# Confronting HIV Stigma Is a Huge Component of the ’Blood Mirror’ Project

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Justin Eagles, “Blood Mirror” (2015). Human blood preserved in plexiglass, UV resin, 82x28x28 inches. Installation view, Trinity Church, New York City.Ian Smith

Jordan Eagles’s “Blood Mirror” sculpture is a ravishing minimalist cube infused with political content. The mirrored object is created in part from the blood of nine gay men as a comment on the FDA ban on blood donation from non-celibate gay men. Visual AIDS intern Maia Paroginog and programs manager Alex Fialho met with Jordan to discuss the sculpture in Manhattan’s Trinity Church, where “Blood Mirror” is on view through December 1. Below is a transcribed portion of the interview.

The NYC opening event at Trinity Church included an insightful panel with Rev. Winnie Varghese;

Rev. John Moody; Kelsey Louie, CEO of GMHC; Eric Sawyer, UNAIDS civil society partnership advisor; and Ryan L. Campbell, visual arts committee chairperson and curator. Footage from the event can be viewed here. A panel from the affiliated exhibition, Blood Mirror, at American University Museum at the Kaizen Arts Center in Washington, DC, can be viewed here.

Maia Paroginog: Can you give me a background of your artistic practice and what sort of mediums and materials have built up to this work?
I've been working with blood for over 15 years. All the blood in my bodies of work have been sourced from slaughterhouses until now. "Blood Mirror" is the first project that involves human blood. Some themes for the previous bodies of work have been spirituality, mortality, preservation, decomposition; body and spirit relationships with a major focus on process and material.

Paroginog: What was the process behind "Blood Mirror" and how did you find donors?
The process was multi-tiered. The first step was investigating the issue more and learning about how I felt about it and how other people felt about it. I wondered if there would be any usefulness in discussing (these issues) through art. Art opens up conversation in a different way than politics. It doesn't necessarily have to be right but it serves as a platform to begin a conversation. I spent a year having conversations with people. If I did this, how would I do it? And would it serve a purpose? The next step was finding my creative collaborators on the project. And that involved Leo Herrera, the filmmaker, The Carry Nation, who was going to do the musical score for the video, and Jonny Cota of SKINGRAFT, who collaborated on "Blood Flag." I had a medical team do the blood drawings safely, and that was Howard Grossman, MD, and his phlebotomist Wayne Burns. And then it was finding particular donors. In the studio I had a chart of different individuals, who, if I could find them, represented certain nuances within the FDA policy that were flawed. For example, an identical twin whose brother is straight. They have the same DNA, but one could give and the other couldn't. We had identical twins, a gay priest / spiritual leader, someone from Africa, a gay father.

Paroginog: You had someone from the armed forces?
Right, we wanted someone in the project who could die for their country but couldn't share their blood to save lives.

Paroginog: Commenting on whose blood is worth more on the battlefield...
CPT Anthony Woods is a stand-up individual. He's a Harvard graduate, and delivered the commencement address. He served two tours of duty in Iraq and brought all his men back safely. He ran for Congress and was an Obama Fellow; an American hero. But that's not to say he's a more qualified as a blood donor than say someone who is unemployed and doesn't have an ivy league degree. Blood is not made up of these kind of credentials, but it was great to have such a unique and strong voice involved in the project to show how discriminatory and wrong the policy is.

Paroginog You're trying to say this issue impacts everyone.
Yeah, he can die in battle but he can't share his blood to save lives. Most people would probably agree that he's a stand-up citizen, but he's still disqualified from giving blood--and he is married.

The screening form for blood donation just isn't appropriate. We have a trans man in the project, Loren Rice, who is married to another trans man, Ethan Rice. We knew we wanted someone from the trans community involved in our work. I met with a lawyer at the Transgender Legal Defense & Education Fund, and he said it would be impactful to have a trans man because it raises different types of questions about the wording on the FDA's screening form. I think it took a total of 40 people to introduce me to the eventual nine blood donors.

Paroginog: It was a whole network.
It was awesome. The spirit of the art is about people, it's about sharing. It's about getting more people involved to build the energy of the piece and momentum on the issue.

