’Each portrait was also a defiant battle cry against the encroaching darkness.’

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Mark I. Chester, “Fire in the Fast Lane” (1982)

Mark Chester is a photographer, writer, performer, curator, and drawing group host who has been living in San Francisco for over 30 years. His latest book, City of Wounded Boys & Sexual Warriors, documents his time in the gay and leather sexual underground over four tumultuous decades. His work is titillating and intimate, testifying to the vitality and eros of San Francisco over a period when it was both a beacon of hope for gay culture and a “desolate warzone” as a result of the AIDS crisis. Chester’s photography is featured in the exhibition Art AIDS America, opening at the Tacoma Museum of Art on October 3 and traveling to the Bronx Museum of the Arts in the summer of 2016. Below, he is interview by Kyle Croft for Visual AIDS.

Preview City of Wounded Boys & Sexual Warriors here and order it here.

Please consider joining Mark at one of the following events this month:

Friday, September 18, 6:30 to 10 p.m.: Show reception, artist’s slide show and talk, book release for City of Wounded Boys & Sexual Warriors. Center for Sex and Culture, 1349 Mission Street, San Francisco.

Friday, September 25, 7 to 10 p.m.: Show reception at Mark I. Chester’s studio, 1229 Folsom Street, San Francisco.

Sunday, September 27, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.: Mark I. Chester studio exhibition will be open to the public during the Folsom Street Fair.

How did you come to start taking photographs, and specifically to start taking sexually explicit photos?
I had occasionally taken vacation slides when I traveled, starting in my teens, but it wasn’t a serious avocation. As I started to come out in 1969, I realized that the image of gay people was very negative in the mainstream media, films and books. The only other images of (supposedly) gay people that I saw were in early 1960s homoerotic porn. I didn’t fit into either of these extremes and the men I was turned on to didn’t either. So I started to photograph gay men at street fairs and gay pride parades in Madison, Wisconsin, and Chicago, Illinois, I think mostly as a way of understanding and validating what it was that I was turned on to.

When I moved to San Francisco in 1977, I continued to document gay men at street fairs and pride parades. Finally, I began to see images of men that matched my own personal interests and turn-ons. Photographing my sex scenes was a natural extension of the photographs that I was taking of gay men. Again, I think it was mostly a way for me to validate the way I was having sex. I didn't look like the typical leather master and some of the scenes I was doing (including Japanese rope bondage) were not common in SF at that time. So photographs helped explain what I was interested in doing far better than I could in words. But it went beyond that. In gay porn, for example, it was obvious that men in leather were models wearing some fetish clothing rather than real leathermen. And it seemed like no one was ever turned on or had a hard on. One day I had tied up a friend who jerked off in bondage while I photographed him. It was an ecstatic emotional experience and I was hooked. With these images, I finally began to see images of radical sex that matched my own personal understanding of the world.

I've heard that your apartment was ravaged in a fire in 1981. Could you talk a little bit about this experience and how it impacted your work and your understanding of San Francisco at the time?
I lived on a dead-end alleyway, off another dead end alley off of Folsom Street and behind the building that had formerly housed a mythic gay bar called the Red Star Saloon and its notorious upstairs bathhouse, The Barracks. This building was being refurbished and a workman, angry because he thought someone had stolen some of his tools, lit the building on fire. The building went up very quickly because it was a big empty wood box with air. Because the streets were two dead-end alleyways, there was no way to fight the fire except from the front, so the fire raced down one alleyway and then the other, wiping out everything in site.

The fire chief had been told that there were gay dungeons in the fire area so he declared that they were likely to find "bodies dead chained to beds." The firefighters further inflamed the situation by claiming that they smelled "burning meat." No bodies were found and thankfully no one died, but the fire was literally stopped at the door to my bedroom/playroom/studio. Police and firefighters essentially rioted in my apartment, the last building standing in the entire fire area. Boxes with hundreds of photographs disappeared. Much of my sex gear, including a custom hood and a beautiful set of handmade long-lash whips, simply disappeared, apparently taken as trophies. Many other belongings in my apartment had been ransacked or destroyed.

You have to understand, it was only a few years after Dan White murdered gay Supervisor Harvey Milk and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone, and not that long after the White Night Riots, protesting Dan White's light sentence for cold-blooded murder. There was a tremendously contentious relationship between the police and fire departments and the gay community. Firemen and policemen were seen wearing T-shirts that read "Free Dan White." So when they found my mostly intact apartment, they knew that they were in what they saw as enemy territory. Posters satirizing Dan White disappeared from my walls. Posters satirizing Dianne Feinstein, then mayor of SF, also disappeared. A photo of my bedroom showed up on the back page of the Saturday morning Chronicle and my bedroom was identified as a "torture chamber" for sadomasochists.

The impact was that I went into a deep depression as I had no money, no job (I had been fired from my job in the financial district only months before the fire) and no support from either the gay or leather communities. In fact, more than once I was told that I deserved what I got for daring to be so public and open about my sexuality in my work.

