

# HONCHO FEATURED ARTIST

## GABRIEL MARTINEZ

by Bill Arning

**P**erformance and installation artist Gabriel Martinez has created some of the smartest, funniest and sexiest pieces in memory that deal with the realities of gay men. Unfortunately, unless you live in Philadelphia you probably haven't seen anything.

Trust me—you would remember if you had come upon one of his events. He comes out of an art/theater hybrid tradition that includes Carolee Schneeman, The Living Theater, Jack Smith, Hermann Nitsch. This is a breed of art typified by heavy doses of casual male nudity, radical politics and ribald wackiness which turned me into an art-history major in the first place. Martinez is specifically involved in investigating the living dynamic structures of queer erotics. He takes issues that our community obsesses about and exaggerates them until the absurdities become clear.

Take cruising at the gym. Even at a very gay gym we glance subtly, making sure to never stare directly at our prey. Instead we use the omnipresent mirrors to take quick mental snapshots of a sexy butt, an arousing belly or sweat-matted pit hair. These little images help keep our discipline, little treats to reward ourselves for the second excruciatingly boring half-hour on the Stairmaster. I was once royally busted for breaking these unstated rules while working on the machine where you flap your legs together as if you were a secretary masturbating under a desk without using hands. Having caught sight of a very thinly covered cock, seemingly two-thirds hard, perfectly framed by a gap in the machine across from mine I became transfixed and stared. Think deer—think headlights. I was unaware that the exhibitionist could look over the top of the machine and see precisely where my eyes were glued—and he did. When I glanced up he grinned, pointed to his dick and gave me the thumbs up sign. I, like an idiot, glanced back over my shoulder, as if he had to be referring to someone else, sending the guy as well as his workout companion into peals of laughter. Suave, huh?

For his 1993 *Body and Steel* Martinez played off this peculiar reality. After keeping the audience waiting outside for just a little too long it was ushered into a room in which fifteen guys were working out wearing nothing but jockstraps. All races, all body types, all ages were represented. The only requirement was that the performers had to be comfortable with their bodies and with being looked at, and you could look all you want. Not that your voyeurism was invisible, but the scopophilia already associated with an artspace licensed



looking, and explicitly disallowed touching, or even interacting too much with the performers. Smelling, however was encouraged, the guys wore no deodorant, the room was kept warm and after two hours the mix was beyond heady.

That the dynamics of viewer/viewed—public/private is more pronounced in the locker room and shower areas was made clear in a live-feed video projection of the artist taking a two hour long shower—not as easy to do as it sounds. Martinez emerged with his skin a painful sun-burn red to a round of applause.

Our natural voyeurism was also made sport of in *A Spectacle*. Again the public was ushered in along a hallway. At the end of it was a sea of naked bodies, men and women, some traditionally beautiful and others for more specialized tastes. Theoretically every person should, in the tsunami of flesh, have found something close to their fantasy lover to ogle. The “catch” was they weren't totally bare—they had flash cameras, which hung around their necks when they weren't aimed at the public's gaping face. These nudists began snapping pictures in effect inverting ones desire to see turning it into a desire to flee.

Most fled quickly, but not to safety. Martinez had another surprise around the corner. There, the artist stood naked but for safety goggles backlit by a light so bright that he was reduced to mere fleshless silhouette. Again your voyeurism was foiled. But fear not, the artist's dashing boyfriend in a tux asked you which body part you desired and the from the lit side popped a Polaroid and handed it over to you. You could have been your true self and asked for “cock” or “buttcheeks” or you could have been shy and discrete and requested a more polite fetish, “nipple” “shoulder,” or my personal favorite manly part, “nape of neck”. While waiting for your trophy to develop in your hands you moseyed into the next room where the photo was taken from you, turned into a button and pinned to your chest. Then while sipping wine at the reception you wore the incontestable evidence of your voyeuristic choice.

