

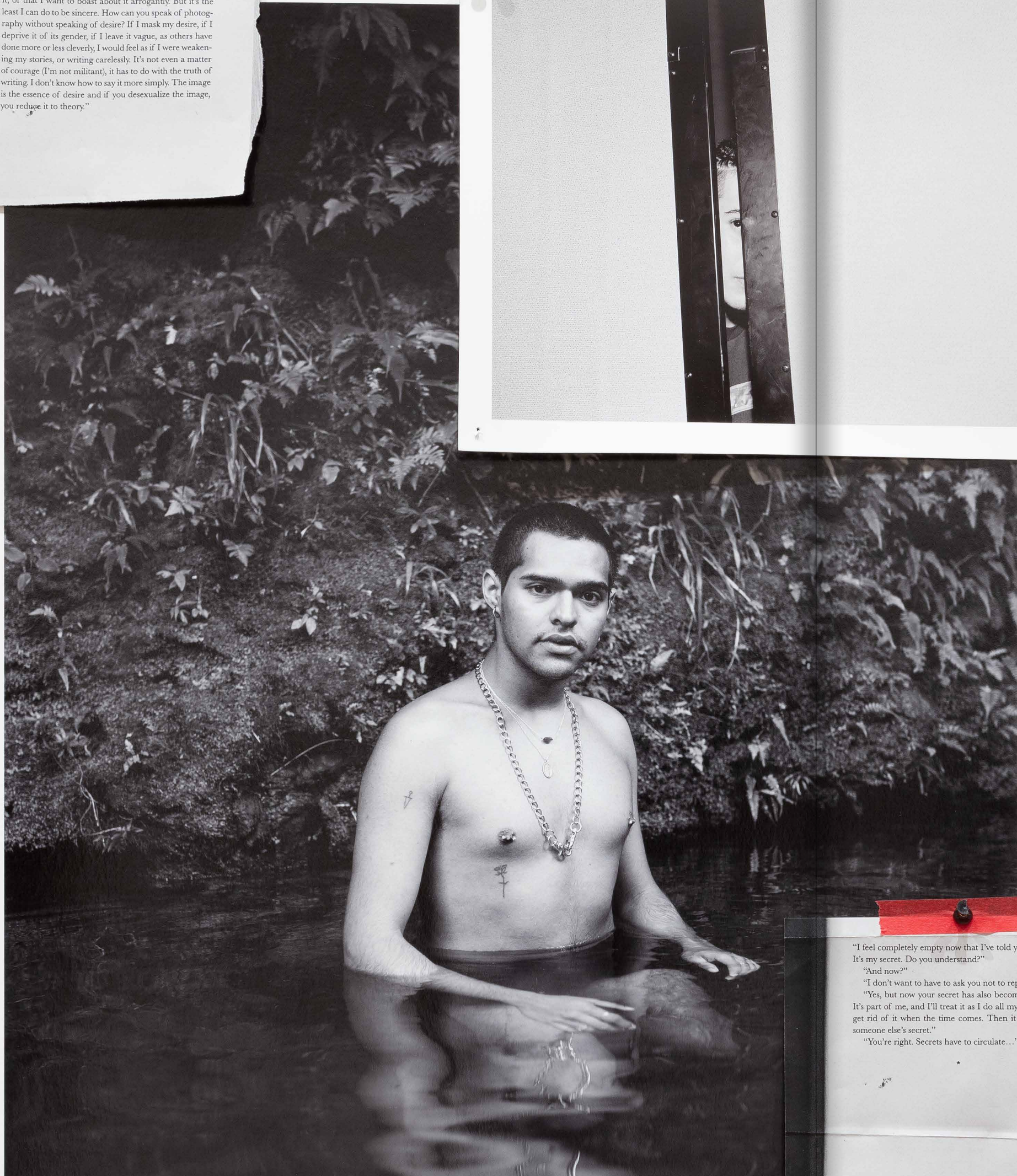
