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DSEM 100 C1  
30 October 2019  
Paper 2 Final



Elle Pérez, *Mae (three days after)*, 2019

Since photography was created in 1826, humans have always been interested in photographing others. The first photograph of a human was made a mere two years later, in 1838. However, there is now more of a focus on contemporary photography, as shown in Charlotte Cotton's book, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. This book introduces the reader to seven different categories of photography such as deadpan and intimate life. Each of these categories contain a description of what makes it a category of photography and collections of photographers and photos that are examples of each category. In "Chapter 5: Intimate Life", there are many photos that show the relationship between two people, including pictures that would potentially be taboo in the public eye. Elle Pérez, a contemporary photographer, has focused more on the idea of taboo photography with their photographs depicting gender fluidity.

*Mae (three days after)* by Elle Pérez belongs in “Chapter 5: Intimate Life” of the next edition of Charlotte Cotton’s *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, because Pérez looks at and photographs domestic life and brings to light contemporary of gender representation.

“Intimate Life” into the narratives of intimate life that are subjective, and not necessarily staged. Some photographers in this chapter have family members recreate scenes of intimate or family life, but the majority of the pictures are taken by photographers who want to capture these images simply for a memory. In intimate photography, it is not the skill of the photographer, or the lack of mistakes that makes the photograph so compelling. Instead, the shortcomings of the photograph make the image that more intimate, and are the best language to communicate the privacy of the photograph at hand. Sometimes, the lack of skill, such as a blur or a bad angle, is on purpose to speak about the intimacy between the subject and the photographer. Intimate photography is also about photographing taboo topics and mundane topics that are often glossed over. One of the most influential photographers in intimate life is Nan Goldin. She photographs the friends and lovers present in her life and how Goldin’s story intertwines with theirs. Goldin addresses themes in her photographs that force the viewer to think beyond what is simply in the photograph, and instead into a universal experience of relationships. Intimate life is also about showing the world the hardships of life, including drug addiction or abuse within a family. All of the photographers in “Chapter 5: Intimate Life” have something to share with the world about their experiences and personal connections with the world around them.

Elle Pérez grew up in Bronx, New York to a Puerto Rican family. They were born in 1989 and grew up around the Bronx punk community that was primarily underground at the time. Pérez started with photographing entertainment wrestlers and nightlife. They were especially interested in the need to photograph the LGBTQ+ life around them at a time when being part of that community was more than taboo. Pérez often explores the idea of an authentic photograph; what makes a portrait authentic? Is it what we show, or what we hide? Pérez believes that the photographs we take of others are important in the ongoing question of what gender is. In the LGBTQ+ community, Pérez has spent a lot of their time outlining how complex gender identity can be. They hope to show how identity changes from person to person, and from day to day. Most of their early pictures of the LGBTQ+ community were taken during a time

when being queer was a mental illness, rather than a positive character trait, and Perez took photographs to show that queer people do exist and are humans too.

*Mae (three days after)* by Elle Pérez is a photograph of a young woman who was recovering from facial feminization surgery. According to The American Society of Plastic Surgeons, facial feminization surgery is a procedure with the goal to “transform the masculine features of the face to a more feminine appearance” (Facial Feminization). People often undergo this surgery in order to continue with the process of visually going from a man to a woman. In the photograph by Pérez, the bruises under the young woman’s eyes and the bandage over the stitches on the upper neck are clearly visible. There is also bruising underneath the stitches on the neck. The young woman most likely had cheek augmentation and an Adam’s apple reduction. Both of these are very common in the world of facial feminization surgery. The young woman has her chin jutting out towards the camera, and her hands are holding her head scarf away from her neck in order to draw attention to the recovery process of the surgery.

Not visually present in the photograph, but just as prominent, is the relationship Pérez has with their subjects. They put an emphasis on caring about the relationship they have with their subjects, because Pérez believes in the intimacy of creating a photograph. There is no rush to make something out of nothing, and that is the same in any relationship. Pérez is proud of being a photographer that their subjects are able to trust and be intimate around, as intimacy is hard to stage but is very compelling when photographed. *Mae (three days after)* is not simply a documentation of a woman who had undergone facial feminization surgery, but instead a story of the fluidity of identity and the trust it takes to share that identity with the world. Identity is a new issue in the world of intimate life, as people are finding themselves less and less defined by the basic view of two genders. *Mae (three days after)* brings light to the new acceptance of gender in the LGBTQ+ community.

In the art world, Pérez has had many accolades for their work. It takes a special photographer to present a space for a subject that allows that subject to be vulnerable enough to share their queerness with the wide audience that walks through museums and public galleries that contain Pérez’s work on display. Both *Kaleidoscope* and *C& América Latina* have interviewed Pérez about the intimacy of their work, and the meaning beyond the photograph

presented. In the *Kaleidoscope* interview by Jagdeep Raina, an artist who studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Raina focuses mostly on the personal relationship that Pérez has with the photographs they take. In the interview with *Kaleidoscope*, there is more focus on the way Pérez photographs their subjects, choosing between portrait and landscape orientation. However, both art blogs are interested in emphasizing the importance of Pérez's work in a time of growing acceptance for the LGBTQ+ community.

*Mae (three days after)* by Elle Pérez belongs in the next edition of "Chapter 5: Intimate Life" because of the question of gender identity that is front and center in the photograph. The photograph highlights the continuing expressions of gender in an ongoing discussion of what gender is in a world that wants to define something that cannot always be defined. Pérez has changed the view of gender identity in a time where a definition of one's gender can delineate the rest of their life. As this view has changed, it needs to be included into the newest edition of *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* to portray the changing perspectives of our most intimate selves.

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