

# BOMB



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# Patrice Aphrodite Helmar

## by Elle Pérez

“Photography can be a way to navigate through darkness,” Patrice Aphrodite Helmar tells Elle Pérez. In their practice, Helmar often works in the shadows, finding connection with strangers and creating pictures that make visible the entanglements of persistence and precarity in queer and working-class life. Many of their photographs are everyday scenes of small-town America, of lingering moments of tenderness and camaraderie at rodeos and in dive bars. And since 2016, they have photographed young people, some of them queer, moshing at punk, hardcore, and metal clubs, especially in more conservative settings in the South and Southwest. Such spaces recall the underground music venues that offered lifesaving refuge and expression to Helmar growing up in Juneau, Alaska, where they learned to make photographs in their father’s camera store and which they have photographed for decades. Made with a medium-format camera, Helmar’s black-and-white pictures capture the almost spiritual experience of togetherness for the headbangers who disidentify with the oppressive local culture as well as the dignity of small-town characters who define belonging in their own terms.

At New York City’s PARTICIPANT INC this past summer, Helmar had an exquisite solo exhibition titled *Polaris*—a reference to the ever-reliable North Star—that presented a small selection

of the black-and-white self-portraits and Alaskan landscapes they began making in 2020. In that first year of the pandemic, Helmar, who lives with a chronic illness, left New York City for their hometown and developed a practice of self-portraiture. With medium- and large-format cameras, they documented themselves clutching their dog Dolly Girl and wearing a hunting mask—a playful yet protective garment—amid stunning ruins of late capitalism and climate breakdown: gold mines and oil tankers, mudslides and avalanches. Helmar had previously avoided photographing themselves, in part because of the overdetermined tropes of people who looked like them in the history of photography, but the heightened circumstances ushered in an existential shift. “If everything falls apart,” they asked themselves, “what can I leave behind?”

Filled with stories and insights, Helmar’s conversation with Pérez sheds light on not only their individual trajectory but also photography as a practice of discipline, curiosity, and communion.

—Jackson Davidow

opposite: *Jules at Her Vanity*,  
New Orleans, 2017, gelatin  
silver print, 11 × 14 inches.  
Images courtesy of the artist.





ELLE PÉREZ: I'm trying to remember how I first encountered your work. I recall receiving an email from you out of the blue, and after hearing your name from a few friends, we started chatting. You invited me to present my work at Marble Hill Camera Club, and though it never quite worked out, I became a regular attendee and loved the community I found there. I've always recognized in you a true community organizer and educator and felt a kinship in our navigating educational and photographic spaces. We're not the type of teachers who want to exclude anyone from photography. Instead, we aim to bring in as many people as possible. So, how did you come to photography?

PATRICE APHRODITE HELMAR: Both of my parents were really into photography. My mom had done a two-year technical program, and through the GI Bill, my dad had studied visual anthropology, which was a relatively new field at the time. My parents met in the '70s through a film project documenting the Trans-Alaska Pipeline and the boom in Alaska's population. This was like a second gold rush. My dad and his buddies, who were still photographers, were hired as crew for the film. Alaska used to be a place where you could be left alone. For someone like my dad, who came from the projects in Boston and had been drafted to fight in Vietnam, it was a place where you could reinvent yourself and have a quiet life. Alaska has as many complications as any place, but there's a little bit more breathing room.

When my parents started a family, they bought a commercial fishing boat, but they never stopped taking pictures. They would take me and my brother out of school, when we were still two little kids, and put us on their twenty-six-foot wooden hand troller. Our family business was salmon fishing, not an easy way to make a living, and after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in 1989, the demand for salmon went way down. A few years later, my parents bought a small camera store in downtown Juneau. Working at the shop as a kid in the early '90s was the beginning of my formal-informal education in making photographs. I thought I was just working for my dad,

but he was teaching me so much about photography.

EP: You've told me a bit about that time. He put you in charge of testing cameras.

