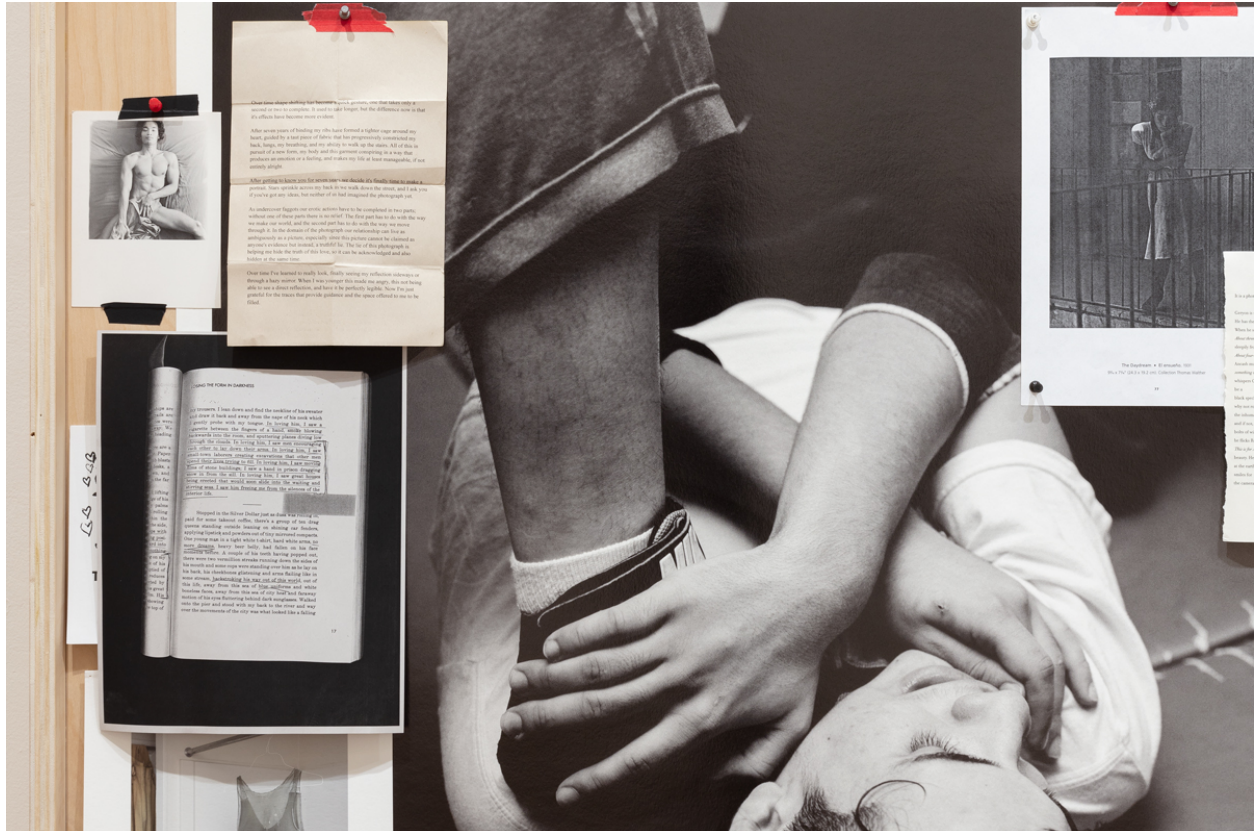


At MoMA PS1, Photographer Elle Pérez Finds Depth in the Everyday

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INSTALLATION VIEW OF ELLE PÉREZ: DIABLO

Elle Pérez, a Bronx-born Puerto Rican photographer, is having a hell of a summer. Their first solo show, *In Bloom*, a tightly curated set of beguilingly intimate portraits and still-lives, went up in March at 47 Canal, a gallery in Chinatown; a handful of months later, on July 1, Pérez’s first solo museum show, *Diablo*, opened at MoMA PS1, where it’s on view through September 3. Their work has also become a mainstay in New York’s art scene, appearing in summer group shows like Yossi Milo’s “Intimacy” and David Zwirner’s “This Is Not a Prop,” both of which were on display in late June and August.

