

ELLE PÉREZ

Intimacies



MASS MoCA



“Because intersection is the only place that exists. There are no opposite shores. We are always at the crossing of paths. And it is from this crossroad I address you...”

—Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus*¹

On first look, it is not easy to categorize Elle Pérez's recent photographs or to quickly locate an overarching theme within their diverse subject matter: two boxers locked in a tight hold. A close-up of a greyhound's velvety neck. A swash of ocean foam glistening under moonlight. A cloudy layer of smudges obscuring a bodega window. The images seamlessly move between portraiture, landscape, still life, and street photography; and also between black and white and color. Yet they share many formal qualities, from their study of light and dark, to their interest in surface and what it might obscure, and their attention to texture and movement.

Pérez's images also all spring directly from their life. The artist photographs familiar people and places, what they have called their own “mundane”:² the Bronx, Brooklyn, Fire Island, Puerto Rico, their partner, queer and trans friends, fellow artists, the boxers they train with at their gym. Yet together what these images evoke is far from mundane. Providing moments of contemplation for the artist and viewer alike, they are quietly revelatory. Their unique power resides in the multiplicities that they represent and in the artist's rejection of the false, fixed categories that neatly separate things—and people—into this or that. In contrast, Pérez's work expresses the complexities of intersections and relations.

The artist's constellation of images provokes an expansive web of associations. Each image acts like a neuron in the network of a brain,

communicating via neurotransmitters and synapses in the spaces between. Generating complex thought. And emotion. And desire. Touch, sight, trace, transformation, control, submission, violence, vulnerability, pleasure, pain, ambiguity, fluidity. These impressions are all evoked, their intersections and overlaps reflecting the artist's own experience while picturing larger truths about the nature—and fullness—of being. And relating. And loving. “Intimacy intrigues me with its mysteries,” Pérez has said. “The ties between my gender identity, kink, sexuality, pleasure, and pain are all interwoven. Instead of attempting to untangle them, I work within these complexities.”³

Pérez sequences their images in intentional configurations that embrace such complexities, arranging the photographs in pairs and groupings that tease out the threads that move through them. The connections that are both reflected in and produced by their proximities are as integral to this body of work as the potency of each individual photograph. The artist provides additional context for the visual conversation with two large collages featuring many of the images and texts that inform the work. These include Pérez' own photographs, photocopies of images by some of the artists who have influenced them (from Eugène Atget and Peter Hujar, to Helen Levitt), along with annotated pages from books and articles, and the artist's own lists and notes. Sharing their process and glimpses into the workings inside the studio and inside the artist's mind is emblematic of

the intimacy and openness that have come to characterize Pérez's practice in both content and approach.

Relationships were central to the artist's earliest experiences as a photographer. They first began making photographs as a teenager, documenting the underground, queer punk clubs in their Bronx neighborhood. Photographing their own social circle, they captured all the gestures, dramas, and relationships lived out in those safe spaces, spaces where black, brown, and queer communities are centered. Pérez would share images online and respond to their friends' feedback on how they did or did not want to be represented. This exchange between photographer and subject/audience became a template for the artist's collaborative ethos and the way in which they continue to work. The trust that exists in Pérez's relationships creates a marked sense of ease and vulnerability in the images they make. Many visualize not only their own intimate life, but intimate exchanges between friends, between lovers, between athletes, in order to explore the multiple forms,

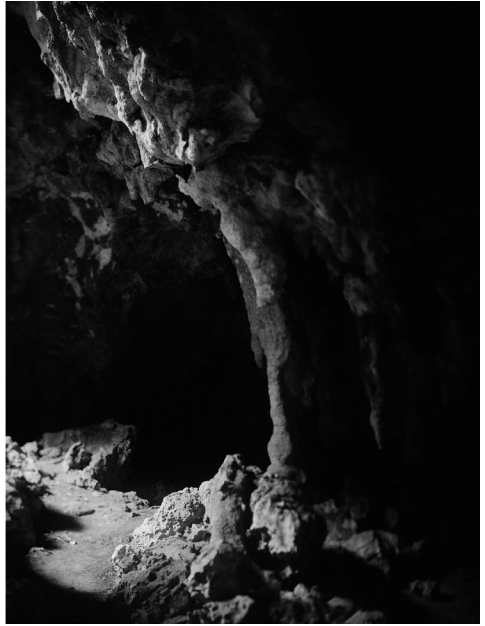
correlations, and power dynamics of the erotic. Multitudes pictured in a gaze. Fists gripping a belt. A hand on a chest. A head on a cheek. The entanglement of limbs.

