

MACBA re-examines the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres

- ▶ *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The Politics of Relation* affords an opportunity to present a new reading of one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, emphasising his relationship with Spain, the American continent and the Caribbean, and focusing on issues such as memory, authority, freedom and national identity. For Gonzalez-Torres the personal is political, and in his works he explores the dialogue between the private or unseen and the public.
- ▶ The art of Gonzalez-Torres can be read as a critique of social conservatism, homophobic attitudes and also as a warning about the rise of right-wing conservatism. His works challenge the viewer through the application of clandestine codes and strategies, such as through the subtle use of language in his titles, which in some cases become a kind of password, or through the recurrence of paired objects, which, as a symbols of both equality and “perfect lovers”, can simultaneously allude to homosexual love and evade censorship.
- ▶ The exhibition, curated by Tanya Barson, is the most ambitious to be presented in Spain and one of the most significant of those held in Europe in recent years. It brings together approximately 40 works organised into four on-site rooms, each focusing on a particular set of ideas: a political reading of his works; the notion of the couple; the existential; and, finally, patriotism and militarism and their connection with both machismo and homoerotic desire. The exhibition also highlights Gonzalez-Torres’ formative influence on queer aesthetics.
- ▶ The exhibition will unfold beyond the MACBA building: “*Untitled*” (*It's Just a Matter of Time*), 1992 , a possible warning about the threat from the extreme right, will be installed on the façade of L’Auditori de Barcelona, as well as other places throughout the city and its environs; the installation “*Untitled*” (*Loverboy*), 1989, composed of sheer fabric curtains, will add a blue hue to the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion (the colour blue in the artist’s work has been associated with love, beauty and fear); and “*Untitled*” (*America*), 1994, will be displayed outdoors on the museum’s façade and the Rambla del Raval. These interventions manifest the central importance in Gonzalez-Torres’ practice of contesting conceptions of public and private space, and how and where the works are experienced, considerations that have become even more important in the context of the current pandemic.

Title: Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The Politics of Relation **Opening:** 25 March 2021, at 7:30 p.m. **Dates:** 26 March to 12 September 2021 **Organisation and production:** MACBA Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona with the generous cooperation of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation **Curator:** Tanya Barson **With the support of:** Henry Moore Foundation **In collaboration with:** L’Auditori, Pavelló Mies van der Rohe **Thanks to:** Co-rpus, La Escocesa **Felix Gonzalez-Torres** is represented by Andrea Rosen Gallery and David Zwirner

Sweets, stacks of paper, clocks, mirrors, curtains and billboards are some of the materials that Felix Gonzalez-Torres (Guáimaro, Cuba, 1957 – Miami, USA, 1996) uses to create powerful and poetic works that challenge viewers by encouraging them to construct their own narrative. The exhibition *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The Politics of Relation*, curated by Tanya Barson, brings together forty of his works at MACBA and explores a new interpretation of Gonzalez-Torres' work by highlighting a political reading with an emphasis on its relation to the location of this exhibition in Barcelona. This new curatorial project places the work of Gonzalez-Torres in relation to postcolonial discourse and the connected histories of Spain, the American continent and the Caribbean, and puts a particular emphasis on the personal through issues such as memory and amnesia, authority, freedom and national identity, while also underlining the decisive influence of his work on queer aesthetics. In this way, this monographic exhibition takes on its responsibility to re-examine the layers of Gonzalez-Torres' practice and the way it connects with histories that have sometimes been underemphasised in the presentation of the work. Gonzalez-Torres' work has influenced not only artists of his own generation but many in subsequent ones.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres
"Untitled" (It's Just a Matter of Time)
1992
Billboard

Dimensions vary with installation

© Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Courtesy of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

Twenty-five years after the last monographic exhibition in Spain, which was curated by Nancy Spector in collaboration with Gloria Moure at the CGAC,* and ten years after the last major monographic exhibition in Europe, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The Politics of Relation* proposes a new line of research that seeks to problematise any essentialist reading arising from a single idea, theme or identity. Structured in four chapters, the itinerary of the exhibition brings together groups of works via themes that are developed through juxtaposition in dialogue with each other. The exhibition unfolds beyond the Museum galleries, in a fifth chapter, with some of the works installed on the building's façade, the Rambla del Raval, the exterior of L'Auditori de Barcelona and the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres
"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)

