

Galerie Max Mayer

Worringer Straße 64  
40211 Düsseldorf

*Life of a Flower*

Rafael Sánchez  
with Ellen Cantor, Jim Fletcher, Mark Morrisroe, Gail Thacker

curated by Alex Fleming and Gloria Hasnay

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The exhibition *Life of a Flower* at Galerie Max Mayer explores the practice of artist and performer Rafael Sánchez within a cross section of works created by his intimate collaborators and friends—Ellen Cantor, Jim Fletcher, Mark Morrisroe, and Gail Thacker.

Sánchez (b. 1960 in Havana, Cuba) has been active for over three decades in New York City's downtown art scenes. He is best known for shapeshifting performances and dramatic scenographies. Appearing in clubs, backyards, industrial spaces, rivers, and later in spaces of theater and visual art, Sánchez's practice is situated in a tender and questioning relationship to site and context. In parallel he has maintained an investigative studio practice which functions as a fulcrum for his productions, where drawing, sculpture and the pursuit of form at large create the basis of ongoing experimentation and study.

The works on view reflect upon shared artistic commitments and sensibilities transmitted across intimate relationships. Themes of desire, exile, grief, sexuality, humor, horror and beauty appear throughout the exhibition, woven together through the interaction of real and fictional narratives. Sánchez was often sought out by friends as an actor, model or muse, and so works by other artists in which he appears are also included. The social thread in his oeuvre is a significant one, joining authorship and participation in ways which instigate the layered framework of the exhibition itself.

The show is anchored by a group of photographs by Sánchez which explore the material properties of honey, a metaphoric allusion to the sexual and social activity by which flowers reproduce. His practice engages a deep-seated interest in materials and the attributes and potential inherent to them. The artist achieved these images by shooting with an improvised cone- filtered camera into several jar sculptures he created, each containing scenarios composed of household objects (used as weights and buoys) submerged in honey. Produced in the months after Sánchez tested positive for HIV and a year after 9/11 took the lives of thousands a few blocks from his home, the works relate to care, healing and afterlife through reference to historical uses of the substance in treatments and cures as well as in ancient mummification and burial rites. These sculptures double as chemical preserves, initiating transmutations over time, reflecting a potential correlation between chemical and spiritual transformation, an interest shared by the artist and his photographic collaborators. The images also reflect something of the changing status of the artist's own physical health. Producing strange distortions and flashes of light, some images appear to depict a glimpse inside an unfamiliar body, seemingly built from once usable fragments, perhaps awaiting reanimation. Others capture still lives as if remembered from a child's dream, candle lit scenes from Pinocchio's life inside the whale.

In 1996, a young Jim Fletcher—now an iconic fixture in New York’s experimental art and theater scenes, most notably as a longtime collaborator of the collective Bernadette Corporation—attended a performance by Sánchez held in a friend’s backyard. The performance featured the artist, dressed as a flower under moonlight, lip-syncing to a selection of songs including Yoko Ono’s *Rising* and *Goodbye My Love*, with an activated sculpture or set comprised of a latticework of balloons. Shortly thereafter, Fletcher faxed Sánchez a poem-essay commemorating the performance, and would soon come to work on and appear in Sánchez’s work, an evolution which began his participation/career in performance and acting. Fletcher’s letter beautifully highlights the propensity of Sánchez’s performances, as well as the work of all four artists included, to both involve and instigate the practice and creativity of others.

Fletcher would later appear as a leading actor in *Pinochet Porn* (2008-16), a feature length film by artist Ellen Cantor. Emerging in the 1980s, Cantor’s work approaches allegorical and pop-cultural references to female sexual and emotional experience. Positioned across from Fletcher’s letter appears her film *Within Heaven and Hell* (1996) in which she juxtaposes two popular American movies based on true stories: *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965) and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974). The resulting film mash-up is both funny and disquieting—the viewer is confronted with overlaying audiovisual sequences of the two movies, pointing to their shared techniques. Cantor draws out the familial and sexual tensions and terrors underlying both, illustrating how the pendulum swings between love and torment. As an artist known for her interrogation of power, sexuality and intimacy, Cantor’s filmic work is guided by a voiceover in which the artist shares a personal experience of a once ideal(ized) romance turned sour. Her film shares similarities with Sánchez’s 1996 silent film *Little Prayers*, included in the exhibition. In their themes of love and exile as well as in their approach to camp and humor, both works make use of the conventions of film making and references to popular narratives to explore emotional realities.

In 1985, Sánchez met performance artist and photographer Mark Morrisroe when the two lived in the same building, forming an intimate friendship built from artistic affinity which would go on to have a profound effect on both artists. Through him, Sánchez met visual artist Gail Thacker who would go on to become one of his long standing artistic allies and collaborators. In 1987, Morrisroe tested positive for HIV/AIDS and died in 1989 at the age of 30. Both Sánchez and Thacker’s work intensified in the wake of Morrisroe’s untimely death. Thacker’s uniquely-processed photographs and portraits of this period depict moments of characteristic playfulness amidst their milieu. At the same time, Thacker’s use of decay, abstraction and painterly gesture mark her prints as unique material events in their own right.

Working through the idea of artistic communication as a social process, *Life of a Flower* positions Sánchez’s practice amidst overlapping contexts and solidarities. Conversely, the artist himself functions in the exhibition as a kind of prism, reflecting his own idiosyncratic vision and refracting a specific moment in overlapping artistic investments. Through this interplay, the exhibition explores conceptions of collaboration and intimacy, highlighting the inherently social character of authorship itself.

We would like to give special thanks to all participating artists and Lia Gangitano for their trust and guidance.