venice Biennale in 2022, typified the aesthetic parameters of their work at the time, where prints were allowed a generous white border between the image and the frame, such that the image, in all its precision and clarity, seemed to float on the wall. This is gone in *guabancex*. Here, each print is shown without a margin between the image and the brilliant silver edges of the frame, making it so that the frame seems an extension of the print. In *guabancex* the intimacy that characterizes Pérez’s work is less obviously given, though no less tangibly felt. There are no portraits or scenes of tender embrace, or of the body being made to communicate some form of interiority or personhood. Instead, there are quiet, observational pictures that are elegiac in tone, as in *flood plantain* and *neil’s funeral*. There are pictures that thrillingly press against the line between representation and abstraction, as in *park trash bag* and *dining shed at night I*, and there are pictures that seem drawn from another world altogether, as in *dining shed at night II*, which evokes a sensibility close to that of film noir, awash as it is in longing and melancholy. The collages, each titled *guabancex I*, *II*, or *III*, permit us to feel as though we are accessing the inner reaches of the artist’s subjectivity, seeing or thinking as they might, but in a cumulative way as we begin to connect images, fragments of thought, notes, suggestions and all the rest. This is not to say that discrete elements in the collages are not disarming or moving, because they are: Pérez shows us how often they ask themselves questions about their motivations, beliefs, and artistic concerns.



Installation View: Elle Pérez: *guabancex*, 47 Canal, New York, 2023. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

“Guabancex” is the name of the deity of chaos and disorder in the mythology of the Taíno, an Indigenous people of the Caribbean. Indeed, the etymology of “hurricane” derives from “juracán”, a destructive storm the deity conjured when displeased, or when retribution was to be meted out. For us today, hurricanes are uniquely destructive forces that are both outside of our control and, we now know, intensified by the greenhouse gas emissions we all unequally produce. We can understand them then, in a sense, as embodiments of a kind of planetary retribution, though we would do well to remember that where there is destruction there is also the possibility of transformation. Pérez’s invocation of this imagery is more than conceptual: we can see it in each collage, in the way what seems like disorder is rearranged into new meaning.