

Art in America

NEWS JUL. 20, 2016

Revisitation Phase: Looking at Art and AIDS

by Eric Sutphin



Brian Buczak: *Corpse*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 33 by 165 inches. Geoffrey Hendricks collection and the Brian Buczak Estate. Courtesy Leslie-Lohman Museum, New York.

Since the apex of the AIDS crisis in the early 1990s, the prognoses of its survivors and people who are newly diagnosed with HIV have shifted dramatically, along with the art and artistic discourse around the disease. The traveling exhibition “Art AIDS America,” on view at the Bronx Museum of the Arts through September 25, features a varied selection of art from the earliest days of the crisis to the present. The exhibition coincides with other shows and events that can be seen as augmenting its perspective by giving additional visibility to AIDS-affected individuals and communities

that have been neglected due to racial, gender, or institutional bias.

“Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett” at the American Folk Art museum is a sensitive and rich survey of the little-known vernacular artist, Ronald “Ronnie” Lockett (1965-1998). Though Lockett’s artistic career was brief, spanning just over ten years, he made over three hundred sculptures, paintings, and other objects in that period. He was born and raised in rural Alabama to parents who saw little value in their son’s interest in art. But his cousin, Thornton Dial, already an established artist, became his mentor and supplied him with materials when resources were short. In the early ’90s, Lockett made wall-mounted assemblages incorporating sheets of heavily rusted tin from a demolished outbuilding on his cousin Dial’s property. He hammered, cut and in some instances painted the battered tin surfaces, creating works reminiscent of Lee Bontecou’s metal assemblages or Rauschenberg’s Combines. Lockett made *Coming Out of the Haze* (1994) during a period of deep depression, shortly after he was diagnosed with HIV. An embossed image of a young buck appears amid furrows and folds of oxidized tin. The buck recurs throughout Lockett’s work as a corollary to the ideal black masculinity, which Lockett, slight and shy, failed to conform to. The artist feared that news of his HIV status would confirm his community’s suspicion that he was gay. Whether he was in denial about his illness or he willingly embraced a premature death, Lockett ignored the symptoms that led to the pneumonia that killed him in 1998.

Stories like Lockett’s are tragic examples of how fear and shame compounded with a lack of advocacy can prevent people with AIDS from receiving appropriate medical and emotional support, even to this day. Whether referring to the stewardship of artists’ archives or to the direct medical, spiritual, and emotional needs of people with AIDS, the notion of care has been a common topic of several programs this summer. During the crisis, artists often assumed the roles not only of activists and advocates but also of caregivers as their friends became sick and began to die. On July 14, Visual AIDS, a nonprofit that has used art to shape the discourse around AIDS since 1988, held a panel discussion at The 8th Floor, where the group exhibition “In the Power of Your Care” is on view through August 12. Titled “IV Embrace: On Caregiving and Creativity,” the discussion included Raphael Sanchez, an artist who acted as caregiver to Mark Morrisroe and others; Joy Episalla, an artist and ACT-UP member; Lodz Joseph, a healthcare worker who has worked extensively with HIV/AIDS patients; and Ted Kerr, a writer and organizer whose work and research focuses on

HIV/AIDS. Both Joseph and Kerr are members of What Would an HIV Doula Do, a collective of artists, writers, activists, and chaplains who work with individuals recently diagnosed with HIV. Kerr moderated the discussion, during which Sanchez and Episalla relayed their personal stories of acting as caregivers to friends, while Joseph offered a more clinical presentation about the importance of “self care” as a necessary precondition to rendering service to others. Kerr described this renewed attention to AIDS and those affected as indicators that we have entered the “revisitation phase;” when issues including women’s health, senior care, poverty, and racial inequality are finally given their due after a long period when HIV had the image of a gay men’s disease.

One of the works in “In the Power of Your Care” was a video titled *Medication Reminder* (2015) by Hunter Reynolds, an artist-activist who gained recognition for his *Memorial Dress* performance (1993-2007), which involved donning an evening gown printed with the names of more than twenty thousand people who died of AIDS. For the recent video, Reynolds compiled a series of recorded voice messages of his friend, artist Kathleen White, who called him daily for a year and a half beginning in 2011 to remind him to take his antiviral medications. Her raspy, gentle voice accompanies animations of pills morphing into kaleidoscopic designs, and glitter-encrusted hands gesturing as pearls spill into containers overflowing with multicolored pills. White died of lung cancer in 2014, transforming *Medication Reminder* into a memorial.

In June, Reynolds joined artist Vincent Tiley for a performance at the fledgling Christopher Stout Gallery in Brooklyn’s Bushwick neighborhood. The two artists wore a neoprene suit that conjoined their bodies. The performance was titled *Knast*, after an iconic, defunct Berlin fetish club. Reynolds was given a leather sling salvaged from Knast by a lover who died shortly thereafter. Before the performance, Reynolds passed the relic to Tiley, a gesture that suggested a call to a younger generation of artists who will inherit the memory and object history of AIDS.

“A Deeper Dive,” on view through September 25 at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in Soho, presents the work of nine artists who are included in “Art AIDS America.” It is organized by Jonathan David Katz, one of the curators of the bigger show, in collaboration with Andrew Barron. As the title suggests, “A Deeper Dive” features a more comprehensive array of the selected artists’ work. The first images one sees

when entering the museum are Ann P. Meredith's black-and-white photographs of HIV positive women and children from the mid- to late 1980s. Most arresting was *Eleanora Rosa, the Ellipse at the White House, Washington, DC* (1988), which depicts a gaunt, exhausted-looking young girl in the embrace of her mother, who crouches beside her. Meredith said in an interview that when she visited women with AIDS in San Francisco in the early 1980s to take their portraits, she was "asked by a security guard at the apartment building to leave her ID in case they needed to identify her body."

"A Deeper Dive" also includes two 1993 works from Anthony Viti's "Elegies" series that include the German Iron Cross, an image taken from Marsden Hartley's *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914). Like Hartley, Viti used the image of the cross as a reference to his own grief and anger. But he raised the stakes by incorporating his own blood into the painted surface. *Corpse* (1986) by Brian Buczak comprises five panels with a combined width of 165 inches. The painting depicts a human skeleton festooned with various objects and symbols—a flaming human heart, an urn, a flayed snake, a tea kettle—that confront the horror of illness and death while also expressing an acceptance of it. In retrospect, *Corpse* looks like a harbinger of the artist's own death in 1987.

"Art AIDS America" has prompted institutions and younger artists to rethink the ways in which AIDS is represented in art. But other artists, activists, and institutions have taken the exhibition as an opportunity to call attention to *who* is represented. We need to see the images of HIV-positive women of color in Meredith's photographs. The supportive care work being carried out by What Would an HIV Doula Do is equally important. We need to know how to talk to a friend or relative who might have been recently diagnosed with HIV. But we can't do that without a diverse and inclusive frame of reference.