It also completely changed the work I was doing in both look and style. I went from flash-on camera documents of sex to extreme high-contrast dreamscapes and highly ritualized interactions. My work

became a way for me to deal with the grief and pain of what had happened and a way for me to start the healing process.

I'm curious if you felt like you were part of a larger gay art scene in San Francisco or if your community was mostly built around leather and kink and your art was a way for you to interface with that.
Well, this is one of the things that have changed. When I moved to San Francisco I hung out at a bar called the Ambush, which was in the South of Market area, and also an art space called 544 Natoma Performance Gallery, which was the first gay performance gallery in San Francisco. Peter Hartman, the owner/creator of 544, was also a South of Market man. We combined all aspects of our lives including our sexuality, which meant that there was no dividing line between sex, art and life. It was all combined. We drank at the bar together, we went to events together, we did performance together, we had Thanksgiving together. I'm not talking about one specific group; these were overlapping groups with people moving in and out of different groups. But that energy has mostly disappeared.

Do you have a sense of when that shift happened?
Well, of course, it is related to AIDS. This is one of the things that I don't think people really understand. It's not just that a whole bunch of people died. It's the kind of people who died. You're talking about a group of people who all left their families and moved to large urban areas to be with each other. That took a particular kind of personality and a special personal courage to do that. And that is what has disappeared. As times change, cultures change. I'm not suggesting that we should be living in the past. You have to live in the present. But we're living in an evolving community and there's no question that it is different now than it was. And it should be different. My loss is in feeling like sexuality has been shoved to the side, instead of being at the center of who we are.

Did your work change in the face of AIDS?
As the AIDS health crisis reached grand proportions in the mid-/late 1980s, I started working on a series of intense sexual portraits called Sexual Portraits & Private Acts from the Warzone. Even the title made it clear that in doing this work I was acknowledging both AIDS and the devastating amount of death that we were experiencing in our community. I know it must seem strange to someone on the outside that my response to death and dying would be to take sexual portraits, but I felt it was important to recognize that while people were dying, the gay community was not dying. In all tragedies, including war--even in the most dire circumstances--life and sex go on. So, in a sense, each portrait was also a defiant battle cry against the encroaching darkness.

But in Diary of a Thought Criminal, my response to AIDS became even more focused and intense. My ex Robert Chesley, a well-known gay writer and playwright, whose plays confronted AIDS straight on in Night Sweats, Jerker and The Dog Plays, had seroconverted and was also suffering from Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) and KS lesions. I did two series of images of him that specifically related to AIDS. The first was more metaphorical. Robert was dressed in what he called his "doll suit," a custom-made, specialized, form-fitting costume that was blank on the outside. As part of a ritualized sex trip, he would have his partner draw his features on the outside of the suit, literally creating him as they went.

But when I started drawing on the suit, I was overcome by this sense that as a gay man with AIDS, Robert had already been "Xed Out" and was considered dead, even though he was still very much alive and still a sexual being. So instead of eyes, I drew Xs over his eyes, the standard symbol for someone who is dead. And then, since his voice was also being silenced, I drew an X over his mouth and across his chest. And finally as a gay man with AIDS, he was not allowed by society to be sexual and so I drew a big X over his groin.Of course by this time, Robert was hard as a rock, providing a wonderful counterpoint to

the Xs. And finally he was put into a spandex bag that was almost like a smooth fabric sarcophagus, completing the idea that society had already declared him dead. And yet even then, you can see his hard dick pressing outward. I eventually showed a series of seven images from these photographs and called it Man X'd Out. Some of them were shown in a groundbreaking museum show, Don't Leave Me This Way, at the National Gallery of Australia in 1994. I had wanted him to show another series on AIDS that I had done with Robert called Robert Chesley - ks portraits with harddick & superman spandex, but the curator was too afraid to show them because they were even more explicit.

I was immediately drawn to that series when looking through your book. Robert is somehow simultaneously somber, dignified and still totally playful.
I was putting together a show of photographs that I had taken of Robert over the years and we decided that in order to be accurate and up to date, I needed to document the fact that Robert had AIDS and Kaposi's sarcoma. At the time, there were two kinds of photographs of people with AIDS. Photographers like Nicholas Nixon did horrifying photographs of gay men dying of AIDS in hospitals, terribly disfigured and wasting away. Other photographers did glamorous photographs of people with AIDS. Neither one of these extremes reflected how either of us felt. We wanted to do images that would be about life and living rather than about death and dying. Equally, we wanted them to reflect something real rather than something glamorized. Unlike some men with KS, Robert's lesions on his face were less noticeable, so I didn't really understand how disfigured he had become from them. So when Robert took off his shirt, it literally took my breath away. Angry red lesions covered his arms and torso. But we went ahead and took some very personal, potent and direct portraits of him.

