Portrait of an Artist

A book excerpt about living in the past to survive AIDS.

May 18, 2020 By Peter McGough

The worst part of being sick, truly sick, was the night. I'd shoot awake from a searing pain that started in my toe and ran right up the inside of my leg. Within seconds my whole limb was on fire. After about twenty minutes, the pain would subside, but now I was wide awake. I'd lived in Manhattan for most of my adult life, but until I was up nightly, I had never realized how quiet Times Square could be at three in the morning: a stillness that left me defenseless against the crushing thoughts of the past and its glory, and of my present dire circumstances.

It was 1998, I was on the good side of 40, and I was almost dead. Paul Bellman, my doctor, the man who was known for pulling patients off the edge of doom, later told me that when he saw me for the first time, he thought, "This person has three months to live." I didn't know it, but his treatment plan wasn't to cure me, which looked impossible even to a man considered one of the best AIDS doctors in the world; his plan was simply to make me comfortable in my final weeks.

A few friends and ex-assistants came to visit. I could tell by their startled faces I must have looked a wreck. I was a skeletal one hundred pounds, covered from head to toe in purple, AIDS-related Kaposi sarcoma sores, with my once thick mane of blond hair now wispy and thin.

I greeted my guests in a frayed nightshirt as I sank into a foot-high feather mattress in my antique brass bed, made for McDermott and me by Iskobel Iskowitz, where I spent my days and sleepless nights. The bed was one of the few remnants from my days of grandeur.

Even if I wanted to leave my apartment—which I rarely did—I could barely manage the stairs. Without savings or livelihood, I was living in the only place I could afford: a glorified attic, five crooked flights of stairs above 46th Street in Midtown Manhattan—"Little Brazil"—in a slanting 19th-century town house. And, for the first time in my adult life, I was living alone.

Only a few blocks away from the stone lions of the stately New York Public Library, the street floor of this once grand house was now a Japanese restaurant for the lunchtime business crowd. From my sickbed at night I could hear the rats fighting over the scraps of mid-priced sushi in the back garden. The second floor had a Brazilian hair salon that specialized in bikini waxing. The sexy Latino proprietor would stand in the window with his uniform of skintight black jeans and a form-fitting dark T-shirt, overseeing the needs of his clients and his coterie of beautiful assistants. The third floor was an "Asian Beauties" massage parlor. I painted a sign and taped it to my door that

read, WHORES ON 3RD FLOOR! DON'T BOTHER TO KNOCK!, to stop the familiar, soft tapping from their late-night clientele.

After a raid closed the massage parlor I broke the police lock and chain on the door to see what was there. The Victorian ornament around the ceiling, now crumbling, was painted black like the walls and the indoor/outdoor–upholstered cube where clients waited for attention. I peeked into the sad little single rooms where men would get massaged. As though frozen in time after the raid, there were still large plastic bottles of economy-sized body lotion and rumpled sheets. At the end of the hallway was a washer/dryer that had stopped in midwash amongst a pile of dirty sex towels. A bok choy dish was still on a dirty hot plate, and melted votive candles were strewn about the soggy-carpeted floor.

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Above this pleasure palace, on the fourth floor lived a thin, pale artist, Chivas Clem, who had told my friend Jane Rosenblum about the apartment. I could always tell when it was 11 a.m. because his alarm clock would ring for an hour while he was in deep, medicated slumber. Chivas was the director of the Pat Hearn art gallery, aka PHAG, in Chelsea. It was one of the first three galleries to move from SoHo to Chelsea, along with Matthew Marks and Morris-Healy. I showed with Pat in the '80s when she was in the East Village. After Pat's death in 2000 her husband, Colin de Land, took over the gallery space.

Chivas's apartment also doubled as a gallery he called "the Fifth International," where he put on exhibitions. One evening Chivas heard me in the hallway and invited me in for a drink. I noticed the remains of drugs on an overturned Artforum magazine with an ad for my former Swiss art dealer, Bruno Bischofberger. Chivas was just finishing dinner with two young artists on the rise, Rob Pruitt and Elizabeth Peyton. I stayed a bit to be polite and begged forgiveness for leaving so soon. I couldn't bear how embarrassed I felt about how far I had fallen and that my looks foretold how ill I was.

In my 5th-floor apartment above Chivas I had a kitchen and three large rooms which I painted in blue, green and white to hide the cracks and cheap plaster repairs. I didn't have any furniture but my bed, so I borrowed two rooms of antique furniture from my friend Ricky Clifton who was decorating artists' apartments. I promised to buy them but kept putting him off because I could barely make the rent. I set up a white-walled painting studio in the front parlor with the easel and art supplies my friend Walter Fleming bought me and where—when I had the strength to get out of bed and my bedroom—I started to paint again. The rest of the time I painted from my bed, finishing watercolors for a show in Paris.

