

## Fine Art

JENNA (J) WORTHAM | ART REVIEW



# Photographs That Record an Ephemeral Feeling

Elle Pérez's work highlights the delicate art of refusing to play the game of identity politics.

SUBTLE RESISTANCE to representation is on display in a handful of new shows, where some artists are refusing the notion that figuration must be their primary subject, or what is required to be successful.

"Source Notes," Lorna Simpson's riveting new show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, highlights her shift toward painting while still emphasizing the artist's career-long interest in destabilizing expectations of Black life and the art that makes sense of it. The painter Jordan Casave's newfound focus on florals is a dreamy drift away from her signature portraits.

And one of the most fascinating new artists I found to be coyly refusing to play the game of identity politics is the New York photographer Elle Pérez, whose exhibition

### The World Is Always Again Beginning, History With the Present

Through July 3 at the American Academy of Arts and Letters in Manhattan; 212-368-5900, artsandletters.org.

at the American Academy of Arts and Letters in Upper Manhattan centers the politics of personhood over the consumption of that same self. The lens lingers on physical terrain: yards, curving coastlines. The portraits included are mantel-size, which, in the cavernous space, dares you to come close and forge an intimate relationship with the work.

At first glance, one could erroneously wonder if the show, comprising nearly 30 images, a slide show, a short film and a collage, is a premature retrospective. The works on display span the artist's career from 2009 to 2025 and seem to be organized semichronologically. But it quickly becomes clear that "The World Is Always Again Beginning, History With the Present," organized by Jenny Jaskey, chief curator, in collaboration with Pérez, functions as a cut section invitation into the sacred practice of process.

This is a show that starts before you get to the show. The Academy is nestled in the vibrant and rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of Washington Heights, near Boricua College. The elaborate iron gates of the 1923 building that welcome visitors invoke the Gilded Age and its arts patronage, a sorely needed reminder of possibility amid devastating arts defunding. As Pérez explains inside: "This is the neighborhood that made me." Pérez was born in 1989 in the Bronx to Puerto Rican parents who were also born and raised there. (As Pérez said in a recent interview, "My grandparents were the generation that made the jump.") Instead of traditional blocks of wall text, the artist chose to install fragments of their poetry, like those lines, which start the exhibition.

The show is spread out over several galleries, and the first one introduces visitors to the youthful eye of Pérez, who began documenting the Bronx Underground, an all-ages punk venue, as a teenager. A slide show on a screen framed images offer selections from Pérez's vast archive. A small white zine titled "how the sea meets the sky" handed out to visitors includes the photographer's personal writing, detailing how Pérez's meticulous rigor included shooting 600 images a night, returning again and again to the same subjects, trying to create an image capable of doing the impossible job of transposing an ephemeral feeling into a photograph.

And yet, somehow, Pérez does, not with images that capture the frenetic energy of the scene but ones that bear the texture of the wilderness of youth. Perhaps the one that comes closest is "Boog's Tattoo," a close-up of a proud forearm bearing the exuberant tattoo B.X.U.G., shorthand for the club Bronx Underground. Walls are interpolated with images from Pérez's work documenting another local scene, a knockoff WWE wrestling group. Exuberant crowds cheer on matches; hefty winners draped in gold belts pose in their Speedos. Across the room, a punk stage is decorated with a dingy American flag annotated in blood or dirt, or both. The wall text asks: "What's the difference between myth and memory?" For viewers steeped in skepticism of empire and the American experiment, there may be none. They know the real history only exists in the moments like the ones Pérez manages to record.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELLE PÉREZ, AND AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND LETTERS



Photographs by Elle Pérez, clockwise from top left: "Flag" and "Boog's Tattoo," from "Somewhere We Belong" (2009-23), the Bronx Underground series; "Untitled (cleaning the pond)," "Untitled (car body)" and "Untitled (cut path and yellow flowers)," from "La Despedida" (2025); and the 2013-23 series "AND STILL..." The images are on view at the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

We are teleported through time to the recent work reminiscent of what has distinguished Pérez professionally: A series of striking images made in 2025, called "La Despedida"—or "The Farewell"—invokes both Monet's *emou water lilies* and a reggae song by Daddy Yankee. Here, a pastel hued sunset bisected by a slanted tree, the blurry rush of energy propelling water to shore and sunlight sieved by lace all affirm that a place as ornate as Versailles also exists in Puerto Rico.

A wall in an opposite gallery holds a large collage, an analog Pinterest board full of photographs, jotted notes, writings, references, clippings from texts and newspapers. It includes a page torn from a fictional biography of Christopher Columbus, written in the 1800s and punctuated with a sticker of a cartoon surfer named Angel, a Disney creation from the original "Lilo and Stitch" universe, all of which traffic in fic-

tions of modern colonialism—the same mythologies and hierarchies of power Pérez seeks to untangle.

In his book "Poetics of Relation," Édouard Glissant, a Martinican poet and philosopher, once powerfully called for the right to opacity—the right to refuse being quantified, grasping, ticking off boxes. Or being illegible. Pérez's show manages that delicate art while still all-revealing—a tactic that I imagine more contemporary artists will gravitate toward in the coming months and years as they reckon with the spiritual tariffs of consumption. At moments, elements of the show felt a bit disconnected, but I thought of Glissant's advocacy for unknowability while sitting in the last gallery, a screening room that is tucked away and easy to miss. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, a series of five different films will screen.

The day I visited, a reel of 16-millimeter

footage was projected onto the wall. They are home movies narrated by Pérez's father in Spanish: Flashes of shaky footage serve as a sundial, tracing the arc of seasons as they pass through the Bronx. The family dogs bounding through waist-high snowdrifts melt into bodies baking on Orchard Beach. Watching, I fell into a bit of a trance, lulled by the hypnotic visuals and tone. While I sat, enraptured, a young couple slid into the seats next to me. After a few seconds, one whispered loudly to their companion—do you speak Spanish? The other shook their head, and both vanished through the blackout curtain. The film had no subtitles—why should it? Glissant reminds us that not being understood is not the same as being misunderstood. As one fragment of wall text outside the gallery reads: "My audience is my subject, they are the same."