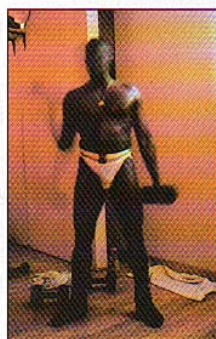
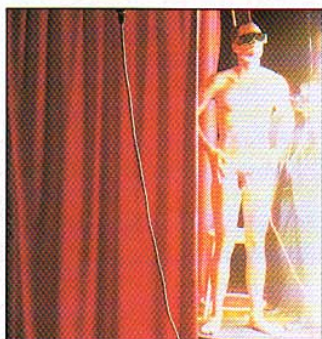
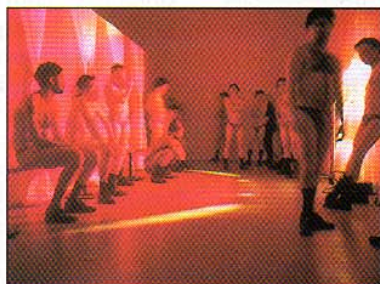
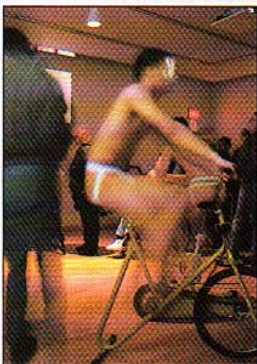
Martinez has also looked at the other side of our voyeurism—our awareness as gay men of being bodily scrutinized by the harshest panel of judges in the world, the anonymous faces at a bar or even passersby in any queer nabe. He made color posters of imperfections about which he was self-conscious and plastered them over the streets of Philly in one version or gave them away to gallery visitors in another.

You could see this as a form of therapy. How can you obsess about hiding something that you have already publicly exposed and of which strangers possess large color photos? I also like to think that there is another possibility in the poster project for recoding our standards of masculine beauty. It is inconceivable that in our often overlooked diversity that a percentage of those taking posters of the thinning hair on the top of his head say, or his inflamed beard stubble saw not an unattractive flaw but a virile, sexy attribute and hung it near the bed to dream about and beat off to.

Recently Martinez has turned his attention to a highly charged issue: how do we feel about straight men as erotic objects? At the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia he was in a show called *You Talkin' to Me?*, in which local talents were paired with well known international figures. In Martinez's case his performances were compared to the Italian Vanessa Beecroft. In her work she has fawn-like young women stand around in bra and panties and identical wigs looking bored and never making eye contact with the audience.

Martinez responded with a parody of Beecroft in which men lounged around the space in animal print polyester and spandex bikini underwear, also with matching wigs. The guys had their names, "Bob," "Bill" "David" and "Jeff" embroidered on the butt of their underwear which were ruffled off to audience members. The parody, while uproariously funny to those who knew Beecroft, was complicated by the artist's assertion that all the models were straight even though they were far more pansy-like than any of the muscley butch dressing homos in the audience.

Some of us have learned from our life experience to distrust assertions of straightness. Alternately we suspend disbelief if this fantasy that you're the first man to touch that and lick this is hot enough. I have definitely fallen for the whispered phrase, "I've



never done this with a guy before" more times than I care to admit. We already know that politically it is considered regressive to yearn for the days when sex between men was limited to one partner as straight, non-reciprocating trade and the other a faggot to be filled. And also

today straight guys have more than ever adopted queer body building regimes, earrings, goatees and sexy underwear to a degree that makes the visible clues almost impossible to read.

With that background cultural buzz, and performing to a mixed gay and straight audience, Martinez brings us face to face with all of our spurious assumptions and fantasies, and says, in effect, do with it what you may. Martinez's best work maintains this non-didactic relationship with the audience, reflecting back to us and how we feel about, sex, sexual orientation, voyeurism and fantasy.

I'll leave you with one final piece. Also at the ICA Martinez staged an event in which the audience was invited up to have a 8 x 10 Polaroid shot with the tuxedoed artist—hugging, smiling, sipping champagne. Although one over zealous audience member stripped off in the middle of the museum for his photo the performance seemed for Martinez's fans curiously non-sexual. Only the next day was it revealed the reason for the artist's curious smile in the photos which now blanketed the walls: he had been sitting on a big buttplug which now sat spotlighted on the black faux leather loveseat. How would those strangers sharing a casual intimacy in the photos feel about Martinez's little secret? Is being hugged by and photographed with a man with a stretched sphincter an insult, a compliment, a form of sex? What does the revelation reveal about how you feel about anal sex in general or about public anal sex? Or is it absolutely neutral, or just funny?

Martinez never fails to be provocative, and if you ever get the chance to participate in one of his performances, do so. You will probably learn something interesting about your own desires and sense of the erotic. ■