AIDS Art in America That's Youthful, Even Joyous [SLIDESHOW]

Curator Danny Orendorff walks us through the HIV/AIDS exhibition "One day this kid will get larger."

February 10, 2017 By Trent Straube

Visit the DePaul Art Museum in Chicago before April 2, 2017, and you'll discover an extraordinary collection of work exploring HIV and the AIDS epidemic from the perspective of youth in North America. But for an introduction—including a slideshow—you can start right here. Titled One day this kid will get larger, the exhibition is supported by the Alphawood Foundation and guest curated by Danny Orendorff. Lucky for us, he stopped by the POZ offices in New York with a copy of the show's catalog—several examples are included below. In this interview, which has been edited for length and clarity, Orendorff shares his insights on the work and walks us through some of the standout pieces.

First off, tell us about the show's title, One day this kid will get larger.

It's the first line of an artwork by David Wojnarowicz—Untitled (One Day, This Kid) from 1990. The Art Institute of Chicago loaned it to the exhibition.

It definitely sets the tone for the show's focus on youth and HIV/AIDS. How did you define youth for the exhibition?

In some ways, it's based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [CDC's] classification of youth as ages 13 to 24. Some of the work is definitely concerned with those formative years. But works in the show are also relative to the experiences of people born HIV positive or HIV-positive people raising infants. Shan Kelley, who's an HIV-positive dad to an HIV-negative child, writes in depth about that. There are over 20 artists, some working collaboratively. A handful are of older generations, but most, I'd say, were born in the early '70s to mid-'80s. The youngest artist was born in '93.

Are they all from the United States?

North America. We have Canadian, Mexican, Jamaican and then artists born in United States.

Before we get into your DePaul show, we have to talk about another HIV-themed exhibit, Art AIDS America, which has been touring the country since 2015. I wrote a POZ feature about it, titled "Art

That Makes You Go Hmmm," which ran before the show opened at the Tacoma Art Museum in Washington. The curators explained that the collection focused more on established artists and how they snuck AIDS-related themes into the established art world, which typically shied away from overtly political or personal work, and how this influenced a new generation of artists. However, the show has been criticized for not including enough women and people of color. As it turns out, that exhibit is currently in Chicago, just up the street from DePaul. How much of your show is a direct response to Art AIDS America?

I learned about Art AIDS America not through the official channels but through the protests that the exhibition inspired. So when it came, there was definitely the temptation to try to directly address or be critical of Art AIDS America, but I decided that youth was a more interesting way to explore this subject matter—and there hasn't been an exhibition dedicated to it yet. And also, DePaul largely serves an undergraduate population. I wanted to do a show where young people would see themselves directly reflected in the content and to bring awareness to the fact that more than one in five people newly diagnosed with HIV are of their peer group [according to 2014 data, the most recent available from the CDC]. Those were the compelling factors for exploring youth.

As you compiled the artwork, what themes or narratives emerged?

I'm deeply influenced in this exhibition by the writing of [HIV advocates] Kenyon Farrow and Ted Kerr. I was very interested in the intersection between contemporary HIV activism and the movement for Black and brown lives and also the disproportionate infection rates among youth of color. That being said, as I gathered more artwork, three subthemes emerged: Childhoods, Educations and Nightlifes and Pop Cultures. The galleries at DePaul are broken up into three rooms, each with one of these themes.

The Childhoods room looks at artists making work about being an HIV-positive parent or losing a parent to AIDS-related illness or the experiences of kids born HIV positive or people deeply vulnerable to infection—like LGBT youth experiencing housing instability.

Another theme looks at the failures of public education to address HIV and the AIDS crisis and also how artists and alternative educators are challenging mainstream narratives of the AIDS crisis and how it fits in the larger narrative of U.S. history.

In the Nightlifes and Pop Cultures room, there are HIV-positive characters in mainstream media—it's entirely possible that for members of the younger generation, the first person they ever heard speak of HIV/AIDS could have been fictional or from reality television. And there's work by Samantha Box, whose photographs document the lives and parties and activism of the kiki scene, the younger manifestation of the ballroom scene. Her photos are stunning. And they're combined with this large, beautiful collage, called Ballroom Floor, by Rashaad Newsome, who makes this opulent, religious-inspired DIY art in tribute to fallen members of the ballroom community—a lovely moment in the exhibit. And for my show, Aay Preston-Myint did this great geometric wall drawing based on the architecture of sex clubs, so it's an abstraction of slings and glory holes. It's a standout piece. I curated and brought together work that comes more from an

activist tradition of documentary and text and audio, but it was also important for me to have strong moments of beautiful visual artwork of a more traditional sense.

Aay Preston-Myint's "Rainbows are the Shadows of a Presence," 2016, wall drawing with mixed media and colored lights, approximately 12x20 feet, pictured at the DePaul installation.Courtesy of DePaul Art Museum/Lizbeth Applewhite

Tell us about some of the documentaries and film work.

Ivan Monforte, who used to work for GMHC—his work is really all about representing more disenfranchised voices. His video I Belong to You is stunning. He received hickeys for four solid minutes on both sides of his neck. Then when the man who gives them to him, who is never identified and never turns his face to the camera, walks away you see these massive hickeys that kinda look like skin lesions similar to Kaposi's sarcoma [the AIDS-related cancer common during the epidemic's earlier years].

And there's Bumming Cigarettes, a short film by Tiona McClodden, a filmmaker in Philadelphia who is focused on experiences of black lesbians or gender-nonconforming Black communities. Bumming Cigarettes, done in a slice-of-life, cinema vérité style, follows a young Black lesbian's first HIV test and the conversation she has with an HIV-positive man several years older than her as she's waiting for her test results. It's extraordinary when you think of how a white mainstream medical establishment has neglected or pathologized communities of color and women, so for Tiona to be making work about connecting Black queer women with care providers, it really is revolutionary.

