

Photo Booth

Elle Pérez's Poetic, Visceral Bodies

By Thora Siemsen April 5, 2018

Between 2002 and 2012, from the age of twelve, the photographer Elle Pérez (who uses the gender-neutral pronouns “they” and “them”) shot more than twenty thousand photographs, often at punk shows in the Bronx, the borough where they were born and raised. Yet the final edit of Pérez’s first solo show in New York, “In Bloom” (at 47 Canal Gallery, through April 8th), is an intimate suite of just nine images, depicting moments in the years since spent in more private spaces. In one photograph, titled “Wyley,” a friend of Pérez’s stands alone outside, their back against a wall, brandishing a red bandanna that obscures their face. The image evokes the handkerchief code, a system used by members of L.G.B.T.Q. communities of wearing colored bandannas in back pockets to indicate sexual fetishes. A red bandanna signals an interest in the practice of fisting, an act that is alluded to in Pérez’s photo “Dick,” in which a hand rests between a shadowed crotch, bloody residue drying above the knuckle into the shape of a tulip. Pérez’s photographs contain these codes of queer desire, but, like Wyley’s face, their meaning is largely obscured to the outside viewer.



Pérez lives in New York and teaches photography at Harvard and the Rhode Island School of Design; they also serve as dean at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and spend time in Puerto Rico visiting family, collaborating with other artists, and working with the grassroots community organization Casa Pueblo. Pérez, who identifies as trans, told me that they are interested in “this idea of making work where you are,” of building a world wherever they bring their camera. “Queer love means making love out of new structures,” the writer Larissa Pham, who collaborated with Pérez on text to accompany “In Bloom,” writes. Several of the show’s photographs were

shot at the apartment of Pérez's partner, Ian, a sculptor based in Richmond, Virginia; one is from a waterfall in Maine that they visited together during summer. In the latter, called "Water Body," a droplet of water is suspended at the edge of swim trunks, while another falls and refracts sunlight between the wearer's legs. At the edge of the frame of "Soft Stone," barren branches from a tree in Central Park reflect in the water. Like all of the show's images, the scene prompts reflection while maintaining a remoteness. "Intimacy between lovers exists in the details—a bruise, a stain, eyelashes and drops of water," Pham writes. "These details weight the form; it is how ordinary objects become haloed and special."

Walking through "In Bloom" one afternoon, Pérez asked me if I'd seen the photography show "Peter Hujar: Speed of Life," at the Morgan Library & Museum. I replied that I had. Pérez told me that on Hujar's print of his famous image "Candy Darling on Her Deathbed," from 1973, he used a pre-digital form of retouching called "spotting" to make sure that Darling's face "was the brightest moment in the image." Spotting is a laborious process, and a risky one, as there is no reversing its effects on silver gelatin photography. Pérez told me that they admire the late Hujar for his boldness in risking his image in order to dignify his subject. Like Hujar, Pérez presents the trans body in a way that resists its prurient consumption. "In Bloom" makes public an appreciation of what happens in private, makes love enmeshed in the practice of making images.