PAH: He did. I mean, he was a really bad businessperson because he was so nice. Shocker. Tourists would come to Alaska, and like a lot of Americans then, they didn't use their cameras all the time. They'd buy whatever the nice point-and-shoot was, forget about it, bring it on vacation, and find out it was broken. But rather than upsell them on new cameras, my dad was of the mind that their cameras could be fixed. It made my mom upset because we were broke. "Just sell them cameras, Paul, please." It was usually a simple fix, like a new battery. He shamed them by handing their Olympus Styluses over to his kids. My brother and I would test the cameras downtown and take the twelve-exposure roll to the one-hour photo, which gave us these little contact sheets. Then we'd sit at the counter with our little grease pencils, and my dad would ask us, "Okay, which ones worked?" The first couple of rolls were just seas of red Xs, everything under- or overexposed. Of course, we thought all twelve of the pictures on those rolls were the best things ever. Very gently he gave advice: "Well, okay, you're too close here. This one's a little out of focus. I see something here." It was this very funny but formal way of learning how to construct a photograph.

EP: Do you remember what those early pictures were of?

PAH: I was photographing what was on the street, just a kid doing a job. I was around eleven, so I didn't have as many hang-ups. I think my dad knew that was a good age for someone to start taking pictures without inhibition, without that frontal lobe telling them not to try things. That has really informed the way that I work in the world today. There's an intergenerational understanding of the town and the landscape that started then and continues to influence the way that I frame my hometown. There are also skills that come from living in a small

opposite: *Avalanche*, 2020, gelatin silver print, 48 x 60 inches.

town, like being able to strike up a conversation with anyone, which helps when you're making photographs with people.

EP: Why do you think photography stuck? What did you get from it that made it the purpose of your life as an artist?

PAH: Sometimes I'd be late for work at the camera store because I was a dawdler, happy to wander around and check out the world. Photography gave me a means to frame the things I was noticing—and that were distracting me. My dad thought I might be an artist, and I was like, What does that mean? I'm not sure I would have become a photographer if he hadn't died because photography seemed like my parents' thing. I wanted to be a writer, and I studied literature and poetry. During the fall term of my senior year of college, in Oregon, I had an assignment in my intro photo class where we had to make portraits of someone we were close to. That week, my mom called me to say that my dad was having heart surgery at a hospital in Seattle and that I should come up. I made these photographs of him the day before he died. He looks scared. He looks like a kid. They're the last pictures I have of my dad looking at me. They're intense. One of the functions of photography is that it cements a fixed point in time. A photographer has to encounter this unknowable factor in making a photograph that can mean something to another person. Roland Barthes alludes to this in *Camera Lucida*, in his refusal to show the photograph of his mother in the winter garden: It exists only for him. For the viewer, there's no wound, and the photograph would be just an indifferent, ordinary picture.

Digital photography was becoming more prevalent around this time too. I went back to Alaska to work at the camera store, and I saw customers throw away film, literally. People were bringing in Hasselblads, Leicas, and Bolexes that they thought were outmoded to sell or trade. The store wasn't open very long after my dad



died. I was twenty-one, and my brother was nineteen. We weren't prepared to run a business, nor did we really want to. So not only had I lost my dad, but it felt like photography was going away with him—that sounds dramatic.

EP: How could it not be dramatic? If he was so technically adept and such a good printer, then of course the medium shifting would reveal this absence.

PAH: At the beginning, digital photography was like the emperor's new clothes. The quality was not there. Digital cameras around 2003 were what, five megapixels? It made no sense. There was just this excitement about being unburdened from the weight of film. But it led to a tremendous loss of image quality, a disrespect for the craft and labor involved in making photographs, and the physical absence of well-made gelatin silver prints.

For the next ten years, I did all these other things. I didn't devote myself to photography, but I did continue to make pictures. I realized photography provided a shorthand for what I was trying to express with poetry and fiction, that if it was not more direct than writing, then it had an economy of means for delivering a punch to the gut. You have to want to express something from your point of view. You have to want to make something out of being a human. My favorite photographers are the ones who are dissatisfied with the state of things. They're sometimes happy, but usually they're pointing toward something that they're ill at ease with or that distracts them from the fact that things are fucked. Poetry and music did that for me early on. It's kind of what I've always been after.