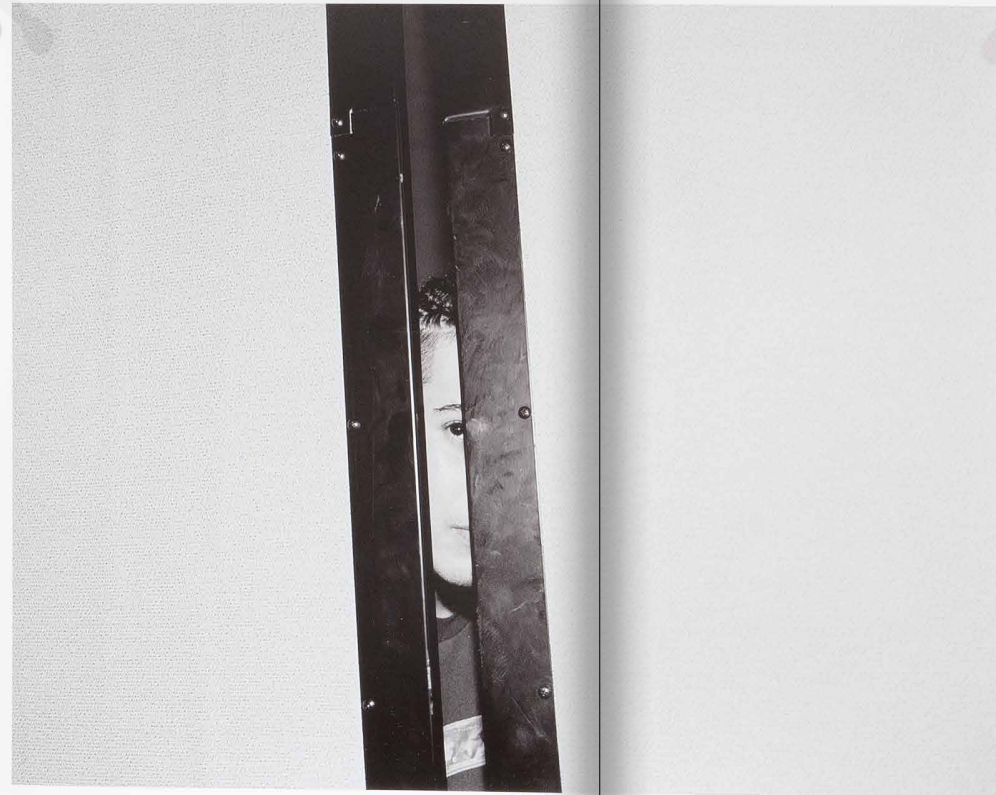


