Grahame Perry: ’I have been creating images that use the objects that HIV+ people interact with over time.’

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Visual AIDS artist member Grahame Perry has a busy month ahead, with work featured in two exhibitions in San Francisco. The press release for Perry’s upcoming group exhibition “The Long-Term Survivor Project” at SF Camerawork poignantly describes Perry’s Materials of Survival series as an “ongoing body of work that is a highly imaginative reconfiguring of the visual elements in the life of an HIV-positive survivor. Perry’s at times fantastical depictions of pills, bottles, prescriptions, vials, and other paraphernalia provide a colorful but poignant visual vocabulary with which the artist tells his own story of struggle, uncertainty, memory, and survival. Perry’s work playfully combines graphic and symbolic photographic elements in the creation of abstract images that represent the very real process of the artist’s own quest for meaning and strength in the battle against HIV.”

Below, Visual AIDS interview Perry about his work, process and upcoming shows.

You have an exciting June, with two exhibitions of your work in San Francisco. Can you describe both exhibitions, venues and contexts?
Yes, I’m certainly quite excited and feeling fortunate to have these opportunities. SF Camerawork is hosting an exhibition, The Long-Term Survivor Project, with the art of Hunter Reynolds, Frank Yamrus and myself. It opens on June 4. While the type of art in the show is pretty diverse, it addresses the issues of HIV survivorship. Hunter Reynolds will be exhibiting these large pieces that weave together newspaper articles, photography, and text. These weavings resemble quilts or tapestries. Frank Yamrus has been working on portraits of long term survivors and the effects of survival are subtly found in these portraits. The show contains six pieces from my series, Materials of Survival, where I’ve taken pills, test tubes, and test results and portrayed them in unique ways, They are reflections on what these objects mean to me and others who interact with them in order to survive. The SF Camerawork show will be the most notable viewing of this work. Its a great opportunity. Also the images are being shown in fairly large sizes which increases their impact.

Besides the show, SF Camerawork is having two public events where additional photo projects are being shown, followed up by a roundtable discussion. They have invited community organizations to participate. It should be a great experience for people who are drawn to the art and the related events. On July 14, I am speaking on the panel with photographer, Anja Matthes, Mike Hickey

(Shanti Project), and Jorge Hernandez (La Clinica de la Raza). You can see the exhibition page for more information.

Additionally, my image, “Every AIDS Obituary” will be in the Connections: Glitter Bomb show at SOMArts. This is the kick-off event for the 2015 National Queer Arts Festival. This is the 17th year that Queer Cultural Center has had this event. I think that there are over 40 artists in the show this year. I was especially pleased to be included in this show. The exhibit is about the connections that the Queer community makes with others, using models from the past to create new visual art, and to speak to our conditions today and the challenges we face. The show also opens June 4. They will be having an artist walk-through on June 20 which I’ll be attending.

I’ll also be talking about the entire series, Materials of Survival, as part of the Harvey Milk Photo Center’s lecture series, on July 16. This will be a preview of the solo show that I’ll be showing in November at the gallery at SF Magnet in the Castro.

“Every AIDS Obituary” is a moving index of obituaries from the Bay Area Reporter. Can you describe the thinking behind this work, and the process of making the piece?
I wanted it to have a connection to how I’ve been working (with other pieces in the series) since reading the BAR obituaries was another common experience related to being gay and HIV+ during this period. I wanted to take something vast and to visually represent it. The power of blending the obituaries together is a key component of the work.

Simply put, if you lived in the Bay Area anytime during the AIDS epidemic, at some point, you would have read the BAR obituaries. We would pour over them and see who had died. It is something that I could say a lot about since it operated on many levels. The horror of the unfolding toll that AIDS was making; Seeing our own mortality in the obits; Seeing people you knew, men you had loved, leaders of the community, the famous who died (either acknowledging or hiding what the cause of death was). So many of the obituaries are very moving, I wanted to create something that captured some of these experiences, the immensity of the loss.

One problem was how could I show the massive number of deaths that the BAR obits contained. I’ve had been aware of the GLBT Historical Society’s database of the Bay Area Reporter’s obituaries. The database was began by Tom Burtch who was trying to locate the obituaries of members of the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus who had died.

Well, there are thousands of obituaries (between 1982 and 2005), each read in order to select the people who had died from AIDS. Each week’s obituaries are aligned and digitally blended. Each week’s is placed next to each other to form one year. Just working with the materials was a very emotional experience, reading about the lives of these beautiful men and women, seeing their faces.

The tonality of each rectangular space shows the effects of the number of people who died each week. The faces would merge yet their essence, the combined humanity, remains. What appears and what is hidden is fascinating. I also made a negative of the resulting image. There are several

reasons: how death negates life, how inverting the images affects viewing a face, and how arresting the rich blackness is.

The resulting piece shows 24 years (1982-2005) and is very large. It's printed on 12 panels measuring in total, 64" by 60". I was thrilled by the opportunity to display this in the Glitter Bomb show at SOMArts.

How does the National Queer Arts Festival foster the arts scene in San Francisco and beyond?
It's just an amazing outpouring of talent, art and performance during just over a one month period. You only have to read through the catalog of what is offered each year to see the scope of subjects being covered. From year to year, it changes. It gives so many LGBT artists and performers a place to have their work showcased. It also shows the support that Queer arts have in San Francisco (and the Bay Area). This area has a lot of people open to the LGBT arts and our messages. The National Queer Arts Festival is one reason for that and the Festival continues to build on the support for LGBT arts in the Bay Area. Incredibly, there are even more arts events that fall outside of the Queer Arts Festival such as the Frameline film festival. Camerawork and the Rayko Photo Center are both having LGBT programing during the Pride month.