Born and raised in the Bronx, Pérez attended the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore and went on to do their MFA at Yale, where they studied under Tod Papageorge and Gregory Crewdson, among others. Pérez first came to attention photographing the Black and Latino wrestlers of the Bronx’s underground, independent wrestling leagues, interested in the way that the young men’s interactions tangled with identity formation, ritual, and performance. In these early photographs, the action bursts out of the frame — bodies and faces are contorted with emotion, and there’s a tenderness in the more intimate photographs, a sense that we, as viewers, have been allowed in. Other bodies of work demonstrate Pérez’s interest in created

community, from photographs taken at a Radical Faeries queer sanctuary in rural Tennessee, to the quiet, almost behind-the-scenes photos from nightclubs and the ballroom scene.

Expansive yet intimate, concerned with the specifics of queer and trans community yet tautly private, even reticent to the unschooled eye, Pérez's current work dwells in seemingly mundane moments of intimate connection — between Pérez and their subjects; between the artist and the world. A binder — Pérez's own — hangs to dry in a bathroom, weighted with its own powerful presence. A figure unfurls a red handkerchief at the camera; it blurs in the frame, flagging — what, exactly? A viewer in the know will realize that, according to the hanky code, red indicates an interest in fisting, an act referenced again in a viscerally beautiful image of a bloodied hand resting between parted legs — the blood on the fist dried into the perfect shape of a flower.



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Many of the photographs feature Pérez's partner, Ian. In some, he gazes into the camera; in others, his face is cropped out, as if to provide an insulating layer between subject and gaze. In a strikingly beautiful portrait at PS1, Ian is shot in black and white, his body curving out of the frame. In the lower third of the composition, Ian's hand is thrust between his legs, but the viewer's eye is drawn to his wide, bright smile.

These private moments are made startlingly public, but never slide into voyeurism — they're still deeply encoded within a language of queerness and trans experience that offers viewers varying degrees of access. In *Warm Curve*, an arm protectively circles the torso of the sitter, which bears a top-surgery scar — and from that scar, a story unfolds, though only its outlines

are known to us. In another photograph, two phallic rocks nestled against each other conjure subtle, diffuse erotics, charging the everyday.

Pérez's show at PS1 features a suite of ten large-scale photographs made in the last three years, many of which appeared in the show at 47 Canal, as well as a new wall-spanning collage consisting of prints, visual references, and pieces of writing by Pérez and other authors, including the poet Anne Carson. The collage hops from place to place — landscapes are connected by colorful foliage; pages are torn out of books, photocopied, and underlined, accompanied by Post-it notes in Pérez's hand. "I'm not necessarily looking for someone else's mundane, but my mundane," says Pérez. "My everyday."

At 29, Pérez currently teaches at Harvard, and is a dean at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, an intensive summer residency in Maine. Earlier this year, I collaborated with Pérez on writing the text for their show at 47 Canal, working to evoke the same haloed, subtle intimacy conjured in the photographs. We spoke again some weeks after the opening of "Diablo" at MoMA PS1, talking about intimacy, formalism, representation, and ... Stephen Shore.

"Of course there is a conversation about representation and authorship that's a part of it," Pérez told me. "Sure, I'm a different kind of author than maybe other authors have been."



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Let's start with the collage. It's so cool to see the network of inspiration that you have laid out. It's not explicit, but if you get up close and read everything, you begin to understand where this work is coming from. Tell me about the collage — what inspired it?

I used to do that kind of building for myself all the time. When I really dig into the studio, that's what my studio looks like. And that'll accrue layers and layers of information and references.

Sometimes I think about what I did before I thought of myself as an artist, and it's like, *oh*, it's been there all along. I was looking for something on my old Flickr account and I found a picture of my room in high school. On all of my walls I had made these intense whole-wall photographic collages that were composed of Xeroxes, and pictures of my friends, and clippings that I had torn out. I think it's something that a lot of people did, but it was kind of funny to see that and think, "Oh yeah, that's totally coming from this kind of obsessive collecting and media saturation." Like, when I was a kid, that was my impulse — to put it on the wall and cut it out and hold on to it.

