

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

January 12–February 25, 2023
519, 525, and 533 West 19th Street,
New York



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Portrait of the Magoons)*, 1993, installed in the home of a private collector. © Estate of Felix Gonzalez-Torres/courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Spanning the gallery's 519, 525, and 533 West 19th Street spaces in New York, the exhibition will feature four major installations—two of which have never been realized in the manner envisioned by Gonzalez-Torres before his untimely death in 1996 from complications related to AIDS. This will be the second solo exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres's work at David Zwirner since the announcement that the gallery would be joining Andrea Rosen Gallery in co-representing the artist's estate.

"Untitled" (1994–1995) and *"Untitled" (Sagitario)* (1994–1995) are two installations that Gonzalez-Torres had fully conceptualized, and which were scheduled to debut at a significant one-person exhibition at CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux in 1995. For institutional reasons, the exhibition was rescheduled and ultimately never occurred. *"Untitled"* is composed of two freestanding billboard structures, configured so that a viewer, when facing the work from either side, sees the surface of one billboard and the rear support structure of the other. Each bears a black-and-white image by Gonzalez-Torres depicting a bird flying beneath overcast skies—a motif that appears throughout the artist's oeuvre. Though related to his well-known billboard works, which are intended to be installed in multiple and varying outdoor locations simultaneously, *"Untitled"* is an immersive indoor installation. Like the outdoor billboards, yet in a distinct way, *"Untitled"* reorients and creates complexity around the perceived boundaries between public versus private space. Another significant aspect of *"Untitled"* is its incorporation of timed sound and theatrical lighting components. This work accentuates the performative aspects of so many of Gonzalez-Torres's works, while also diverting notions of the theater as a passive/escapist experience into an active/thinking one, calling into question the pretense of the fourth wall and the traditional roles of spectator and performer, subject and object.

"Untitled" (Sagitario) consists of two twelve-foot diameter circular reflecting pools, embedded and level with the floor of the gallery space. The pools are positioned to be just touching, causing a nearly imperceptible exchange of water. The motif of the double—and paired circular forms in particular—recur throughout Gonzalez-Torres's oeuvre, and *"Untitled" (Sagitario)* may echo themes of the poignance of partnership, relationality, and queer intimacy within these works. At the time this work was made, the

constellation Sagittarius was thought to encompass two stars near enough to exchange gasses. Movement or vibrations in the space—or even the sound element from *“Untitled”*—may visibly resonate on the pools’ surfaces. The possible movement of water between the pools is richly evocative—potentially of bodies in the cosmos, as well as the exchange of fluids between two human bodies. The latter association brings to mind notions of contamination, infection, and the specter of AIDS.

In the middle gallery will be *“Untitled” (Public Opinion)* (1991), a candy work on loan from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Listed at an “ideal weight” of 700 pounds, this work may be thought of as one of Gonzalez-Torres’s largest candy pieces, yet—like all of Gonzalez-Torres’s candy works—it can shift in scale, form, and number of simultaneous locations within and throughout each manifestation, in addition to potentially being affected by the audience’s interaction. Composed of an “endless supply” of black candy in clear wrappers, its appearance also pairs with the clear water of the pools and the black-and-white images of the billboards, lending additional affinities to their presentation together. *“Untitled” (Public Opinion)* can be understood and experienced in a multitude of ways. Its form and title may summon up the diversity of points of view that comprise any notion of a “public,” or the profusion of information within a never-ending news cycle—as relevant today as it was when the work was made, as the work remains continually responsive to its present. While this work resonates with *“Untitled”* and *“Untitled” (Sagitario)*, as these three works elucidate the artist’s remarkable ability to evoke the personal in the monumental and the sublime in the understated, its distinct form of engagement contrasts with those works’ experiential conditions. The works’ presentation alongside one another highlights Gonzalez-Torres’s interest in shifting ideas of what may be perceived as permanent and what may be perceived as malleable.

