Art That Makes You Go Hmmm

An exclusive look at the upcoming 'Art AIDS America' traveling exhibition

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If you visit the *Art AIDS America* exhibition expecting to see activist slogans and memorial pieces along with some art-world superstars, you won't be disappointed—Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe and the "Silence = Death" slogan are present and accounted for—but you might also walk through the show scratching your head in confusion.

That's because the exhibit highlights a less-obvious style of art, one that may cause you to wonder, "Huh? How is this about AIDS?" Nonetheless, as co-curators Jonathan David Katz and Rock Hushka set out to prove, the 100-plus pieces in the exhibit do more than capture the breadth of the U.S. epidemic and inspire discussion about the disease; they also illustrate, in Hushka's words, "how the artists' response to the epidemic utterly changed artistic practice in the United States."

But first, an overview: A decade in the making, the exhibition kicks off with a preview in June at the ONE Archives Gallery & Museum in West Hollywood before opening October 3 at the Tacoma Art Museum in Washington, where Hushka is the chief curator (Katz is a professor with the University at Buffalo, SUNY). The show then moves in early 2016 to the Zuckerman Museum of Art in Kennesaw, Georgia, before closing at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in New York. At this point, dates are tentative, so double-check with each institution.

The exhibit is divided into pre- and post-cocktail eras—when combination therapy transformed HIV from a death sentence to a "manageable" chronic illness—and it spans more than three decades. Katz says the show's oldest piece, Izhar Patkin's "Unveiling of Modern Chastity," from 1981, "is, as far as I know, the first work of art about AIDS." Made of rubber paste, latex theatrical wounds and printing ink on stretched canvas, it's a putrid green surface pitted with lesions, an obvious reference to Kaposi's sarcoma.

Katz and Hushka scoured the country for works of both artistic quality and historic or cultural importance, most notably pieces by regional and community artists as well as art featuring minority populations. An example is photographer Ann P. Meredith's 1987 "Anonymous Woman With AIDS" from her portraits of women of color living with the virus. "Remarkably," Katz explains, "each of those women insisted on having her face removed, given the context of the time, so Meredith scratched it out."

The show includes a variety of styles and mediums, including the use of language and words, like in

Jenny Holzer's 1988–1989 work "Laments (The New Disease Came…)" comprising verse on drafting paper resting atop coffin-like black forms. It begins: *The new disease came. / I learn that time / does not heal. / Everything gets / worse with days. / I have spots / like a dog*. Fast-forward to 2013 and you have fierce pussy's "For the Record," a collection of posters, stickers, postcards and downloadable files created for Visual AIDS. A dense block of text, it reads: *if he were alive today he would be at this opening if she were alive today you'd be texting her right now if he were alive today he would be going gray if they were alive today* … and on and on and on.

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Works like these are fairly self-explanatory. But others require you, the viewer, to think things through, or at the very least to read the accompanying wall labels. It helps, too, if you know a bit of cultural context and art history.

As Katz points out, when AIDS first struck, the prevailing frame of reference in the art world was postmodernism, which claims that art is not the product of the maker but of the viewer. In other words, the artist is "dead" and the audience interprets, or creates, the true meaning of the work. As such, postmodern artists never include biographical elements or offer information that might influence the viewer's experience (that's why many pieces are labeled "Untitled").

The early '80s also witnessed the birth of the culture wars and intense censorship, when statements about sexuality and AIDS were verboten in mainstream museums. How to get around this? One popular reaction has been to create works that reference well-known pieces while giving them a twist. For example, Pop artist Tom Wesselmann was famous in the '60s for his bright breakfast collages. Along comes AIDS activist Joey Terrill, who created a similar piece in 2000, "Still-life with Zerit," subtly adding a bottle of the HIV med to the product placements in the kitchen landscape.

Other AIDS artists developed a new strategy. They "took a cue from the very infection that was killing them," Katz says. "They decided to attack—undercover and camouflaged—and to essentially enter the museum virally. Félix González-Torres says this flat-out: 'I have become a virus.'

"The remarkable thing," Katz continues, "is that it succeeded. The work was circulated in the museum system, unmolested by the Neanderthals in Congress like Jesse Helms who were aggressively policing the representation of AIDS."

