

Art in America

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The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Effect: Artists Weigh in on His Enduring Influence
By Maximiliano Durón



Felix Gonzalez-Torres: “Untitled”, 1991, installed in Princeton, New Jersey, in 2013.
Photo: James Ewing/©Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres/Courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

In his influential book *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Édouard Glissant advocated for “the right to opacity for everyone,” referring to the ways individuals might, through art, speak from their perspective while preserving all the nuances of their humanity, rather than flattening or reducing it for easy legibility or categorization. No one exemplifies this better than Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–1996), who was working around the time Glissant wrote the book, creating art that would become an important touchstone for generations of artists.

Made of everyday objects—piles of candy, curtains of beads, pairs of clocks—Gonzalez-Torres’s works don’t typically reveal their weighty stories readily. Instead, they obliquely yet poignantly capture his experience living as a queer person of color at the height of the AIDS crisis. “Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), 1991, for example, is a pile of candies said to approximate the weight of the artist’s late lover; viewers can take the candies, which are continually replenished. Works like this one point to the absence—the death—that surrounded Gonzalez-Torres in the late 1980s and ’90s. They are deeply personal and intimate, but also speak to more universal themes of love, loss, and how the two are ever intertwined.

Gonzalez-Torres’s works are heady and conceptual, but at the same time, deeply affecting. The artist is currently the subject of “Always to Return,” an exhibition co-organized by the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery and the Archives of American Art that frames his object-based works as a kind of portraiture. For the occasion, *A.i.A.* spoke to an intergenerational group of artists impacted by Gonzalez-Torres. They noted his ability to make absence present; the mutability of his score-based works, which are reconstituted according to the artist’s instructions each time they are shown; and how his works live on after his untimely death from AIDS-related complications—how even today, his presence is profoundly felt.

Ghislaine Leung (b. 1980)



Ghislaine Leung: *Holdings*, 2024. Score: An object that is no longer an artwork.
Photo: Photo Bob/Courtesy Renaissance Society, Chicago

I once got a present from my partner wrapped in a poster by Felix Gonzalez-Torres: an image of the sky, from one of the stack works [“*Untitled*” (1992/1993)]. I was probably in my mid-20s. I wasn’t making art at the time, but this work’s distribution—how it proliferated in the world, that this poster was and also wasn’t the work—fascinated me. It worked through how it circulated, and in that way somehow also freed the work to have this oblique quality too.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres: “*Untitled*,” 1992/1993.
Photo: Ben Blackwell/©Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres/Courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

I started working with scores myself because of a very basic limitation: I wanted to find a way of working I could maintain, both economically and emotionally. I wanted to find a way the work could work without me, with the material conditions at hand. The score was a way of doing that: of letting go of control and instead, showing works in a way so that I didn’t have to be there to install them. The work constantly circles questions of labor and what work is deemed valid or not, as in *Holdings* (2024), a score for “An object that is no longer an artwork,” and *Jobs* (2024) a score for “A list of jobs held by the artist.” Those came very directly out of parts in my life that I had been compartmentalizing, hiding. That vulnerability is a risk, formally and personally, but also a tacit acknowledgment that artworks are always dependent on a great many other people to carry them. Gonzalez-Torres’s practice actioned that for me in many ways. As he said in a 1995 interview with Ross Bleckner, “Your limitations should be your strengths.”