1987–90

Wall clocks

Original clock size: 13.5 inches diameter each

Edition of 3, 1 AP

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT

Gift of the Peter Norton Family Foundation

© Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Courtesy of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

* This was a travelling exhibition originally shown at the Guggenheim, New York, curated by Nancy Spector. At the second venue, CGAC, it was co-curated by Gloria Moure, and for its third venue, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, by Suzanne Pagé and Béatrice Parent.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born in Guáimaro, Cuba, in 1957. As a child in 1971, he and his sister Gloria were sent from Cuba to Madrid. A short time afterwards they both travelled to join an uncle in Puerto Rico. There Gonzalez-Torres began to study art, later continuing his studies in New York at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. In 1987, he joined Group Material, an artist collective concerned with social issues and adhering to the principles of activism during the AIDS emergency, a period of time that also influenced his work. In 1990, he held his first exhibition at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York. Together with David Zwirner, Andrea Rosen Gallery continues to represent the artist today. In 1991, he participated in the Whitney Museum Biennial in New York, both as an individual artist and as a participant in Group Material. In 1995, the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea in Santiago de Compostela dedicated an extensive exhibition to his work, the second venue of a travelling exhibition from the Guggenheim, New York (curated by Nancy Spector), followed by a third venue in the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. González-Torres died of AIDS-related complications in Miami on 9 January 1996, five years after the death of his partner Ross Laycock. In 2007, he was posthumously chosen to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. In 2020, the ARCO Art Fair replaced their usual guest country with a tribute to Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

THE EXHIBITION

Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The Politics of Relation

Room 1 (Sala B)

This room addresses the broad politics of Gonzalez-Torres' practice as it relates to ideas of authority, judgment and memory/amnesia. The works are linked through oblique references to authoritarian or establishment culture, to fascism and social conservatism, as well as to the repression of the gay community and homophobic attitudes that could refer to the US during the AIDS crisis in the eighties and nineties, but which can also be connected to Spain and an equivalent repression under, and persisting after, Franco. There is an immediate visual and ideological link through the colours red, black and white. This selection makes clear that Gonzalez-Torres' project was profoundly anti-fascist. While the pieces could reference a particular era of politics of the United States, at the core of Gonzalez-Torres' work was its intention to be both timeless and malleable with context, and thus they apply equally to recent history evoking the politically polarising years of former President Donald Trump and his ongoing influence. Nevertheless, in Barcelona they might suggest a different interpretation: that of the history of the Spanish Republic, Barcelona's support for this legitimate government during the Spanish Civil War and the repercussions during the subsequent years of dictatorship, Spain's amnesia about and irresolution of its own fascist past, and contemporary resonances in the threat of the far right and the resurgence of populism. Time itself, as referenced by some of the works, can also be seen as political here, especially because, since Franco, the clocks in Spain have been aligned with those of Germany rather than with its geographically defined time zone.

Room 2 (Sala A)

The works in this room present ideas of coupling, touching, doubling, sameness and equilibrium. They demonstrate Gonzalez-Torres' importance in providing a subtle and often intentionally cryptic language of queerness simultaneously combining with images of the broader idea of equality. They also show how he recast the vocabulary of Minimalism and Conceptual art as vehicles for affective content, one of his most important contributions to new artistic forms. This, however, is also one of his most political gestures, given that he acknowledged that this approach would enable him to speak about homosexuality, specifically to address homosexual desire, love and vulnerability, while eluding far-right conservatives and their efforts to censor such content. At the same time, the open character of his language makes his work accessible to all viewers; it encompasses the specificity of individual identity while at the same time offering an image of equivalence, community and the commons. Through the dialogue between mutability and eternity in the work, this room also foregrounds ideas of romantic conceptualism and shows how Gonzalez-Torres drew on feminism's political interpretation of the personal sphere. The colour blue often stands for love or beauty in his work, as well as fear, and the image of rings can be read as matching wedding bands, referencing the use of both the circle and the figure 8 or ∞ (infinity) as symbols of eternity or enduring love. This motif, along with that of two identical circular objects (such as mirrors, clocks, metal rings or light bulbs), and the use of exact symmetry, occurs frequently in Gonzalez-Torres' work as a symbol of 'perfect lovers'. Many of Gonzalez-Torres' works make reference to the AIDS crisis, the fragility of the physical body and the eternal presence of our effect on the world, engaging in a further recasting of the aesthetics of Minimalism – for instance, by transforming a minimal grid into a reflection on health, life and death, or by enacting physical or material presence and absence. The works here show the artist's engagement with poetry through the theme of love and loss, and the dialectic between presence and absence and what endures. They reinforce Gonzalez-Torres' engagement with queer aesthetics in poetry and writing, while also touching on the theme of exile.