ELLE

Having grown up within the underground Bronx punk community, and gaining a public stage at a time when transgender and gender-nonconforming people are fighting to see their rights acknowledged, photographer ELLE PÉREZ talks with artist JAGDEEP RAINA about the process of making a portrait—an open conversation with the subject, carrying the traces of the artist's diasporic experience.



"The majority of your stories ooze homosexuality."
"How could it be otherwise? It's not that I want to hide it, or that I want to boast about it arrogantly. But it's the least I can do to be sincere. How can you speak of photography without speaking of desire? If I mask my desire, if I deprive it of its gender, if I leave it vague, as others have done more or less cleverly, I would feel as if I were weakening my stories, or writing carelessly. It's not even a matter of courage (I'm not militant), it has to do with the truth of writing. I don't know how to say it more simply. The image is the essence of desire and if you desexualize the image, you reduce it to theory."



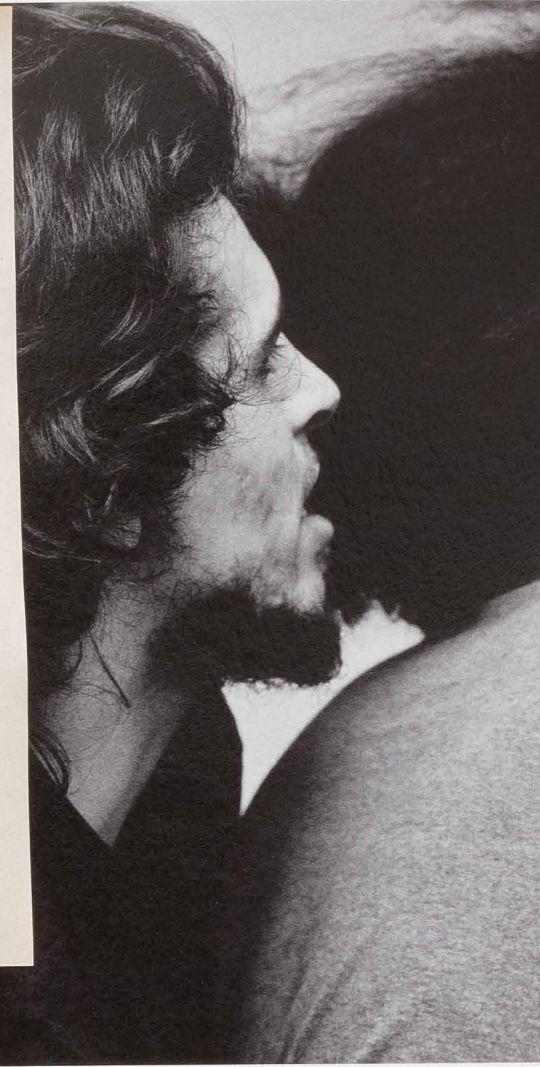
lately it seems that I have been working on writing and also on reconnecting my entirety to itself.

reconnecting pleasure to my body, reconnecting my thoughts to my fingertips, my feelings to my words, my discipline to my ability to move, my will to my body.

Understanding myself in relationship to giving pleasure to others. I like giving pleasure. I may be good at something.

I feel like i'm pulling myself together from pieces scattered. I feel like i've had to go a very long way to finally find all of these pieces, and there are more, somewhere, but i think i've got a number of them now to the point where i can feel like i'm alive, or i can feel like i'm doing something that is uniquely for me.

Even when topping, or dominating, it feels like it has to do with something that i am finally owning, as opposed to so much of the other emotional labor in my life that feels like i am cowering.



"I feel completely empty now that I've told you this story. It's my secret. Do you understand?"
"And now?"
"I don't want to have to ask you not to repeat it."
"Yes, but now your secret has also become my secret. It's part of me, and I'll treat it as I do all my secrets—I'll get rid of it when the time comes. Then it will become someone else's secret."
"You're right. Secrets have to circulate..."





JR What does it mean for you, when you reflect on older bodies of work knowing that you have truly captured a historic moment in time?

EP The artist Simon Leung said something recently that stuck with me, which is that an archive is made primarily for the future. The passing of time allows for the images to engage with history, in that I'm able to track what has happened (personally, politically, socially, environmentally) since their making. For example, the body of work that I did in 2011, "Outliers," consisted of portraits of genderqueer and gender-nonconforming queer people. In 2011, people were still realizing the potential of Tumblr and Instagram to connect people and affirm and create community, and "genderqueer" was only starting to become popularized online as a term for a particular transgender or trans-adjacent identity.

Now in 2018, gender-neutral pronouns in major cities and media outlets are common-place and growing in acceptance. There are a growing number of non-linear trans narratives available in media and art; I can talk to my doctor at Planned Parenthood about being gender non-conforming and *still* receive hormone therapy. All of this was unimaginable in 2011. And of course, there is what has *not* changed. The epidemic of violence against transgender women (the majority of those being black women), the restrictive medical gatekeeping, the extreme rates of homelessness, joblessness, poverty and suicide among transgender and gender-nonconforming people. All of these things can be measured with and against not only my photographs, but the photographs of other image-makers like Mariette Pathy Allen, who were making work that empathetically chronicles trans life long before me.

