Milestones

February 1, 2000

Tribute
ROBERT BLANCHON
1965-1999

It is one of the last days of this warm summer-inside-fall, the light blazing through thousands of dry, brittle leaves. My friend Robert Blanchon, an artist and teacher, died of AIDS on October 4. He would have been 34 in December. I find myself beginning countless conversations with him—and then I remember that not even Robert's dust remains.

Robert was born and raised in Boston. After earning his MFA in 1990 from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Robert went to New York City, where he worked in the communications department at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. In 1995, he moved to Los Angeles and taught at the University of California at Irvine and at Cal Arts; he was an extremely popular, challenging and dynamic professor.

A conceptual artist, Robert employed many media, primarily photography. His work plumbed various tropes of gay life in the '90s—endless stacks of sympathy cards, stains and waste, tattoos, textual and iconographic references to plagues past and present. He used self-portraiture to skewer art-world pretensions (which he shamelessly shared) and dismantle received ideas about human personality, as well as to flaunt his own beauty.

"Untitled (Protection)" (1992) was a letter from Robert to his parents revealing his HIV status combined with his mother's rambling, evangelical reply. For one of his more recent works, "Wave (0–10)" (1997), he stood waist-deep in the ocean, photographing oncoming waves in a futile search for perfection, trying to capture two images that were exactly the same. A member of ACT UP, he created a sticker in 1990 bearing a portrait of Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley inscribed with the text "I will not get AIDS"—the phrase used in one of the city's abandoned awareness campaigns. His videotape Let's just kiss + say goodbye (1995) was screened at national and international festivals. He was a prolific writer and edited "A Wretch Like Me" in 1995 for the Chicago-based journal Whitewalls.

Robert had seven solo shows in his last five years and was included in nearly 40 group shows since 1989. His recent recognition by the art world was bittersweet, given his deteriorating health. He returned to Chicago in 1998 to teach at his alma mater. The loss in February 1999 of his dear friend, performance artist Larry Steger, was a heavy one.

While packing up Robert's apartment after he died, we discovered a piece, "Cyclops," made a year earlier, which now seems strangely predictive: a set of eyeglasses whose lenses had been fused into one. Last summer, Robert lost all vision in his right eye. Although he never let go of the possibility of living, he despaired that he would never ride his bicycle again. And yet, in spite of his suffering, Robert never lost his sense of humor or his interest in the world outside.

—Mary Patten

Donations can be made in Blanchon's memory to: The CORE Center, c/o Kathi Braswell, 2020 West Harrison St., Suite 2-264, Chicago, IL 60612. Phone: 312.572.4509.

Awards

Veteran AIDS fundraising mavens **Scott L. Mayer** and **Dean M. Prina, MD**, were each awarded a $25,000 Stonewall Award from the Chicago-based Anderson Prize Foundation in November. Mayer started as a volunteer for the Minnesota AIDS Project and built an events-planning business to serve nonprofit organizations. He organizes the largest Academy Awards party outside of Hollywood, which last year drew more than 4,000 guests and raised $100,000 for ASOs. In the past decade, Prina, a pediatrician, has raised an estimated $10 million for AIDS and gay rights organizations. Like Mayer, Prina began as a volunteer—he did his time at the Colorado AIDS Project—and now serves on the ASO's board.

Funding

Captains of industry with big bucks to spare were all the rage last fall. Media mogul **Ted Turner's** long-standing love affair with the United Nations spawned another $51 million in grants—paid with Time Warner stock—from his U.N. Foundation, including allocations to fight AIDS in Malawi, Nigeria and Senegal. **The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation** announced $750 million in funding for the newly created Global Fund for Children's Vaccines. And, that other Microsoft cofounder, **Paul Allen**, invested $25 million in VaxGen, Inc., of which he now owns 22 percent. The company—which makes AIDSVAX, currently in Phase III trials—said the capital will help develop vaccines for all major global strains of HIV.

Careers

In November, **GMHC** bid goodbye to Executive Director **Joshua Lipsman, MD,** when he resigned to dedicate more time to his medical practice after a 10-months-that-shook-the-agency tenure. **Ana Oliveira**, a Brazil-born former associate ED with three years' experience at the ASO, took the reins a week later.

Deaths

William Wilson, editor and author, died October 18 of AIDS. His An Incomplete Education (Ballantine), cowritten with friend Judy Jones in 1987, is a cheeky A-to-Z encyclopedia of all the "books, music, art, philosophy, and discoveries that have, for one reason or another, managed to endure," as the scholarly, hip pair wrote in the best-selling book's introduction.

Wilson, 51, who grew up in Middletown, Connecticut, graduated summa cum laude from Yale

University and attended Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. He worked as an editor at Esquire and GQ, contributed to Artforum and Interview magazines and was the director of research for The National Enquirer.

After his diagnosis in 1988, Wilson joined ACT UP and volunteered for various political causes. He also served on the visiting committee at Boston’s Robert Mapplethorpe Laboratory for Medical Research at Beth Israel/ Deaconness Hospital. And he maintained his signature wit—in an essay for the online zine Soil about two longtime HIV positive friends, he quipped: “Gee, I could go on and on, forever. If I weren’t dying, that is, also from AIDS.”

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