Collecting and Cruising in the Work of Barton Lidicé Bene?

October 14, 2015 By Visual AIDS

Barton Lidicé Bene?, Lethal Weapons (1992-1997) (installation view)

Writer Kyle Croft considers Barton Lidicé Bene?'s gallery exhibition at Pavel Zoubok Gallery for the Visual AIDS website. The exhibition is on view through October 17.

The title of Barton Lidicé Bene?'s latest gallery exhibition at Pavel Zoubok Gallery, Museology, refers to his signature "museum" pieces: framed arrays of rectangular shelves containing objects Bene? accumulated over the course of his lifetime. These collections demonstrate Bene?'s keen eye for treasure and call into question the process by which some lives and objects become valuable while others are discarded or overlooked. At the heart of Bene?'s work is the ability to create value and meaning against the grain of prescribed power structures--an ability that was integral to the burgeoning gay culture of the '70s and '80s and at the heart of the political response to the AIDS epidemic.

His museums consist of dozens of artifacts, each mounted individually on a deckled square of paper and cataloged with a date, location and description. There is a propensity for celebrity among Bene?'s selections: a pottery fragment from Liberace's patio; a corn husk from Bill Clinton's dinner; threads from Laurie Anderson's towel. There is also a fascination with bodies, beginning with a classical naturalism (a whole frog, a mink penis bone) but developing into a more elemental obsession with the human body--fingernail clippings, hair, semen, blood, and even a severed toe. AIDS comes to the fore here, with pills, medical devices, vials of blood and other accouterments of epidemic incorporated into the displays. Though each artifact functions on its own and demands individual attention, each museum coheres as a diary of sorts, an index of Bene?'s life.

In the documentary Gay Sex in the '70s, Bene? talks at length about cruising, not only in designated spaces like the Chelsea piers but also in everyday life, in line at the grocery store or walking down the street. He was constantly looking, approaching the world with a sense of possibility; anyone could become a trick and any piece of trash could become part of his next piece. The ethos of cruising, so widespread in the '70s and '80s, permeates Bene?'s work. It is a spirit of purposelessness, and this is why the title Museology feels particularly cheeky. If Bene? is a curator of his own museums, he has none of the entrepreneurial zeal that seems to characterize high-profile curators who seek out works of legible (or soon to be legible) value. Instead, he demonstrates an openness to encountering the world and a capacity to create value and meaning out of what is otherwise brief and fragmented--a capacity at the

heart of the gay subculture that was emerging when Bene? began making work.

If Bene?'s work is an exercise in this capacity, then his apartment was its most complete articulation, literally packed full of hundreds of artifacts from his travels as well as the vast collection of materials he uses for his museums. One could imagine Bene? as a bird, always hunting for new bits and pieces for his nest, building a home out of the world around him. In this sense, cruising--for bits of treasure, for sex, for whatever may come--becomes productive. It can be a way to create a habitat, to make a city habitable, to make a life or come into an identity. Bene?'s work is about this active processing of the world, the bit-by-bit assembling of a life from ephemeral encounters and their material traces. His museums become an archive of this process, tiny habitats for memory.

What is remarkable about Bene?'s work is that it maintains an ethos of cruising through the most devastating years of the AIDS epidemic. "Reliquarium" (1999) is entirely devoted to the AIDS epidemic, combining objects collected and created during a period when Bene? and many of his friends tested positive and began reckoning with their mortality. Where his other museums operate on juxtaposition and an element of randomness, "Reliquarium" is focused and meditative. Bene?'s cruising eye is joined by an urgent need to create something solid and monumental in a milieu of loss and impermanence. Among used condoms and embalming materials is a cut out of the word "sperm," each letter saturated with the semen of a different HIV-positive friend of Bene?'s. One can imagine the ritual of its creation; the desire for posterity; the irony of memorializing themselves with the vestiges that carry and perhaps transmit the virus that was killing them. Always looking, despite the fear and moralizing that accompanied AIDS, Bene? doesn't flinch in his choice of materials. He even pushes further, parodying the AIDS ribbon by sculpting the cremated remains of a friend into the same shape. Nancy Reagan's chocolate soufflé'd napkin is just feet away in another work--this is what was disposable at the end of the 20th century.

Exhibited with "Reliquarium" are a selection of five of Bene?'s Lethal Weapons (1992-1997), a series of framed sculptural works that use Bene?'s HIV-positive blood to transform various objects into "weapons." Syringes turn a toy gun and a paper airplane into something more sinister. A bottle of holy water and a perfume atomizer are filled with blood. There is a wicked sense of humor here, as Bene? couches HIV into various metaphorical contexts: with a squirting flower, it becomes a prank; with a crown of thorns (made from medical tubing and needles), a sin. Ultimately, the series reads as a rearranging of signifiers, twisting blood and the virus into playthings, metaphors rather than opaque and fixed symbols of fear and morality. The trope of HIV as a weapon has often been employed in the service of the right wing, and Lethal Weapons remains unfortunately poignant in the context of current HIV criminalization policies which unironically posit HIV as a biological weapon and transmission as assault.

As major art institutions begin to acknowledge and consider the impact of the AIDS epidemic, Museology may lose some of its wit. But Barton Bene?'s work will persist as a model for a different type of curation and a reminder to always be looking.

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