I think this impulse to create a photographic ledger partially comes from desiring to understand my own and my family's history, but having that be inaccessible to me. I can trace my family back to my great grandparents, and then it stops. Both my parents' families are from Puerto Rico, which only did its first census in 1899. Before that, the Spanish did a terrible job of keeping records, and my families were of mixed races, farm workers, domestic workers, and from the rural mountains, so they were not likely to have recorded histories anyway. The great-grandparent I know the most about was a judge in Arecibo that raped my great-grandmother and then paid for her ticket to New York as a way to cover up what he had done. And "what he had done" made my grandmother. He and his family refused to recognize her and my father as relatives for the rest of his life. And yet, she asked me in 2012 to try to find his grave in Barceloneta to make an image of it. I go to the cemetery there every time I'm in Puerto Rico and have

never found his grave, but have made many photographs over the years in that cemetery during my search efforts. How do you pick up these pieces? I guess you just start.

JR In many ways, I find that your older work has already started to develop this special historical importance, because of your gifted ability to capture such breathtaking moments in time. I was recently thinking of the words of John Akomfrah, who said that the archive is one of the few spaces and reservoirs of memory for diasporic subjects, and being in New York last week, getting to see his exhibition at the New Museum followed immediately by your work at MoMA Ps1... To say that it was an emotional experience for me is definitely an understatement!

Spending time with *Diablo*, a collage board you presented at PS1, I was really moved to experience the power of active listening and introspection. I took my time, read all of the writings, and looked at the weaving of photographs that were both by you and by other artists. In what capacity do these collected materials exist alongside the photographs you make?

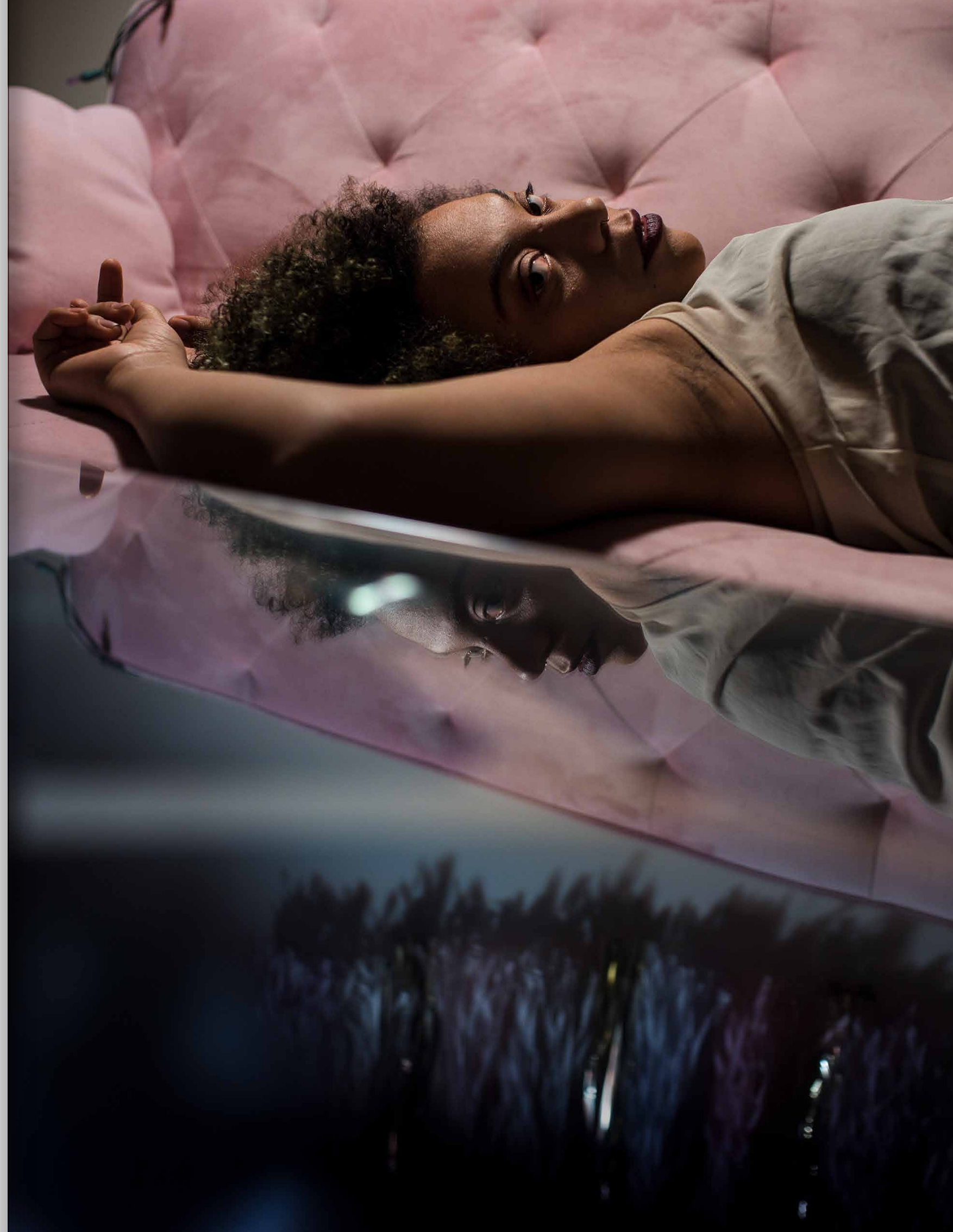
EP I have always made this kind of image collection, even as a kid. I had this entire wall collage in my childhood bedroom that was really intense. I was surrounded by these images and pieces of text for years. It really hurt to take it down when my dad had to repair the leaking walls, more than anything else I've ever dismantled in art. After that, I've made one in every studio I've had. So when we were discussing the show at PS1, and the curators Klaus Biesenbach and Josephine Graf were interested in doing something that evoked the feeling of being in my studio, this piece came along as a kind of evolved version of one of my foundational impulses.

