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Bathhouse Bods, Punk Shows, and Simulated Birth: Our Critics Cover Shows from Washington Heights to Long Island City

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Elle Pérez, *Untitled (the world is always again beginning)*, from "La Despedida," 2025. Image courtesy of the artist.

Elle Pérez's subject matter spirals outward from their social world. A formal sensibility forged in the Bronx punk scene of their teen years and the visual language of a particular queer subculture maintains its ethics of exchange, connection, and looking—even when the artist wanders much farther afield with their camera, to, say, Monet's garden in Giverny. "The World Is Always Again Beginning, History with the Present" is an abbreviated

overview of their practice (which includes text, collage, and film, as well as photography), spanning 2009 to 2025. Arranged associatively within chronological categories, the airy presentation at Arts & Letters doesn't belabor the through line of distinct eras: The wall text, composed of Pérez's own poetry, is fragmentary and oblique, reflecting a cross-medium penchant for synecdoche.

Portraiture is central throughout, perhaps especially to the earliest photos on view, with judicious details—a tattered Tyvek wristband, a wallet chain—speaking volumes about Pérez's young subjects. An archival impulse to document faces and friendships suffuses these images

—though not at the expense of a sense of place. One of the most striking black-and-white pictures on view in the first gallery shows a small, empty stage with an American flag backdrop, a drumstick, and a water bottle suggesting just-transpired action. These images of a local punk scene segue into others shot at entertainment wrestling events in 2013, also in the Bronx (a world Pérez gained entrance to via a cousin).

The third gallery contains a breathtaking new series of larger prints, “La Despedida,” 2025, which pairs two distant gardens: the aforementioned site of the French Impressionist's lily pond and Pérez's grandfather's yard in Puerto Rico. Vastly different landscapes seem to merge in moments, becoming a single, continuous, sun-dappled source of artistic sustenance—though the nearby portrait *Pedro in His Garden*, 2012/2025, illuminates Pérez's deeper history with one of them.

—Johanna Fateman