

**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](https://itsdavid.substack.com).

If we could stay here, it would be bursting with life life would be so great  
but we can't

we walked together down the dark street noticing how the light shines  
how the sidewalk shines  
how the plastic shines  
how the city is quiet, I like it quiet, feels like mine

Don't want to go out in the rain. I kind of like it.  
If this is dying, I guess I kind of enjoy it. I shouldn't  
But the light is just too good at the end of the world

And where are you? How am I supposed to exist? I say loudly I realized at your funeral that our lower life  
expectancy was not a theoretical, but a fact, I said it still theoretically, horrified as you died

So Do you think You Want to be Here forever?  
What's forever? when you don't know anyone anymore? What's forever? when everyone's gone?

Here, are my people, doing things

they move  
they move again before I even register it, myself formed only in an absence

your absence  
shatters my frame and opens a portal somewhere else still here, but also wherever you are  
underground, I want to see the sky

And I can't do anything about it. every day I do everything about it

I can't imagine a world with you gone so I don't. I want to put the sky and the ground back together for  
you.

Imagine a world with you gone: so I do. I want to put the sky in the ground but you're free.

I am an artist because I notice when I lose things, not because I use a camera. But with the camera I can  
let other people know you were here and we lost you.

I guess it always has been about death. Do you remember when we kissed. I loved you always even  
though I couldn't. I loved you and your happiness. your joy. your smile. You deserve to grow old. The rest  
of us are still hurting. The rest of us are still learning.

Don't learn all your lessons toooo quickly. I am thinking of us in a concrete stairwell. I am thinking of us in  
the Bronx. I am thinking of us in your car, you fingering me and me apathetic. I am thinking of us. I am  
thinking of your fiancé. I am tired. I just want to sleep, I don't want to die. anymore.

Are you there  
What's it feel like

I can't sleep at night so I walk the dog. Lol how can we possibly describe the loss from all directions. I'm angry and it's Tuesday. I'm angry and it's a new day. The flood.  
The sky was blue the next day. I'm angry and I miss you.

The water  
The water feels warm

takes me on, teaches me about patience, about the ground, about the foreground, and the depths.

Amalia is distraught. Amalia says no one has called. I say no one knows we are here  
they probably don't know this is happening

the water crosses the marquesina

In the cave we talk about the water, sitting on the rocks shaped by water, once shaped by hands, shaped  
by water again. You aren't dead yet. That comes later.

Amalia suggests I move back to the Bronx to be closer to my mami. My dad says the Bronx is at least  
higher ground. Eric Adams puts a nuclear bomb infomercial on TV. I think maybe my rent would be  
cheaper. I think I just wanted a chance to be happy. I think maybe I was happy. Happy it's over now. How  
nice it would be to have an easy answer. I think wouldn't it be nice to also forget where I am from. I think  
how far is the horizon. I think who are all these people. I feel welcoming to them.

On the lower east side Ramon tells me about a freedom fighter who spent decades in prison, was  
pardoned by Clinton, and then was only allowed to be free within Puerto Rico. I think how diabolically  
poetic it is to turn patria into a prison, a living tomb. I learned patria also means heaven. I guess when you  
put it that way.

I think of how the ground takes everything back in Puerto Rico

even the plastic walmart planters amalia sticks straight in the dirt as i pick out their pieces from the mud  
while the water recedes

I can't take anything back in new york

just a bunch of white kids partying in carcasses  
forgetting is good for business

there are ways that I move my body that I have to stop because if I kept going my body would crack in  
half

It's what I have learned from watching it's what I do to say I belong it's  
All the things that feel like home that I need to leave behind

Hair pull

Jaw hurts

Hip (I know your walk)

I realized maybe the other day I didn't need to look like I belong because I look like I belong

it's in the way my ankle knee hip back hurts

even though I didn't have to do anything

It's in

Resilience