Kia LaBeija, Artist and HIV Activist, Is Prepared for Her First Solo Show

The exhibit tells the story of her life, says Kia LaBeija, and that includes her mom, HIV, ballroom, love and a double rainbow. [SLIDESHOW]

February 25, 2022 By Trent Straube

When Kwan Bennett was diagnosed with HIV in 1993, she embraced AIDS activism and spoke 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 for her daughter, along with memories, lessons and a love of documenting her own life.

The influence of Bennett, who was born in the Philippines and moved to the United States at age 4, is evident in Kia's first solo museum show, prepare my heart, on display at Fotografiska New York through May 8.

“Kwan and Kia Speaking at a Union Square Rally,” 1995Courtesy of Fotografiska New York/Kia LaBeija

“My mother is very much present in the show, 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,” says Kia, an interdisciplinary artist known for her photography (especially self-portraiture), performance and dance, with a history 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 only her first name. Also, she identifies as a “multiracial—Black and Filipino—cisgender queer woman who has been in a relationship with a woman for 8 years, take it or leave it.”

POZ caught up with Kia a few days before her show opened February 24, with her 32nd birthday approaching. The interview has been edited for length and clarity and includes numerous images from prepare my heart.

First off, how have you been holding up in recent years?

I’m OK. It’s been a really rough year for me personally, but with this show coming up, it’s a silver lining. It’s a happiness that’s keeping me going.

Tell us about it. What’s the meaning behind the title?

It’s an autobiographical show that looks at my life from childhood to adulthood, growing up with HIV and implementing the things my mother taught me about what it means to be prepared. When my mother found out in 1993 that she was HIV positive, she got everything together very fast. She

made sure she had a will. She joined lots of organizations and started speaking at conferences. She did everything in her power to figure out the best way to survive—and this is before 1996 when [effective HIV meds became available]. Also my father [a drummer from Brooklyn, who has played for Whitney Houston, Nina Simone and others] is still in the picture, and we had to figure out how to survive as a family unit.

The name of the show is prepare my heart because it's thinking about what that preparation taught me. [My mom] wrote a series of notebooks to me, very much things she wanted me to know about her life. She put things in boxes and labeled them. She was so ready. And the thing that I learned about preparation is, you're never really ready.

"Eleven," 2015Courtesy of Fotografiska New York/Kia LaBeija

The show honors my mother in many ways. There's a lot of ephemera [such as pamphlets as well as videos and poems]. But it's also about the other experiences I had on my own, without her.

Can you share with us a lesson you learned from your mother?

So many things. My mother was very loving toward me. She taught me that among living through hard and painful situations, there's always so much more love to be had. To be gentle with yourself and be kind with yourself first, then you can be loving and gentle and kind to other people.

She was such a powerful strong optimistic person. She also taught me to speak up for myself, and that's always been difficult for me to do. I saw her be able to step into her power and watched her and admired her for being so outspoken and vulnerable and easygoing about it all. She wasn't afraid to tell people she was HIV positive, and she was recognized and was a voice. There are so many voices lost in the AIDS narrative. For her, being who she was—heterosexual and of mixed race and Asian descent, factors, it seems, that were not the prototype of someone who would contract the virus—she wanted to tell her story so more people would be aware that HIV and AIDS can affect you regardless of who you are and who you love.

I'm surprised to hear you say speaking up hasn't been easy for you—you seem like such a public and open person.

Sometimes it feels easier to talk to strangers or to speak to an audience. When you're one-on-one, you never know how people are going to react, especially for women, in my mind. There's the threat of violence and harm.

When I meet someone new, they ask me, "What are you interested in, what do you do?" I tell them I'm an artist. "Oh, tell me about your art." And then I have to tell them the most personal thing about me in that moment. That can be a terrifying thing.

