

Art in America

HORACE D. BALLARD ON THE EARLY AMERICAS AND CREATIVE INTENTIONALITY

By Horace D. Ballard November 23, 2021



Installation view of Elle Pérez's exhibition "Devotions," 2021. From left to right, Elle Pérez: *t*, 2019, digital silver gelatin print; *Tomashi and Ally I*, 2019, inkjet print.
COURTESY CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

I am curator of pre-1900 American Art. Right now, we are in this moment in history when we, out of necessity, are questioning everything. To arrive at this moment, as the first African-American to hold the post, means to me that there are two things I need to do very quickly: the first is to listen and, in so doing, to get to know the [Harvard Art Museums](#), the history, and the people who come in and out of it every day such as staff and team members; the second is to listen to where people want to go, where their dreams are, where the sticking and the sticky places have been in history, and to see where collaboration and relationship building is possible. And I think it is. The benefit of having a new person in this position is that I'm open to understanding where we can go.

In my research, I'm interested in the borders and the limits between things. I consider a lot of different questions, among them, where does the British colonies end and the Federal era begin;

what is American and at what point did the United States begin to think of itself as such, instead of as a Confederation of States; what is the trade relationship beyond the British and the American colonies? I often consider the 17th and 18th century trade between Mexico and Japan, and how those material goods, particularly textiles and spices, made their way to the ports of Savannah, Baltimore, and then Philadelphia, as well as the history behind the sale of fashion goods and furniture in New York and Providence. I'm thinking continentally about early American history and I'm eager to foreground that perspective at the Harvard Art Museums, so that every time we say "American," we're thinking beyond the United States.

I found Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's volume *As We Have Always Done* [2017] particularly helpful during the United States' moment of national reckoning with race last year. The author's engagement with her own Indigenous community as well as critical race theory reminds readers to accord not just with methodologies of healing and strength, but with deep pedagogies of resistance rooted in theorizing, thinking, organizing, and writing. She makes clear that everyone must be part of that resistance for Indigenous freedom, not just those directly impacted. Ultimately, she reminds us that there are multiple ways to be an ally to BIPOC folks, and one is simply to provide support as well as physical and mental space.

In this moment, we're asking big questions about the spirit and the space between people during the global pandemic. Elle Pérez's photographs are deeply concerned with the subtle interplay between physical settings, whether natural or manmade, and the intimacy expressed by humans in love, sex, and friendship. Many moments depicted in the artist's exhibition "Devotions" at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh this past summer were so authentically honest that the show felt like coming home.

"The Medici: Portraits and Politics," recently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, showed how visual culture can be used to influence an entire society. It begins with the rise of the sixteenth-century Italian banking family and demonstrates how its members legitimized themselves on the local, regional, and then international stage. We will probably never see this many Medici portraits, particularly those by Raphael and Bronzino, together again in the same place in our lifetime.

I used fashion as an escape while I was writing my dissertation five years ago. Thinking through fashion designs has allowed me to consider the way in which materials are used. The presentation of the Valentino Spring/Summer 2021 Haute Couture collection was filmed in an Italian villa, where it nodded to natural elements such as sunlight, which was reflected from mirrors, crystals, and the polished floors. The designs really picked up on a twenty-first-century world with free-flowing upcycled material, and yet everything was still sumptuous and radiant.

Ali Smith's novel *How to Be Both* [2014] reminds me of what it's like to walk through an art gallery. Half the copies of the book start with the ghost of a 15th-century Italian painter, while the others start with a young woman who has just lost her mother. The woman, having recently

fallen in love for the first time, visits her mother's favorite painting at a Renaissance palace in Italy. At the time the ghost painter encounters the woman looking at his work, he is trying to understand societal shifts, such as the emergence of new gender norms. Both versions tell the complete story, but changing the sequence of the events affects the derived meaning.

—*As told to Francesca Aton*