2015 Vanguard Awards: Luna Luis Ortiz Archives History as It’s Happening

April 27, 2015 By Visual AIDS

Luna Luis Ortiz, “Self-portrait -- mummified” (2003)

The 10th annual Visual AIDS Vanguard Awards (VAVA Voom) 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 Luna Luis Ortiz, Julie Ault, and Jim Hodges. Below, Visual AIDS friend Zachary Frater introduces and interviews the inimitable Luna Luis Ortiz.

The first time I saw Luna Khan was at Escuelita’s last winter. It was before the first category had opened that I saw him posted up at the edge of the stage--legs crossed, sipping a drink, chatting up his neighbor. I assumed Luna would be judging, but then again there were so many people up there it was hard to make out who was a spectator and who would be giving tens (or chops). I had

seen clips of Father Khan on Youtube (probably during one of those late-night ballroom video black holes I sometimes find myself in), so I was able to discern his legendary face from the rows of people laughing, ignoring, and stepping over each other on the crowded stage. To the casual observer though, he was just one amid a teeming sea of people, some of whom seemed edging to get the function started, others already looking over it.

The room had a pulse, something more subtle than the thumping bass resounding in my chest. I had been to Vogue Knights a handful of times before, and to the Latex Ball, but hadn't really had the nerve to speak to many people. I wasn't in a House, and neither were any of the friends I had come with. We were black and brown gay boys who wanted to join in on the joy and affirmation that balls were supposed to grant participants, but we were also outsiders with no real ties to the community beyond our bedroom imitations of Meeka Prodigy's tribute videos.

Regardless of affiliation, the interior life of the ballroom scene has provided entertainment, empowerment, and elation for many young men and women of color coming into their own in New York City. I know on a personal level, voguing has allowed me to reconcile with aspects I have previously hidden from myself and others, especially the feminine self as it manifests in Vogue Fem. And yet, for as many people who idolize the softest and most ovah Icons and Legends from afar, there are probably many more of us who don't intimately understand what is at stake within the community. For example, do we ever get into the life of the Legend outside of their ballroom status? How many of us really understand the labor that has gone into making the ballroom such a rich support system for so many people for so many years? I had heard of Luna Khan, but I came to interview Luna Ortiz and get a glimpse at where his passion and his life's work intertwine.

I want you to tell me in your own words, who is Luna?
Who is Luna…? [laughs] All right. Luna is an artist. I was always creative, but it wasn't until after infection that I became the artist, and that was when I was 14. My father gave me a camera when I was 13--didn't use it--then, when they told me I was gonna die of HIV in two years in '86, I was like, "Well let me do self-portraits," because I wanted the family to remember me as this nice, healthy kid. Because at that time…. You remember the images. Well, you don't remember, but you've seen it. The images of AIDS was, like, scary. I thought I was gonna be one of them. So I was doing myself in high glamor poses, and I have this connection with nature and trees, so I was photographing myself with trees and things like that. They came out cute, and they were black and white, and then … I just kind of started shooting all my friends that were dying and they wanted to be remembered. So that's where it all started really.

Media images are really powerful. Do you feel like the images of sick/LGBT people are different today?
One of the things that's great about working at GMHC is that we have amazing young people, and we don't do anything without asking the community that the images [are] for. So "I Love My Boo" came from young people saying, "Every time we see images of gay men, it's always sexualized…. That doesn't look like us." The "Kiss and Tell" campaign came out of young people. It came from "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," so it was kind of that play on words. The images that we are now creating are different compared to how things were in the past. We try here to portray a different

perspective. So that was a big deal because young people said, “We want something that is about trust and love,” and that’s exactly what we did. We did what they wanted, and some of the people that were in the images are the people who were saying that.

I’m interested in House of Frame and how that came about and how it fits into your work with youth.
House of Frame by Frame Fierce. I miss those days. Actually, that was really more my friend Shawn Atkins--she was the one that was really gung ho about doing this project. I was sort of the middle guy because I had HIV and the work was supposed to be about using [animation] as a form of activism. We went with the house thing because she knew I was a part of it. She loved the ball scene and she felt she wanted to play with that. I think collectively we came up with the House of Frame by Frame Fierce. I think I giggled when she first told me, but then it kinda had a rhyme to it. I think it was around ’94, ’95.

