Bloodless, Still Gutsy

Self-mutilating maestro Ron Athey on new work, old wounds and those three-hour enemas

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The meds made mortality a less pressing issue for me than back when congressmen were cursing out my work. But not dying as expected causes other dilemmas! You spend over a decade preparing for it, and suddenly you're 40 and don't know how to live -- how to think beyond a couple of years. So instead, in my art, I went even further back to the initial source.

The new show we just took to Hamburg is called *Joyce*, my mother's name. This is probably the strangest piece I've ever done. It's about my matrilineage of Pentecostal schizophrenic women: The aunt who's religious but sexually compulsive, the grandmother who has a prophet complex, and the mother who is disassociated and spastic and institutionalized since 1969. The female incest, epileptic seizures, compulsive cleaning -- my new work is all the neuroses I come from.

I think sexuality is magic and spiritual. It's also unhealthy, dangerous and insane. We don't always operate from our rational minds. That's why you fetishize, get into degrading play -- you're working through self-hatred. By living out being a piece of shit, you can stop feeling like a piece of shit.

I have a fun time with my Swiss boyfriend. We've been together for two and a half years. He's negative, so that's probably the thing that makes my HIV most real to me now. Things that were once low risk become a greater risk, and I go through paranoid periods with that.

One thing I was always accused of was presenting sexuality in an "unhealthy" way in my work. Which I had a good laugh over. I was making this link to my grandmother and aunt's incestuous relationship -- these women who douched each other with betadine everyday -- and realizing that that was why I was giving myself three-hour enemas.

Something that grounds me is gardening. I have three yards. I feel like I'm creating a little paradise, and I'm ever inspired by the Southern California vibe. That's why I live in a cottage with herbs, flowers and weird cacti, not in a loft downtown.

Crying hasn't been easy for me. I was on a plane watching a movie with Sharon Stone on

death row, and I almost cried. I thought, “Bitch, you haven’t cried in 10 years, and you’re gonna cry over Shaz?!” But recently I got an update about my mom’s persistent mental illness and cried. It’s hard to remember that things don’t stop when you leave. They continue -- to deteriorate, in this case.

The last thing that made me laugh? Talking about what made me cry.

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