The price of this successful strategy, though, is that the resulting pieces risk being too academic and removed for the general viewer. Works created in this style—or "strain" of art, as Katz calls it—reference HIV in the most indirect, oblique manner. Imagine, for example, that you visit a gallery and notice strings of red beads hanging from a rod placed over the doorway; after you walk through the beaded curtain, you realize it's an artwork: González-Torres's "Untitled (Blood)" from 1992. Given the year, you'd likely viscerally understand the subtext—*You touched blood, you could be infected*—but what would you make of his 1993 piece "Untitled (North)," comprising nothing more than strings of light bulbs hanging in the center of a bare room?

Katz and Hushka make the case that these are important works that went on to influence the next generation of artists. "They brought back the voice of the artist," Hushka explains. "Contemporary artists

working in an autobiographical frame have realized the dream of the AIDS activists. In this radical way of thinking of art, they've incorporated their own meaning back into the work." The artist is no longer "dead."

But hold on. The battle hasn't been won. Both co-curators stress that HIV remains with us, as do the culture wars and censorship. Just five years ago, the Smithsonian censored a show Katz curated called *Hide/Seek*, about sexual identity in portraits; after complaints, it pulled a controversial David Wojnarowicz video that portrayed ants on a crucifix.

Both Katz and Hushka expect controversy this time around too, though neither can predict its precise focus. Likely contenders include Barbara Kruger's 1991 "Untitled (It's our pleasure to disgust you)" involving a gas mask and crucifix, and the 1989 Mark Chester piece titled "Robert Chesley – ks portraits with harddick and superman spandex." Katz explains its relevance: "I can't tell you how important this work was for a generation, in 1989, that had come to associate their own ejaculate with death. This work takes an obvious AIDS body and resexualizes it. It's a remarkable work, and Robert Chesley is an important San Francisco playwright."

Does that make you go hmmm? Regardless of your personal interpretations, the *Art AIDS America* exhibit is not to be missed. In fact, it's one for the history books.

Carrie Yamaoka, “Steal This Book #2,” 1991, unique chemically altered gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 inches

HMMM Factor
Many artists address AIDS on an indirect, oblique level. Here, activist/artist Yamaoka takes pages from Abbie Hoffman’s 1971 book, Steal This Book—about challenging the powers that be—and whites out almost all the words.

Eric Avery, “HIV Condom Filled Piñata,” 1993, molded paper woodcut, each is 8.5 inches in diameter

HMMM Factor This is a photo of Avery’s educational installation that includes piñatas shaped like HIV and filled with condoms. Avery, who is also a physician, let people break them open. Alas, that won’t happen to the piñatas in Art AIDS America.

Derek Jackson, “Perfect Kiss,” 2007, slide show with found music and original still imagery, 7 minutes

HMMM Factor
To the sound of New Order’s “Perfect Kiss,” images depict Jackson cruising online, hooking up and dancing. They seem to ask: As you navigate sexual intimacy, do you put yourself at risk?

Robert Sherer, “Sweet Williams,” 2013, HIV- and HIV+ blood on paper, 24 x 18 inches

HMMM Factor
As a child, Sherer would help his grandmother by collecting flowers from a garden. “Take all the pretty ones first,” she’d instruct. Years later, he recalled those words as he witnessed young, handsome men dying of AIDS complications. What’s more, he created this piece using blood.

Tino Rodriguez, “Eternal Lovers,” 2010, oil on wood, 18 x 24 inches

HMMM Factor
Evoking Mexico’s Day of the Dead celebrations, Rodriguez illustrates his personal philosophy: We need not fear the afterlife, he says, because eternal love overcomes death.

Thomas Haukaas, “More Time Expected,” 2002, handmade ink and pencil on antique ledger paper, 16.5 x 27.5 inches

HMMM Factor
Look closely and you’ll notice that some horses are missing riders. That’s in honor of Native Americans lost to the epidemic. Haukaas is a member of the Rosebud Lakota Sioux.

Deborah Kass, “Still Here,” 2007, oil and acrylic on canvas, 45 x 63 inches

HMMM Factor
From her body of work Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times, this painting references Stephen Sondheim’s “I’m Still Here,” a song that champions survival and resilience.

Jenny Holzer, “Untitled (In a Dream You Saw a Way To Survive and You Were Full of Joy),” 1983–85, packaged latex condoms with printed text, each is 2 x 2 inches

HMMM Factor In her Survival Series of artwork, Holzer printed various truisms on condoms. What does it all mean? Like many artists, Holzer refuses to answer, leaving all interpretation up to you, the viewer.