I know that things have been shifting a lot in terms of what people are learning about what it means to be a person living with HIV. We're seeing commercials for PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis, pills or injections to prevent HIV] and U=U [Undetectable Equals Untransmittable, the fact that people living with HIV who maintain an undetectable viral load do not transmit HIV].

There are so many HIV commercials now that you wonder if HIV pharma is banking all of television.

Literally! It's crazy! And it's insane to see commercials that are like, "You take one pill once a day," especially for those of us who are long-term survivors. I'm going to be 32 next month. That's a long time [to live with HIV].

Because I lived through the early '90s, I still carry that with me. It's not like, "Oh well, it's different now." All those years of taking all those medications and feeling sick and all the doctors' appointments and going through my mother's death. All this stuff is just not going to go away.

In terms of my artwork and creative process, it has been difficult because I can feel pigeonholed [for including HIV in my work]. I want to be loved as an artist, not as a person living with HIV who made art. But I still want to grow as an artist, and I know that I'm going to be living with this virus until a cure comes, which, hopefully, I'll see in my lifetime. I'm very optimistic that one day we'll reach that point. Until then, HIV is a part of my life, and my art is a reflection of what I'm going through.

“Negotiating,” 2018Courtesy of Fotografiska New York/Kia LaBeija

Tell us about some of the more recent works in the show.

There’s a 2018 series called On and Off Again. I made it specifically about going on and off my medication regimen, which is something I dealt with my entire life because when you’re little and you have to take eight pills a day and they make you sick and nauseous, it’s hard to stay on top of that, especially when you’re going through puberty, your social environment is changing. To this day, it’s hard for me. One of those works is Negotiating, a very green photo of me looking into a mirror and medication is in the cabinet. At first, I thought it was way too literal, and it was a hard image for me to look at. But the more time I spent with it, it felt important, and I wanted to include it in the show.

And there are images from last year.

My new series includes those two images of projections [of words onto bodies]. One is called I RISKED MY LIFE FOR YOU. That’s a phrase that has been said to me maybe four or five times in my life. So it’s like you have a sexual experience with someone or have a relationship, and they know you’re HIV positive, and once that relationship comes to an end—they weaponize your status against you.

That phrase is what people said to you after the breakup?

Yes. I kid you not. A plethora of times. How did every single one of these people say the same thing? I'm like, Did you all call each other or what?

I feel like a lot of times, especially when we talk about HIV, we don't talk about the things women go through, and we don't talk about women. More than half of women living with HIV have experiences with intimate partner violence and sexual abuse and violence. And I've experienced it. That's been one of the most difficult things of my life. I wanted to make that image because after all these years I'm ready to be more open about and talk about that. I had to learn the hard way, and that's unfair. And it's not just women living with HIV. It's women in general because we don't live in a culture that values women's bodies in ways that we should.

"SHE KNOWS AND SHE LOVES ME EVEN MORE," 2021Courtesy of Fotografiska New York/Kia LaBeija

But juxtaposed to that image is my favorite image, called SHE KNOWS AND SHE LOVES ME MORE. It's a photo of my partner [Taina Larot] and me. We've been together eight years. When I told her [my status] on the first day, she said that her heart opened to me and she felt my vulnerability and courage to tell her something so intimate and so up-front and that it was something she was very attracted to. She said it made me love you even more. So I wanted to make that image to present optimism. My mother taught me to express the fact that women with HIV can find love and be loved and are deserving of love.

You were involved in the ballroom scene, portrayed recently in mainstream media thanks to TV

series like Pose. You even appeared in that show's pilot as a dancer. Does that history of ballroom appear in the show and influence your work?

Yes. I'm very much an archivist. I learned that from my mom. A lot of those photos are from when I was immersed in the ballroom scene, of people who were very close to me. Some who have passed on, like my gay father, Hector Xtravaganza, and my very dear friend and brother, mentor, wonder twin Derrick Davis "Pop Dip" LaBeija, who passed away last year.

