

## Elle Pérez with Ksenia M. Soboleva

July 2022



Portrait of Elle Pérez, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Elle Pérez locates intimacy that moves beyond bodily matter. Ranging from portraiture to landscape, their photographs capture the lived experience of bodies and nature, the transformations that occur across time and space. The distinct configurations in which Pérez presents their work in exhibition spaces offer a glimpse into the artist's thought process, allowing the viewer into their creative constellation. I had the pleasure of being in conversation with Pérez on the occasion of their exhibition *Devotions* at the Baltimore Museum of Art, as well as their inclusion in this year's Venice Biennale *The Milk of Dreams*. We spoke about their introduction to photography, its malleable qualities, and the ways in which thinking about gender has taken a backseat. Pérez generously described the process around *Devotions*, as well as the photographs in the Biennale, taking me on a journey to Puerto Rico and their first visit back after Hurricane Maria.

**Ksenia M. Soboleva (Rail):** Photography has long been viewed as the medium par excellence to explore the performance of identity, and gender in particular. I'm thinking of the 1997 *Rose is a Rose* show at the Guggenheim, for example, which explored this history. How did you arrive at the medium of photograph, and were you aware of its performative aspects?

**Elle Pérez:** The way that I came to photography was almost as an answer to an impulse; the impulse to preserve something, and the impulse to do something for someone else. I started photographing when I was a teenager. I started becoming active in the New York City—specifically the Bronx—punk scene. A friend moved down to Florida, and they were really sad to be missing out not only on shows, but on the community. And in that moment, I was like: “Well, I’ll just take pictures and send them to you.” So that was the very beginning. And then it grew into this larger impulse.

My friends were putting on shows in the Bronx; at a church, at a local community center called The Point, in Hunts Point, and sometimes in what used to be called the Bruckner Bar and Grill, and now I think is the Mott Haven Bar and Grill. So there were all these very underground locations where punk shows were happening, and I was photographing them. At first it was to document them, and maybe to try and figure out what I wanted to do there. But then the crowd became more interesting to me than the performance, especially because you can only take so many different photographs of the band, but the crowd is where everything is happening. It was the place where you got away from your parents, where you made out with someone for the first time, where you saw your friends. This social mix was really intriguing to me, something was always happening. Every time you turned around, something else was happening: People are dancing over there, moving their bodies, people are making out over there, people are fighting over there, people are arguing over there, or people are just having a really deep heart to heart over there, you know, it’s like everything is going on. So that was this really exciting thing, and it was before cell phone cameras.



Elle Pérez, *Tomashi and Ally I*, 2019. printed 2021. Inkjet print. Framed: 61 × 47 1/2 × 2 in. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal.

It’s interesting to have to situate the desire to preserve before cell phone cameras, before social media. I mean, this was in the MySpace era. There was no tumblr, or anything in that regard. There was Craigslist, there were chat rooms, but in terms of finding community, it was happening for a lot of people in person. Right there. Especially in the Bronx, especially amongst alternative teenagers in the Bronx. So that’s how I

came to it. Those couple of years were about becoming really familiar with a place, becoming really familiar with a group of people, becoming really familiar with individual people. One of the things I would do, which was really popular at the time, was that if you were somebody who was taking photographs in these community or night life situations, you would generally start your own website and put them up, pretty immediately, like the next day. Nowadays I guess that isn't that immediate anymore. But then, you would post them the next day, and you would immediately get feedback. People would be like, "I love this," they would appropriate it for themselves—or they would be like, "I hate this," or they'd be like, "actually you really need to take this down," or like, "My parents can't know I'm out," things like that. In either sense of the word [*Laughter*]. So that was a really interesting way of creating a relationship to an audience, because it meant that the audience for pictures was literally the people that were in them.

**Rail:** That's so interesting that you shifted from the performance onstage to the performance of identities in the audience itself.

**Pérez:** I don't know if it was so much identity that I was interested in as it was gesture, or energy. Just being interested in people's faces. I guess it's interesting because I wasn't thinking about it like, "These are what punks look like." I was thinking "These are what my friends look like."

**Rail:**—but punk is a very performative subculture right? In many ways it set the stage for queerness in the nineties, this performative rebellion.