EP: The camera is a tool that can do a limited set of things, and photographers come to understand a kind of suffering in the belief that it could do more. But as you spend more time with the camera and learn to do something beyond what it once seemed to offer, you get the feeling you've used it to figure out a new equation for making different kinds of pictures. That revelation comes from a certain disciplined intuition but also from believing that

the camera can do something, which I think is distinct from "believing" in photography. Rather than conceiving of photography as the "objective truth," we both think about how the fiction of the photograph reveals an emotional truth. What have those revelations been like for you? How has the camera changed for you over time?

PAH: Disciplined intuition is the whole deal. The camera and the tools involved have changed so dramatically, and the ability to make thousands of digital photographs and the quality of those images is like a siren song at times. There are still limitations to photography, and our medium is so new, compared to something like fresco, and so dependent on technology. I'm still hung up on medium- and large-format photography: the mechanics of the camera body, the weight of hauling it around, how the quality of the lens makes or breaks the picture. I'm still puttering around the darkroom making eleven-by-fourteen work prints and listening to music. What the photographs mean is something to figure out after making them. It's the idea that creating and analyzing are two different things—Sister Corita Kent talked about that in her rules for students and teachers. I don't believe in photography as "the truth." I'm not a journalist or a social scientist. A photograph is either hiding something in plain sight, a failure or an accidental success, or it's subconsciously revealing something too difficult to say out loud, maybe an emotional fact. I don't feel insecure about photography. I'm devoted to it. It's what I think about the most. I love it.

EP: It's been almost eleven years since you moved from Alaska to the Lower 48 for graduate school. Looking back, what were your first experiences of making art and living in New York City?

PAH: My first year of grad school tore me apart, and I think a lot of programs do that. I came here not really knowing anything except that I needed to come here. I had no one advising me, and I was not prepared when I got to Columbia University. I didn't have a formal art education. I had been a social worker, and a bartender, and a public school teacher. I knew education

opposite (top): *The Arctic Bar, Juneau, Alaska, 2015*, gelatin silver print, 11 × 14 inches.

opposite (bottom): *National Guard Recruits, New Mexico, 2016*, gelatin silver print, 11 × 14 inches.

and literary theory, but when it came to art, I was like, What should I know? By the second year, I got my bearings.

The fault of the academy is that it underestimates: It thinks it's doing people who don't golf a favor by letting them in. I wanted to make the most of school because I knew it was transactional and that the academy was taking a lot from me. I snuck into film courses, like Tom Kalin's class on queer cinema, and this very intense seminar at Barnard College on Jacques Lacan. I went to every event I could, like, Oh, I can hear Jamaica Kincaid read! But I didn't start making the pictures I thought I should have been making until my third year in the city, when I was out of my program.

EP: Did that experience influence what you did with Marble Hill Camera Club? You started the Camera Club in your apartment as a potluck in 2016, and then it moved to Gottscheer Hall, in Ridgewood, Queens, in 2018.

PAH: I didn't find a solid cohort of photographers in my year of my program. I met some great people and artists at Columbia, like Rola Khayyat, Nat Ward, Davey Hawkins, Katie Kline, Jesse Wakeman, Heidi Howard, and Esteban Cabeza de Baca, and I'm still in contact with my pals. I learned I wanted to be part of something that had no tuition, no barrier. At the Camera Club, you just had to show up. You were gonna get fed, and you were gonna be in the room with people who have diverse engagements with photography, from people who are really successful photographers to people who are there because they're curious. This was by design: There was so much talking in school, and I wanted to see photographs.

EP: How many people would talk each night?

PAH: Sometimes it got out of hand—

EP: It did! (*laughter*)

PAH: If it was balanced, three to five, but sometimes seven if we were on a bender. People got so excited. Their talks were like their retrospectives.

