

Elle Pérez

guabancex

September 9–October 7, 2023

A boxer balances like a crane against a white wall, his left glove lifted in parallel with its corresponding leg. He's turned away from us, concealing almost his full anterior, and yet the composition of the photo feels like a key turning in its lock: though we can't see the boxer's face, there is the sense of having been shown everything.

The boxer appears twice within the framed works of "guabancex," Elle Pérez's second solo exhibition of new photographs and collages at 47 Canal. Aside from the collages, the rest of the mostly monochrome series is conspicuously unpeopled. Pérez, herself a boxer, has spoken before about their interest in "making work where you are." What then are we to deduce from the planters, curbs, and lightless apertures into the unknown? From the natural settings of resilient disrepair that adjoin liminal publics—subway trains, dining sheds—and fraught privates, like the garlanded parlor of a funeral home?

The capacity to notice a place's most mundane aspects—the vestibules, the sliding doors, the inadvertent petri dishes where grit and moisture coagulate—suggests a deep familiarity, one that can't be easily granted. "guabancex's" framed work conjures a glimpse so intimate as to be microscopic, producing insights that one is forced to question; similar to a boxing coach, Pérez instructs by feinting (or feints as instruction).

That sense of careful, if combative, guidance pervades "guabancex." To borrow from film director Douglas Sirk, you can't make photographs *about* things, you can only make them with them. When the *with* is obvious, we're graced with a dynamic stillness of breathtaking beauty, like the other framed photo of the boxer, whose bare back curves like a nautilus against that same white wall; but when the *with* is unclear, as in the framed photos of broken chain link, wet plastic, or algae-furred mangrove roots rising from water, it feels like a delicate redirection, a reminder to avoid the temptation of *about*. *With* and *about* are different experiences, as Pérez is surely aware.

Which isn't to say that Pérez won't play with this distinction: the collages recombine the framed photos with new images of grapplers, surgical patients, anthropomorphic sculptures, and the photographer herself. In contrast to the framed photos' unpeopledness, the *body*—a Pérez standby, along with tantalizingly rich shadowplay and the voyeur's studied cool—has followed us here, though it, like *location*, must be understood expansively. "guabancex," says the artist, is a "meditation on...historical erasure, absence, resilience, presence," on "being part of a politically constructed body of people that has been created to be moved, denied roots not just once, but in multiple eras and epochs, in multiple locations."

– Davey Davis, September 2023

Elle Pérez (b. 1989, Bronx, New York) lives and works in New York City. Recent solo exhibitions include: “Devotions,” Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland (2023); “Host,” Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles (2021); “Devotions,” Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (2021); “from sun to sun,” Public Art Fund, New York (2019) and “Diablo,” MoMA PS1, New York (2018). Their work has been included in group exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2023); the Ballroom Marfa, Marfa, Texas (2022); the Renaissance Society, Chicago (2020); Barbican Centre, London (2020); Brooklyn Museum, New York (2019) and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2019); among others. They are currently an Assistant Professor of photography at Yale University. They have previously held appointments as an Assistant Professor of Art, Film, and Visual Studies at Harvard University, and Dean at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

They participated in both the 2022 Venice Biennale and the 2022 New England Triennial. Their solo exhibition, “Intimacies,” is currently on view at MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts. They were also recently awarded the 2022-23 Rome Prize in the visual arts.

Davey Davis (b. 1988, California) lives and works in Brooklyn. Davis is the author of the novels “the earthquake room” and “X.” They write a weekly newsletter about art, culture, and sexuality at itsdavid.substack.com.