

EXPOSURE



Gabriel Martinez

Portraits, Peeps, and Bulldogs

Colette Copeland

Entering Gabriel Martinez's home is like entering a wonderland—equal parts funk, kitsch, and hominess. Penny the dog greets me warmly as I peer into the living room. One mirrored wall reflects classical paintings of angels, ornate furniture, and a half-dead plant. Martinez points to one cherubic painting and says, "It was my grandmother's, isn't it great?" And it is great, in a weird sort of way. He takes my coat and has lunch waiting for us. "Have you seen Lady Gaga's 'Bad Romance' video? It's awesome. She totally rips off Matthew Barney and Guy Bourdin." We take our lunch into his office and watch Lady Gaga. Most people would be annoyed by the fact that a performer blatantly rips off another artist. Not Martinez. He's thrilled that Lady Gaga is hip and edgy enough to emulate contemporary art. Within moments, I love Lady Gaga too. Martinez's infectious enthusiasm rubs off on whoever is around him. He has the rare combination of genuine kindness mixed with more than a bit of naughtiness, and the result is intoxicating. How else can you explain how he manages to coax so many folks into disrobing and performing for him?

Over the past eighteen years, Philadelphia-based Martinez has created an oeuvre focusing on the male body. Employing performance, video, photography, and sculptural installation, Martinez's work explores the queer gaze, as well as how the media and culture define male identity and sexuality. Two photographic series, *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men* (2007) and *Untitled—Self-Portraits*

All images Gabriel Martinez, courtesy Samson Projects

Right: *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men*, 2007, chromogenic prints, each 20 x 30 inches. Entire series comprised of 100 images, illustrated grouping of 12.

1st row: Christiaan, Brian (for Ginsberg), Sonny, George.
2nd row: Michael 4, Anonymous 6, Niko, Marc.
3rd row: Michael, Chin, Eric, Claude.
4th row: Enrique, Anonymous 13, Rocco, Wassupjean.





The images' awkward, psychological discomfort speaks to the inherent tension in our culture between gay and straight male sexuality.

Above: *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men (Bob)*, 2007, chromogenic prints, 20 x 30 inches

Opposite: *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men (Jdog69)*, 2007 chromogenic prints, each 20 x 30 inches.



(2007), were exhibited at Sansom Projects gallery in Boston in the fall of 2007. *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men* features one hundred 30-x-40-inch digital color photographs of straight men's feet at the moment of ejaculation. The series revisits one of Martinez's earlier projects: From 1996 to 1998, he invited straight men to photograph their feet during climax. Martinez transformed the subsequent photographs into ambrotypes (a nineteenth-century photographic process using wet collodion plates). The objects were encased in authentic Victorian frames and displayed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Why revisit the project? How does the work read differently when it becomes a large color photograph? The earlier series references Victorian culture. The ambrotypes' metallic surfaces distance the viewer, and they function more as small, fetishized objects than photographs. In the later series, the viewer is a complicit voyeur, publicly witnessing an erotic, private moment in high-definition

detail. Why straight men? "Gay men would have been too easy," he replies. Yet the photographs speak to the tension of the queer gaze, the desirous gaze of what is unattainable. The images' awkward, psychological discomfort speaks to the inherent tension in our culture between gay and straight male sexuality.

At first glance, the photographs seem banal—their compositions consist merely of an unconventional perspective of men's splayed legs and feet, some in focus, some not. But once we get the punch line, there is simultaneous revulsion and hilarity. The "money shots" disclose a moment of extreme vulnerability. Within these domestic spaces, each identifying element reveals something about the individual: Jon is a painter and likes to masturbate in his studio, Marc keeps his pants on and has a Mac computer, Karl's feet form a perfect ballet first position, JDOG69 wears socks that are too tight, Wassup Jean likes to drink Pabst Blue Ribbon, and Bob's cats like to watch. In a few images, residual DNA is evident. I admit to



experiencing the “eww” cringe factor. “*exposure* is a family magazine,” I tease. “Please, no penises or semen.” Yet, as Martinez immediately points out, “It’s just pictures of feet.”

Sixty percent of the men photographed were strangers who answered an ad on Craigslist. “It’s an illicit thrill,” he explains of their willingness to participate. I consider this as I ponder his other recent photographic series, *Untitled Self-Portraits* (2007). Culled from Websites such as *dudesnude.com*, *manhunt.com*, and *ratemyschlong.com*, Martinez transforms the explicit snapshots into haunting, beautiful images. Created and posted for the purposes of securing a “friend,” it is interesting to note how many men consciously or unconsciously obliterate their faces. Posing in front of a mirror, the flash eradicates their heads, highlighting their more important features.

Employing an elaborate photographic process, Martinez uses the source images to produce paper negatives and make solarized silver gelatin prints. The laborious process starkly contrasts with the immediacy of the Internet snapshots. Removing their color, the images are reversed—the severe whiteness of the flash becomes a dark explosion. The images acquire an ominous quality that belies the pedestrian domestic environments where the photos were taken, mostly in bathrooms.

On a recent trip to Beijing with a group of photography students from the University of Pennsylvania, Martinez pursued a small photographic project entitled *Peking Ducks* (2009). The title refers to the slang word for Beijing hustlers. Using a Holga camera, the



Previous pages: *Untitled (Self-Portraits)*, 2007, installation, Part 1, 50 solarized silver gelatin prints, face-front Plexiglas-mounted and framed, 54 x 89 inches

Above, right: *Untitled (Peking Ducks)*, Pink, 2009, archival pigment print, image created with a Holga Stereo 3D camera, 30 x 58 inches

Right: *Untitled (Peking Ducks)*, Yellow, 2009, archival pigment print, image created with a Holga Stereo 3D camera, 30 x 58 inches

artist photographed boys and men cruising in a local park. To protect their anonymity, the subjects covered their eyes with marshmallow Peeps; the double entendre of “eye candy” is not lost. “My ‘peeps’ are completely invisible in China. In the U.S., we are fighting for gay marriage; in China, they are fighting to exist,” Martinez states. “The government is constantly shutting down gay bars and clubs. Connections are made through innuendo, code signs and signals.” Printing the images in large-scale versions of a stereo card brings attention to the covert glance or gaze. Once again, we the viewers are voyeurs.

“What’s next for you?” I ask. “Formal portraits of pit bulls photographed as religious tableaux,” Martinez replies. “I’m interested in the theme of fighters/survivors.” Questions immediately flood my brain. Where will you get the dogs? Have you ever photographed a dog before? Do you need dog handlers and assistants? What if one attacks? How does this tie into male sexuality? Since the project is in its infancy, the artist is keeping mum on most of the details. However, I am confident the resulting work will bestow the paradoxical characteristics of formalism, spectacle, veneration, humor, and just the right degree of sauciness, which I’ve grown to love in both the artist and his work.