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Welcome to the Doll House

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From the Barbie dresses he made as a boy to his first splash in the New York art world, Martín Gutierrez is working to perfect what he has always done naturally.



by Francie Latour

ONCE HE WAS DONE STAGING HIS MOTHER'S SUBURBAN KITCHEN, removing the large center island and curating the racks of an open dishwasher; once he had the lighting down, casting painterly blocks of glare and shadow that echoed the beveled cabinets; once the strawberry wig was fastened and the foil-colored dress slipped on; once, after setting and resetting his self-timer for countless discarded iterations, he had figured out how to arch his back and angle his elbows, **Martín Gutierrez** 12 PR still had this dilemma: how to mimic the molded hands and perfectly vacant stare of a sex doll.



“It was definitely uncomfortable shooting them—in many senses of the word.”



“It was definitely uncomfortable shooting them—in many senses of the word,” Gutierrez says of *Real Doll*, *Raquel 4*, one of 16 photographs from his series *Real Dolls*, which pays playful and poignant homage to the mail-order partners of the same name. The fictionalized world of four blow-up personae—Raquel, Ebony, Mimi and Luxx—reveals Gutierrez in the flesh, posing for the camera and perfected to a high, synthetic sheen.

“The eyes especially were so challenging, trying to exude something that’s lifelike but isn’t at the same time,” he says. “I had to be totally aware of what my body was doing, but then kind of go to this blank place and forget about my face.”

At age 24 and just one year removed from RISD, Gutierrez is making an early, eerie and explicitly gender-bending mark on the art world. Starting in a junior Film/Animation/Video studio and continuing after graduation from his childhood home in Vermont, he has created a body of work that is obsessive in its production, hallucinatory in effect and incredibly fluid in its command of multimedia—from photography

to performance to video to fashion to music. This past summer, Gutierrez landed his first solo exhibition, *Martine(e)*, at the Ryan Lee Gallery in New York. In addition to *Real Dolls*, the show featured the video series *Martine Pt. 1–3*, in which he turns himself and the streets of Providence into a gauzy, hypnotic dream.

In many ways, Gutierrez’s life still looks, feels and sounds like that of a freshly minted college grad: He’s had a prolonged period of living not-quite at his mother’s house and not-quite on the couches and spare beds of friends’ New York apartments. When Ryan Lee Gallery first called the summer after graduation, he was naïve enough to bring a polished résumé, hoping for some kind of position after a professor had passed along his work. “It was very unclear what that meeting was about,” Gutierrez says of the interview. “They kind of looked at my résumé and then just put it aside... I remember calling my mom afterward being like, ‘I didn’t get the job. I guess I’ll come back home.’”

Raquel 4 (previous page) and *Mimi 3* (above) are among the archival inkjet prints from the *Real Doll* series shown in *Martine(e)*. Gutierrez’s summer solo show at Ryan Lee Gallery in Chelsea. The gallery also ran a video loop from his series *Martine Pt. 1–3*.

Now, with a solo show behind him and his first EP out this fall—not to mention collaborations with Paris fashion houses Dior, Acne and Saint Laurent, which have featured his music singles in editorial campaigns—it’s clear that Gutierrez is an artist and musician very much on the rise, with a highly developed vision rooted in the rich make-believe of his childhood.

Drawn to dress-up play from a young age and left to stage his own homespun theater in the woods of central Vermont, Gutierrez naturally evolved into a one-man production team at RISD, writing, directing, styling, shooting, editing and scoring all of his work, while also starring in it.

Through the RISD crit experience, he has developed a process that is exacting and exhaustive. “What’s rewarding but also sad about any project I do is that I have this criteria for what the image should look like,” Gutierrez says. “If the image doesn’t live up to that... then it’s just out. No one is going to see it.”

The result of that ruthless self-editing has been a steady stream of exposure and acclaim by critics, who recognize Gutierrez as an emerging artist whose blurring of boundaries simultaneously disturbs, entices and needles the viewer. “With Mr. Gutierrez, as with many young artists now . . . mashing up race, class and gender is second nature, the basics, what they start with,” wrote *New York Times* art critic Holland Carter of the artist’s debut show. “It’s where they go with it that counts, and Mr. Gutierrez is going in several directions.”

EMBRACING AMBIGUITY

Gutierrez was born to an American mother and Guatemalan father. His childhood unfolded on two coasts, in two distinct phases. The first phase was in the Fruitvale section of Oakland, CA, in a neighborhood that was mostly Latino and African-American; the second phase, starting in the sixth grade, was in Warren, VT, a town with a nearby ski resort and a population under 2,000.

In both those environments—one multiracial and heavily machismo, the other traditional New England and lily-white—there was a constant. As a boy, Gutierrez was drawn to objects and pursuits associated with girls: butterfly clips, plastic chokers, My Little Pony, wigs, costumes and dolls.