**Pérez:** Actually, I was thinking there's different kinds of trajectories; New York is a city that has all of these different layers, and is so geographically bound. I feel like the downtown punk scene was such a different thing than the uptown punk scene. And it's interesting how the internet has almost dissolved some of that geography, to a degree. Not entirely, but to a really big degree. I had some friends whose parents were really active in the downtown punk scene in the eighties and the nineties, and it wasn't like we were on completely different planets, but we sort of were, you know? Like the reasons were different, for wanting something that was different, if that makes sense. I think a lot of the downtown punk scene was people that were coming to New York to find themselves, and people who were in the uptown punk scene had been born in New York and were trying to redefine themselves from particular stereotypes, for better or for worse.

**Rail:** When did you start thinking about your work as a series of configurations?

**Pérez:** Meaning is so malleable with photography, there are a lot of different ways that people develop meaning. I think people develop a kind of visual literacy with photographs before they develop a visual literacy with maybe almost any other kind of

art—other than film. You have a kind of casual literacy before you have a critical literacy, whereas with something like painting or sculpture or installation art or other types of contemporary art, it's almost like people think of having a critical literacy as a prerequisite to understanding. Whereas with photographs, people really don't feel that. They can be understood as so immediate. People have a real impulse to put a narrative on photographs, especially when they're in formations. So that formation, regardless of who made it, is being read as a kind of story.

There's a long historical tradition in questioning photography's place in contemporary art. There are certain consequences to different configurations of images, different sequences of images, each grouping can be read in a totally different way. With my work especially, there's ways that I think about it when I'm in the studio putting things together, where I'm developing what one could call a body of work. A "configuration" of images, that's just the word that I kind of landed on, because people seem to understand it that way. But the impulse for configurations came from building a whole body of work, and then having to pull back from it when it reaches the wall of a gallery or a museum. I wanted to convey the process of the studio work through building these groupings. I think a lot of times what I've experienced is that people are like, "Well this group of images needs to be understood by somebody else." And I was like, "No, no, no, I understand this group of images, I made this group of images, so this is how they go." You know? And sometimes it can be a little difficult for people to automatically give that authorship, but you would give that to an installation artist, you would give that to someone else. Why can't we give that kind of authorship to photography?

**Rail:** It's almost like a mind map.



Elle Pérez, *Yet to be titled*, 2022. Installation of photographs. Archival pigment prints and digital silver gelatin prints. Dimensions variable. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia Photo: Marco Cappelletti.

**Pérez:** Yeah, and when you put the images in a different order they mean a different thing. I guess I just don't want to give up that much authorship. Photography seems like a realm where the authorship needs to be dramatically declared.

**Rail:** I particularly love that way that you tend to pair bodies and landscape. It always makes me think of Virginia Woolf. Woolf never dwells on the body, but instead uses nature to describe the body. Moods are explained by weather changes.

**Pérez:** Totally, totally.

**Rail:** On that note, what are the ways in which you think about gender as moving beyond the body? For example, the photograph where your partner is holding their belt. It's not about the body, but about a particular gesture that is very queer and there is so much gender embedded in it. But it's not about the body. And then of course the landscapes... the ways in which we leave traces on bodies and on landscapes, how those two merge.

**Pérez:** This might not make sense but ... I don't really think about gender. [*Laughter*] Not really. I think that's a privilege I've worked really hard for, I've really fought for that privilege of not having to think about gender. Obviously I live in the world. I move through it, I make decisions on how I move through it, and I think that, for me, gender has given way to thinking about autonomy. I think the word "gender"—maybe the privilege I have fought for, was in my own mind and in my studio, to kind of atomize that into another question about autonomy or agency or freedom, ability, a kind of visceral feeling or moment, like thinking about surface. I think gender is just a way of reading surfaces. Gender as a sort of legend for how to read a surface. Depending on your perspective or your own reference points, you can see more or see less.

In *Devotions*, there was this moment where the surfaces went from being hard to being fluid. Like the surface of a rock versus the surface of the ocean. The ocean became a real point of consideration and contemplation, and then thinking about fluids as something that really just lent itself to a medium like photography that's so iterative. Because these fluid surfaces can be so affected by light or affected by weather, affected by temperature, all these different conditions.

**Rail:** Surfaces is such a beautiful and articulate term to describe your work. I recently wrote an essay for Andrea Geyer's forthcoming book, and I titled it: "Surfaces of [E]motion."

