



The art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres can always be viewed as an exploration of place in one way or another. Born in 1957 in Guáimaro, Cuba, but living most of his adult life in New York, Gonzalez-Torres was acutely aware of occupying spaces and places in this world both as an artist and an individual in society. He devoted his artistic career to creating instances and environments that call into question or challenge the structures and systems that shape the world around us, analysing difficult issues and complex ideas in myriad new ways.

Much of his work can be understood as carving out a place for underrepresented voices in society, individual voices that were routinely denied agency within the social and political climate of America in the late 1980s and early 1990s; voices that continue to be quietened, ignored, or quelled to this day in countries across the globe, Northern Ireland included. As a member of the artist collective *Group Material*, Gonzalez-Torres collaborated on numerous socially- and politically-engaged projects which sought to counter the culture of avoidance and ignorance surrounding a range of issues, one being the AIDS crisis in the US at that time. Inextricably linked to this collective practice we find articulated in his work a deeply personal exploration of self, belonging, love and loss - attempts to understand how one exists in this world and how one might make it a better place in which to live.

In addition, in a period of intense activity spanning less than a decade, he contemplated on the responsibilities of the artist at the end of the 20th century, acknowledging all that has gone before but also, perhaps more than most, imagining the possibilities of what is to come, and considering how his artworks might fit into an unknowable future long after his own passing.

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*This Place* comprises a number of significant pieces made by the artist between 1987 and 1993. The exhibition considers how this emotionally lush and disarmingly chameleonic work can seamlessly fit into a never-before-explored setting in Belfast. In certain instances, commonplace materials are used to transform exhibition spaces and urban places in the most poetic and poignant of ways, whilst elsewhere more easily understood artistic media such as painting, print, and photography are reconstituted by the artist into radical new formats.

The objects and installations currently filling the MAC effortlessly fly in the face of the preciousness and detachment so often ascribed to contemporary art. Several are the perfect antithesis to the look-don't-touch diktat which we have grown to accept as part of a gallery experience. Take, for example, two works from 1991 both sharing the title “**Untitled**” (**Lover Boys**). Here, the artist proposes an ‘ideal weight’ for each installation consisting of thousands of wrapped sweets: in both cases this stands at 355lbs. On this occasion we have chosen to realise these plentiful sculptures at this weight to then allow them to change, dwindle and possibly disappear over the course of the exhibition as viewers choose whether or not to take a sweet. Specifically, the ideal weight of the material used in these works has been referred to as the total mass of two bodies combined, the artist’s and that of his partner Ross Laycock, but beyond this intimate reading they also speak to us more broadly in a deliberately contradictory manner through a juxtaposition of unity and disarray. What matters most in Gonzalez-Torres’s artistic methodology here is not prescribing definitive meaning, but rather presenting expansive ideas that can be wrapped up (in this case, literally) in familiar materials, producing gentle resonances, always allowing interpretation to oscillate and shift.

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Other works such as **“Untitled” (Rossmore)** are perfect examples of how this unique artistic practice resonates with new associations as it appears in new exhibitions. This glowing light string may be understood as a reference to a certain street in Los Angeles where Gonzalez-Torres lived, but in Belfast can newly refer to certain streets bearing the same name in the south of the city, offering up a parallel locality across space and time. It is here we also see the artist’s generosity at play when attributing titles to his works, offering only a suggestion of ideas in parenthetical captions, leaving enough room for each individual viewer to imbue these objects with their own thoughts or feelings.

*For most of the work I do, I need the public to become responsible, to activate the work.<sup>1</sup>*

In pieces such as **“Untitled” (Orpheus, Twice)** the artist challenges the viewer to think further about themselves in relation to the work through literal reflection. This piece also serves to refract our perception of the spaces around us. Elsewhere in the building our navigation through the galleries is yet again disrupted, the beaded curtain **“Untitled” (Chemo)** stopping us in our tracks, appearing as a physical threshold to be crossed, asking us to get involved, to become active participants in this installation. However, when considering our own engagement with these ideas it is worth noting that participation is never mandatory or forced; there simply exist subtle invitations for us to accept or decline. Not wishing to pass through the curtain, or take away certain materials offered up within the exhibition, are perfectly acceptable responses. Similarly, no one has ever been forced to dance beneath the light thrown by **“Untitled” (Arena)** but, by the positioning of headphones playing soft waltz music nearby, Gonzalez-Torres ensures we have the option to do so if the urge takes us.

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1. Felix Gonzalez-Torres in conversation with Joseph Kosuth. Originally published in A. Reinhardt J. Kosuth F. Gonzalez-Torres: *Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility* (London: Academy Editions 1994).