EP: It was always beautiful to be in a room full of people talking about photography.

PAH: At the beginning, back in 2016, I was living with roommates in a rented house in Marble Hill that had two parlors and a kitchen. It was huge. After grad school, I was a nanny for a well-to-do family downtown, making more money than I ever made as a public school teacher. I would get off work in Little Italy, go to the markets in Chinatown, buy whatever was seasonal and cheap, and then cook for a day or two. I didn't know if anyone would show up for the Camera Club, but, come to find out, everybody likes free food.

EP: I never got to go to the Marble Hill originals, but I loved going to the ones at Gottscheer Hall. Anyone could be there, anyone could talk. You saw people inhabiting different roles or trying on new ones, like, What if I announced to a room of other artists that I'm an artist and this is the art that I make? That was a transformational thing to see.

PAH: The only rule we had was that you couldn't be a jerk. (*laughter*) And that was a really hard rule for a lot of people. No monologues, no critiques. Later on, we shaped the level of inquiry because we wanted people to ask thoughtful questions to the person showing new work that they might feel insecure about.

EP: You were still doing Marble Hill Camera Club when you started teaching at the Pratt Institute and Fordham University, and now you teach at Harvard University. How has teaching shaped your understanding of your own work?

PAH: If you're going to teach, you better have something to back up what

you're talking about in the classroom. You should be engaged in the same struggle as the students in the intro photo class. It's important to practice what you preach.

EP: What work do you show in your classes? Is it work by artists you're influenced by?

PAH: I don't show a ton of work right away. In a place like school, where people are so concerned about being good, I'm worried that the students might think that what I'm showing them is the benchmark or what they should mimic. I've learned about teaching from other educators—Mary Claire Harris, Lawson Fusao Inada, and George Gress—and I've modified what they taught me to suit my own pedagogical framework. If you want to say something about the world, you have to know something about the world. I tell students a lot of stories, and I ask them a lot of questions too: What do you care about? What do you know that I don't? Show me *that*. There's only one of you, and you're at this intense school. After midterms, we'll go to the Harvard Fine Arts Library and the study room at the museum, and when we get there, I want them to be able to look at everything.

EP: Schools so often want practice, history, theory, and criticism all in a single semester, but the charge, especially with something like Photo I, is to make art.

PAH: They get practice and history, and we talk about the formal qualities of a good picture. But it's not until they try to make photographs and make a lot of mistakes that I show them the pictures I love the most. I don't want them to have these hang-ups.

EP: What are the pictures you love the most? I imagine there's some Roy DeCarava in there, some Brassai, some Peter Hujar.

PAH: Of course. One of the videos I show is Roy DeCarava talking with Charlie Rose, who's such a jerk. He asks, "What haven't you been able to photograph that you very much wanted to?" And DeCarava responds,

"The wind." We look at Deana Lawson—a genius. We look at my pals: you, Bryson Rand, S\*an D. Henry-Smith. We look at Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series* and talk about how making a picture at home can be so charged. You don't have to take a road trip.

EP: Home is such a charged subject of photography, and you have to travel quite far to get back to Alaska. At the beginning of the pandemic, you decided to return to Juneau for what was a completely unknown length of time. The photographs you made there became the body of work *Polaris*, which you showed at PARTICIPANT INC. The scale of each photograph felt intentionally determined. With the amount of detail that the large-format camera provides and the photographs' size, the viewer could really appreciate and experience the depth and complexity of the environments. People became immersed in the landscape of Alaska and the world that the photographs created. I could feel how difficult it was to set up the camera in those situations. How many photographs did you include?

PAH: Eleven gelatin silver prints. Big boys. Four were forty-eight by sixty inches. The scale of the landscape in Alaska is hard to communicate in pictures, but it's a little easier with large-format.

