’Kia brings the punch people have been waiting for.’

May 12, 2014 By Visual AIDS

The 9th annual Visual AIDS Vanguard Awards recognize the contributions of individuals who, through their work, talent and dedication, strengthen our communities and reinforce the mission of Visual AIDS. This year Visual AIDS is proud to honor Kia Michelle Benbow (Kia Labeija), a multi-disciplinary artist working in photography, performance and installation. A native New Yorker, she is an alumni of the Juilliard School and the Ailey School, where she trained in music and dance. Benbow is a member of the iconic House of LaBeija, a platform she uses to continue her love of the intersections of performance, nightlife and community. As an activist her work focuses on raising awareness of issues surrounding HIV/AIDS--specifically in relation to youth--by educating and creating space for new conversations through art. Currently, she is finishing her degree at The New School, NYC. Benbow is this year’s recipient of the Bill Olander VAVA presented to an individual in the creative arts living with HIV, and named in honor of the late New Museum curator and co-founder of Visual AIDS. Below, activist and QUEEROCRACY co-founder Cassidy Gardner shares how she met Kia,and how she is inspired by her to innovate, activate and motivate.

Visual AIDS: How did you meet Kia?
Cassidy Gardner: I met Kia while we were both studying at the New School. She was living with two of my best friends at the time and hung out with a lot of the same kids. I would visit them in their cramped dorm and I will always remember how you could barely see the floors since they were covered with sequins, feather boas, leather, 9 inch heels. It all pretty much led to Kia’s bed.

Visual AIDS: What is one thing people should know about Kia?
CG: If I were to only name one thing about Kia I would honestly not be painting the right picture. She is a million colors, 2 million costume changes and 3 billion brilliant ideas reverberating constantly. Kia is everything darling.

Visual AIDS: As part of a new generation of AIDS activists yourself, what do you learn from Kia? How does she inspire you?
CG: I have learned from Kia that the energy you put into AIDS activism, art or awareness is what counts. She has taught me that in order to reach more people, you yourself have to constantly be creating even if it’s coming from a place that just feeds you. No one idea or concept will work. There’s so much room for innovation in AIDS activism. Kia brings the punch people have been waiting for. I know I’ve been waiting for it.

To learn more about VAVA, including who else is being honored, how to purchase a ticket or make a donation, visit the Visual AIDS Vanguard Award webpage. Cassidy Gardner is a Co-Director at QUEEROCRACY. In 2010 she wrote up the call for QUEEROCRACY in an attempt to bring more queer voices to the domestic AIDS movement. Since then, QUEEROCRACY has grown to cover a variety of issues that fall within the queer social and economic justice movement. Cassidy continues to be a major driving force behind QUEEROCRACY's direct action planning and community outreach.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/-the-9th-annual-visu