My bedroom was in the back, where I could see a jeweler (the Diamond District was the next block) working diligently through the night, his room illuminated by the blue flames of his trade. My friend Mary Bertold from the Fashion Institute of Technology was so horrified after seeing where I lived and how I looked that she bought me a small refrigerator, which she had her friend Liz drag up the five flights so I could keep food there. Mary would burst into tears with each visit or

phone call. A lot of people cried when they visited. I felt terrible that I upset them.

“How the hell did I end up here?” I’d sigh at night as the fumes of burning flesh filled the apartment from the fast-food burger place below. I had watched so many friends die miserable deaths from AIDS and now my number was up. I felt damned and cursed. As I passed people on the streets I wanted to change lives with any of them. I’d take their lot. Anything was better than this death sentence.

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Only a little more than a decade before, in 1986, a painting I made with my partner, David McDermott, was on the cover of Artforum, at the time the international bible of the art world; and in 1993, a picture of us and our assistants in our studio was the cover of Art in America. We had sold-out shows in the best galleries in New York and Europe and endless invitations to museum openings, art parties, society events, and movie premieres. Our life was seemingly a never-ending one of fame and luxury.

After the financial crash in 1987 we lost our 1840s town house on Avenue C in the East Village, lit by candlelight and heated by fires in the hearths. We had filled the two floors above an old storefront with mid-19th-century antique furnishings right down to the drinking glasses. Our mattresses were foot-high striped ticking, fluffed into mountains full of feathers. We covered the cracked walls in period papers and hung vintage prints, paintings and mirrors for our 19th-century “time experiment.”

Every object had to fit perfectly—no modern element was allowed there, not even a telephone. As a part of our time machine, we wore detachable starched collars and cuffs, high-button-shoes, silk top hats and capes, and carried walking sticks—among our vast period wardrobe.

We also lost our studio in 1994, which had been the Kings County Savings Bank, an intact 1865 three-story Second Empire limestone building on the corner of Broadway and Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. We had acquired it in 1989, decades before the arrival of frat boys and Wall Street financiers. The bank’s first floor housed our offices that we furnished with period manual typewriters, candlestick telephones, and oak office furniture, all under a grand ceiling lit by six hanging cast-iron early electroliers.

At noon each day a chef would arrive with a vegetarian lunch to feed the staff. Our British secretary, Jane, also wore period antique clothes. We forbade our studio assistants to wear printed T-shirts and had them wear smocks while they worked, to cover their modern dress. The second floor was our sun-filled painting studio, with many assistants stretching and preparing the canvases. And above that was our photography studio, with a 23-foot-high ceiling and pumpkin-colored walls piled high with our antique props, period costumes, and large wooden view cameras. There we published the one issue of our magazine—The Cottage, Protector of Hearth and Home—and had it printed in New York with a hand-set letterpress.

But perhaps what I missed the most was our “miniature mansion,” as we called it: an untouched

brick house from 1790 with no heating, plumbing or electricity. The only heat source was the fireplaces, where we cooked our meals, and the water was from a hand-pump well outside the kitchen door. The house was next to an 1880s general store with an apartment above it and a Greek Revival two-seater outhouse with wallpapered walls. It was set among tree-shaded barns and a carriage house alongside a flowing stream in Oak Hill, in the Catskills.

We also gave up our 1913 crank Model T Ford touring car, our 1926 Model A truck, and a plush navy-colored 1930 Graham-Paige luxury car with silk window shades, a bud vase, and a brass blanket bar for the backseat. Not to mention our horses, carriages, handmade saddles and riding boots. After the IRS seized our property, they had a three-day auction in Albany of all the antique furnishings of the house, the general store, the apartment above it and the contents of the barns.

I begged the local antiques dealers, whom I knew well, and those who came from far and wide, not to bid against us, so I could buy back the contents of my life. My pleas fell on deaf ears. The highest bidders left with our furnishings, 18th-century clothes, carriages, and an 1880s wooden, horse-drawn omnibus with a Hudson River scene painted on the side, which held 18 passengers. All that remained were our feather mattresses and a few old American flags since they couldn't sell them legally. I had to remind them of that fact.

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McDermott departed for Ireland in the summer of 1994, on the QE2 with a one-way ticket his grandmother bought him, saying he wanted to live in a country that protected its artists. At that point Irish artists didn't have to pay taxes.

I thought he'd return after a year, but he didn't—and that was how years later I found myself living alone in a fifth-floor walkup off Times Square, trying to stay alive and revive our floundering career.

"If only I had kept McDermott under control," I uttered to no one.

Excerpted with permission from the book I'VE SEEN THE FUTURE AND I'M NOT GOING: The Art Scene and Downtown New York in the 1980s by Peter McGough, published by Pantheon Books, an imprint of The Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.
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