See No Evil

Patrick O’Connell’s visual world

June 1, 1994 By Casey Davidson

Patrick O’Connell is a long, lean drink of a man with liquid brown eyes, a mane of gray, wavy, shoulder-length hair and a smile that lights up his face. He’s the director of Visual AIDS, the group behind Day Without Art/Night Without Light as well as the Red Ribbon Project. We meet in the cozy Chelsea loft that Visual AIDS calls home.

“We’re an odd organization in terms of the history and the model we used,” says O’Connell. “In 1988, a number of us were meeting constantly at memorial services and funerals, and the conversation started revolving around the impact AIDS has had on the arts. A core group started meeting very informally on a monthly basis.”

The proverbial light bulb went off when someone at a meeting suggested an arts version of the Vietnam Moratorium day. “We worked all our phones,” says O’Connell, calling museums and galleries, “saying if we asked you to close down for one day could you do this? We thought of it as a general strike. Most major institutions said, ’We can’t close down, we’re state agencies,’ but they ran with it as a metaphor.”

Nationwide, more than 1,100 arts organizations -- all the major institutions in every significant city -- shrouded their canvases and covered their sculptures in memory of the artists (and everyone else) who had died of AIDS.

“The first time gave the media a different way of talking about AIDS,” O’Connell says. “It was very exciting. The enormous success of that first Day Without Art in 1989 forced us to reassess whether we would be an informal collective doing projects or we were going to become an organization.” The arts community rallied and offered individual fellowships from Art Matters Inc. to O’Connell and Alexander Gray. Suddenly O’Connell had a new job.

When O’Connell talks about his current job, it’s as if Glinda the Good Witch had granted his wishes. “I have this terrific job. It’s amazing to work with this many brilliant, committed people. I’ve always wanted to work with artists.”

Wish again: “My boyfriend [Jimmy Morrow] is the best boyfriend in the world.” O’Connell is HIV positive, Jimmy is negative. That’s kind of a miracle. My life is full of them. Sometimes you think

when you’re HIV positive, well maybe you’ll be dating but you really won’t be seeing anybody because who wants to get involved with someone who might get sick? Well, Jimmy’s friend died. He’s been down this road before. We made a decision to go forward."

As the originator of the Red Ribbon Project, Visual AIDS turned a simple piece of cloth ino the most widespread symbol of AIDS. “We’re a programming organization. We’re trying to understand the impact AIDS has had on the arts not just by presenting the artists’ response to AIDS, but by asking what we can do with that? I think that success is seen with the ribbon project. We created this public participatory artwork that has, in two-and-a-half years, become this international icon,” says O’Connell.

If O’Connell seems passionately committed, it’s a natural reaction, a way of fighting back against the loss. He calculates that from close friends to mere professional acquaintances, he can list some 900 people he has known who have died from AIDS, but he insists this is not unusual. “I can live with the fact that like my grandmother, who just died at the age of 96, I am almost stripped and bereft of contemporaries who remember me as young and cute and vibrant. Part of our definition is the reflection we get from our friends. It’s painful that that is all gone.”

He seems particularly proud that his organization has “provided a way for the art community to heal itself, to mourn and to go into a process of healing. We have helped stretch the terms of responsibility for cultural institutions.”

Visual AIDS continues to reassure a whole community by saying: “This is appropriate, and it’s your responsibility to educate your public.” Patrick O’Connell is out there doing his part, visually.

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