The Curious Closets of Barton Benes

Step inside and thrill to the infectious humors of the eccentric artist: a blood-filled squirt gun, a real AIDS ribbon, Monica Lewinsky's soiled napkin and, believe it or not, a $50 virgin.

August 1, 1999 By David Groff

In Barton Lidice Benes' apartment in Westbeth, the Greenwich Village artists' residence, you can cruise the little ceramic shards of dead men on the kitchen table. Each jagged fragment features a photo of someone Benes has lost to AIDS. You can linger over a bare-chested boy, his hair slouching into his face, or a man sporting a very-1976 mustache, his foxy eyes gazing back, insolent as life. "It's amazing how people sit and go through these," Benes says, arranging and rearranging the pieces. "They're sexy, aren't they? And they appreciate being cruised."

If you're HIV positive, you might feel indignant at the shards, as if Benes were sizing you up to be a party to his art. "Bet you can't wait to get my picture on there," a friend of Benes keeps telling the artist. But Benes, a veteran of HIV, is in no hurry to add to his little pantheon. "I haven't had to make a new one in a long time," he says, and his eyes brighten. "Isn't that nice?"

Forty-six shards: fragments of the same vessel, pieces of a puzzle that won't fit together, *memento mori*. "You can tell a lot about a civilization through its artifacts," Benes says. He gestures airily at his studio space, a library of found objects, the accumulation of more than three decades of sophisticated scavenging: a mummified Egyptian cat, a dance troupe of African masks, Larry Hagman's gallstone, Monica Lewinsky's soiled napkin.

Benes, 56, is a peculiar boy cloaked in a sage's solid body, lithe but tentative on his neuropathy-needled feet, his devilish, Slavic face at once naïve and wise. His eagerness and gentleness surprise—especially for someone who swallows 40-plus pills a day and spends his most passionate hours up to his wrists in other people's cremation ashes or gluing ghoulish or bizarrely precious items into the small compartments of his reliquaries. His life and career mark him indelibly as a survivor: an artist with an established name in a fickle art scene; a gay man since 1957, when *gay* was a whispered word; a person with AIDS at the cusp of a new century. Puck with crinkles etched around the eyes, Barton Lidice Benes is an impish messenger of loss, memory and renewal.

"To me these are holy relics, sacred," Benes says, holding up a vial of embalming fluid labeled Royal Superior Cosmetic Afterglow. "In Prague, they keep cremation ashes in little glass boxes, with photographs of the people. They're like vitrines."

Reliquaries, at New York City's Lennon, Weinberg gallery through July, are different in tone and subject from the artist's wild and controversial AIDS-inspired work. The show consists of 14 wood box constructions, each divided into many small grids in which objects are displayed, treated in Barton's unique silly-holy way. "Food," for example, contains that napkin that touched The First Intern's notorious lips—just a few Hollywood squares away from Nancy Reagan's napkin, Gore Vidal's swizzle stick and coaster, and Art Buchwald's toothpick. Other reliquaries include "Sharp"—everything from a road-killed animal's claw to a needle that contained Caverject, which one of Barton's past sex partners used to inject into his penis to get an erection—and, of course, "Death," a topic that engrosses Benes the way, say, football preoccupies frat boys.

"People get caught up in the reliquaries, like a book," Benes says, angling "Food" to catch the eastern light from the two big windows in his highly cluttered and supremely neat boxcar of a studio where he has lived and worked for nearly 30 years. "It's not something that you can look at like a decorative thing on the wall. You have to read it. And once you do, it's like trying to put a good book down. You can't." Benes beams, proud as a thriller writer; the installations fetch as much as $40,000 each.

Even his creepiest pieces have a compelling aura, like a car crash. "Death" is framed with torn photos of murder scenes. Inside the compartments are embalming eyecaps, a skull fragment from a victim of the Black Plague, an item labeled "cotton used to wipe the face of Howard Meyer after he died, July 10, 1989." Howard Meyer was Benes' lover of 30 years. His illness was the pivot point in Benes' life, and his legacy infuses everything Benes creates.

Barton Lidice Benes seems to have been destined to become a scavenger, a Zelig who picks up the debris discarded by history. A third-generation Czech-American, he was born the same week in 1941 that the Nazis, retaliating for the murder of a German officer, killed every male in the Czech village of Lidice, packed off the women and children to concentration camps and razed the town. His father burdened his son with the name. As an artist, Benes would use his whole name, meaningfully, even as he tried to wear it lightly.