**Pérez:** That's really where the interest is, the kind of poetics. In fighting for that privilege in my studio of not thinking about gender, I pushed myself more into the world of poetics and less into the world of declarative, discursive ideations or words, because, well, I'm just interested in learning. And I feel like sometimes when photography can become representative, particularly around identity, I just want to sidestep it—like literally move out of the way of the freight train. I guess maybe because I'm more interested in speaking towards the future than I am to speaking to a past. I don't know if that makes sense.

**Rail:** It does. I actually relate to that in a way. As a queer art historian there's often this expectation that I'm going to apply queerness to something, I'm going to queer this or queer that. Whereas for me, the things I'm interested in at least, queerness is a given. I find it far more interesting to talk about things that are within that realm, not impose something from the outside. Also, I think the term "queer" has exhausted itself. Let's talk more about *Devotions*, which has traveled to the BMA from the Carnegie. How did you decide on the title for the show?

**Pérez:** That title came from searching for a description for an act that was the base impulse to the work. I grew up Catholic within the Bronx, along many different cultures who have put their own kind of stamp on Catholicism: Italian Catholicism, Puerto Rican Catholicism. I'm not Italian but I grew up in a very Italian neighborhood, so I was also really immersed in Italian Catholicism. The church that my parents went to was an Italian Catholic church, so there was always a very strict and conservative relationship to gender, religion, and roles and expectations. In Catholic school you would be explaining these transformations, and potentials, and utopias, but there was also a constant component that had to do with shame. Like, I was told I was going to hell very early in life [*Laughs*]*—before I even did anything, you know, I was like, "Damn, alright!"*

**Rail:** Me too! I grew up Muslim, try that.



Elle Pérez, *Ascension (Fire Island)*, 2019, printed 2021. Digital silver gelatin print. Framed: 61 x 47 1/2 x 2 inches. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal.

**Pérez:** It's interesting to have that come into your life or be something that you're kind of untangling through various physical modes—on a visceral level, on a personal level. *Devotions* for me is this body of work that kind of bridges right before COVID and now. It's almost a result of being in the world, after not being in the world for like two years. And being in a different world. Being in a different type of related world. I haven't really explained this before, so that's exciting. I think *Devotions* was a way of working through or navigating a certain type of shame that lives in one's body, and also in one's mind, that permeates everything: your interactions, any type of interpersonal interaction, from the most casual to the most intimate, and having that be something that's a result of the cultural framework you were given at birth, and therefore formed the walls of your mind before you even knew it. Devotions are a very catholic act, and I think one of the ways that people find their queer's BDSM fascination with Catholicism is rooted in shame. Catholicism is so devoted to a certain type of conservative shame, it almost makes itself so ripe for perversion, almost like Gemini twins. That's where this title came from, it was this confluence of thinking about almost the naive understanding of the word, or maybe not naive, but a more innocent or casual idea of devotion, and then also thinking about this catholic element and thinking about this photographic way of looking, which requires a certain level of attention. A friend had given me this book of Mary Oliver's titled *Devotions*, I think six months before I choose the title. So the word was floating around in my head even though I never read the book. [Laughs]

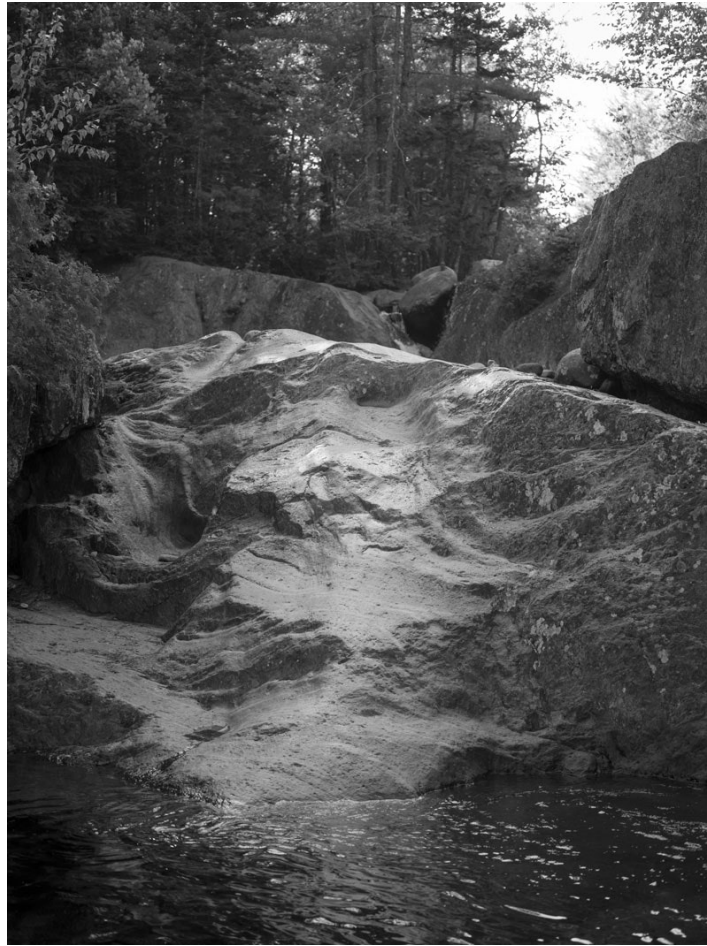
**Rail:** The gift of language.

