

Seminal Images: Gabriel Martinez with Darren Jones, October 15, 2015

by [Darren Jones](#)

Gabriel Martinez is a Cuban-American artist working in photography, installation and performance. Raised in Miami, Martinez is now based in Philadelphia where he also teaches photography at the University of Pennsylvania. His current body of work engages with the history of queer culture, particularly the gay male experience of the 1970s and '80s. On the occasion of his solo exhibition, "Bayside Revisited" at the Print Center in Philadelphia — in which Martinez focuses on the island community of Fire Island Pines — he shares some of the ideas behind the show.



Gabriel Martinez, Meat Rack 46/80, 2015.
35mm slide projection, dimensions variable.
Courtesy: Samsøen.

DARREN JONES: What drew you to Fire Island as a subject for this body of work?

GABRIEL MARTINEZ: As a child growing up in Little Havana, Miami, I was first introduced to Fire Island through the Village People's song of the same name. I was just nine years old when that song came out in 1977. I was instinctively drawn to the image of masculinity on the cover of the album, the song's rhythmic disco beat and to the lyrics: "Don't go in the bushes/Someone might grab ya..." I had a subtle sense of what those lines referred to. It took me 36 years to actually step foot upon this mythical location, and I'm still not sure if it actually exists.

For most of my artistic career, I've investigated various themes related to masculinity from a Queer perspective. Lately, I've been specifically focused on Queer history, with a particular interest in the time period between Stonewall and 1981, including Donna Summer, AIDS, the films of Wakefield Poole, the novels of John Rechy, and now Fire Island. I'm intrigued by the national sites of particular importance to the history of gay culture.

What is Fire Island to you?

It's a place of intense beauty and sorrow. It's a living memorial, a sacred space, a state of mind.

Fire Island is rife with personal transformative encounters and shared collective experiences. I want the exhibition to reflect both points of view.



Gabriel Martinez, *Bayside (1)*, 2014. Archival inkjet, silkscreen, silver leaf on paper, 35 1/2 x 53 1/2 inches. Courtesy: Samsøn.

The title of the show is redolent of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Sacred & Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (1945) — a story that while in a different time, deals with a lifestyle and environment hitherto unknown to the narrator. The story touches on homosexuality, desire and nostalgia. It is observed of Brideshead Castle that it had "the atmosphere of a better age." How did you come to choose the title?

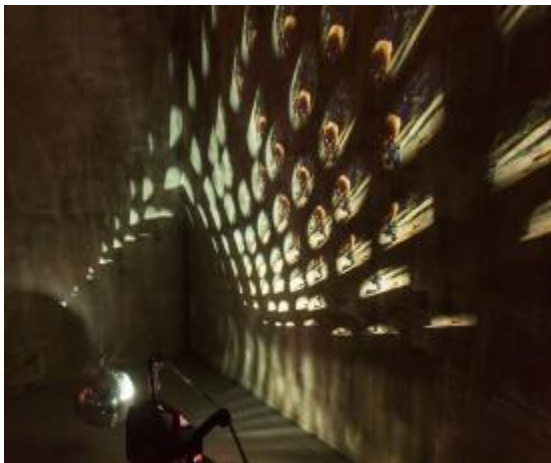
Any associations with Waugh's novel are conscious, yet general and loose. I worked closely and collaboratively with John Caperton, the Print Center's Jensen Bryan Curator, on all aspects of the exhibition, including the title. This show is presented as part of the Center's Centennial, and so an exploration of history itself, in various dimensions, is an integral aspect of the exhibition. For instance, the beginnings of the island's Cherry Grove as a safe haven for queer people can be traced back to the mid 1930s. The show also explores issues deeply interrelated to narration, homosexual desire, camaraderie and nostalgia.

Fire Island is associated primarily with the summer season. You have included winter scenes in the exhibition— silence, desolation, aloneness. Why did you expand the exhibition into a time of year that so few have experienced?