What we would do is, we used to go to Safespace and [...] other youth agencies and work with whoever was interested and do photo cut-out animation, which is really fun and could be really something interesting. Almost like Romare Bearden, that concept where everything is cut out and it’s layers of cities and people. That was the format we were playing with. It was easy to do Polaroids and have them just cut themselves out and create bodies using magazines, so it sort of became this cute little project. [Shawn] would bring a camera and we would literally animate the pieces right there with them.

The young people ... at first--you know, kids are kids--they were like, “What? What the fuck?” When they would see the outcome, even when they moved from here to here, they were like, “Oh my god, let me see it again.” It was kinda cute when you see that “oh my god” look. We were trying to use that to convey messages. It was individual so it was whatever the young person wanted. “What’s your story?” we would always ask. So they would write a little storyboard.... Then I think we just outgrew it. We did it for a couple of years, then it just died. People were interested in other things. But the intent was to animate the world [laughs] and have messaging with it.

When did you start doing The Luna Show?
The Luna Show started because I got tired of people referencing Paris Is Burning (1990). I felt like, yeah, it’s a great film, but now it’s dated to me. So I thought, why don’t we do something that’s a hub of interviews by people who are part of this community now? Also because in Paris Is Burning, it almost treated us like we had no lives. It was all about the ball. It was all fantasy. There were no professionals; nobody was going to school or to work [laughs]. People were in bed, in their apartment, in the dark putting on makeup, and then--ball! It didn’t give roundness to who we are as people. We have lawyers and doctors [...] that are a part of the ballroom scene, why not show some of that? But I guess that wouldn’t be interesting. So that’s why I wanted to do The Luna Show. And I didn’t know it was gonna be what it became. I thought I was just gonna interview people and talk about life and HIV and things like that. It was supposed to be kinda political in a way. That’s kind of where it started. The intent was to be more educational.

But we’re a whole bunch of other things. We’re not just ball-walkers; we’re part of the community.

We have jobs. We go to school. We struggle. We make it. We're artists. So that's what I wanted instead of "the dream ." In Paris Is Burning, Octavia [St. Laurent]'s dreaming about becoming a model, and then the other part is people are dreaming of becoming legendary, a word that you can do nothing with outside of ballroom. Also, interestingly enough, it was around the time that HIV was wiping out the ballroom scene, and they didn't even talk about AIDS in the film. I think one person mentioned it: Venus Xtravaganza said, "I don't wanna get 'the AIDS,'" is how she said it. The other part was, except for Kim Pendavis ... all of those costumes, all of that stuff that we create--that all comes from somewhere, right? There was no highlight that we are these wonderful fashion designers and make-up artists. They didn't show any of that. I always had a problem with that. I love the film though because to me, it's like a photo album that moves. It's everybody I met when I came out.

That's how I feel about it. I feel like we forget ballroom is part of people's lives but it's not the only thing. And like you're saying, people use their talents in many different ways and sometimes the vehicle for that can be the ballroom, but it's not the ultimate goal.
We've influenced so much of pop culture over the years and nobody gives us the credit. Every few times over the years, at least in the last twenty-five, designers send their people there trying to see what the hell we're doing. We always have outsiders studying us. At Vogue Knights, I remember Jack Mizrahi getting upset because we get a lot of requests by journalists and people that are filming. There's photographers hidden in the corners taking pictures. We're like, "Wait, wait--what are you doing with our images?" Sometimes you gotta control shit like that because what happens is, before you know, they're writing an interview (again) about poor Latin and Black kids of New York City. Usually when they write articles about ballroom, they always seem to throw in "poor" [laughs]. I mean, there's a nicer way to say that, I'm sure. But I think this is what drives people to continue reading it because, "Wow, these people! They're so poor, but look, they're having fun!" [laughs] It's very layered.