Each of the galleries will also present distinct versions of *“Untitled” (Portrait of the Magoons)* (1993), one of Gonzalez-Torres’s word portraits. The presentation of three versions of the work highlights its ability to exist in more than one place at a time, as well as underscoring the fact that at the core of the portrait works is Gonzalez-Torres’s intention that each manifestation be an opportunity for a new version, in which content could be added, removed, changed or rearranged, that is, to be perpetually mutable. As with all of Gonzalez-Torres’s portrait works, *“Untitled” (Portrait of the Magoons)* comprises short textual entries and dates that are presented directly on the wall in horizontal registers at “frieze” height. The portrait works are the only body of Gonzalez-Torres’s work that were made in collaboration with the initial owners. When an owner manifests or lends a portrait, they may determine the version or versions that will be installed, or they may choose to extend the right to make a version to another individual with the knowledge of the specific, yet open-ended parameters of the work. In this exhibition, distinct versions of *“Untitled” (Portrait of the Magoons)* will be determined by Coco Fusco and Glenn Ligon, two artists whose expansive practices and interests dovetail with Gonzalez-Torres’s, and Nancy Magoon, who, along with her late husband Robert, are the portrait’s subjects and original owners. The operation and critical use of language constitute an essential aspect of Gonzalez-Torres’s work; with respect to the portraits, Gonzalez-Torres described a strategy of reversing the denoted and the connoted. The shifting content/authorship of the portraits over time also conveys a nuanced critique of representation and the perspectives from which histories are written.

As this exhibition delves deeply into the nature of the portrait works, David Zwirner will also present a new edition of its celebrated Program video series, hosted by Helen Molesworth, in which the three individuals who authored the distinct versions of *“Untitled” (Portrait of the Magoons)* will be interviewed.

Through this special and intentional selection of works and the distinctive format in which they will be presented, this exhibition will afford new and reconceived approaches to understanding and experiencing Gonzalez-Torres's art. In particular, the two large-scale works that have never previously been seen as they were originally intended by the artist will shed light on the evolution of key motifs and conceptual throughlines that animated Gonzalez-Torres's practice; altogether, the exhibition underscores the constantly shifting methodologies Gonzalez-Torres utilized in order to inspire an engagement with the ways that change and questioning foster meaning.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born in Guáimaro, Cuba, on November 26, 1957. He referred to himself as American. He lived and worked in New York City between 1979 and 1995. He began his art studies at the University of Puerto Rico before moving to New York City, where he attended the Whitney Independent Study Program, first in 1981 and again in 1983. He received his BFA from Pratt Institute, New York, in 1983 and his MFA from the International Center of Photography and New York University in 1987.

From 1987 to 1991, Gonzalez-Torres was a part of the artist collective Group Material, whose collaborative, politically informed practice focused on community engagement and activist interventions. In 1988, he had his first one-man exhibitions, at the Rastovski Gallery, New York, INTAR Gallery, New York, and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. His earliest billboard work, "*Untitled*" (1989), was installed at New York's Sheridan Square on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion. In 1990, a solo presentation of Gonzalez-Torres's work served as the inaugural exhibition of the Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

In 1994, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Traveling*, a survey of the artist's work, was presented at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. In 1995, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, organized an international traveling retrospective of his work. The artist participated in numerous group shows during his lifetime, including early presentations at Artists Space and White Columns in New York (1987 and 1988, respectively), the Whitney Biennial (1991), the Venice Biennale (1993), and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1995) and the Art Institute of Chicago (1995).

Gonzalez-Torres died in Miami on January 6, 1996, from AIDS-related causes. In 1997, the Sprengel Museum Hannover, Germany, organized a traveling posthumous solo exhibition and published a catalogue raisonné of the artist's work. Further solo exhibitions of his work were held at such institutions as The Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (1998); The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (1999–2000); El Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales, Montevideo, Uruguay (2000–2001); Serpentine Gallery, London (2000); Le Consortium, Dijon (2002); and Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin (2006). In 2007, Gonzalez-Torres was selected to represent the United States at the 52nd Venice Biennale. More recently, in 2010–2011, WIELS Contemporary Art Center, Brussels, organized a six-part traveling retrospective, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects without Specific Form*, which was also presented at the Fondation Beyeler, Basel, and Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt. At each institution, Elena Filipovic curated a retrospective version of the exhibition which was reconsidered midway through its run by a collaborating artist-curator: Danh Võ, Carol Bove, and Tino Sehgal, respectively. Further exhibitions devoted to the artist's work have been held at PLATEAU and Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea (2012); Metropolitan Arts Centre, Belfast, Northern Ireland (2015); Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, China (2016); and Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) (2021).

Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Summer was on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto in 2022. Also in 2022, the two-person exhibition, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres – Roni Horn*, was presented at the Bourse de Commerce–Pinault Collection, Paris.

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