

1000 Words

Speaking to the future: Elle Pérez in New York

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*A constellation of images, films, collage, and poetry – over fifteen years in the making – comes to life at New York’s American Academy of Arts and Letters in Elle Pérez’s latest exhibition, *The World Is Already Again Beginning, History with the Present*. From the raw pulse of punk in Bronx basements to a tender reckoning with history and memory woven through Puerto Rican gardens, Pérez questions our image-world and, in this conceptually disruptive presentation, draws a line of undeniability through acts of feeling, witnessing and remembering, writes Gem Fletcher.*

In 2005, Elle Pérez began making photographs at The Bronx Underground, an all-ages music project where young Black and Latino punk bands could play their first show in the basement of the First Lutheran Church of Throgs Neck. The New York artist – a teenager at the time – found the scene through whispers and rebellious friends and wanted in, cunningly negotiating free entry in return for designing the ‘BXUG’ flyers.

The Bronx’s punk scene was different from its white, suburban counterparts. As Pérez puts it, “The protest culture of punk here isn’t about rebelling against going to college, getting a job, and being boring. It’s about survival. It’s about experiencing visceral life. It’s about getting away from your voucher housing and throwing down. It’s about showing how much you hate the government for messing up your mother’s WIC payments and making her take a three-hour round trip on public transit so that your baby sister can eat.”

Taken by the scenes' urgency, passion and physicality, a sacred space they co-created with and for each other, Pérez began chasing a desire to approximate experience. To somehow imprint the scene's ineffable shared energy and euphoria into an image. After every event, they would rush home to frantically edit and upload the photos online, eagerly awaiting the audience's response. This rhythm of making and sharing pictures of BXUG continued every month for a decade, resulting in an archive of over 30,000 photographs. The scene concluded in 2015, and that energy moved in different directions.

It's these cycles of life and culture that Pérez unravels in their latest exhibition, "The World Is Already Again Beginning, History with the Present," at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York. Curated by Jenny Jaskey in collaboration with the artist, the show offers a constellation of images, films, collage and poetry traversing bodies of work created between 2009 and 2025. In one read, the exhibit gestures towards an abridged retrospective – bringing together slices of Pérez's ever-expanding archive that honour the relationships and places that continue to shape their artistic vision from BXUG and the Empire Pro Wrestling troupe, to the fragile tendrils of family life and history in Puerto Rico and the Bronx. The exhibition hinges on a reflection of time; thinking about power and politics of presence, impermanence, remembering, continuity, and the role photography can play in these gestures.

This comes to the fore in new works like *La Despedida* [The Farewell], which sequences photographs of Pérez's grandfather's [Pedro] backyard in Puerto Real, a small village in the southwest of Puerto Rico with Monet's garden in Giverny, France. Pedro's yard is lined by large trees of quenepas and starfruit and filled with a pink outdoor bathroom, the shell of a Toyota Tercel and a beached boat named the Mona Lisa. In Giverny, Monet's pink house is abundant with sprawling wildflowers, rich foliage and the infamous lily pond connected by a network of narrow shingle paths. The intention to cultivate and care for a wild, open, free space unites both men across time. Pérez recalls being struck by the garden as an artistic strategy: "I realised Monet had set up a studio paradigm for himself. By creating a garden that changed daily, Monet gave himself endless possibilities to see." The potential born from a life dedicated to looking, listening and feeling through pictures and what that can reveal or open up is the beating heart of the exhibition.

In Pérez's life and practice, images transform into gestures of love and togetherness, representing something beyond their material reality. In March 2024, Pedro passed quietly at home and never had a funeral. *La Despedida* is both an audacious disassembly of hierarchy and more poignantly exists as a memorial to Pedro; Pérez honouring his passing with flowers from Monet's garden. A fragment of nearby wall text reads: 'The world is always ending and always again beginning. So, we tell stories to survive it.'

Throughout the exhibit, Pérez's subversive and multivalent use of text attempts to create a new context to experience their work – an exercise made possible by the artist-first approach of the American Academy. Founded in 1898 for the 'advancement of art and literature,' the Academy has the look and somatic qualities of a museum but is more akin to a contemporary art space. With a deep commitment to centering new artistic visions, they empower artists to present new projects and reimagine their work's spatial encounter. Like a wrestler who works things out on the mat, Pérez used the exhibit to play and develop new curatorial strategies that reverberate long after visitors leave the space. Firstly, there is no curatorial text upon entry. Instead, each visitor is handed a small white zine titled *How the Sea Meets the Sky* and advised to take it

home and read it later. The first text you encounter is an invitation; ‘Please feel free to take a chair.’

Through absence, Pérez gives the audience presence, opening space for the transformative effects of inhabiting our individual feelings and responses to the work. From there, the orientation across three galleries and a screening room is entirely personal, punctuated only by short poetic aberrations which riff off the artist’s reflections on time and practice. The viewers don’t encounter any such statement about the show until they reach an interstitial space, and by then, they are already fully immersed in Pérez’s world. Likewise, captions exist as brief meta documents offering titles and elongated timestamps illuminating how bodies of work keep evolving, gaining new meanings as time shifts and the world changes. In gallery three, you encounter a large collage containing hundreds of images, texts, personal notes, references, and ephemera – a combination of aspiration, inspiration and juxtaposition. Affectionately known by the artist as “context backpacks,” the piece takes what happens in the studio and transplants it into the gallery. Now artworks in their own right, the collage becomes a wayfinding device conjuring a dynamic and visceral route into the impulses of the artist’s mind.

“The World Is Already Again Beginning, History with the Present,” embodies Pérez’s unwavering pursuit of intimate moments, emotional exchanges and visceral details, and how these form a photographic expression of the ephemeral condition of living. And yet, it’s their side quest to reckon with the ever-mutating complexity of our image-world through a rallying call of optimism that proves most provocative about the show.

We live between two image worlds: the one we think we know and the one that actually exists. The former was organised by truth, fact and information – a society built upon the premise of the image as evidence. The new image world, catalysed by social media and AI’s unsettling ability to conjure realness untethered from reality, operates differently. A compelling image matters more than any indexical truth. In our current moment, photography is perhaps more consequential than ever. In riposte, Pérez’s work is about preserving history and the profound political implications of creating a line of undeniability in an era where collective memory is clouded by constant crisis, and the tools of power are weaponised to erase. At its core, the show is a blueprint for living, to slow down, feel and remember. As Pérez puts it, “the archives we each make allow us to speak to the future, to tell others we were here, to say we were alive.”