

160 PORTRAIT ELLE PÉREZ

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(untitled) *American flag, NYC* (2008) depicts a stage littered with the detritus of a concert. A plastic Dixie cup abandoned upside down atop a looping pile of amp chords flaccid upon a plywood floor. Three quarters of the image is dominated by a painted American flag, which serves as a backdrop to every chord of music the viewer can imagine being played in the absence that is the concert's aftermath. Its bottom half is smudged with the evidence of bodies thrashing in an effort to express something that is unutterable elsewhere than here.

Over the course of the first decade of the millennium, Elle Pérez made close to 30,000 images of the underground spaces of their Bronx punk community. They arrived as a show was being set up, then stayed through its crescendo and into its aftermath. Unlike the kind of archive that strives to contain and quarantine difference, Pérez accumulated theirs intuitively and without pretense to objective distance. "The images were immediately put online and available to those who were photographed," Pérez explains, "allowing me to have very real and immediate feedback from those pictured, happy and not so happy."¹ Each show provided a context for negotiation about the representation of public sexuality and other forms of alternative world-making.

Their impulse to render the complex social world of the punk show visible, or to counter-archive it, is due in part to an absence of history in Pérez's Puerto Rican family. "I can trace my family back to my great grandparents, and then it stops."² 406 years of the island's working class experience is a vast space to fill with photography. In Pérez's work, an archival imperative is crossed with a subtle attention to the way objects can testify both to historical absence due to structural violence and to the inadequacy of representation in face of polymorphous lived experience.

Barceloneta (2018), for example, depicts a tombstone from the cemetery in Barceloneta, Puerto Rico. It is one of many photographs Pérez made in response to their grandmother's request to find the grave of her mother's rapist, a judge in Arecibo who paid for her one-way

ticket to New York to erase his actions and their human consequences. The grave is a square-shaped tapered pillar with neither dates nor a name. Its face is cracked open, the fault-lines of its injury sketching the counters of the classic male nude at the groin: delicate muscles at the bottom of an abdomen arching down along the top of each hip to join in a thick open wound in the stone. This gap is wide enough to imagine a flaccid dick resting between thighs and narrow enough to imagine it otherwise, as well. It does not really matter that Pérez has never found the grave. There are many ways to address the desire to know what one is made of that do not entail finality or certainty.

To make an archive such as that of Pérez does acknowledge that there exists loss that cannot be mourned because it has no definite body. Further still: there is loss that results from the body's own volition. A photograph of Mae after her facial feminization surgery, a scarf loosely tied and held gingerly several inches beneath her chin to reveal a freshly plastered incision at the throat. The creases around her eyes are fading quickly, already a dusty shade of ochre that echoes the shade of the flower bloom printed in the folds of her scarf. It is clear from the stillness of the muscles in her face that she is in pain, yet her expression is liquid with a desire not only for recognition, but also for the pain of transformation that, as Pérez puts it, is "so different from shame that shame feels confusing to even consider."³ The same expression multiplies across Pérez's recent work, sometimes appearing as a gaze and sometimes as an object—a binder or a bottle of testosterone—testifying in each case to the experience of an intense and visceral *jouissance* in the process of becoming else.⁴

When Pérez talks about how they make portraits, they talk about *love*. They also talk about empathy and care, but what interests me is love. There is a photographic acknowledgement in Pérez's work of everything that has to break before two people can love one another, before they can bring themselves into appearance before one another. Such as: a photograph of a bloody hand resting between open thighs.

The blood has coagulated along a line that dips toward the middle finger, meaning that it had remained inside a bleeding person long enough to mark that boundary. It is an image of mutual submission to love. It is a statement about the kind of recognition that cannot happen in language, that must be sought deep within the body of another. To make such an image requires trust built on the photographer's surrender to their subject, though not always at the level pictured in *Dick*, and to really see *Dick* is to identify with that position of surrender.

Stone Bloom—*Dick's* photographic pair—is a picture of the ground in Puerto Rico. Its title is a reference to Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues*, especially to Feinberg's refusal to let the book's narrative be adapted for the screen. It is a relentless image, a sort of threshing floor for traumatic experience, blank spaces gouged in its grey and crimson stained surface. There is no sense of narrative linearity to the abstract choreography of these wounds. A mess of textures and traces of blood is shown at the foundation of perception—of gender, sexuality, desire, orgasm, and of the possibility of figurative representation of any of these—and left unresolved. "I have decided to just breathe into these entanglements," Pérez admits. "This is a lot of where the photographs come from."⁵

Stone Bloom, 2018 (p. 162) José Gabriel, 2019 (p. 163)

1. Correspondence with the author, April 2019.
2. <http://kaleidoscope.media/elle-perez/>
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Jouissance*, from the French, means physical or material enjoyment, or sexual orgasm. Lacanian psychoanalysis and poststructuralism have further developed the term in English to denote a transgressive kind of pleasure experienced when a subject splits psychologically.
5. Correspondence with the author, April 2019.







bound body, 2018 (p. 166) Dahlia and David (fag with a scar that says dyke), 2019 (opposite)
Mae (three days after), 2019 (p. 164) Wilding and Charles, 2019 (p. 165)

All images Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York