Traveling to Cherry Grove or Fire Island Pines via the ferry from Sayville during the winter months is impossible. The bay is usually frozen. I wanted to experience this sense of impossibility and to explore the quality of the island, by myself, during a moment that is the polar opposite of the high season. As a sort of pilgrimage, I hiked five hours in freezing temperatures from Robert Moses Park to reach Cherry Grove and Fire Island Pines. What I discovered was isolated and solemn, yet powerfully charged. I wanted these images to present an atmospheric antithesis of the festive social scene that was/is Fire Island. I created multi-layered hybrid prints (silkscreen, inkjet and silver leaf) that evoke and mirror a sense of what I felt that particular day: decay, tragedy and trauma.

Mythology is a major currency in the perception and story of Fire Island. It is a place that almost seems to evaporate as soon as you are back in “reality.” How much does the concept of that place conflict with or complement the actuality of it in your work?

This factors greatly in “Bayside Revisited.” Once you enter through Donna Summer, your journey begins. The space is dimly lit alluding to a nocturnal experience. The soundtrack to Wakefield Poole’s *Boys in the Sand* permeates the space with angelic voices. You are within the fantasy. Stepping back out of the main exhibition space, you are coldly reminded of the paradise to which you immediately long to return.



Gabriel Martinez, Untitled (Bayside Projection), 2015. 16mm projection on mirror ball, sand and glitter, dimensions variable. Courtesy: Wakefield Poole.

By projecting an original copy of *Boys in the Sand* onto a mirrored ball you splinter it into a kaleidoscope, giving tantalizing glimpses rather than a full screen. Why?

I’m indebted to the source material and at the same time feel that it’s imperative for me to transform it. By projecting the 16mm print the film disperses into the realm of the cosmos, day into night. The images seem to radiate around you, enveloping the viewer. The wall onto which the film is projected via the mirror ball is coated with sand from the Meat Rack [a section of the island known for public sex], and glitter. Both the ephemeral and tangible are depicted.

The viewer enters the exhibition through a wall-to-wall curtain of Donna Summer in ecstatic voice against a blazing sunset: it’s carnivalesque, implying something to be discovered on the other side. It

could be illusionary, supernatural or historical. What do you intend to communicate through the supernatural or magical artifice inherent in the subject?

On July 7, 1979, Donna Summer was scheduled to perform before an audience of 5,000 adoring gay men on the oceanfront there, but she canceled last minute. Many speculated that the “queen of disco,” growing increasingly religious, did not want to be so directly connected or associated with the gay community.

Last year, I placed her iconic *Live and More* (1978) album cover on the Fire Island seashore and let the waves drag her away. Through photography, Summer now posthumously performs on the island for the first time ever.



Installation view, “Gabriel Martinez: Bayside Revisited,” 2015, at the Print Center, Philadelphia.
Courtesy: Samsøen.

That image has been converted into a curtain that signals the beginning of your journey through the exhibition. I definitely intended to set up a kind of funhouse atmosphere resplendent with wonder and excitement, with just a touch of anxiety and apprehension. You’re entering Neverland; let the Peter Pan Syndrome take over.

There is the vaguest sense that you long for a Fire Island that no longer exists. You are too young to have been there in its ‘70s heyday, and it is understandable for men of our generations to wish to have seen a pre-AIDS Fire Island. How do you negotiate the distance between you and the times you portray?

I look back at the ‘70s with a great sense of admiration and empathy. It was a time of intense struggle, but also of outrageous courage and creativity. Yes, I wish to have lived through that era, and at the same time grateful that I came out when I did, in the mid ‘80s.

The theme of AIDS has been embedded in my multidisciplinary projects from the outset of my career. I have created works that pay homage to those who perished since the start of the epidemic. I have also created various works dedicated to the memory of those who have lost their lives while seeking freedom from oppression.

Lately, I find myself positioned in the middle, both as a mid-career artist and as an openly gay Latino man centered between the older and younger generations. I sympathize greatly with the older

generation, a group of individuals who fought so vehemently, faced such animosity and experienced such profound loss. I liken my current role as an artist to that as conduit between the two generations, as inter-generational mediator.

"Gabriel Martinez: Bayside Revisited" is on view at the Print Center, Philadelphia, through December 19.

For more information please visit printcenter.org/100



Gabriel Martinez, Grove Hotel, 2015, Fujiflex Crystal Archive print, 30 x 45 inches. Courtesy: Samsøn.

- See more at: <http://www.artcritical.com/2015/10/15/darren-jones-with-gabriel-martinez/#sthash.4dV8n4OY.dpuf>