

Gabriel Martinez

Excruciating self-exposure drives Gabriel Martinez's work. In photography and performance, he displays what we usually try to hide. He has shown images of the rashes, pimples, and stretch marks on his naked body in large, color light boxes commonly used for bus shelter advertising (see figure 12). He has also mounted details of his body on extension and tabletop mirrors, mimicking the self-scrutiny that these devices assist. Perhaps most startling, in a 1995 performance at White Columns in New York, he submerged his naked body in a narrow, vertical glass tank filled with water, vulnerably placing himself on live display as he breathed through a snorkel.

For Martinez, minor physical imperfections are the stuff of major critique; they enable him to hold up a mirror to a cultural obsession with personal appearance and surface perfection. As a gay man, Martinez can reflect on gay culture's version of this societal preoccupation, which includes aspects of both pride and self-punishment.

Photography, as a medium based on exposure, is a perfect vehicle for Martinez's concerns. The photograph is made by exposing sensitive film to light, and its results hold a special claim to representing reality. It can bring a clarity of detail to bear on the activity of scrutinizing the visible surface, which Martinez furthers by his frequent use of a large-format, eight-by-ten-inch camera. His assertive, even confrontational use of photography to engage issues of identity, media influence, and the body as an ideological construct reflects a general trend in photography of the late 1980s and 1990s. In addition, his photographs have the cold quality of the plastic surgeon's documents that he saw regularly at an early job at a film-processing chain as well as the glamour of advertising.

Martinez's work embraces both mortification and courage. His cheeky acceptance of vanity and self-absorption is what allows him to comment on these conditions from within. In addition to critique, Martinez's approach serves a cathartic function. "The more I release, the more I want to release," he has said. "The more I experience the crucible of humiliating exposure of imperfection, the more I want to continue on that path . . . for the purifying, therapeutic, cleansing feeling of . . . coming clean."¹

Martinez's strategy of self-exposure has led him to consider the related issues of the male gaze and desire, two themes that are central to contemporary art theory and criticism. His images are strongly related to the age-old tradition of representing the nude body as an object. But by using his own, male body as an object of both desire and repulsion, Martinez complicates the notion of the male gaze. He is at the same time the subject and object of his work, the looker and the looked-at. From his dual perspective, he represents both the dominant culture of masculinity with its objectifying gaze and the "Other" of homosexuality.

In a recent series, Martinez focused on one hundred heterosexual male sitters (plate 11). Using a nineteenth-century technique called ambrotype, in which photographs are printed on small glass plates, he made tiny, exquisite images of the feet and lower legs of his subjects, each of whom was left alone to activate the camera's shutter release at the moment of autoerotic climax. As the instigator, collector, and presenter of the records of these private events, Martinez turns the male gaze back on itself. Moreover, seen as a whole, this series establishes an unexpected resonance between sexuality and spirituality as the partially contained figures suggest traditional Christian images of ascension.

1. Conversation with the author, April 1, 1997.