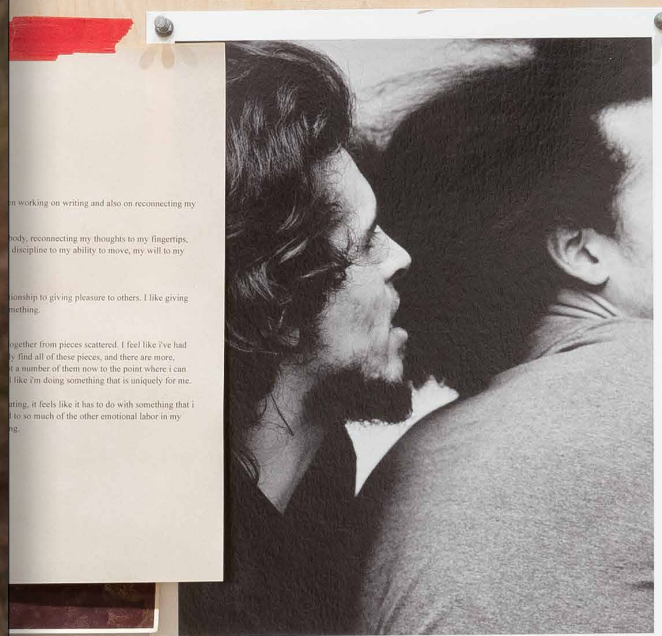
JR What also inspires me in your work—as someone who is not a photographer, but relies on photography as a conduit for creating paintings and drawings—is your ability to take the frozen moments of distance and documentation, and inject them with tenderness, care and intimacy. I believe this quality also comes with the investment and ethics you have with building relationships and working with people over time.

EP It's funny, because I am a photographer who has come more and more to rely on the language of painting to explain what it is I am doing. The way that time happens in both the making of the painting and the image itself; the way time wrestles with itself between timelessness and the urgency of the mark; the way space is rendered, created, alluded to, or flattened; the role of opacity and transparency;

Jagdeep Raina The first time I encountered your work was through a series depicting underground spaces and nightlife. You told me that nightlife for you was not only a subject of interest, but a part of your identity formation as well, particularly growing up in the Puerto Rican diaspora within the Bronx. This really resonated with me in many ways. Coming from diasporic communities myself, I've often turned to the archive to imagine what radical realities must have looked like.