Pérez has expressed that their photographs capture some vital force in each of their subjects. They relate this to the traditions of *cemi*, a spiritual concept important to the Taino peoples indigenous to Puerto Rico. In their notes, the artist emphasizes that *cemi* is "a numinous power, a driving or vital force" that can exist within beings, objects, and natural phenomena. The *cemi*, which can also take the form of ritual objects made in stone or wood, is important to a relational understanding of the world and to situating oneself amongst the nonhuman beings and other phenomena that make up the landscape and cosmos. Similarly, bodies in Pérez's work are often situated within or in relation to the landscape, emphasizing not just our relationship to nature, but our oneness with it. It is both a sanctuary and a mirror, the way it can be classified, controlled, and colonized much the way people are. One of the artist's most recent works, *Cueva (Morovis) (2022)*, takes us deep into the landscape and Puerto Rico's complex history with an altar-like diptych of an ancient cave that is becoming a contemporary tourist attraction. Pérez reinscribes a sense of gravity and spirituality to this subterranean system that has yet to be mapped, acknowledging its archeological and indigenous significance as a space of ritual and refuge.

Throughout Pérez's work, landscapes and seascapes evoke the body and its desires, traumas, and cycles, as well as its perpetual states of transformation. In *slip curve (2021)*, the meeting of two large boulders suggests the space between two thighs. The rush of water in *Ascension (Fire Island) (2019/2021)* conjures the build-up of energy and its release, and the flow of bodily fluids, like the secretions on a lover's fingers in *pull (2020/2021)*. These repeated images of water and liquid (including the compact glass bottle of testosterone lit up by the sun in *t (2019)*) evoke the internal forces, the tides that drive us and—like water's own responses to light, wind, and temperature—the works articulate



Elle Pérez, *Belt*, 2020/2021. Archival pigment print. 35 x 26 1/4 inches. Collection of Michael Sherman



Elle Pérez, *Cueva (Morovis)*, 2022. 2 digital silver gelatin prints. Each 60 × 46 1/2 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York

the relational nature of all things. Not surprisingly, water also figures as a destructive force, with *vega baja* (2022) capturing the historic but barely reported flooding outside Pérez's great aunt's home in Puerto Rico.

Depending on which way one enters the exhibition, it begins or ends with the video *Wednesday, Friday* (2022) which Pérez filmed on two different trips to Puerto Rico the year after 2017's Hurricane Maria hit the island. That the work is either beginning or end is fitting for its circular logic. The first half of the film is shrouded in near total darkness. With the power still out, the loud hum of generators is a constant backdrop. Lights from occasional passing cars wash over the buildings, and the iron bars typical of the local architecture create spectacular patterns; beauty in the chaos. The second half of the film captures the revelry of the annual Festival de las Máscaras de Hatillo in 2018, the first held since Hurricane Maria. Costumed celebrants dance and congregate amidst the whirring lights, pouring rain, and loud sirens—a sound of ecstasy

rather than emergency. Yet, it is difficult to tell. They run down watery streets, splash in the fountain. The piece closes with wind and waves lapping against the shore—water being the force that both isolates the island and connects it to the mainland. Wednesday. Friday. And every day. Life goes on. And it is essential that we make the mundane visible in all its poetry and vicissitudes.

— Susan Cross, Senior Curator, MASS MoCA

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- 1 Paul B. Preciado's book *An Apartment on Uranus* (excerpt translated from the French by Charlotte Mandell) is one of the texts that finds its way into Elle's studio collages. Reflecting on Preciado's gender transition, he declares: "I am the multiplicity of the cosmos trapped in a binary political and epistemological system, shouting in front of you. I am a uranist confined inside the limits of technoscientific capitalism." Pérez's view of this world looks as free from these oppositions as Preciado's Uranus.
 - 2 The artist in conversation with Ksenia M. Soboleva, *Brooklyn Rail*, July 2022.
 - 3 The artist quoted in Emily Gosling, "Elle Pérez's photos explore the inherent intimacy and power-plays in relationships," *Creative Boom*, April 2021.

Elle Pérez (b. 1989, Bronx, New York) lives and works in New York. Their work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland (2022); the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (2021); Public Art Fund, New York (2019); and MoMA PS1, New York (2018). They were featured in the 59th International Venice Biennale (2022) and the Whitney Biennial (2019) and in group exhibitions at Ballroom Marfa, Texas (2022), Renaissance Society, Chicago (2020); Barbican Centre, London (2020); and Brooklyn Museum, New York (2019), among others. Pérez's work is in numerous museum collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; the Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland; and Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Pérez received a BFA in Photography from the Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, in 2011 and an MFA from Yale School of Art, New Haven, Connecticut, in 2015. That same year they participated in the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Madison, Maine, where they served as Dean from 2016 to 2021. They are currently Assistant Professor in Photography at Yale School of Art. They have also taught at Harvard University, The Cooper Union, and Williams College. Pérez received the Abigail Cohen Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome where they were in residence in 2023. The artist is represented by Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Mexico City and 47 Canal, New York.

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Front cover: Elle Pérez, *pull*, 2020/2021. Digital silver gelatin print. 44 x 29 3/8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York

Interior flap: Elle Pérez, *Ascension (Fire Island)*, 2019/2021. Digital silver gelatin print. 54 x 40 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York