I started making self-portraits in 2020, and they were unlike anything I'd ever done. Like a lot of people, I was sort of losing my shit then, thinking about what it means to be in a human body with so many people dying all around. I've always thought about that, but this question felt so much more particular in that moment. I was also reading David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives*, in which he writes about his anger and dissatisfaction with the government's treatment of people with HIV and AIDS. I was dealing with some major undiagnosed chronic health issues, and with Covid—which is still happening now—and seeing live eugenics, my thinking changed.

opposite: *Oklahoma City Dancer*, 2022, gelatin silver print, 11 × 14 inches.







opposite: *Tanker*, 2020, gelatin silver print, 48 × 60 inches.

right: *Spawn*, 2020, gelatin silver print, 48 × 60 inches.



I realized a lot about human nature, including my own, and how often people overlook those dealing with chronic illness and disability. It seemed like there was nothing to lose and that I might die, and making those photographs was how I distracted myself. I spent a thousand dollars on film, which was all the money I had in savings, in a panic that film was going to disappear. I gave myself this exercise to do self-portraits. I wasn't satisfied with the existing photographs of people who look like me, and I'd never really had the gall or the want to make photographs of myself. I had made photographs of other people in Alaska and the Lower 48, but self-portraits had never appealed to me. Then I thought, If everything falls apart, what can I leave behind? The person in the photographs is me, but it's not me. They show what this body was like in this world and what it wasn't. I made around four hundred self-portraits—things got weird.

EP: There are boxes and boxes of Patrice Aphrodite Helmar photographs that have not yet been seen. What was the process behind choosing eleven

pictures for *Polaris* from around four hundred? It seems like an impossible task.

PAH: Lia Gangitano is the best. PARTICIPANT feels like the version of New York City that I always wanted to live in, and it's at the service of the artists. Going to shows there after graduate school was where I learned the most about contemporary art. Lia has an incredible eye. I showed her a PDF of the self-portraits from 2020 and some of the landscapes that I had made simultaneously, and she whittled it down. Working with Lia and her crew, including the artist John Brattin, who conceived of projecting 8 mm films from my family's archive on the larger gelatin silver prints for a performance, was a transformative experience. I witnessed the care, thought, and years of dedication PARTICIPANT has given to artists' works and lives. I remember the first time I went there, when I was just hanging out, Lia introduced me to someone as her friend Patrice, and I just blushed. Art can be about deep caring and friendship. And she has her little dog Waylon, and I had my sweet

baby angel dog Dolly, both named after the country music stars.

EP: Art can be a home. As your friend, as someone who loves your work in photography and loves your work as a teacher, you really do make a home for others.

What were you looking for when making *Polaris*, if you could identify it?

PAH: I was looking to stay in the world but just outside of it. In Alaska I took hunting safety in school, and I learned that if you get lost in the woods and need shelter and food, you also need to remember to play. Play is an essential part of human survival. I was reminded of this in 2020, when I was feeling really isolated. I started dressing up, burying myself in snow, climbing an avalanche, at one point painting my face like a bear, and photographing all of it.

I didn't know what to name the show. The title on the PDF was "Polaris," and Lia asked what it meant. And I said, "I learned about it when I was a little kid: If I get lost, or if my family gets separated when we're fishing, I can look to the North Star to

find my way home.” She said, “That’s the title. Why are you thinking so hard about it?”

The photographs are complicated. I often don’t like looking at them, and I think a lot of people can relate to that feeling when they reflect on their origins. I’ve had a guiding star since I was a kid, and photography can be a way to navigate through darkness. It’s powerful. Over the past ten years, I’ve thought a lot about how hard it is to find healing in a place that has caused you harm. Alaska has given me so much, but it also reminds me of difficult times in my life. In 2020, I was confronted by my own mortality. When we look at the stars, they remind us of how small we are, what we’re made of, and what we return to. Being human, being in a body, grappling with the complexities of life—it’s wild to think about. Instead of trying to fix everything, I’m choosing to embrace what’s happening around me. It’s not easy, and I’m not complaining, but if you take life seriously, you work hard at it because you want to be counted. If you don’t talk about heartbreak, death, your home, who will? You don’t need critical theory to see what’s around you. Just look at landfills and graveyards. That’s where we end up.