“I was really into making Barbie clothes for a while, so at a certain point my father’s handkerchief collection disappeared within a few days,” Gutierrez says. “And I remember the first skirt I ever got. I’d wear it to school with the skirt part tucked into the shorts. And then at school I would take the skirt part out and go, ‘Yeah, I look good!’”

It sounds like the kind of childhood that would invite traumatic bullying. But Gutierrez says he was nurtured and largely shielded from any pressure to conform—cocooned by an accepting family, a progressive Bay Area school and an early, strong sense of self.

“I was pretty oblivious to the fact that I wasn’t following gender norms,” he says. “And I don’t entirely know how that was possible, but I guess I had a strong enough imagination. I wasn’t performing as a girl, or wanting to be seen as a girl. I honestly just liked it. And I wasn’t going to stop doing it because it made other people uncomfortable.”

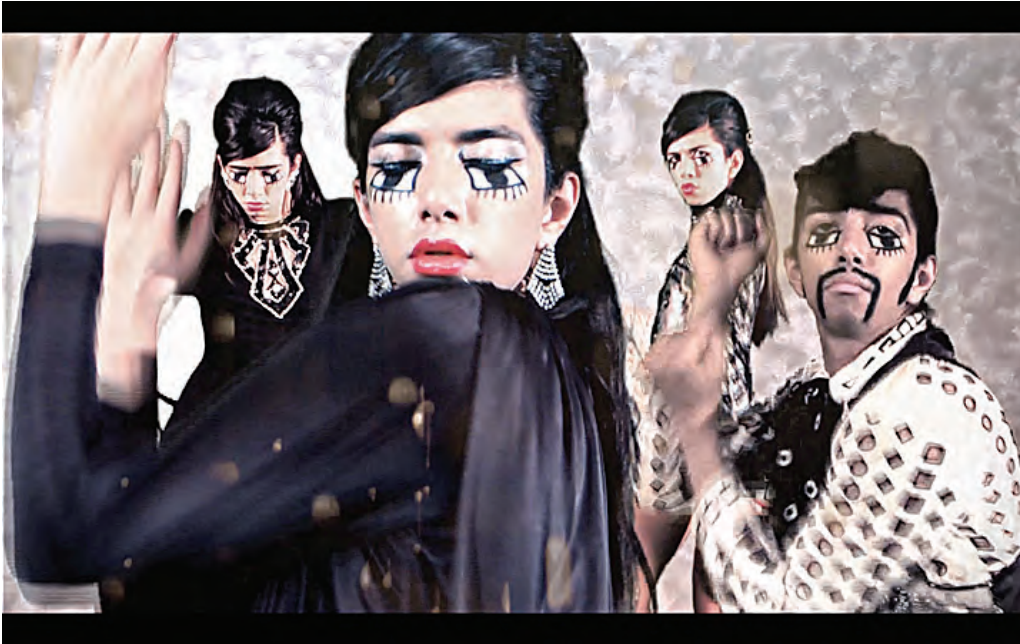
“My name created this duality that I wasn’t aware of at first, but that it turned out I also didn’t really mind at all.”





Part of what makes the work especially compelling is that Gutierrez puts himself at the center of it all, questioning conventions about race, gender, class and sexuality. He also does all the styling and photography himself and writes, directs, produces and creates music for his videos.

“Before, patience wasn’t really in my vocabulary in terms of making something. Printmaking gave me this level of discipline, which, when I got to video, forced me to think more about the initial decisions I had to make before I started filming.”



In Vermont it wasn’t quite so easy. Gutierrez made people uncomfortable enough that, for a while, he couldn’t summon the courage to correct those who mistook him for a girl. But over time, as he made friends and connected with a community of artistic teenagers—at a summer art institute in Vermont, then later at RISD’s and MICA’s pre-college programs—he began to relish living in a place of gender ambiguity. That included embracing the ambiguity embedded in his own name.

“Martín, in Spanish, is a boy’s name, but it has this elongated sound, like *Mar-teen*,” Gutierrez explains. “It wasn’t until I got a little older that I realized the confusion people had about it, because it sounds like the French pronunciation of the girl name *Martine*. My name created this duality that I wasn’t aware of at first, but that it turned out I also didn’t really mind at all.”

Given the encouragement of his parents, a growing circle of artistic friends and a relentless drive to experiment with every possible medium, art school was a given. After being accepted by every school he’d applied to, Gutierrez says he chose RISD based on a bottom-line criterion: which school offered the opportunity to do the most making with the least amount of distraction.

“I wasn’t going to school to have a good time,” Gutierrez says. “Right off the bat from RISD Pre-College, I knew the work I’d made there was my strongest at that time. And then later, when I visited RISD, I ended up staying with a friend and for

some reason we couldn’t find any parties. We kind of walked around and wherever we went, everyone was making work.”

