



GABRIEL MARTINEZ BOSTON

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—Amanda Douberley

The only problem with the *Global Feminisms* exhibition at Wellesley this fall was its exclusive focus on the female body; the show lacked equally challenging and erotic images of men. Enter Gabriel Martinez, a gay artist who has been producing portraits of the clinical, erotic or sexualized male body for at least fifteen years. His recent exhibition, *Self Portraits*, consisted of twenty-by-thirty-inch color digital prints of heterosexual men—or, rather, of men's feet—at the moment of autoerotic climax [Samson Projects; October 26–December 8, 2007].

The series revisited his earlier project, *Self Portraits by Heterosexual Men*, presented at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1998, for which he photographed one hundred men's feet during orgasm, using a 35mm camera in a studio setting. Feet, he considered, were the least clichéd part of the human body. While those pieces were small, gemlike ambrotypes, the current series is much larger, almost life-size. This time, Martinez gave his subjects—a combination of friends, acquaintances, and strangers contacted through various online forums—a digital camera and told them to shoot, as it were, wherever they felt most comfortable. The resulting edition of one hundred images presents feet in various states of undress, in locations ranging from a home office with stained grey wall-to-wall carpet to a cement-floored studio and a luxuriously decorated bedroom. The feet register the unique effects of orgasm on each performer, even as they expose the fact that visualizations of the erotic always include context and staging as much as the elusive physicality of the body itself. The feet are variously light or dark, hairy or not. They hang, rest or stand. Some bear sock-lines, others crumpled pants or overalls. They are either isolated or accompanied by various items: the corner of a laptop, a *Hustler* magazine thrown open on the floor, a stack of coffee-table books, a computer console, the occasional white stain, or—my personal favorite—a pair of kittens staring inquisitively into the camera.

ART PAPERS



The work is explicitly about the homosexual gaze, mobilizing the straight male body as an enticing and normally unavailable sexual object. Yet the depiction of men's feet in relation to masturbation has none of the potentially more transgressive eroticism of showing just about any other body part—except perhaps to the male foot fetishist. The imagery dramatizes both the social taboos surrounding masturbation and the power differential in which straight male sexuality is coded.

For some viewers, these pictures are as likely to seem aggressive—or even frightening—as they are liberating. Walking into the gallery, you are surrounded by two grids of photos, fifty on the left and fifty on the right. This is an entirely male space, somewhat reminiscent of a nightclub—or a website—but strangely more banal. The installation puts you at the feet of these men, which can be an overwhelming experience when you realize what they are doing. What's more, the images' framing actually protects these men's sovereign anonymity. This power differential bothered me...until I realized that the bottom row of feet appeared opposite my own, making me not only a voyeur—or, as a woman, an implicit object of desire—but also a complicit mirror image of the performers. As such, the pictures invited viewers to share the moment of ecstasy, which is as much a moment of extreme vulnerability as it can be—and has historically been—about heterosexual male power. With sly humor, they open an important conversation about the mediation of male sexuality, while simultaneously pushing sexual relations between men and women largely out of the picture.

—Karen Kurczynski

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Florian Slotawa, detail of *Florian Slotawa: One After the Other*, 2007, installation [courtesy of the artist and Arthouse at the Jones Center, Austin; photo: Paul Bardagjil]; Gabriel Martinez, installation view of *Self Portraits by Heterosexual Men*, 2007, c-prints, 20 x 30 inches each [courtesy of the artist and Samson Projects, Boston]