Going back to activism, there have been initiatives within the ballroom scene like House of Latex that benefited the community. Were you involved with starting Latex?
At the very beginning? Indirectly, not realizing it though. Avis Pendavis--that was my first house--we used to be in her house all the damn time and she would be getting dressed and we wouldn't know why. She'd be like, "You guys gotta hurry up and leave because I gotta get ready," and she needed to get to "a meeting." She wasn't saying which meeting. Basically, it was meetings of house/ball people that later would [create] the Latex Ball. Or the Latex Project, because it was not just a ball, it was a heavy-duty relationship with GMHC, from workshops, to HIV 101--the basics. Houses would come and sit down, have some free pizza and a soda, and learn everything you needed to learn. This is in the early '90s.

Was it mostly people from the ballroom scene who were organizing the project?
No, they were GMHC workers that eventually would walk balls and stuff. The Latex Ball/Project actually began with people from the community saying, "We need you guys," because GMHC at the time was the lead in HIV work, period. They came to GMHC and they said, "What are you guys gonna be doing for us? Our friends are dying, something's gotta give." So they said that, and then the conversations began and GMHC sat down and they found funding for it. That's where it was

born. It was the community that asked for it first. And then, the people who were working at GMHC were going to balls and putting out tables with condoms and information, and people weren't going to them because it's a stigma attached. If you went to the table, you obviously had something. So people were avoiding the table: "Oh, we don't see the table!/We don't want the table!" So it was ballroom people who said, "Why don't you guys be a part of us?" And so that's where the House of Latex came from, because they thought maybe the people that are the workers/peers would then participate, so now people would see them as friends/part of the community. But Avis Pendavis--the first time I heard about Latex anything was through her.

The messed up part about all of this is: All that happened; we were all affected and went through it; and we found ways to survive. And then, for some reason, those numbers continue to go up. Here we were trying to do the work and trying to help the community, and the numbers are still going up. The numbers are still going up now, and we're in 2015! I'm talking about 1990. What did people not hear? And of course, it goes way deeper than just "use a condom" and the basic info that we provide but... Everybody now is talking about PrEP and all of this stuff, but at the end of the day it's other stuff out there, too. You have people taking PrEP, but...

If you can get it.
Right, because half of the people we service don't have insurance themselves. Sometimes it's frustrating. There was a time that I used to think, "Am I glamorizing HIV right now?" Because I'm healthy, I'm constantly doing something, young people gravitate to me, they become my children/my friends, and they see I'm good. So there was a time that I used to be hard on myself thinking, "Am I making this look too good?" Because they're reading articles about me, they see my ad on the train. And this is a community where it's about being seen and about what you can do, how you can get to the top. So indirectly I was wondering, instead of helping, was I kind of ruining it in a way? Not letting them hear the message? It's something I used to think, but now I just say, you know what, people are people, and you do the best you can, and you give them the information that they need, and if they're not getting it then what can you do, right? They're all grownups. Even though I call them all kids [laughs]. Anybody under me is a kid.

I'm really glad that you're doing the work that you're doing, especially with media, because I feel like it really reaches people. [The Luna Show] is our archive of history as it's happening, and that hasn't been told from other sources and that's been really empowering for me, just to know that a resource like that exists. Do you know when Ballroom Throwbacks started? Because it's also really extensive.
I have no idea, but I think it's great that [Ceasar Prodigy] thinks outside the box. The things he covers I think are interesting. It's funny because there were things he's doing that I thought and just didn't do it just yet because I wasn't there yet or whatever. Same thing with the iPod. I invented the iPod in, probably about 1991, because I said, "Wouldn't it be kinda cool if we had a jukebox that was your walkman that actually had all your music in it?" And then the iPod came out and I was like, "Fuck!" [laughs] So yeah, it sucks. I could have been a fucking millionaire. I would've found a cure.

Zachary P. Frater is a writer, curator, and producer from New York City. He is the 2014-2015 curatorial fellow of the Queer Art Mentorship where he is developing a public access TV show centering the stories of LGBTQ youth of color.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/2015-vanguard-awards