Earlier pieces on display challenge us to think about the possibilities of more commonly recognised media and modes of production. The 1988 painting work **Forbidden Colors**, an occasional instance of Gonzalez-Torres crafting a piece by his hand alone, nods deftly to art historical predecessors in colour-field theory and abstraction, but twists these techniques to form a loaded statement in relation to place. By highlighting the difference between a display of the colours red, black, green and white on a wall of a gallery in Manhattan and the ramifications of what it would mean to do the same in Israeli-occupied Palestine at that time, Gonzalez-Torres ensured that the response to this quadrytpic can never be divorced from political contexts and biases. In another more intimately scaled series of objects produced between 1987 and 1992, the artist takes photographic images and fractures them into delicate jigsaw puzzles, held loosely in thin cellophane bags that look as though they may fall to pieces at the slightest touch. The associated imagery reinforces Gonzalez-Torres's refusal to separate himself from society in any way by combining appropriated images of crowd scenes with intimate snapshot photographs. Negotiating a path between social awareness and private disclosure here underscores the view that the personal is political, a critical position more relevant than ever in Northern Ireland.

Beyond the shimmer of **"Untitled" (Chemo)** in the Upper Gallery, and in front of the open gesture conveyed by the outstretched hand in **"Untitled" (For Jeff)**, lies **"Untitled"**, 1989/1990. It is within this one exceptionally powerful yet subtle work that we find all the contextual pluralities inherent in Gonzalez-Torres's practice relating to place-making on a number of different levels - geographical, personal, social, political and intellectual. Indeed, the title of this exhibition is directly inspired by the dual texts reproduced on these paper

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stacks as well as the scope of nuanced meaning that can be associated with this seminal piece. It remains to be seen how the people of Belfast will change this work over the course of the exhibition, which (if any) statement each individual will choose to align themselves with and take ownership of.

As we continue to focus on the complicated notion of place we finally look out beyond the walls of the galleries, through the blue haze of the **“Untitled” (Loverboy)** curtain adorning the back windows, faintly altering the cityscape. It is out there where the possibility exists to experience the work **“Untitled” (For Jeff)** anew as it unfolds across the city. The aforementioned image of the hand pasted directly onto the gallery wall is just one element of this piece which extends beyond the MAC to transpose Gonzalez-Torres’s complex thinking onto 24 different billboards dotted around the city, appearing and disappearing as 2015 draws to a close and 2016 begins. Like so many other pieces in this rich body of work, **“Untitled” (For Jeff)** is filled with the same potential for new meaning in new contexts - perhaps even more so than what is contained within our gallery spaces.

These billboards open up zones of contemplation and reflection in an arena normally reserved for brash advertising and corporate promotion. In this context they will also sit as quiet anomalies amidst community artworks and murals, replete with social and political signifiers and slogans, reflecting collective identities in differing neighbourhoods of this complicated and unique place. The universality of the photograph of the outstretched hand offers countless possibilities for interpretation and, placed within the urban fabric of Belfast, connects particularly to people from, or living in, the city.

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This image may convey ideas of openness and welcome to some, but could be interpreted by others as a plea, a vision of emptiness, of something lacking. At present it might silently speak to us of something lost, something to be regained.

*In Gonzalez-Torres's work there is always the insistence that elegance and ecstasy are to be found in daily life, in our habits of being, in the ways we regard one another and the world around us.*<sup>2</sup>

Experiencing these works makes us think about the positions we occupy: in the gallery, in the street, in society, in history, and in time. Gonzalez-Torres offers so much to the viewer – and demands nothing in return. Encouraging us not to take anything for granted, he invites us to explore all the possibilities and impossibilities of our surroundings. By so doing, we may find that art is not something reserved for special occasions, or for the few, but in fact is woven into the fabric of the everyday, the commonplace, and the seemingly unremarkable – we simply need to seek it out.

**Eoin Dara**

October 2015

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2. bell hooks *Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation*. Originally published in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres, exh. cat.*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), p45-49.



## **Felix Gonzalez-Torres: This Place**

**30 October 2015 – 24 January 2016**

Alongside the exhibition you'll find the following public programme of events happening in response to the work. Tickets and more information can be found at [themaclive.com](http://themaclive.com). You can also visit our reading room on the second floor where you'll find a selection of texts to help further contextualise the exhibition.

### **Curator's Tour**

**Saturday 14 November, 2pm**

Exhibition curator Eoin Dara will lead a guided tour through the gallery spaces, talking about the development of the project and how we might consider the artist's work in Belfast in 2015.

### **United in Anger: A History of ACT UP**

**Tuesday 17 November, 7pm**

In his lifetime, Felix Gonzalez-Torres always sought out a communal, active audience. His art is not meant for passive by-standers, it is offered up as a source of collaboration and active participation. In light of this we are hosting a screening and talk, in association with Outburst Queer Arts Festival, with author, activist, and academic Sarah Schulman, considering powerful models of collaborative community activism developed in response to the AIDS crisis in the US at the end of the twentieth century.

### **Displacement, Deviation and the Heterotopic World of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's Billboard Works**

**Thursday 3 December, 6pm**

As we stage a billboard work by Gonzalez-Torres for the first time in Northern Ireland, curator and writer Paul O'Neill will give a public lecture in relation to this body of work. In this talk O'Neill will read the billboard series through the theoretical lenses of heterotopia, sexuality and a notional double-loss of place.

### **We are no longer needed by what we created**

**Saturday 23 January**

To mark the close of the exhibition we will be presenting a newly commissioned text by writer Maria Fusco, developed in response to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