**Pérez:** I heard one poem from it and was like, "That shit was good! Who did that?" And they were like, "That's Mary Oliver."

**Rail:** Her poetry really conveys what it means to be devoted without being religious. What does it mean to be devoted? Especially growing up in a place where you are told that your devotions must go into this one religious thing. How does one negotiate a different kind of devotion ... I'd love to talk about your work at the Venice Biennial. It's a series of how many photographs?

**Pérez:** I think there's seven. There were nine but we cut two for space, so I keep saying the wrong number. That work is almost a different project entirely. It is and it's not. It's a body of work that's very much in progress, and it's been in progress for a while. In 2018, after Maria, I went to visit family for the first time. I went in January, when it felt reasonable to go. I was visiting my great aunt Amalia in Vega Baja where I normally stay when I'm there. We had brought her a bunch of things, and we were just happy to see her. She was doing really great because her neighborhood had really banded together, this was a very common story about the hurricane. She was babysitting a three-year-old, and an eighty-seven-year old with dementia, and her twenty-five-year-old neighbor was bringing her ice, and she was cooking, and things like that. She was actually very emotionally sound, and we were very lucky that she didn't have any damage to her house. That's remarkable actually. But she still didn't have power, so when I was staying

with her, I was going out onto the porch and the way that the neighborhood is set up, she's on this kind of curve, and there's a house in the middle of this curve and it sort of curves around.



Elle Pérez, *Stone memory*, 2020, printed 2021. Digital silver gelatin print. Framed: 61 × 47 1/2 × 2 inches. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal.

The only sound that you would really hear were these generators going, and as people would go to bed the generators would go off and the lights would go off, and the cars that were coming around the bend would become fewer and fewer. So I started filming very high ISO, just these videos of the car headlights lighting up the whole block, and a lot of the vernacular architecture in Puerto Rico is this iron work. So it would create all of these patterns as the cars went by. Normally you wouldn't really see this because there's a bunch of streetlights, so it's almost like the shadows are fixed or something. During this period of time, the shadows became kind of unfixed, and they would move, so I was filming them and doing that.

I was about to have a show at 47 Canal, and I was working on these color photographs of grounds, and I had made a couple pictures on that trip. But then I had this video, and I was intrigued by it, and then later that year I went back for this festival that I really like



to photograph. It's this saint festival at the end of the year, called La Mascaras de Hatillo, and it's this really colorful festival where everyone dresses up, and you'll deck out your Jeep Wrangler in these crazy specially devised themes. Like you have a costume, your Jeep Wrangler has a costume, and you're setting off police sirens. [Laughs] It's nuts. It's very intense. I've photographed it multiple times before, so that year I thought, "Okay, I really want to go and photograph Hatillo, it's going to be the first Hatillo after Maria."

So I go there, and it starts pouring. It's pouring during this festival. And people are like, "Fuck it. We're doing it anyway. There's no stopping it." It's pouring, there's shaving cream, there's sirens, and it sounds like an emergency, but it's also a celebration. It's absolutely a celebration. It felt very joyous and it felt very fun to be there, but the videos — it's interesting how different that can look, or what that can evoke. That film is going to be in a show at the Whitney this year, about the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Maria. I've never shown that piece before. So this work at the Venice Biennial almost comes out of that film.

I had started to think about the way that light could be this tool for talking about time, and different confluences of moments in Puerto Rico, and not just in Puerto Rico but in the Bronx, and the relationship between New York and Puerto Rico and the relationship between Puerto Rico and Florida, and the relationship between not just this diasporic community but also the nodes of power or speculation that have existed for centuries at this point. The images come from a way of trying to find a language for this idea.