Elle Pérez I feel so lucky to have grown up within the underground Bronx punk community during the 2000s. I can tell that it's affected the way that I conceive of myself, my community, others, and what is possible in ways I can't fully understand. At the same time, I think I've always known how important that experience was and would be, even while it was happening. I knew I needed to photograph it, because it was special. I was so taken by the people, the situation, the urgency, the passion, the sweat and the physicality of it, while also being aware of the historic possibility of what it was we were doing. I knew I was doing something for posterity, to mark what once was so that others would know that it, and we, had existed. I don't know how I knew this, but I knew that it might take a while for people to "get it." I recently put those photographs back on my website. They're some of my favorite photographs to go back to.



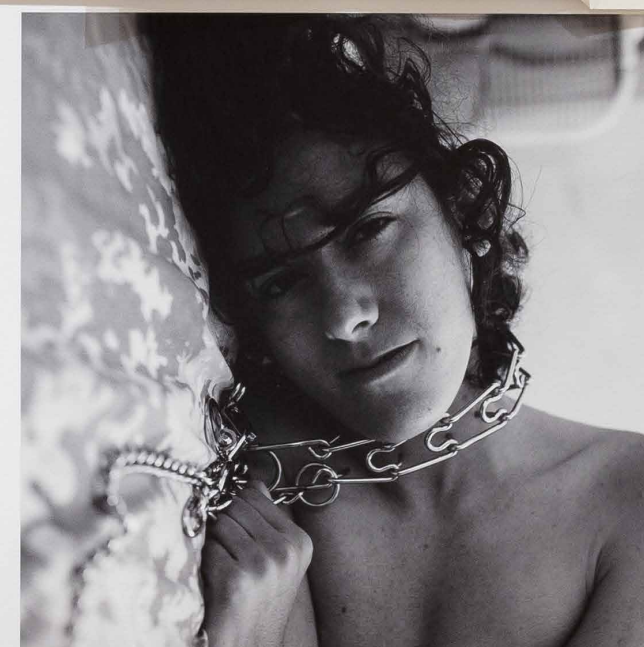


St. Clare's fence
Tongue picture
Body and blood of Christ
Man goes
North avenue
Sacrifice
St. Sebastian
Orphans and outcasts
Origins of the real and the devotional
The realistic after served
Stone butch and straight to hell

Close when I was young
my mother told me that
the way her friends who
never left her side
never met any was
through an extended
long held hands
sustained love

GHOST IMAGE
PHOTOGRAPHY is also an act of love. Once, when my parents were still living in La Rochelle, in that large bright apartment entirely surrounded by a balcony overlooking the trees in the park and a little further off, the sea, I decided to take a picture of my mother. I must have been

In Loving Memory of
Fernando Rubin
February 15, 1926
October 9, 2017
Though his smile is gone forever,
And his hand we cannot touch,
Still we have so many memories
of the one we love so much.
His memory is our keepsake
with which we will never part.
God has him in His keeping.
We have him in our hearts.
Schuyler Hill Funeral Home
718-792-8270







the gesture, the pose and the convention of the portrait; the relationships between colors; the haptic. Simon Leung, who I am lowkey obsessed with at the moment, recently said that painting was fundamentally about a desire to touch the subject. I about lost my shit when he said that, because it rang so true for the way I was working in photography.

I don't really think of these images as "documentation." I think of them more like one would think of painted portraits done from life, like those done by Angela Dufresne or Alice Neel. You know the image is the result of an encounter, and you also know it's the result of an interpretation. The photographs are also made with an understanding of what will be lost upon translation into a photograph—all context, all discursive identity, all feeling from the moment of making—and that loss for me isn't mourned. I accept the terms of photography, and prefer to think about it more in regard to form. Form is perhaps the thing I think about that has the closest connect to queerness for me, because "form" necessarily cannot be something that is rigidly or finally defined; it is relational and always re-inventing itself.

