’AIDS meds may not cure the disease yet, but time does heal emotional wounds.’

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Still from Glen Fogel’s “7 Years Later”

To honor the 25th year of Day With(out) Art on December 1 2014, Visual AIDS commissioned seven artists/collectives--Rhys Ernst, Glen Fogel, Lyle Ashton Harris, Hi Tiger, Tom Kalin, My Barbarian, and Julie Tolentino/Abigail Severance--to create provocative new short videos that reflect and respond to the ongoing AIDS pandemic for a program titled Alternate Endings.

Here, Joe Westmoreland considers Glen Fogel’s contribution, “7 Years Later.”

A Certain Kind of Boundary

Joe Westmoreland on Glen Fogel’s “7 Years Later”

Spinning images appear often in Glen Fogel’s work. In his video installation “With Me...You,” Glen projects shots of bright, shiny diamond rings revolving slowly like a Home Shopping Network commercial. When you study the rings, you see there are stones missing and the metal is chipped and worn. They aren’t as shiny close up as they are far away, but the rings mean more when you realize they belong to his mother, sister, and grandmother. In his installation of “Something (black),” a large black whirling sculpture spins around like a seven-foot-tall spiral. Its edges are sharp and can hurt if you get too close. One of my favorite installations of Glen’s didn’t spin, but you had to move around it closely in tight quarters to experience it. He put a white ’91 Cadillac Seville inside a small art gallery on the Lower East Side. There was barely enough space to move between the car and the wall. The car would randomly moan and curse “Shit” in a deep slow groan. “Sh-h-h-i-i-i-t-t-t”

In Glen’s video, “7 Years Later,” the camera does the turning. It pans around the room in a full 360-degree circle. The imagery is subtle and understated. It’s the dialogue that had my head spinning. Glen asked Nathan, his former boyfriend, to talk on video about what he thinks went wrong with their relationship. It’s a brave thing to do; they are exposing themselves and making themselves vulnerable.

What's big and shiny and hard not to look at in this video is Nathan's discussion about "boundaries" and then the quiet revelation that he seroconverted (became HIV positive) when he and Glen were having an open relationship. Nathan "slips in the fact" that Glen may have been more freaked out about his HIV seroconvertion than he was. It's Nathan's casual attitude towards seroconverting that upsets me. I've been HIV-positive since the '80s and have had AIDS since 1995. I've seen the horrors of the early days of AIDS and have been lucky to live to see treatment of the virus become more manageable. What was really disturbing about the video, to me, was that I found myself being jealous of Nathan's attitude, like being HIV-positive isn't such a big deal. I wish I could say the same for myself.

In the video, Glen and Nathan are together in Nathan's sunny kitchen while the camera is panning slowly around the room. There are shots of them walking through the kitchen, at the sink, getting a knife out of a drawer, and then back to them sitting at the table. They're comfortable with each other and even hug near the end of the video. Nathan talks a lot about the boundaries they agreed on when they decided to have an open relationship. He tells Glen how he feels the boundaries were pushed and crossed and that was upsetting to him. Glen responds with words like "uh-huh" and "yeah" and lets Nathan do the talking. The camera pans around to the right, scans the kitchen counter and down the hallway. Then it comes back to Glen and Nathan sitting at the kitchen table. As they are talking about what went wrong with their relationship, the camera seems to tune in to what they are saying. While Nathan explains his view of the boundary issues, the camera stops suddenly, does a double take, and turns back to the left to look at Glen and Nathan at the table.

Toward the end of going around and around about their blurred boundaries, Nathan notes that when he seroconverted, Glen found that more upsetting than other boundaries that were crossed over the course of the relationship. For some people, it's hard to talk about the thing that you feel the strongest about. Like the Cadillac Seville, it's the elephant in the middle of the room. What's interesting to me is that Nathan talks more about the boundaries and parameters in their relationship than his seroconverting. When he mentions becoming positive, it's one of the few times that Glen says something besides, "yes" or "uh-huh" while Nathan talks.