Your Materials of Survival series is an exceptional work that refashions the daily paraphernalia of living with HIV into art. How do you go about conceiving works for the series, and what are you trying to convey about the realities of living with HIV through the piece?
I have been creating images that use the objects that HIV+ people interact with over time: HIV test results, drugs, pill bottles, blood test vials, blood tests, the language of HIV/AIDS, sex/safe sex strategies, science/politics/art, and obituaries. I use a combination of photography, photographic elements, appropriation, digital manipulation, and design. These photographs and graphic images try to tap into the deeper meanings of these object for those of us living with HIV.

Often I'll start with an idea. For example showing how a photographed daily dose of pills would look over 24 years (in the case of "It Adds Up"). I might come up with an initial strategy for how to lay it out. That initial idea would go through several iterations before it reaches a final version. Working with digital tools really helps me to build and then make different versions from my ideas.

I'm often making the image just to see what something might look like. Sometimes I'm astonished by the results. In the Materials series, different pieces are created to cause different reactions. Several of the images work with the idea of much repeated behavior like taking pills. Sometimes it about facing a difficult past but also that the reality of today might be less dire (as in "Every 3 Months" about getting blood tests). The realities of living with HIV create quandaries that we must face, the mixture of emotions of being here against all odds, the gratitude but also the regrets that we face. Many of us struggle to make sense of our lives. My art, in some ways, is a tool to do that and also a way for others to understand the journey.

We recently had a moving event at The Center in NYC called Living Positive and Long-Term Surviving: An Artist Perspective. What evolution have you seen in your work as the number of years that you have been living with HIV continues to grow?

Well my life as an artist is a relatively new thing. It's only been since 2010 that I've been creating photography. In the '80s and '90s when I tested positive, I contributed by helping others get treatment information through Project Inform. It was important to do this during those early years where there wasn't a lot of hope and treatment information was saving lives. I was very aware of the cultural impact of AIDS on some of the brightest cultural icons in our community. The art, music, writing and performances had an urgency to them that galvanized a lot of us to the reality of HIV and AIDS. In a society that was ignoring the tragedy occurring, the cultural and political voices were vital to our survival.

In the late '90s after the protease inhibitors became commonly used and the number of deaths had diminished, I think that many of us wanted some sort of normalcy. That return to normality was probably a fallacy since for many of us, the fight against HIV and being HIV+ had become the norm. For me, it gave me a chance to see that I needed to leave my job and try doing something meaningful. Photography and art is what I was looking for. It has given me the language to talk about my experiences and a way to discover an unrealized talent. But the work that I create is different from that of the '80s and '90s. Today, I have been changed by the death of others, but there is a meaning to the years that I have spent struggling. There is a perspective that I've gained during that time. I have been trying to see what my life has been about and what I have become. I also try to show that life can still be a struggle. Silence now sometimes seems to surround HIV, whereas before it was all we talked about. It has gone from something of urgency to something often unspoken. How do younger generations of LGBT people view HIV and the survivors of an earlier time? I think that this is an important conversation to have.

Do you have thoughts on the work of Hunter Reynolds and Frank Yamrus, whose work will also be included in the Long-Term Survivor Project? What are the significant lessons, emotions, understandings, and/or revelations that you want individuals to take away from interacting with your work?
I greatly admire both artists, they have been creating amazing work for many years about HIV and other subjects. I feel quite fortunate to be included in the show and hope that my work resonates as strongly as their work does. Hunter Reynolds has a great reputation for his performance art and visual art. I was recently in a Queer Art History course and his work was shown and discussed in class. The body of work, Survival AIDS, that will be in the show is very powerful and brings together the historic struggles that have been part of the fight against AIDS with the personal. I'm really looking forward to see his work in person.

I also admire Frank Yamrus's large format portraiture of long-term survivors, A Sense of A Beginning. There is a quiet dignity and strength revealed in his portraits. And like so much of what we've discovered in the LGBT and HIV affected communities, our reality is what must be manifested for people to understand and for change to happen. Behind the faces are the many stories of lives lived facing adversity and overcoming it.

It is difficult to say what others will take from my work since I think people will have differing reactions to my art. I hope that the viewers will find the work to be inspiring. It tells a very human story of struggle against adversity. The lives of survivors needs to be told. They will hopefully see

a story behind the display of objects. They will recognize the profound changes that being HIV+ has meant to me and others. They will experience the mournful yet vibrant nature of the work. I hope that they can appreciate my attempts to find meaning in the struggle for survival and my turning those experiences into art.

I appreciate the opportunity to talk about my art and the events that I'm part of. I also thank Visual AIDS for all of the work that it has done helping and highlighting the art that HIV+ artists have been making. It's quite an achievement.

Grahame Perry is a San Francisco Bay Area-based photographer creating interesting and artful images. Especially drawn to urban landscapes, night photography and personal projects. He was born in London, coming to the U.S. when he was young. He received a B.A. from U.C. Berkeley and had a career in computer support. In the late 2000s, Grahame discovered a passion for photography during which he received an A.S. in Photography from City College of San Francisco. For the last several years, he has been inspired by photography and digital art. Perry has had individual exhibitions and participated in numerous group shows. Recently, Perry has been creating visual images that captures some aspects of being HIV+. This series, called The Materials of Survival, is part of an ongoing, evolving work. Using the drugs, pill bottles, blood vials and test results to build photographs and collages that reflect the unexpected symbols and emotions that being a long term survivor has created. His photography is available through his website.

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