^{JR} I am interested in what happens when time moves forward. When relationships and people grow and change, evolving from what they initially were when you created an artistic and photographic bond, how do you negotiate and reflect on those changes?

^{EP} The thing about photographing people is that it's always an open conversation. It's not the same with all photographers, but for me, the image has always been a contract of care. The process of photographing is a slow one—no rush, more like the development of a relationship. There were a few times when I almost photographed someone, brought my camera and everything, but it wasn't time yet. A question I've been trying to figure out for myself is, "What makes it time?" Perhaps an intimacy, or a trust finally being achieved. There is a difference in how quickly different people can get there—some people have the walls down immediately, while for others it takes a long time. This sensitivity to trust is something I am proud of myself for, and I consider it a formal strategy of the work. Formal distance also helps make the image become compelling to others.

There are a handful of people I have photographed over many years. Of course, as time moves on, people change. There have also been times where in very real human ways, the relationship changes or ends, and to honor that contract of care, I've pushed those photographs to the background or stopped showing them at all. This of course has been majorly complicated by the Internet. Not only do I have

to contend with the object(s), but also with the JPEG, and how endless unknowable and untraceable copies of that image exist out in the world. I am very careful now about putting an image on the Internet, because at the moment, it is an unretractable gesture.

^{JR} Stepping away from your portraits of people for a moment, can you talk about the role that urban space and landscape—whether it is Baltimore, the Bronx, or elsewhere—continues to play in your work?

^{EP} When I was growing up in the Bronx, I deeply felt that where I was could only be the periphery. There's lots of ways I can think about this or analyze the reasons and the wrongness of that thought, but what I'll say instead is that I am incredibly grateful that I have an opportunity to image it now. The mental and literal distances that I've traveled in order to understand myself and the places that mean a lot to me have allowed me the privilege of being able to hold the Bronx or Puerto Rico at a distance while always feeling familiar. And that familiarity is not just visual—it's how the space feels, how it smells, and an awareness of the layers of life on top of a place.

I'm still trying to find a mode of thinking about place in the work. For a long time, I had been trying to shed some of the conventions of photography—the idea that a narrative has to be tied to a place, or that a project had to have recurring characters or a recurring location. I think it was coming from doing art school during Alec Soth's meteoric rise, and how extremely influential his work was to how so many of us thought about photography. He revealed a new paradigm, with his ability of addressing the soft malleable space between fiction and nonfiction, documentary and directorial. I had to do a lot of work to move away from that approach that was popular in mid-2000s photography and influenced my earlier work, which I think has a way of reifying, exoticizing or reinforcing mythologies about places.

So I thought the more honest thing to do was just let place be something incidental in the photographs. I wanted to be able to make a picture anywhere, and what it ended up revealing was the network of locations I live my life in (Maine, Virginia, New York, Puerto Rico, the Bronx, rural Massachusetts), the privilege of being mobile, the pattern of seasonal moving for jobs. Maybe it has to do with trying to figure out how to image in a diasporic way. It ends up being more about the traces, surfaces, visual patterns and echoes, what travels, what remains true, what is brought from place to place, how do different things *mean* something new or the same in each context, and putting that all together. **K**

ELLE PÉREZ (AMERICAN, B. 1989) LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK. THEY CURRENTLY TEACH PHOTOGRAPHY AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY AND SERVE AS DEAN AT THE SKOWHEGAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE. JAGDEEP RAINA (CANADIAN, B. 1991) IS AN ARTIST WHO STUDIED AT THE RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN AND THE SKOWHEGAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE.

IMAGES IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE: MORNING, 2017/2018; UNTITLED (DETAIL), 2018; JAN, 2017/2018; WATER BODY, 2016/2018; BARCELONETA, 2018; UNTITLED (DETAIL), 2018; WARM CURVE, 2018; JOSE DE JESUS, 2018; NICOLE, 2018; HOBBS, 2015/2018; UNTITLED (DETAIL), 2018; WYLEY, 2017/2018; STONE BLOOM, 2018; DICK, 2018. ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NEW YORK.