Gutierrez chose to major in Printmaking based on somewhat similar criteria, wanting to make his home in a major where his skills were the weakest, and where he would be allowed maximum freedom to dabble in other majors. As he took a deep, immersive dive into performance-based video and photography during junior year, printmaking became a grounding influence, with its intense emphasis on detail and technical execution.

“With printmaking, it’s so much more about your technique and what it is that makes a good print, regardless of the imagery you’re using,” Gutierrez says. “Before, patience wasn’t really in my vocabulary in terms of making something. Printmaking gave me this level of discipline, which, when I got to video, forced me to think more about the initial decisions I had to make before I started filming.”

“The *Times* review of Martín’s show had an interesting comment that the work had nothing to do with printmaking—and I thought, wait a minute,” says Senior Critic Brian Shure, one of his RISD Printmaking teachers. “He would do an incredible amount of reworking to get his plates the way he wanted them. And with his videos it was the same, with constant editing and critiquing of the sequences, pushing his own understanding...and with such a clear vision of what he wanted to do.”

ACTS OF TRANSFORMATION

On the surface, it's easy to read Gutierrez's work as primarily about gender. Not surprisingly, throughout the *Martine* exhibition, much of the response from visitors mirrored what he had encountered in rural Vermont: Is that a boy or a girl? "Friends of mine at the show would overhear people standing there deliberating what gender I was for the entire video," he says of his *Martine* series. The videos feature a hyper-stylized Gutierrez—in billowing white cotton, pink lips, heavy eye makeup, a drawn mustache and waves of flowing back hair—floating through scenes shot everywhere from the glass display cases of RISD's Nature Lab to the glistening ocean of a Rhode Island beach to neo-classical façades of College Hill.

"A lot of times the conversation had to do with my chest, as in, 'It's definitely a girl, she's just really flat-chested,'" Gutierrez says. "I just think it's funny people care *that much*. What I've learned from being someone who grew up being mistaken as a gender they weren't is that being feminine or being masculine—they're very blurred categories to me. You can't just put breasts on something and it's a woman,

or put a penis on something and it's a man. To me, you're born a certain sex, and then the rest is kind of up to you."

If Gutierrez's alter egos revolve around blurred gender distinctions, they also suggest a deeper, more basic sense of metamorphosis. His performances hover between the mundane and the surreal, between playful humor and quiet melancholy, between the intimately familiar and the strangely exotic. He's not interested in gender-blending for its own sake, Gutierrez says. At its heart, the work is about the act of transformation itself, and what that process reveals about being vulnerably human. "He's working across gender, but beyond that he's interested much more broadly in coding, how things in our culture get coded and read," Shure says.

That is clear in the case of *Real Dolls*, where his pristine interiors and mannequin-like poses create a palpable poignancy. As the fetish dolls come out of their bubble wrap and into imagined lives of domesticity, the pull of the images lies in the tension between human intimacy and the strange comfort offered by a figure in medical-grade silicone.

Luxx 1, another *Real Doll* with a different persona but an equally controlled look.



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“Maybe it’s somewhat about romance,” says Gutierrez, who researched the phenomenon of sex dolls extensively for the project. “I think part of what was so intriguing with the dolls was that you could select any combination of features—skin color, hair color, eye color, body type, body size, different shaped faces—and make a doll to look like your ideal partner.... Even though I knew what their purpose was, for me they were infused with this non-sexualized presence. In my mind I started to think of each girl in a narrative, and try to play out what a real Real Doll would look like or what she would be doing in a house if she were owned by someone else.”

In the vortex of New York’s art and fashion scene, Gutierrez’s emerging body of work may come off as deliberately self-conscious and self-referential. But to him, there’s a direct link between the obsessive making that grounded his childhood and his artistic concerns in the here and now. He may be overjoyed by the success of his debut work, but he’s not always comfortable with the way in which it’s interpreted.

“That’s been the hardest part of entering an art community,” he says—not only in “learning to talk about what you’re making, but implying that all your ideas are coming from this place that’s completely thought out in advance. That’s not how I grew up making things. Even coming from RISD’s crit environment, a lot of my work is very heart-to-hand.”

By way of example, Gutierrez describes one of his earliest influences in creative making, which resonates with him deeply to this day: mermaids.

“I was obsessed with mermaids growing up. I’m pretty sure I drove everyone around me crazy, I was so obsessed,” he says. “Part of it was that I grew up around water, and I loved the ocean. But it was also this idea that you have a certain amount of time to transform into something else, before you return to your original ‘you’ state—which is such a big part of how I feel about what I do.

“It’s just the idea of putting on something and altering yourself, and how much that can change the way people perceive you,” Gutierrez says. “In a lot of ways I think I’m still doing that, not in a half-human, half-fish way, but more in just a human way.” ■