Growing up with his grandparents in Queens, New York, after his parents separated, Benes would cut high school and sneak into Manhattan to get picked up by older men at the mob-run gay bars that shadowed the Beat streets. "I'd walk around the city barefoot," he recalls. "I thought it was romantic to be a pig." One bar, the New Colony, gave him his first exhibition, when Duke, the old doorman, let him hang his portraits of the artist as an adolescent—"awful, awful stuff: me under a streetlight, crying." But even as he was playing the tender Beatnik, the teenage Benes made the U.S. Olympic speed-skating team—while smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. He had an early taste for contradiction.

A man he met at the New Colony gave the 17-year-old a job making the stuff of window displays—mannequins, carousels, Christmas elves—and also introduced him to Howard Meyer, an earnest and dreamy 26-year-old Presbyterian seminarian from Maryland. Meyer was shockingly out of the closet for his era, and suffered for it; thwarted from pursuing a divinity degree, the former Navy man grew his hair long, dropped acid and soon set up house with Benes—two

children of the ’60s. In that spirit, Meyer made a living as a weaver of exquisite tiny baskets, working about 20 feet away from where his lover made his art. Their open relationship was rocky but as solid as any marriage. “Once a year he’d beat me up,” Benes says, recalling the drama with evident relish. “I’d just push and push and push. I think I liked it. He was extremely gentle, but he could kill, which I found very attractive.”

As pop and conceptual art caught on, Benes focused less on painting than on radical performance art. His “Leather and Lace” show in New Orleans featured the artist strapped naked to a padded leather table. “It was a big deal in 1969,” he says. “Now everybody gets strapped naked to anything.”

A visit to West Africa two years later transformed his work and, indeed, his life. “I went to the Ivory Coast to make a mural,” Benes says. “That was the last painting I did.” With his imagination galvanized by African masks and other exotica—which, of course, he brought home with him—he was liberated into becoming a piquant chronicler of his own culture’s relics, masks and ritual contradictions. Through the ’70s and ’80s, much of his art revolved around the construction of profoundly clever artistic puns. Whether nailing a book shut in a comment on censorship, creating a Virgin Mary out of shredded U.S. and Asian currencies or putting a Picasso lithograph in the blender and selling the results in cocaine vials, Benes presented himself as the court jester of contemporary art.

Sometimes the source of his art was close to home. His Aunt Evelyn, an eccentric widow retired in Florida, began writing him 50- and 60-page typewritten letters, often several a week, their pathological volubility fueled by speed, which the old lady swallowed by the handful. Evelyn was fascinated with her gay nephew’s tales of the city—cruising the Hudson River piers, waiting in line to enter the St. Mark’s Baths, the drag prostitutes who walked the blocks around Westbeth, the taste and texture of semen (Evelyn compared it unfavorably to egg whites) and much more. Soon she was writing not just to Barton but to many of his friends. (One, the late choreographer Merce Cunning-ham, dubbed her the “Gertrude Stein of middle America.”)

Unbeknownst to Evelyn, Benes began to make—and sell—small elegant books out of the reams of letters she sent, with passages rendered in rubber stamp-–style lettering. (Eleven were adapted by Benes for *POZ* from August 1998 to June 1999.) “Snacks,” for one, took Evelyn’s strenuously banal disquisition on her dietary habits and turned them into something droll and profound. Around this time, Benes’ birthday gift to his lover was the services of a hustler—a “Donny Osmond–lookalike” who began not only a long affair with Meyer but a correspondence with Evelyn. It was Donny who spilled the beans that she was Benes’ raw material. “When she found out what I was doing, that was the end. It was a disaster,” Benes says sadly. The amphetamine-addled Evelyn threatened to sue, then cut off all contact. “I tried to make peace, but back then I was a bratty kid, too,” he says. “And drugs get in the way of stuff.”

There were quaaludes (copped from Aunt Evelyn, of all people) for the baths. There was marijuana and the occasional hallucinogen. But mainly it was cocaine that dictated the terms of Benes’ life in the early ’80s (at a party, he was once introduced to Nancy “Just Say No” Reagan with white

powder caking his nostrils). His brashness gave way to drug-induced denial in the face of a strange new disease that stirred terror and anger in Benes' happy-go-lucky circle. "Friends were dying. I guess coke was a way of numbing it all, getting through it," he recalls. Benes, shaken and afraid, finally went cold turkey, and hunkered down with Meyer. "We thought we were fine, because by then we were pretty much monogamous."