EP: What about *Polaris*’s significance in finding home, especially in relation to the photographs’ atmospheric quality and the strangeness they convey?

PAH: You can’t ask for a better backdrop than Alaska when it comes to scale. When you get off the plane in Juneau, you’re surrounded by massive mountains. The vastness is humbling. When I’m making photographs there, I’m thinking about what part of town to go to—there’s an avalanche on Thane Road every year, but even without the avalanche, there’s no road out of Juneau. The water around Juneau isn’t an open ocean, it’s a channel, and for who knows how long, there was a giant oil tanker stranded on the beach. The places we live in shape who we are, influencing our emotional and psychological interiors, and a landscape can describe interiority. If you’re constantly reminded of your smallness in the grand scheme of things, you have a different perspective than someone

who grew up in a place where the tallest thing around was a building.

Cozette Russell from the Film Study Center at Harvard mentioned during a studio visit that my experience of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill as a kid had a lasting impact on me. My parents sold their boat afterward, bought the camera store, and then I made a self-portrait years later in front of a tanker. I didn’t connect those dots at first, but they’re there. The sociopolitical geography of Alaska, how resources have been extracted since contact, and how colonization has impacted traditional Alaska Native ways of life—our bodies reflect where we are and how we live. Things like food sovereignty, subsistence hunting and fishing rights, land claims, access to education, early childhood education, community care, and care of elders all impact life expectancy.

EP: After finishing the work on *Polaris*, what did you find yourself drawn to photographing next?

PAH: I continued my work in the South and Southwest. I wasn’t just focused on rodeos: I was exploring underground all-age dance clubs, which reminded me of where you and I started out. I photographed the hometowns and childhood homes of musicians I admire, like Lightnin’ Hopkins, Hank Williams, and Johnny Cash, thinking about the origins of North American music and the intersection of Black spiritual traditions, blues, and country music. That body of work is my most recent project, an extension of what I started in 2016, but I had to put it on hold for a couple of years due to Covid. I hope to extend that survey to the Northwest in the next couple of years.

I didn’t grow up on the mainland, so there are a lot of cultural aspects of the United States that I don’t fully understand. The geography is vast, and I’m photographing a lot of different people: kids moshing, a family in Texas selling wolf dogs to survive, a National Guard recruiter in New Mexico, young couples at rodeos. I’m photographing friends in their backyards, bartenders in New Orleans, and landscapes of places that were once factories but are now crumbling. Sometimes I photograph veterans at rodeos, and I see glimpses of my

family members in them. I think about what life looks like in these places. What do you aspire to when you’re in an overcrowded public school that’s a pipeline to prison, or you’re facing religious trauma, or you’re grappling with disease and addiction at home? It’s not all negative. I see so much beauty in this country. I’ve been in Oklahoma, driving on back roads, struck by how gorgeous it is. It makes sense that a musician like John Moreland comes from there and writes like he does.

EP: How do you make pictures of strangers? That’s really difficult for many photographers, but you do it so well. What’s that process like for you, and how do you shape the encounter with another person? What are you looking for in the photograph?

PAH: Okay, here’s a story: I have this picture of myself as a toddler, about two or three years old. I have a bottle in my mouth and my little hands pressed against a window, saying hello to a stranger on a bus. That curiosity about people has always been a part of me. Now I’m a bit more wary, but I still feel curious. When I want to photograph someone, it often feels like a calling, like if I don’t ask them, I’ll regret it. Sometimes it comes with a bit of anxiety, too, like when they remind me of someone. Even if a person doesn’t seem approachable, I can spend a few minutes with them and try to make something decent, though I don’t always know what it might be. Everything in my life—from working in the camera store, to teaching, to performing as a musician—has helped me get over that initial hurdle of approaching someone. I’ll say, “I think you look great. Can I take your picture?” I’m not trying to hustle anyone, I’m just being me. Sometimes I don’t even need to say much. I just take the picture and move on. Don’t overthink it!

*Ty in the Garden, New Orleans, 2016, gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 inches.*

