The Art of the Matter

Ellis Eisner paints the days of HIVers by numbers

May 1, 2001 By Ellis Eisner

It is my third morning as an art-therapy intern at a New York City drop-in center for adults with HIV. This is a place that exists between life and death, between the lives the clients once knew and the illness they now face. Despite how much I've read, all the stories I've heard and the two HIV tests -- both negative -- I've had (following an illness that required two blood transfusions), when I actually face the people here, I realize that I know nothing.

I watch the clients come here to take care of their health, go to support groups and conduct their lives. This is where people -- some have no one else in their lives who knows their status, not even their family -- go when they get up in the morning. They work out in the exercise room, eat meals in the cafeteria and carry their medications in big bottles and pill dispensers marked with the days of the week. The kitchen staff touts what's on the menu and urges them to eat.

Despite (or because of) their dubious futures, these clients are hungry to learn. Some get job training and go to work. Rafael, the agency's maintenance man, is also a client. He is a kind of role model to others, though it's unclear if this is by mutual agreement or self-appointment. He is very fit, with good color in his pock-marked face and, always, a kind smile. He encourages a friend without an appetite to eat anyway. "You gotta eat, man," he says, striking a pose as if to say, "Look at me."

In the art room, many make plaques in memory of friends from the center who have died; there are shrines, praying hands, crucifixes, signatures and icons of the dead. Sometimes a client will complete the work started by a fallen friend. I learn that I have come here following the death of a man whose inspirational presence lingers. I know Vincente only through his artwork -- which hangs in places of honor -- his shrine, and the expressions on people's faces when they speak of him.

One man in the group that I am instructing has painted a large work on two 4x8 panels that butt up against each other. It is a landscape of a large tree with wild animals in the foreground. The tree is in the middle of an expansive grassy field, and in the background there are mountains and the sky.

On close inspection, I can see many signatures next to various elements. The artist, the short, young, gaunt-looking Manuel, tells me that it is a tree of life. The signatures, he says, are the names of those who have died.

The notions of life and death blend easily here. Proudly, Manuel says that the painting took him four months to complete. It is a beautiful work, with much thought and planning. He asks me for help to make his landscapes more real.

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