I had been hesitant, or reticent, to put the collage up. It felt like part of the process, but not a piece itself. But then, for the show at PS1, there was the idea of, "What would your studio look like in an exhibition?" And I thought of the best ways to do that. The individual pieces of the collage were things that I'd just been thinking about, and looking at, and really intensely referencing for the last year. There are a couple of pages from Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* ...

Oh, I saw that! I knew immediately. That's one of the first queer love stories I can remember reading that felt complicated and adult and deeply mythological, but also so present. Of the moment. Which line in particular is your favorite?

It's the one where he's like, "Lots of little boys think they're a monster/But I'm right./The Dog regards him joyfully."



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There's a lot of text on that board, which I wanted to ask you about — how your writing practice started out, and how you see it play into your photographic practice.

I think the moment where I was pushed to make that public was actually when we were working on the writing for the show at 47 Canal, in February and March this year. And Jamie, who is the

director, called me out a little bit! He said, "I feel like you're maybe hiding behind your friend's writing!" And I was shocked. He said, "I really want you to write something. I'm not going to let you hide from this. You need to do something too. It can be a network, we can do all of it, but you're not allowed to hide anymore." And I was like ... I just gagged. Like, oh my god, OK.

Ian had told me about his daily writing practice. He writes for thirty minutes every day, in a stream of consciousness. And he said, I think this might help you. So then I was trying to do that, and I pulled the pieces together of all the diary entries that I had had, that I had written, which I wasn't necessarily thinking of as a writing practice.

Talking to you really made me think about what I was trying to do in that first show. At first I was like, "I don't even really know what I just did here! I don't know if this is good, I don't really know what's happening, I don't know ..." I was not ahead of it at all. I was maybe five steps behind it. Things became much clearer at the end of the exhibition than the beginning of the exhibition.

With the PS1 show, you can kind of see the backbone of it a little more. As you said, you know what it's about, and I think the device of the collage allows us to know what it's about. I wouldn't consider it voyeuristic, even though some of the photos can feel really intimate. The way that you handle the intimate relationship you have with Ian, for example, feels very protective.

That's good. That makes me happy, because sometimes I worry about how vulnerable the work can be. Sometimes it does feel like there needs to be time for the relationship to heal before photography can come back into it. Especially now that we're more aware of the fact that the images will be distributed. Whereas before the two shows it wasn't like that.

This summer I've taken a little bit of pressure off of our relationship by not photographing our intimacy as much, and putting this material aside to contextualize it allows me to still be doing something and making, but it's also giving our relationship some time to heal from after being made very public.



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Do you feel like your work is moving in different directions now, or does the way that you conceive of it feel different now?

What was cool about having the opportunity to do this PS1 show was that I had realized what I was doing with the show at 47 only after it all came into focus. And I started to feel like then I could really home in on a couple of things ... and then this kind of came out of thin air. And I was like, Oh, wow, now you do have an opportunity to do that.

It was perfect in a way, and such a privilege — it was like saying, here's the second half of that body of work that you saw the beginning of. If this had been a longer period of time, people might have expected a new body of work entirely.

What's the process of photographing like for you? What is the impulse that you have to make a picture of a moment?

There are two things that go on at the same time. The first thing usually comes from impulse. Part of how this work started was, I was super not making work after grad school. In my second year of grad school it dried up. It had to do with a lot of personal things, and a lot of

changes I had to make. I started feeling like, if I didn't figure out how to have this process and make work, it was not going to happen.

I really wanted to be able to make work, and I really wanted to make work wherever I was. Previously it had been so tied to the right location — to being home, to being in the Bronx, to going to wrestling matches. There were people who I admired who were able to make work anywhere, and I was tired of allowing myself to have those excuses. Like, Oh, it's not the right place. I really wanted to move away from that. So it became this thing about making photographs of what is around me. It's also been these very specific moments of thinking about what was around me that I hadn't necessarily been allowing myself to see as material, or to see as worthy of being in a picture. And it's been allowing myself to just fully use my life as raw material.

