

F L A U N T

NOVEMBER 2, 2018

ELLE PÉREZ

BY JESS REYTLAT



ELLE PÉREZ. "UNTITLED" (2018). MIXED MEDIA COLLAGE. 73 1/2 × 96 1/2 × 3 INCHES. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 47 CANAL, NEW YORK, AND MOMA PS1, NEW YORK. PHOTO: JOERG LOHSE

There's a sensation of immediate intimacy as I enter Pérez's studio in their Brooklyn home. In an open, mostly unfurnished room with plants lining the windowsills, Pérez (who uses 'they' series pronouns) warmly greets me with a cup of coffee and begins to talk about the work at an unhurried pace. After graduating from Yale's prestigious MFA program in 2015, Pérez has experienced a meteoric rise in the eyes of the art world. They've exhibited at the Stonewall National Museum & Archives, followed by solo shows at MoMA PS1 and 47 Canal gallery. The latter exhibition, titled *In Bloom*, stopped me in my tracks, a jarring sense of stillness in contrast to the accelerated pace of gallery hopping around the Lower East Side. Surrounded by nine photographs fusing traditional portraiture, landscape, and still life, a photographic poetry is formed, and I get the sense I'm looking in on the lives of fully-fleshed, loved and loving individuals.

Today, in their studio, Pérez is preparing for a group exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum entitled, "Nobody Promised You Tomorrow," derived from a line in Marsha P. Johnson's speech. In the front of the studio, photos are printed and hung in rows using binder

clips. Lining the floor are neatly stacked portfolios filled with prints. One by one, we flip through the photographs, sharing an illuminating glimpse of emotional exchange between Pérez and the protagonists. Pérez says, “The first layer of every photograph is the facilitation of each individual relationship, ultimately reaching a point where another person wants to engage in this thing with me.” Each photograph’s blueprint is an inherent presence of trust between photographer and subject, while capturing a world where Pérez recognizes humanity and themselves.



ELLE PÉREZ. “STONE BLOOM” (2018). ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT. 44 3/8 × 31 INCHES. EDITION OF 5 PLUS II AP. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE

As a gender non-conforming artist and a proud member of the vibrant Puerto Rican diaspora, Pérez is drawn to visually fluid manifestations of the body and bold expressions of identity. In their early days as a photographer, their lens was treated on the underground culture of the Bronx, where Pérez was born and raised, documenting fringe identities in the punk scene via thousands of photographs. As their work developed, the photographs became more autobiographical—near-diaristic examinations of their own lived experiences.



ELLE PÉREZ. "BINDER" (2018). ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT. 44 3/8 × 31 INCHES. EDITION OF 5 PLUS II AP. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NEW YORK.

maybe I can trust this—it was sort of this turning point where I could trust my ability to find something in this moment of making a photograph with someone.”

We stop and look at two photographs arranged beside each other—“Dick,” a portrait of a bloody hand drying up while resting between two legs, and “Stone Bloom,” a delicate moment capturing a weathered stone landscape as a stand-in for the body. Both images speak to one another, exuding intimacy, albeit in entirely opposing manifestations. As our eyes scan left to right looking at both photographs, Pérez mentions, “these two pictures kind of have this conversation or relationship between them that alludes to a way of depicting intimacy without a certain type of sexuality, without having to show two human figures doing things to each other in that sort of spectacular way.”



ELLE PÉREZ. “DICK” (2018). ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT. 44 3/8 × 31 INCHES. EDITION OF 5 PLUS II AP. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NEW YORK.

It is worth mentioning that each photograph is fixed, suspended in time. Each photograph is anchored in its composition. They are paradoxical in the sense that, conversely, they could be referencing something fleeting, offering a visual tension that derives from that suspension. Pérez tells me that each photograph is painstakingly composed while “isolating a moment of authentic gesture that has a compositional standard without being contrived.” The images are facilitated in a way that maintains fluidity and emotion even within the confines of an arrested frame.

Pérez’s photographs deal in the territory of impression, the tangled impact that the body enacts upon nature, and visa versa. All subjects, whether they be object, human, or landscape, are treated with the same degree of autonomy as they are elevated to the realm of hallowed ‘subject.’ Their sensitivity to touch—to the actions imbued in scars left on the body and the Earth—is Pérez’s creative signature. Within a still frame we see an index of action. An index of healing. An index of a small, intimate arc in the story of Perez’s life.



ELLE PÉREZ. “UNTITLED” (DETAIL), (2018). MIXED MEDIA COLLAGE. 73 1/2 × 96 1/2 × 3 INCHES. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 47 CANAL, NEW YORK, AND MOMA PS1, NEW YORK. PHOTO: JOERG LOHSE