Paroginog: And your process reflects that. The visual element that is most striking about your piece is that people can see themselves in the surface. What was going through your mind as you assembled "Blood Mirror"? What reactions were you trying to evoke through that design?
I wanted to make a work that didn't reflect the human hand too much. There's a lot I can do to manipulate blood and create certain patterns and textures. Or mixing it with metal or gauze, which I have done before. But I wanted this to be minimal, sculptural, and incomplete, in the sense that more blood could be added to it over time. It had to be constructed to accommodate that possibility. I wanted Blood Mirror to have a feeling of strength. But also to have a somber and introspective tone. There's a relationship to AIDS when you discuss the ban on gay blood. I wanted it to feel like a piece for remembering those who passed from the AIDS epidemic. Yet something that offered hope for equality. I wanted it to be as dark as possible, because when people hear blood the first thing that comes to mind is "red." My Life Force series consists of glowing painting-sculpture hybrid pieces that are very red. I didn't want Blood Mirror to be that. I wanted something where a viewer could interact with it and see themselves in it through the blood of the nine donors. The sculpture itself is part of a larger project. The men, the video and the documentary is all connected to "Blood Mirror."

Paroginog: Could you explain how the terms "life force", "sacred", and "unifying" apply to the piece?
In terms of the word "life force," all the men who donated to this piece could have donated their blood to save lives. This sculpture never should have needed to be created in the first place because the policy should already be fair. In the time the sculpture was created, each of the donors could have given blood yet again. When you start to quantify how many times a year a person can give blood, and then over the course of say a decade--how many individuals, how many lives can one person save? The Williams Institute from UCLA did a study that suggests if the ban was completely lifted, it would add 615,000 pints of blood to the blood supply every year, which translates to one million lives being saved annually. So this issue is multi-layered. We are dealing with inequality. Implementing the one year celibacy revision, adds something close to 300,000 new pints to the blood supply. But the reality of a one year celibacy clause changes the lifetime ban so it enables heterosexual men who might have had a gay experience post 1977. It doesn't actually help all gay men, because how many of us are going to be celibate for a year? It's not designed for gay men.

It’s insulting because it shows the government is so terrified of gays that it won’t trust sound science. It’s also scary because we have a government that doesn’t trust sound science. That has other implications.

You asked about the sacred nature of blood… blood is something that has been addressed through religion and spirituality. We talked earlier about Jesus being potentially being the greatest blood donor of all time. There’s a large portion of our society that believe in the Eucharist, every Sunday, has a wafer and the wine. They believe that they are taking in the blood of Christ. That belief is is fine. But people have an intense relationship with blood. When you ban people from something that sacred it has larger spiritual implications, which relates to ideas of inequality.

Alex Fialho: Who are all nine donors, and how do they fit into the larger narrative you are trying to tell?
All the donors have a very profound meaning to the project. They all connect. Dr. Larry Mass being an AIDS warrior and Co-founder of GMHC. He was on the front lines back when the epidemic was hitting. And then you fast forward to 2015, and there’s Kelsey Louie, the current CEO of GMHC. I think of the sculpture as a documentary sculpture; a time capsule. From 1983 to 2015 and moving forward--two men that were part of the same organization. That’s a nice balance.

Kelsey Louie and GMHC have been on the forefront of fighting this issue and Kelsey has been very vocal about it. There’s Blue Bayer who identifies as polysexual and is a father of two beautiful little girls. He wouldn’t be able to give blood to his own children. We talked about CPT Anthony Woods. Ty Spicha, who has a straight identical twin. Dr. Howard Grossman is the medical supervisor on the project as well as a blood donor. He was one of the first doctors to treat AIDS patients. He’s been fighting of our community and gay men’s health for over 35 years. There’s Oliver Anene who founded an LGBT organization in Nigeria who is now in the US on political asylum. It’s dangerous to be there because of the anti-gay laws. In seven countries, people are put to death for being gay. The blood represents a viable brotherhood. The Reverend John Moody, an 89-year old openly gay priest, is the reason the piece is at Trinity Church, as he has been part of the Trinity community for over 40 years. There’s Loren Rice who is a transgender man and married to Ethan Rice who is also transgender man. Their relationship proves that any screening form that comes from the FDA that asks for gender is already dealing with this issue incorrectly. You shouldn’t be checking a box based on gender, it should be about being an individual.

