An Artist, Prepared

Kia LaBeija, born with HIV, documents her life in a solo show.

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When Kwan Bennett was diagnosed with HIV in 1993, she embraced AIDS activism, speaking out for women and children. She also began preparing her daughter, Kia LaBeija, who was born with HIV in 1990, for the inevitable loss of her mom. When Bennett died, in 2004, she left behind a series of notebooks, memories and lessons, including a love of documenting her own life.

Bennett's influence is evident in Kia's first solo museum show, prepare my heart, on display at Fotografiska New York through May 8. "My mother is very much present in the show," Kia, an interdisciplinary artist, tells POZ, "but it's also about the experiences I had on my own, the people I met, the love I found, the love I have not found." Those experiences include growing up as a queer person of color with HIV, struggling to take meds and keep secrets, facing loss, dealing with intimate partner violence, finding her voice as an artist and HIV activist and discovering beauty and community in New York City's ballroom scene—she was the overall mother of the iconic House of LaBeija, hence her name, though she is no longer involved and generally goes by her first name.

“Mother’s Day” (1997)Courtesy of Fotografiska New York/Kia LaBeija

Kia began photographing her life nearly 20 years ago. Her documentary style leans into fantasy and glam—as seen in the 2015 image Eleven, which presents Kia in her actual prom dress having her blood drawn by the same doctor she saw for nearly 25 years. The museum show also includes poetry, videos and ephemera, such as HIV pamphlets from the 1990s. “It’s the life of a person,” she says of the exhibit. (Go here to read our full Q&A with Kia.)

A recent standout work is SHE KNOWS AND SHE LOVES ME EVEN MORE from 2021, which shows text projected onto the bodies of Kia and her partner, Taina Larot, who have been together since 2014. The phrase references Larot’s acceptance of Kia’s HIV status and serves as a counterpoint to life’s darkness and loss. “I wanted to make that image to present optimism,” Kia says. “My mother taught me to express the fact that women with HIV can find love and be loved and are deserving of love.”

“She Knows and She Loves Me Even More” (2021)Courtesy of Fotografiska New York/Kia LaBeija

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