The way I got to that though, was through practicing. Like, Since I'm just practicing, since I'm just trying to make something, I am going to try to make a really good picture. My specific problem was, How do you stop relying on a kind of written context? That I had to tell you that people were queer, that I had to tell you that people were trans. It was about figuring out how to make a queer photograph, how to make a trans photograph, that would operate on a couple of different levels. I really wanted to figure out those problems in photography that I had. [Laughs] I wanted to figure out how to make a picture with content. I really really wanted to figure that out!

Formal problems are such a good way to go about art making. Even in my own painting practice, when I'm going through and editing down and figuring out what I'm actually going to paint, it becomes: what am I drawn to, why am I drawn to it, why is this happening, what does this body of work say.

That has been a real shift for me that has been really generative. The things that I was thinking about when I was doing the first show had to do with surface, texture, and having a balance of gesture and pose and stillness. It was about making an image that felt like it had the right amount of tension in the frame but still emotionally authentic. And not having an image that was too staged, or too contrived. Because I'm not interested in feeling contrived. When it comes too close to that, it starts to annoy me. Like, ugh, get rid of it. And compositionally, how do you make a photograph that works? Which brings up color relationships. How does color work, how does light work? These are really basic problems. It was about color, light, composition. What do I do with that?

The easiest things to reach, of course, are my particular life, and my particular circumstance. It comes down to being honest about that, and being honest about who the people who surround me are, or what objects are really close to me. And what is my mundane: I'm not necessarily looking for someone else's mundane, but my mundane. My everyday.

Of course there is a conversation about representation and authorship that's a part of it. Like, sure, I'm a different kind of author than maybe other authors have been. But I'm still interested in formal things. It's funny, when I have college students, they're surprised by this, when I say I'm really interested in Stephen Shore. Do not shit-talk Stephen Shore! He's doing a lot that we can learn from! And my students are like, You have a septum ring and you're a trans fag, and you're telling us that Shore has the answers?

Because of my identity and what is part of it, which is part of the work, sometimes the conversations can really focus on that, and not on the other parts of it. So I really appreciate being able to go off about this formal stuff.

Apart from Shore, who are some other old-school photographers you've been influenced by?

I love Roy DeCarava. Classic stuff. He's incredible. I've learned so much from Roy's work, because he's someone who really thought about the way the tool of the camera — but also the picture plane, and the tones, and the way that he was utilizing his printing and image construction — could create a metaphor for what he was talking about.

The thing about DeCarava's pictures is the gray tones are where everything happens. He has these super luscious shadows, and so much information is in the shadows — it reinforces that idea of there being life in the shadows. Everything happens in the shadows for Roy DeCarava, and you can spin out from there, and associate various kinds of positions on black life in the Fifties and Sixties. What didn't have light cast on it but was still there. That is present in the physical, formal construction of the images. And that was like, a fucking mind-blowing lesson that I get to have every semester, because I have the privilege of teaching it.

You mentioned trying to figure out how to do the work. How do you think you're doing?

By the time I had the show at 47, I was really earnestly discovering what the work is about. And then for PS1 it was cool, because I had done a little bit of that discovering, and it was like what else can I find out here? At that point it felt a little bit more like, this is what I found! Knowing partly what it was. Because, obviously, I know what my life is.

I was looking at this Nobuyoshi Araki book, that I've had since I was like eighteen. It was the first photography book that I'd ever bought, Araki's Phaidon monograph, *Art Life Death*, and I carry it around with me everywhere. It's the only book that doesn't go into storage. I hadn't read it in a long time, but I was going through it, and he has this one quote that I find so fucking funny, and also really true: he was like, "If you want to change your life, change your life. If you want to change your photographs, you need to change cameras." Like, real. I think that's really true.