When we were done, Robert, with a twinkle in his eye, asked if I was willing to do some more images. When he returned, he came back with a spandex Superman outfit. Spandexed superheroes flying free were some his favorite sexual fantasies. And as he started to get dressed, his dick started to get hard. He commented that while he had a hard time getting hard these days because of the AIDS drugs, he seemed to have no problem getting hard in front of my camera.

I know from the outside this series seems like a preconceived political and artistic statement, but I assure you it wasn't. It was something that came out of the moment where we both contributed equally to the shoot. But in the end, where I had intended on doing some simple yet powerful portraits, the series became about transformation from images of a diseased man to a proudly sexual man. And it became even more focused, when he chose the superman character, a persona that is powerful and impervious to the things that very human beings suffer from, like AIDS.

It is a confrontational series of images combining life and death, erotic turn-on and disfigurement and bondage and freedom. It is meant to have that jumble of conflicting emotions because that is what life was like, not just for men with AIDS, like Robert, but for all of us. Our lives were a confusing jumble of conflicting emotions and realities.

This series has continued to cause upset whenever it has been exhibited. In the mid-1990s, I was invited to participate in a show called Rated X - Works That Dare Censorship that was being held at New College of California in San Francisco. I hung the photographs of Robert and in less than a day they were taken off the walls because lesbians at the college complained that a hard dick coming through clothing would trigger women who had been raped and were therefore unacceptable.

I later tried to have them published in a magazine called Art & Understanding which was a publication specifically created to explore the artistic response to AIDS. They refused to publish the series declaring

that it would put their nonprofit status at risk. I thought it was sad that when it came to AIDS that anything sexual was automatically unacceptable, compounding the tragedy of AIDS and what it had done to our community.

Now, 25 years after they were taken, this series of photographs of Robert Chesley will be part of Jonathan Katz's groundbreaking exhibition called Art AIDS America that will open at the Tacoma Museum of Art on October 3 of this year and then travel to a museum in Atlanta and finally the Bronx Museum of Art in the Bronx, New York. It is the first time that my work will be seen in a museum in the continental U.S.

Can you talk a little about your book that is coming out this week and how it came to be? What has your experience been promoting/publicizing/showing your work?
The seed money for this book and exhibition came from Bill Henkin, a friend of mine from the kink community in the 1980s, and a nonprofit group he was a part of called the Cumulus Fund. The Cumulus Fund funded small community projects that focused on radical sex and sexuality. In addition, I did fundraising and we took book pre-orders to raise additional capital.

I have self-published the book using a digital print-on-demand format. I did this to be sure that I wouldn't have to deal with censorship, something I had to deal with when I self-published my first photo book, Diary of a Thought Criminal, in 1996. But the downside is that the cost of each book is tremendous, about $73. The book is hardcover, with 132 pages and over 80 images. My work has changed so dramatically over time, reflecting my own personal changes and the tremendous changes that have occurred in my community. The monograph is set up chronologically, with each body of work prefaced by a statement to provide context to help people understand how each group of images came to be.

I believe in books and the importance and power of putting something into a book. Over the years my work has been damaged and nearly lost due to devastating fires and earthquakes. I don't think people realize how fragile and ephemeral it is doing this work, and how easily it could disappear forever. Putting these images in a hard cover book is a desperate attempt on my part to create multiple images and copies of my work, so that even if the rest of it did disappear, that something would be left of what I have spent nearly four decades doing. Those men (and women) and those times deserve to be documented, recorded and honored, for being who they were, and particularly for being the pioneers that they were and providing the ground work that has led to recent advancements in equality for all gay people.

Let me just say that there is much more to my work and archives than the work that is in the book, City of Wounded Boys & Sexual Warriors. Since my work will never receive grants from the government and organizations supported and funded by the government, support has to come from the gay community, the arts community or the sexual underground. I am looking for angels and heroes who believe that we as gay people have something special to offer the rest of world when it comes to sex and sexuality. Angels who want to make sure that all voices, even those from the underground, get recorded and saved for future generations so our lives don't just disappear like they have been written in invisible ink.

Mark I. Chester has created a dark, explicit photographic diary that documents his life in San Francisco's sexual underground from the late 1970s to the present. Mark's work captures these tumultuous times, politically, socially and sexually, through personal portraiture that crosses the normally exclusive photographic genres of fine art portraiture, social documentary photography and sexually explicit art. His art, serving as a visual journal of sorts for Chester. is uniquely personal, sexual, confrontational, devastating (parts are a response to the AIDS crisis) and full of pleasure as he chronicles the history in

San Francisco’s gay and leather sexual underground.

Kyle Croft is a graduate of the University of Washington and former a intern at Visual AIDS. He has also worked with MIX NYC and Seattle’s Reteaching Gender & Sexuality. He is the project manager for this year’s Visual AIDS Day With(out) Art Project RADIANT PRESENCE.

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