Ballroom influenced me so much. I made a lot of aesthetic choices based on the fantasy and excitement I found in ballroom. Ballroom is a creative space for queer people of color, and it influenced what I imagined could be possible.

Can you give us background on the series of photos from around 2015 that show you in glamorous gowns but in a doctor's office or a bathroom floor?

The bathroom image is Mourning Sickness. There's a double meaning. It's the bathroom of the apartment I grew up in, where I'd be throwing up before school and where, when my mother died, I locked myself in that bathroom for so many hours my dad had to go get someone to physically help me get out of that room. And I wanted to make an image about my experience with medication as a young person but have it be super glam and about the possibilities of who I could be. So many of the images we've seen of the AIDS epidemic are hard, difficult images. I just wanted to show something that reflected my experience—there has been so much beauty there, and I wanted to feel beautiful.

“Mourning Sickness,” 2014Courtesy of Fotografiska New York/Kia LaBeija

In the other image, Eleven, I’m wearing my actual prom dress, and the other figure is the doctor I saw for basically 25 years of my life. At one point, prom was like a milestone that I didn’t know I’d live to see, and there were a lot of children living with HIV who died, who never went to high school or prom. In telling my story, I want to speak up for all those kids who never got recognized and just faded away. There were so many children, and it hurts to think about that.

How did you get into photography?

So my brother was kind of a popular actor in the ’90s, and he wanted to direct movies, and he started filming me, since I, like, literally came out of the womb. He’s 13 years older than me and has a very beautiful aesthetic, and I grew up watching him create images, and I was interested in that.

In high school, I got a little PowerShot camera, and after my mother died in 2004, I went back to the hospital, and I took photographs of the critical care unit, the room where my mother died and the room where she was on a ventilator. I didn’t understand why I was doing this at that age, but I just felt compelled to do it. After that I was really into taking pictures.

I went to the New School [in New York City], to their liberal arts college, Eugene Lang, and I went for writing. But I lived in the dorm with all the art students going to Parsons and wished I was doing that instead. And my brother got me a Canon Rebel T2i, and I started taking pictures of

everything. And I was able to take two photography classes at Parsons. Both were life-changing.

Finally, is there anything else you'd like us to know about the show?

The show is very much about what my mom taught me about preparing. And my series 24 is a lot of photographs of myself and my apartment. I grew up in two separate homes. I grew up with mom in one, and when I had to leave, it was so traumatic for me, and I didn't have any [documented] memory of it. Part of the reason I started 24 was not only about myself and HIV but also as a way to archive and document my apartment [with my dad] because I knew my father would have to move to a smaller apartment after I moved out. That's how the building I grew up in works—Manhattan Plaza [a federally subsidized apartment building that houses a large number of artists in Hell's Kitchen, a gay neighborhood in Manhattan].

"In My Room," 2014Courtesy of Fotografiska New York/Kia LaBeija

I did end up moving out officially in 2020, and by the time I moved out, I felt I was ready because I had spent all that time prepping. There's also a series of images [shot from] that balcony as a way to archive and honor the amazing view of New York that I grew up with on the 24th floor.

Is that where you shot that amazing image of the double rainbow over Hell's Kitchen?

Yes! That was on Pride 2020. In the midst of COVID and Pride and what to do for the parade [which was canceled due to the pandemic], but there was a Queer Liberation March, and that was amazing, and when it rained, everyone was dancing in the rain, and there was a rainbow—a double rainbow!

Kia LaBeij: prepare my heart, runs February 24 through May 8 at Fotografiska New York, 281 Park Avenue South (yes, the same building the figures prominently in Netflix's based on true-crime series Inventing Anna). For more information, visit fotografiska.com.

To read more about Kia in POZ, see "Unique Voices in HIV-Themed Memoirs, Art Books and More," "Kia LaBeija on Jessica Whitbred," "Race, Gender and Identity in 'Art AIDS America': A Conversation with Kia LaBeija and Sur Rodney (Sur)" or click Kia LaBeija.

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