

## A minimalist masterpiece with profound implications

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[wp washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/interactive/2023/felix-gonzalez-torres-perfect-lovers](https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/interactive/2023/felix-gonzalez-torres-perfect-lovers)

Sebastian Smee



(Courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation)

Great Works, In Focus  
#149Perspective

### **This elegant work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres is a devastating meditation on love and death**

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By Sebastian Smee  
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Felix Gonzalez-Torres was a minimalist at heart. He wanted people to respond to his art with their bodies — to feel the oddity, freshness and surprise of sharing the same space as objects that happened to have been designated as works of art.

These works bore no trace of his hand. They were non-hierarchical — that is, they had neither frames nor pedestals to raise their prestige above the objects around them. They were often installed in marginal or peripheral spaces, like an art gallery's back office. They took the forms of wrapped candies piled up or spread on the floor, hanging strings of lightbulbs and, in this case, cheap, store-bought clocks hanging side by side.

According to the artist's instructions, the two clocks that constitute “‘Untitled’ (Perfect Lovers),” 1987-1990, should be hung above head height, they should be touching and they should be synchronized at the time of their installation. Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996) knew that slowly, inevitably (batteries being what they are) the clocks would fall out of sync, so that by the end of an exhibition they might be off by seconds or even minutes.

“‘Untitled’ (Perfect Lovers),” which you can see at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Conn., is at once a nonchalant-seeming bagatelle and a very beautiful, deeply considered artwork. It has the efficiency and apparent weightlessness of all the deepest poetic images. It articulates something subterranean about both love and mortality — and specifically (since the clocks are the same) about same-sex love.



“Untitled’ (Perfect Lovers)” installed in a 2018 exhibit at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. (Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation)

Gonzalez-Torres didn’t want people to think there was any “correct” interpretation of his work. He loved the more democratic idea that it might instead accrue meanings over time. But he did say that “Untitled’ (Perfect Lovers)” could be thought of as a double portrait of him

and his lover, Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS-related complications in 1991 — five years before Gonzalez-Torres would die as a result of the same disease.

Since the work's gestation overlapped with the height of the AIDS crisis, it could also be seen as a portrait of an entire community. In the late 1980s and early '90s, the gay community, which had made so many political gains since the 1960s, was reeling — not just from a cruel disease, but also from political setbacks that had dire, real-world consequences, including delayed or bungled education campaigns; restrictions on the availability of medical treatments; the reversal of basic human rights; and even targeted violence. Governments and institutions were making repellent decisions informed by irrational homophobia. Fear and stigma were rife.

At the same time, and despite so much tragedy, there were important gains. Activist groups and the health community slowly turned the political tide and made vital breakthroughs in the fight against the disease. Meanwhile, astonishing acts of love — acts for which there are really no words — transformed lives, offered succor to those facing death and began to break down stigma.

If Gonzalez-Torres sometimes resisted the idea that his work be seen in this biographical context, it was because he wanted to expand, not delimit, his art's meanings. But this was itself a political wish: In a censorious environment, art that was metaphorical and poetic rather than explicit could find more traction. "Two clocks side by side," he said, "are much more threatening to the powers that be" than a more explicit image of gay sex, "because they cannot use me as a rallying point in their battle to erase meaning."

You could spend a long time unpacking that statement, which strikes me as very clear-sighted. But you could also take the minimalist approach and let the two clocks speak for themselves. Hear them tick now: In and out of time, in and out of love; the same, different; alive, dead; always touching.

Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1987-1990

Felix Gonzalez-Torres (b. 1957). At the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Conn.

## Great Works, In Focus

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A series featuring art critic Sebastian Smee's favorite works in permanent collections around the United States. "They are things that move me. Part of the fun is trying to figure out why."