Nathan: So I was thinking about that in relation to when I became positive. There's other aspects too, but part of it was, there's a certain kind of boundary that got crossed and I imagine, for you, this felt like some kind of a qualitatively radically different type of boundary to be crossed. Right? That this was something sort of above and beyond a normal thing of like do this or don't do

that.

Glen: That’s exactly what it felt like.

Nathan: And I think for me that it didn’t so much. Partly because I mean there are other factors that we can talk about, but it seemed to me to be part of a dynamic we had between us for a very long time, of, you know, crossing these kind of boundaries.

It’s the casualness of being positive that is foreign to me. I know becoming HIV-positive isn’t as scary as it used to be. There are steps you can take and things to do to deal with it. It used to be when someone found out they were HIV-positive, the fear and often reality was that they’d get sick and die in about six months to a year. As new treatments came along we lived longer, two to five years. Thanks to the revolution in antivirals, I’ve been going now for almost 20 years on the “cocktail.” I’m one of the lucky ones who survived the horrible summer of ’95. When I was in the hospital, on the AIDS ward, in July and August of 1995, half the people on the ward died. If you made it through the summer, that autumn the first available antivirals came on the market. The drugs slowed down the death rate incredibly. My Kaposi’s sarcoma (KS) lesions disappeared soon after starting my first antiviral treatment. Then the side effects of medications started making people sick. Now scientists and doctors have figured out how to reduce many of the side effects.

I’ve taken HIV meds for over 20 years and have had almost every side effect you can get: extreme fatigue, nausea, general weakness, weight loss, memory loss, diarrhea and constipation, to name a few. I know these new drugs are refined. I am still ambivalent about what their effects will be in the long run. Get back to me in 20 years and then let me know if they haven’t taken a toll on bodies. It’s not something to be taken lightly.

I associate HIV with pain, physical and emotional. I have post-traumatic stress. When I hear someone has become HIV-positive, it makes me a little crazy. I flash back to that time when people were afraid to touch you or kiss you on the cheek. And then the KS lesions started showing up. People were covered with dark purple spots. Others would complain about feeling extremely tired and then wind up in the

hospital on a respirator with Pneumocystis pneumonia. Peripheral neuropathy, nerve damage in the feet and hands, was so painful you couldn't walk across the room. Weight loss, spots, losing your youth--they were so scary. Sometimes, blood would suddenly spurt out of any and all orifices--your mouth, your butt--for what seemed like no reason. That's what I think of when someone tells me they've seroconverted. I can't help myself.

What bothers me in "7 Years Later" is how calmly Nathan talks about seroconverting. It's not just Nathan. These days I hear other people talking about how much easier it is to be positive today. Some people say, "AIDS is chronic now, like being diabetic." But even diabetes still kills. People get very sick. They lose their feet and limbs. It has to be closely monitored to keep it under control. It's no walk in the park. Being "chronic" is so much better than dying, but it's hard work. It is a big deal. HIV can still make you very ill and even kill you depending on how well you monitor it and stay on top of your medication regiment. That means taking drugs regularly, every day, for the rest of your life. I wish I could relax about being HIV positive or having AIDS and think it wasn't such a big deal, but I can't.

At the end of the video, Glen and Nathan are hugging. AIDS meds may not cure the disease yet, but time does heal emotional wounds. The two of them are sitting at the table with the sun shining in the windows. They seem to have made peace with each other. The camera slowly turns around the room. They talk about the weather.

Joe Westmoreland has been published in anthologies including Discontents (New Queer Writers), The New Fuck You (Adventures in Lesbian Reading), and Best American Gay Fiction 1996. His column "Still Kickin'" appeared in POZ Magazine from 2003-06.His stories appeared in queerzines including My Comrade, Straight To Hell, Holy Titclamps, and his own joezine. He wrote essays for the exhibition Not only this, but "New language beckons us," Fales Library (May 2013), alLuPiNiT Magazine (2014), sober.com (Feb. 2015), and the anthology Anarchic sexual desires of plain unmarried schoolteachers (2015) . His novel, Tramps Like Us, was first published June 2001.He lives in New York City.

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