Essentially the short story of the Venice work is that it's what I'm working on right now, which is thinking about these links. These links between New York, Puerto Rico, these perpetual sites of multiple histories layered over each other, these sites of perpetual speculation, both in a capitalistic sense and also a kind of historical sense. These places that we somehow know everything and nothing about, and that so much history has happened within but also seem to have no histories. Because personally, my family doesn't have a legible or recorded history: beyond my great grandparents there's nothing. There's no tracing, there's no records, there's no—the Spanish were really bad



Elle Pérez, *t*, 2019. Digital silver gelatin print. Framed: 56 x 39 1/2 x 2 in. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal.

at keeping records, so even just any kind of personal relationship to a recorded or related identity is hard to even claim with any level of certainty.

Those images in Venice have this high ISO, trying to use the least amount of light, so they're made at dusk, they're made at night. When I was in Vega Baja this past spring, we were experiencing this historic flooding that just started out of the blue. It's supposed to be the dry season, that's not supposed to be happening. The way that climate change is affecting Puerto Rico, and then also the way that no one in the US was even hearing about it. It was so funny because my aunt was like, "Nobody has even called to check," and I was like, "Well probably no one even knows that this is going on right now, that you and I are watching the streets to see how far the water is going to come up." And luckily we were pretty okay and we didn't flood, but a lot of people did.

The next day I was supposed to photograph these caves, and I went and was talking with the people who were guiding me through the caves, one of whom was a poet and the other was a geology student, and my friend came with me. All of us were talking about our Maria feelings and experiences, and it was kind of bringing it back. It felt like this almost circular thing was happening with time. So I had made this picture of the street flooding at night, and a couple of images at 11 p.m., midnight, with the streetlight, the little bit that was available to make these images on Delta 3200 film, pushing it as far as it'll go, and then taking this large format into these caves that are historic sites throughout the island, but haven't been mapped, are very interesting to the communities and the archaeologists that are in Puerto Rico, and some outside, but generally haven't been preserved or are only recently being considered—you know, it's either a historical site or it's a tourist trap [*Laughs*]. And that's also a really interesting phenomenon, for this extremely important local Indigenous history to be privately owned and to be able to be turned into a water rafting adventure. There's multiple layers to things. The water rafting adventure is often what happens with the Tanama River, which is a very important waterway that has a lot of archaeological value. All these things just kind of converged into those images. And then simultaneously I was thinking about this relationship to others, relationship to control, relationship to bodies. In the way that I had been thinking that *Devotions* had this relationship to autonomy, maybe. Then I think the work at Venice has this relationship to control, or this kind of core common denominator, thinking about control. In all the ways that it goes, all the ways that it can be experienced.

**Rail:** And all the works are black and white?

**Pérez:** Yeah.

**Rail:** I wanted to ask you how you navigate between black and white and color?

**Pérez:** Individual images need what they need, and they do different things. They do different things and they're different tools. I really like using them together but I think there's a particular level to it that is intuitive that has to do with what an image presents viscerally, where it's at its most visceral. There are two images that are in the extended cut of *Devotions*, that will hopefully be up at Mass MoCA next year. I'm really excited for that version of the show. Because basically the work that was at Commonwealth and Council is also still part of *Devotions*, but the Baltimore show had to be scaled down. The Baltimore installation is really cool, because that specific gallery is three rooms; there are these two satellite galleries and then there's this central zone that you kind of walk in, and that room has one picture in it. It's a hexagon, so they're like six-sided rooms—it's amazing, you experience the photographs almost as altar pieces. And the walls are literally space-black, so it feels like it's just sucking you into outer space, which is this really awesome feeling. Why did I bring that up? Because there wasn't enough space to show those images, but two of the images that were in that show at Commonwealth are now in the Venice show, but they're printed completely differently, and I'm okay with that.

**Rail:** Different scale also?

**Pérez:** Different scale, and totally different type of visceral impact. The ones that are in *Devotions* are a lot softer, smaller, and have a different kind of feeling. But it was just what that work needed. Or what that grouping needed, what that presentation needed, what that configuration needed ... The images in *Devotions* have a little more softness to them, and I feel like that's also related to the color. The printing is so specific to the emotion of the overall work. Which is why I'm so insistent that they are one body of work, it's not a series of pictures that can be deleted or moved around or, you know, somebody else's idea.