

‘They’re All Made From Really Strong Relationships’: Watch Elle Pérez Discuss the Emotional Alchemy of Their Tender Photographs

As part of a collaboration with Art21, hear news-making artists describe their inspirations in their own words.

Caroline Goldstein, April 21, 2022

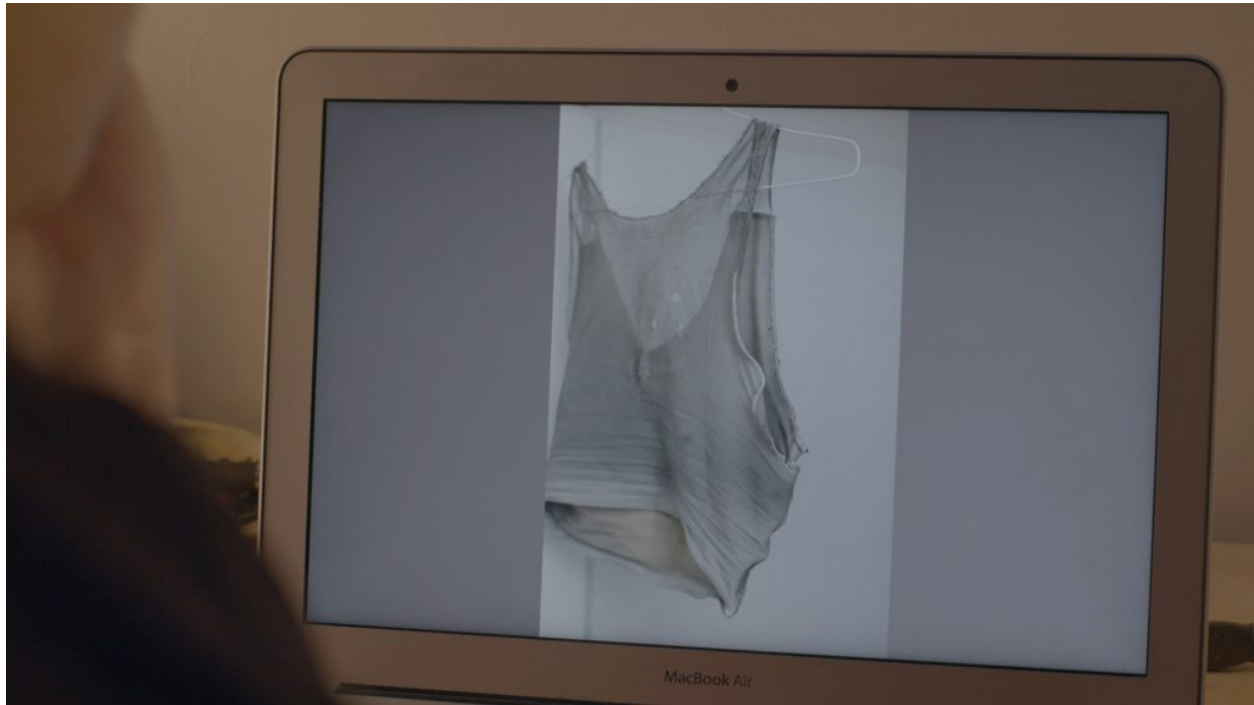


Production still from the Art21 "New York Close Up" film, "Elle Pérez Works Between the Frame." © Art21, Inc. 2019.

Elle Pérez has always thought of photography as more of a collaborative effort than a solitary one. Even when their lens is aimed at a landscape or inanimate object, Pérez considers the subject as much a part of the process as the person behind the camera.

The Bronx-born artist’s work often focuses on intimate moments of connection, such as two people bent over each other in an embrace, captured unawares. Even when Pérez trains the lens on the natural world—sun glinting on the cresting waves as wind blows over them, or the sinuous curve of a grotto and the pitted earth casting shadows—it feels tender, as if glimpsing a secret place. A suite of their black-and-white photographs is on view as part of the main exhibition in the Venice Biennale, “The Milk of Dreams,” which explores themes of the body, transformation, and transcendence.

In an [exclusive interview with Art21](#) filmed as part of the *New York Close Up* series, Pérez explains how the emotional alchemy works. “Definitely the geography of where a lot of the pictures are made—whether it’s in the Bronx or Puerto Rico—it’s really important,” the artist explains, “I think about them as being more related to people. They’re all made from really strong relationships.”



Still from the Art21 *New York Close Up* film “Elle Pérez Works Between the Frame.” © Art21, Inc., 2019.

In the video, Pérez discusses one particular photograph of a binder they wore for about five years, until it was creased and frayed. As Pérez notes, the chest compression garment holds great significance within the transmasculine community, and “the sweat and pain...all of it is visible in the fabric itself—and then in how it’s photographed with, an extreme focus on precise details.”

Pérez explains that the form is related to queerness, because “it’s undefinable and un-boundaried,” with so many avenues of expression. “Something like a photograph is then like a perfect container,” [the artist says](#), “because it is not actually ever definitive.”