Death Becomes Her

"Obscene artist" Karen Finley wants you to remember

August 1, 1998 By Alice Naude

I love the AIDS quilt," Karen Finley tells me—we're talking about "Ribbon Gate," her own AIDS memorial—"but tying a ribbon gives you something immediate if you need it right now."

Finley's art has always been about immediate response. As the ultimate raging and enraging '80s performance artist, she railed against oppression of women and gays, smeared her body with chocolate and ended up a scapegoat in the right wing's crusade against "obscene art." Along with Holly Hughes, John Fleck and Tim Miller, Finley was denied a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant because of a congressional protest led by Sen. Jesse Helms. In 1990, the "NEA Four" filed a lawsuit claiming the "decency standards" used to determine grant eligibility are a violation of the First Amendment. Arguments were finally presented last April, and a Supreme Court ruling was expected by July.

For Finley, it's been a near-decade-long stint as poster child for anticensorship. She retreated from the performance scene, but continued to make political art, focusing her energy on creating memorials for people with HIV. "Ribbon Gate" was the centerpiece of Memento Mori, a large exhibit in 1991 at LA's Museum of Contemporary Art. Finley's idea was to engage the public in a work of mourning. The gate was almost bare at the exhibit's opening; by its close, 14,000 visitors had tied ribbons to it in memory of a lover, child or friend who died of AIDS.

The red ribbon, of course, has had a contentious career as a symbol of "activist chic." Yet Finley says that her intention was neither to endorse nor to critique the ribbon as such. In fact, "Ribbon Gate" was inspired by the St. Xavier Mission outside Tuscon, Arizona, where mourners rip off pieces of their clothing and tie them to its gates. "It also symbolizes the gates of heaven and 'the gates ajar,' a famous image used in Victorian funerary arrangements," she says. "After attending plenty, I realize I can't stand antiseptic funeral services."

"Ribbon Gate" is willfully beautiful. In fact, the loud, in-your-face politicizing of Finley's performance art is notably absent in her traveling memorials, including "Vacant Chair," "Carnation Wall," "Positive Attitude" and "Written in Sand" which she describes as a "hope chest" in which the name of the dead can be written in sand and then smoothed over. These works grieve more than they protest and, in bearing witness to the lost, are a natural extension of her first AIDS piece, the 1991 poem "Black Sheep": "We are sheep with no shepherd/We are sheep with no

straight and narrow/We are sheep with no meadow/We are sheep who take the dangerous pathway through the mountain range to get to the other side of our soul…."

"Black Sheep," inscribed in bronze and set into a boulder originally on display in New York City's East Village, was moved to Connecticut in 1993, but its oft-noted absence is, paradoxically, a constant comment on the '80s downtown queer arts scene, many of whose stars are also long gone. Last year, Village Voice art critic Peter Schjeldhal hailed Finley as "a historical figure from an epoch when art was conceived as an arena of officially sanctioned, somehow socially beneficial anarchy."

After almost 10 years of memorials, Finley is ready to re-emerge. Through August, Creative Time is sponsoring a 1-900-ALL-KAREN phone line, giving Finley a public platform for daily performance. In October, LA's Smart Art Press will publish her first book, Pooh Unplugged: An Unauthorized Memoir, in which Winnie, Piglet and the rest of the 100-Acre-Wood gang come out of the closet and go to work for Disney. And December brings an installation to the Whitney Museum. Meantime, Finley is raising a daughter, driving a minivan and trying to put the NEA lawsuit behind her. Art imitating life? Expect more of both from Karen Finley in the future.

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