That’s fascinating. These are such timely and important topics, and it’s really cool to see them reflected in the arts.

These artists in the show, although they have visual art practices, they also work as social workers, and they are activists or photojournalists or educators. Most are not represented by galleries.

How did you find them?

My work always had one foot in grassroots social justice organizing. I’ve worked in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, New York. So I’m tapped in to the broader network of younger artists and activists.

Based on your experiences with them, what do younger people today think about HIV?

They have a very narrow understanding of HIV and the AIDS crises. A lot of kids, depending on their social upbringing, really do think of these illnesses as being restricted to a time, place and type of person—there’s that overwhelming narrative of it being a disease that primarily affected white gay men in the ’80s and early ’90s, and that gets perpetuated through shows like Art AIDS America.

Does the work in your show span the entire epidemic?

Yes, and even before the ’80s and ’90s. Ted Kerr looks at Robert Rayford, a teenager who, according to medical research conducted in 1987, died of AIDS-related issues in 1969. Ted was doing a residency in St. Louis around the same time Michael Brown was killed [by a cop in August 2014] in Ferguson, Missouri, and the same time of the criminalization of Michael Johnson [a former college wrestler now in prison for not disclosing his HIV status]. All of this occurred around St. Louis, so Ted’s research became about connecting this historical tendency of erasing or making invisible the lives of young Black men and the premature deaths associated with that. So Ted’s work is looking at, again, a sort of history of AIDS that doesn’t begin with, like, the Patient Zero myth.

What’s another piece that explores a link between HIV and the Black Lives Matter movement?

Lenn Keller, a photographer in the Bay Area. This is actually a series of hers from 1989 called Another Image: Black Teenagers Coming of Age. Basically, it was a portrait and oral history project where she took photos of Black youth around Oakland and asked what they were learning, or not learning, about the AIDS crisis. A lot of the conversations expanded to talk about racism in the classroom and community and how that affects self-concepts and their understanding of history and their performance in the classroom. What’s striking—and Lenn writes about this today—is that the things kids were talking about in 1989 are still so pervasive and relevant in 2017. Especially now that young people are drawing inspiration from ’80s and ’90s fashion, this whole photo series could have been taken last week.

Of course, as an editor at POZ, my eye is drawn to the artwork with the words Poz Since 1492 splashed across it. What’s that story?

It’s artwork Demian DinéYazhi’ made for the show. He is indigenous Navajo, and it really situates the AIDS crisis in a larger transnational historical tendency of disease and plague to be the by-product of white colonization [Christopher Columbus reached the New World in 1492].

What do you mean Demian created this for the show? Did you commission a lot of artwork?

He works in multiples, in screen prints. They preexisted, so he sent us copies of screen prints he had already made. But that’s an interesting question, and a previous question of your also speaks to this: Part of the problem with Art AIDS America from the get-go is it’s already assuming who had the resources and access to the stuff of art making, whether that be paint or canvas or a camera or the ability to produce physical versions of digital work. So for this show, much of my budget was dedicated to making physical prints of what was digital material—for example, all of Samantha Box’s photographs and all of Oli Rodriguez’s photographs.

Samantha Box, “Untitled 2” from the series “INVISIBLE: The Last Battle,” 2006-2012 giclée print, 20x24 inches, unframed Courtesy of the artist

The project by Oli has a large presence in the show. Oli is an alum of DePaul University and is a trans male artist and activist very visible in Chicago. This is a large multi-component project he initiated in 2010 called The Papi Project. His biological father passed away from AIDS-related issues in ’93. Essentially, he received an archive of photographs from his father from the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s of his father’s queer community. And so Oli does this doubling of images of biological families—there is an image of his brother posing for an Eagle Scouts photograph and another is a lover of his biological father. His biological father was a gay man who, for several years, seemed to

be leading a kind of double life but then came out in the ’80s. Then Oli received all this material later on and began this project, resolving his own relationship between queer family and biological family, through his father’s archive. In addition to that, Oli investigated the contemporary landscape of cruising through this project. So he took photographs of sites where his father participated in gay cruising culture, and in order to seek out some of the men who knew his father, he posted pictures on Craigslist of his father asking, “Do any of you know this man? He went under these aliases. I’d be interested in meeting you if you think you had sex with him.”

Wow. And did people actually respond?

Yes! Some of the email correspondences are in the exhibition. Oli doesn’t try to resolve or take a moral stance on any of this; he’s using ambiguity to get to know everyone better. So it’s really interesting and complex—and it’s beautiful.

One last question. Are there any performances or events slated to take place in conjunction with the show?

We had a performer, Darling Shear, at the opening. Kenyon Farrow is giving a talk, and we’re doing letter writing to people criminalized—Ted Kerr is leading that. And there is an exhibit soundtrack by local DJ CQQCHIFRUIT, who did this great playlist that starts with Liberace and goes to contemporary hip-hop, with audio archives of ACT UP and pop culture sound bites in the mix. So there’s always music.

I really didn’t want to do a show that dwelled on the depressing aspects of this all. In Art AIDS America, the death tolls in the ’80s and ’90s inspired a lot of the work, which is very morbid and about the nearness of death. So it was important to me to showcase life and pleasure and joy and also to show HIV-positive individuals alongside HIV-negative individuals. AIDS as subject matter in visual artwork isn’t limited to HIV-positive artists, especially among younger people. HIV and AIDS is felt by everyone, certainly more so by people who are HIV positive, but it’s an issue that confronts us all.

Shan Kelley, “Growing Concern,” 2013, giclée print, 20x24 inch image, 22x28 inch frame Courtesy of the artist

For more about the DePaul Art Museum, click here.

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