Fialho: Can you speak to the breadth of the project outside of the individual sculpture?
There are two videos, one of which was commissioned by MSNBC and filmed by Leo Herrera with a musical score by The Carry Nation. It was released on June 11, 2015 which is a few days before World Blood Donor’s Day. On May 14, the FDA, issued a 60 day public comment period on their proposed revisions on the one year celibacy. The video served as a public comment from these nine individuals and the creative team. The exhibition video is the raw footage of all the blood drives, interviews, and it’s really deep in that you’re hearing how these men feel about this issue and how it relates to their unique life perspective. And then you see them give blood. One of the things that I wanted to show is gay men giving blood. It looks like anyone else!

There is a Untitled second sculpture made of all the blood bags, blood collection tubes, medical gear that I had to wear while working with it. That's all preserved. If the FDA is going to treat us like garbage, might as well make a sculpture out it.

There's also the Blood Flag, made of the microscopic image of the red blood cells of all 9 donors and the microscope slide with the merged blood of all 9 men. These works address the patriotism and the nationalism behind blood donation in our country as well as the science behind it.

Fialho: With regards to the potential upcoming December ruling, where are at with the issue and how does this piece relate to that?
When I started the project there was very little public conversation about this issue. It was under the radar. Halfway through the process, we did our very first blood drive, which was a few days before the FDA announced for the first time that it might enact revisions on its current policy. As we stand now, the FDA has not ruled based on the public comment, which closed on July 14. Today is November 20. I anticipate the FDA announces sometime in December, before the new year, about the final ruling, but we will see. Over the past couple months, Argentina has changed its policy and screening process, which does not ban gay and bisexual men. France made a bold step; they are implementing a one year celibacy policy but they acknowledge that it's not perfect. If the science shows at the end of the year that there is no increase in HIV detection in the blood supply, then they'll get rid of the celibacy rule. It's baby steps, but I think their vision is for eventual equality.

Yesterday, Twitter announced that it was canceling all its company blood drives until the policy was fair. The issue has certainly built steam over the past year.

Fialho: Any general thoughts about how art can provoke dialogue around HIV/AIDS?
The ban on gay blood was enacted because of fear around HIV/AIDS, so they're going to be connected forever. This policy perpetuates the stigma that gay men are the only people that carry HIV. It puts the wrong information into society and that has global health implications. In addition to the lives that could be saved if the ban was lifted, it's educating the public about HIV/AIDS in the wrong way. It's the wrong information. Confronting HIV stigma is certainly a huge component of this project.

Jordan Eagles is a New York-based artist who preserves blood primarily sourced from a slaughterhouse. Through his invented process, he encases, layers and suspends the blood. This preservation technique permanently retains the organic material's natural colors, patterns, and textures. When lit, the works often become translucent, cast shadows, and project a glow. The materials and luminosity in these bodies of work relate to themes of corporeality, mortality, spirituality, equality and science.

Maia Paroginog is an intern at Visual AIDS who is entering their final undergraduate year at Stanford with focuses in visual art-making, arts writing, and comparative studies in race and ethnicity. Their work employs several mediums and representations, which range from abstract

sculpture to figurative painting. Their artwork and academic interests revolve around bodily dysphoria, queering interpersonal relationships, intersectional feminism, power/privilege, and the abject abstract. They use queer art to interrogate notions of “identity” and are interested in its uses in addressing collective trauma.

Alex Fialho, programs manager at Visual AIDS, has facilitated projects and conversations around both the history and immediacy of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, utilizing art to maintain HIV/AIDS visibility, consider its legacy and galvanize contemporary response. He has presented his research on the art of Glenn Ligon and Keith Haring at the College Art Association and New York University’s Fales Library. He also curates exhibitions for the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council as research and curatorial associate, and is a frequent contributor to Artforum.

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