Their lives collapsed in January 1986 when Meyer was diagnosed with Kaposi's sarcoma. At the same time, Benes found out he was HIV positive, but Meyer was soon so sick that he had no time to worry about himself: "I felt I had control over my life," Benes says. "I didn't feel I had control over his life." With his lover's hospital bed commandeering his workspace and AIDS annihilating his impulse to create, he stopped making art. Meyer was uninsured; AIDS burned through their savings. As Meyer grew bedridden and increasingly removed from the material world, the artist became "a pretty good nurse," Benes says. Dr. Susan Krown, Meyer's oncologist, agrees. "Howard was the adult in the relationship, Barton was the clever, adorable child," she recalls. "Suddenly the child had to take care of the adult—and he did. It's a helluva way to grow up."

Meyer died in July 1989. "I told him it was OK to die," Benes says, recalling that decade-old day. "He squeezed my hand and said, 'I love you.' Howard was not the kind of man to say that." When Meyer stopped breathing, Benes crawled into bed with him. "When he died—it's crazy but true—I saw the energy leave his body," he says, smiling. "And I got on top of him to grab the energy." The urge to snatch the spirit for himself was Benes' first artistic gesture in a long time.

For two years after Howard died, I was a zombie," Benes says. Art had always been his means of not only making fun but making sense, yet his lover's death and his own uncertain health daunted him. Doubting his ability to make art about AIDS that was not doused in sentimentality, he felt frozen. Meanwhile, the short-attention-span art world had moved on. "It's like a race. You stop for two or three years, and everybody forgets you," he says. "That was a real trauma for me—to get my name back."

One night in 1991 while chopping parsley, Benes cut his hand on the knife and dripped blood all over the kitchen counter. Accustomed to thinking of his body as toxic, Benes ran for bleach and rubber gloves. That moment of panic and confusion—"I was terrified I would infect myself"—was the impetus for a new body of work. "I started making weapons—water pistols, Molotov cocktails, poisonous darts and perfume atomizers"—all filled with his own HIV-infected blood, sprayed out onto heavy paper under wired safety glass. The exhibition, *Lethal Weapons*, traveled worldwide and even landed Benes in a Swedish court after health authorities put a quarantine on it. As a compromise, the show was heated in a hospital oven at 160 degrees for two hours. "That's what they said would kill the HIV," he says, laughing derisively. "'Fine. Whatever.'" And then the work was set free, only to be attacked by the Tories and the tabloids in Britain. But front-page headlines screaming "AIDS Horror Show" failed to close it down. "I'd always pushed, but this was so personal. This wasn't frivolous anymore," Benes says. "I was a terrorist."

"'Brenda' was political," Benes says of the array of 192 AIDS-awareness ribbons onto which he had glued the cremated remains of a friend's sister, a woman dead of AIDS. "I hated those red

ribbons," he says. "They were so stupid." So he decided to give the ribbon a potency that it never had: Brenda. Fascinated by "Brenda," Noel McBean, a Jamaican-born man who worked for Ralph Lauren, contacted Benes and asked him to plan to make his ashes into art. McBean and his German-born lover, James Borden, died within weeks of each other. Benes mixed their ashes together in a three-foot-high hourglass, one of his most resonant creations. "They loved traveling," he says, "and I thought, 'This hourglass is going to travel to shows all over the world.'" Right now, the hourglass sits in his studio, a sentinel between the spaces where he works and where he sleeps, more intimate than a ghost.

"I have all these friends' ashes, and they're all different colors," Benes says, carefully laying out more ribbons on his work table. "I must be one of the few people in the world who knows that ashes are different colors. Is it temperature? Diet? It's something in the bones." Nor is the artist finished with ashes. Benes and his mother plan to have their ashes combined and stored together. At first his mother, with whom he speaks every day on the phone, resisted the idea. "Isn't that incest?" she asked.

