



González-Torres, Félix (1957-1996)

by Richard H. Axsom

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An American artist who reached prominence at the end of the twentieth century, Félix González-Torres is noted for his minimalist and conceptual art, especially his installations oriented to galleries and outdoor spaces. He created art that was at once personal and political and that reflected his AIDS and gay rights activism.

González-Torres was born in Guaimaro, Cuba in 1957, the third of what would eventually be four children. His parents encouraged his interest in art. From 1971 to 1979, he and his sister Gloria lived in Spain and, then, Puerto Rico. In 1979, he returned to Cuba to visit his parents; and with them, his sister Mayda and brother Mario, he escaped Cuba in 1981 during the Mariel boat lift.

He took his B.F.A. at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in 1983 and his M.F.A. at the International Center for Photography and New York University in 1987. He achieved important recognition in New York and international art circles during the later 1980s and early 1990s. He was invited by the prestigious Whitney Museum of American Art in New York to participate in the 1991 Whitney Biennial.

González-Torres, linked by critics to minimalist and conceptual art, takes his place within a postmodern context by virtue of his commitment to gender and sexual identity. He visualized this commitment in installation art oriented to gallery and outdoor spaces.

Variiously utilizing found objects, the written word, and the strategies of commercial media, he shaped an art that was both deeply personal and political. In his art as well as public life, González-Torres was an AIDS and gay rights activist.

Unlike most activist artists of the period who addressed gay identity and the AIDS crisis, González-Torres was not confrontational or angry in expression. His art, like that of another contemporary gay artist, Ross Bleckner, is elegiac and lyrical. Nonetheless, his art invites viewers to reflect on the universality of the gay experience. Herein lies the political dimension of his art.

Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1987-90 consists of two round Seth Thomas clocks that hang side-by-side on the wall. Battery-run, they are synchronized to exactly the same time, including the second hands. Using two identical commercial clocks that touch each other, González-Torres created a haunting metaphor of same-sex love in perfect unison.

The private aspect of this work is the artist's allusion to his personal relationship with a partner who was dying of AIDS. The bracketed dates of the piece mark the period of his lover's disease and death. The resonance of the work expands to include tragic loss, with a sense of "time running out."

This concern for the slow extinguishing of life is also revealed in a series of installation works that González-Torres began in 1992. They consist of strings of low-watt incandescent bulbs hung and festooned in gallery spaces. In concept, the bulbs are allowed to burn out one-by-one in a poignant ebbing of light

and life. As memorials, these radiant garlands eulogize the beloved.

González-Torres's wish to involve viewers actively in his art is manifested in his series of "spills," mounds of objects made up variously of wrapped hard candies, mints, lollipops, cough drops, or candles. Most often stacked in corners of galleries, these sweets were there, at the artist's invitation, for the viewer's taking.

One example is *Untitled (U.S.A. Today)*, 1992, a heaped corner of wrapped candies in red, white, and blue foil. The amount of each "spill" was either the ideal weight of the artist's lover or the combined weight of the two. As each "spill" diminished in weight, museum staff replenished it with additional wrapped objects. The visitor was, thus, gifted by a gay man and asked, wittingly or unknowingly, to play a caring role and to empathize with the artist's love and loss.

González-Torres himself died of AIDS-related complications in Miami, Florida in 1996 at the age of 38, leaving behind a body of work that bridges private experience and public politics and that had gained international acclaim for the artist.

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About the Author

Richard H. Axsom is Senior Curator of Prints and Photographs at the Grand Rapids Art Museum. He is Professor Emeritus of Art History at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, where he taught courses on the history of modern and contemporary art. His extensive publications on contemporary prints include catalogues raisonnés for Ellsworth Kelly, Claes Oldenburg, Frank Stella, and Tony Winters.