Room 3 (Sala C)

Organised around some of Gonzalez-Torres' most existentially oriented pieces, which nonetheless have an underlying political content and a powerful contemporary resonance, the works here engage with themes of travel, emigration, exile, tourism and escape/freedom. They foreground imagery of water, sky and beaches, which function as expansive poetic metaphors within Gonzalez-Torres' work. In Spain, historically, through the era of dictatorship, travel and tourism were co-opted as part of the political narrative and the constructed identity of the state. Today they have become a large segment of the economy with an impact on the very existence of some communities and the quality of life in cities such as Barcelona. Several of the works actively manifest the idea of dispersal, with reference to people but also in the dispersal of the physical components of the work, and thus their 'viral' aspect. Moreover, in Gonzalez-Torres' work the theme of travel encapsulates what Nancy Spector has called a 'nomadism of the mind.' Here, the works are linked through their tonal range of white, blue and grey, and their relative lack of image-based content or focus on an overall pattern, giving the visitor space to reflect.

Whilst maintaining a contemplative poetic ambiguity, the works nevertheless embody the confrontation with mortality and a reflection on existence itself. Minimal abstraction is addressed through a number of

these works, which can be read in the light of a personal history rooted in the Caribbean and the artist's awareness of the beach as a symbol of both utopia and exploitation. They also reference the politics surrounding tourism and exoticism, and the histories of colonialism, migration and exile. Likewise, they can be read from the perspective of Barcelona and the Mediterranean in the twenty-first century and the politics of human movement through refugees, migrations and trafficking. These works may also evoke the problems of Barcelona's pre-pandemic tourism industry, frequently described as a plague or an invasion, as well as its history, during which the Franco regime tolerated a certain licence in Spain's resorts in order to generate a tourist economy.

Room 4 (Sala D)

This selection of works examines the ideas of patriotism, militarism, machismo and homoerotic desire, and how the nationhood of a people is also rooted in its monuments. While Spector has commented that 'monuments are historical records made manifest. Most often fixed entities, monolithic and static in theme, they denote for culture what its history and values are supposed to be', we are living through a time when such monuments and the culture they represent are being vigorously contested. Gonzalez-Torres' complex engagement with the form and meaning of monuments is a particular focus of this room, which will undergo changes over the course of the exhibition. The ability for much of Gonzalez-Torres' work to not hold a singular form manifests in how he contested the fixed idea of history. Here, certain works suggest ideas of (erotic) attraction towards men in uniform, specifically within the context of the military. In both his native Cuba and in Spain, as well as across Latin America, such works also evoke dictatorship and a series of complex and deeply contradictory emotions: from the fear inspired by authoritarianism and persecution to the sometimes simultaneous presence of admiration for a strong and powerful leader, especially among the political right. The works, and their juxtaposition, plays on eroticism, while emphasising how patriotism and militarism can be manipulated to distract from more acute social problems, such as the AIDS crisis. These prescient works also evoke the context of recent protests and calls for the removal of colonial, patriarchal and hegemonic monuments, such as during the Black Lives Matter movement, but also more localised movements here in Barcelona. These pieces reinforce the ongoing relevance of Gonzalez-Torres' works in our time.