Thanks to Viracept and Combivir (nasty side effects notwithstanding), Barton Lidice Benes is not likely to end up in an urn any time soon. His life right now is better than good, as his *Reliquaries* garner the onetime court jester greater acclaim than ever. "Barton is a well-kept secret in the art world," says gallery owner Jill Weinberg Adams, "but even so, I was impressed by how many collectors, critics and artists have been paying close attention to the show. And tourists who happen by enjoy it as much as connoisseurs who have waited a decade to see it."

So there is no question of stopping. He gets up early, works out when his health permits ("I still have great legs," the former speed skater says) and spends most days "mounting, gluing and labeling" his reliquaries. A cablenews junkie who leaves CNN on even when he sleeps, he processed the media's information overload following the recent Littleton, Colorado, school shootings by covering a small toy gun with stickers of nursemaids caring for babies. The piece is the start of what Benes calls his "reporter" phase. And while he will continue to report on AIDS, he says, it's no longer the only thing in his life.

The day's mail may bring a new relic from someone in his vast network of designated scavengers—the glove that lawyer Alan Dershowitz experimented on during O.J. Simpson's trial, say, or a second Lewinsky napkin ("This one is paper—I prefer the cloth"). Privacy-hoarding celebrities who still wouldn't mind a personal item kept for posterity will send him the odd throwaway and not worry that Benes will reveal his sources. He has one of Elizabeth Taylor's size 8 and a half white Charles Jourdan pumps. Sharon Stone sent a bouquet of white roses to his Lennon, Weinberg opening.

It's not just Hollywood that's grabbing Benes. Last year, the North Dakota Museum asked him to make a "museum" to commemorate the floods that had devastated the area. *The Grand Forks Herald* ran a story asking people to donate objects that conjured a memory of the disaster; Benes selected hundreds of relics for the five-by-24-foot installation-turned-monument. "Barton has been very generous to the museum. We hope to rebuild his entire studio and its magical collections as

an installation here," says the museum's director, Laurel Reuter. "After Barton no longer needs it, of course." He also has work in the Smithsonian Institute's upcoming *Millennium Messages*, a group show of "time capsules" by artists Christo and Faith Ringgold, architect Robert Venturi, designer Milton Glaser and seven others.

Benes' artistic agenda is full, including a "Glass" reliquary of glass objects and a "Sex" museum, framed in the ugly pink of dildo rubber and featuring ordinary and perverse relics of desire. His next feat, *Transubstantiation*, takes the reliquaries to a more sublime level. A piece of rubble from O.J. Simpson's Rockingham Drive estate is cut into the form of a knife; oil from the Exxon Valdez spill is used to paint a bird; artist Mark Rothko's necktie is fashioned into replicas of his suicide pills. At Lennon, Weinberg, it was these pieces, a preview of the mischief to come, that generated the most buzz.

Romance and love, though, have proved more elusive than productivity and success. In the decade since Meyer's death, Benes has come to know well the loneliness of the long-distance survivor. "Most people from my time are gone. Wiped out. And no one wants a sick old man," he says, with a disarming laugh. "For a long time, I felt invisible. You find yourself alone and old in a world of bodies." Still, his art has helped him to sustain a vision of his own possibilities. After coming to terms with his own infectivity with *Lethal Weapons*, Benes says, "now, I can say 'Hey, I'm here, I've got a body.'"

"The thing is, I resist everything," Benes tells me matter-of-factly. "When someone says this is how it is, I say no." Throughout his career, Benes has done something subversive that gay men have always excelled at—turning the power in culture's protocols to his own purposes. And that achievement is likely to survive him. As the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Ashton Hawkins says, "Barton has created a body of work that is original, beautifully made and very subtle in its effects. And it will last because it has a life of its own."

Bedside is a piece of art as moving as his shards: an artist's palette created entirely out of dead friends' AIDS pills and capsules. From a distance, they look like luxuriant smears of paint. The palette stands next to Benes' own many meds. The effect is witty, creepy and poignant—pure Barton Benes. The pills give the man the life he needs to make art, just as AIDS gives color, shape, even substance to his work. But from his palette he can create anything he damn well pleases.

It takes guts to look loss in the eye and poke death in the ribs. As Benes works alongside his daily companions—the cat mummies and African masks, the ash hourglass and the shards and all the other mortal mementos of his times—how does he keep from getting morbid? "I'm not afraid of death," Benes says with his tricksterish laugh. "That sounds so brave, doesn't it? But I think you know what I mean."
