Voila! AIDS as Art

Barton Benes' provocative ways

April 1, 1994 By Casey Davidson

Barton Lidice Benes' Manhattan apartment doubles as his work space and feels like a miniature museum. There are thousands of artifacts on the walls, including four mounted animal heads (a deer, a wild boar, a mountain goat and a horned bull), Egyptian mummies, colorful African masks, feathers from the Amazon that turn into tribal hats, human skulls, a hunter's jacket with claws and teeth noting each kill and a stuffed dog resting comfortably in a glass box.

From this neat and warmly lit space, he creates his playful and provocative art. On a recent cold winter night, he is in he midst of assembling one of his pieces, dubbed a "medical museum." It's a collection of oddball, yet real, medicine-related tidbits, carefully labeled, nestled in compartments the size of jewelry boxes, all contained within a larger frame. The Band-Aid from his first experimental AIDS vaccination shot is in there, as is a severed human toe found on the Williamsburg Bridge. But the artist's real calling right now is blood, specifically his own HIV positive blood.

"You tell people you work with blood and they gross out," says the short, jolly man of 51 whose face looks much younger. "But these pieces are fun," he says. "This is black humor, gallows humor." He admits that he enjoys breaking society's rules. In the gogo '80s, his material was shredded money with which he sculpted. "It was a taboo, tearing up money," he says, "then it became like a cliché. And it sounds awful; but I was saved by AIDS."

He explains: "My lover died of AIDS in 1989. We were both diagnosed at the same time, and I'm fine. I'd never been able to do any kind of work about it. I hate the stuff I see, sentimental stuff. It took me until 1991 to deal with the subject, which is kind of therapeutic for me," he says.

The blood work is now touring in a show called Lethal Weapons. It is a shocking and fear-inducing collection.

At his apartment he showed me how he once sent letters addresses to himself all over the world (the Eiffel Tower, Bellevue Hospital) just to see how they would be marked when they came back. Benes tells about his lover dying: "When he was sick, I took care of him. He had KS, he found something brown and shriveled up that looked like a lesion that had fallen off. The doctor said to bring it in," he says, pointing to their shared bed, above which is the mounted deer head. "The

next day we realized it was the nose from the deer.”

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