Façade

Like many bodies of Gonzalez-Torres' work that can take the form of adaptable installations that invite the curator or owner to place them in different locations and configurations, Gonzalez-Torres' light strings are a kind of anti-monument. *"Untitled" (America)*, 1994, displayed here, is one of his most ambitious works of this type. Composed of twelve light strings (four of which are installed on the façade of MACBA and eight in the Ramblas de Raval), it was conceived in its ideal context to be an outdoor work, a fact that emphasises the artist's interest in redefining the monument, perhaps along the line of a communal gathering or outdoor celebration. In this way, the work addresses the arbitrary separation between public and private space, the formal and informal occupation of those spaces and questions the boundary between art and life. The title contains conflicting connotations of the name 'America', which reads differently to Anglo and Latinx audiences. To the former, especially within the US, it speaks to a sense of

seemingly straightforward patriotism. From Gonzalez-Torres' own position as a Cuban-born naturalised US citizen, it could simultaneously signify conceptions of a place of aspiration, questioning about nationalism and patriotism or the so-called 'American Dream'. From the Latin-American perspective it is the name that has been co-opted to mean the United States, but which in fact encompasses many nations across the continent; in that sense, it also references the exclusions of national identity and patriotism. Using the word America highlights the entirety of the Americas, without erasure, and emphasises Gonzalez-Torres' careful usage of language in his works.

Corridor/Pasillo

"Untitled" (Portrait of Andrea Rosen), occupying the corridor, reinforces and expands on the ideas examined within the galleries. A core intention of Gonzalez-Torres' portrait works, which are painted directly on a wall, is that they can be perpetually adapted with additions and subtractions to the content in the context of each manifestation. When owners lend out a work, they can choose whether to authorise such decisions. Here, the curator has taken on that right and responsibility to the work by choosing to remove all previous events and dates, presenting an entirely new text that provides a series of dates suggested by the location and the moment in time, reflecting on the histories of representation, race and colonialism. While we perceive a portrait to be something that is fixed, in reality we are always changing in response to our context, and in this way the work may at this moment be a portrait of this institution (or of this moment at this institution), while it also remains a portrait of the subject.

PUBLICATION

The publication accompanying the exhibition will simultaneously situate his work in relation to the postcolonial discourse and the connected histories of Spain, the American continent and the Caribbean, particularly the ways they effect issues around memory, authority, freedom and national identity, as well as act as a documentation of the specific curatorial choices made for this exhibition and how much of the work may shift over the course of the six-month exhibition as a reflection of these decisions and the nature of the work. It will include two essays: Tanya Barson on the politics of relation, and Agustín Pérez Rubio on marginal histories in Spain. Seven short texts have also been commissioned from the artists Alejandro Cesarco, Dora García, Aimar Pérez Galí, Adam Pendleton, Amalia Pica, Beatriz Santiago Muñoz and Daniel Steegmann, who address issues such as the use of photographic images, installation instructions, the sense of touch and the dissemination of the work of Gonzalez-Torres, among others.

The publication will include an in-depth photographic record of the artist's works throughout the MACBA exhibition, as well as documentation of the exhibition's on-site and outdoor installations in Barcelona: the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion, Rambla del Raval, L'Auditori de Barcelona and billboards within the city and its environs. The design is by Lali Almonacid (<http://almonacidestudi.com/>). The single edition will be in two languages (Spanish and English) with approximately 180 pages.

ACTIVITIES

Inaugural activity. Thursday 25 March, 6:00 pm Meier Auditorium and Online

To mark the inauguration of the exhibition Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The Politics of Relation, we invited Agustín Pérez Rubio to present part of his research about the artist and his work. Together with Andrea Rosen, President of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, there will be a discussion of the exhibition with Tanya Barson, curator of the exhibition and Chief Curator of the MACBA.

CYCLE OF LECTURES

Felix Gonzalez Torres: The Performance of the Political

Wed. 26 May: Tanya Barson, curator of the exhibition.

Wed. 2 June: Cabello/Carceller, artists.

Wed. 9 June: Joshua Chambers-Letson, researcher.

Wed. 16 June: Pablo Martínez, Head of Programmes, MACBA.

INFO: 7:00 p.m. Meier Auditorium. Free. With prior registration at macba.cat.

Thanks to: Co-rpus, La Escocesa

The exhibition continues in the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion*, the façade of L'Auditori de Barcelona, Rambla del Raval, and other spaces in and around the city.

* Admission to either institution allows free access to the other between March 26 and April 12 (ticket must be showed).

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