# Sur Rodney (Sur): ’His visual imagery stands out with a lurking affirmation--this is part of who I am, what I love.’

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Derek Jackson, “Future Faggotry” (2014)

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, Sur Rodney (Sur) considers Hi Tiger’s contribution to the video program, “The Village.”

Hi Tiger, “The Village” (2014) from Visual AIDS on Vimeo.

Visual and performance artist Derek Jackson grew up in Texas on the Mexican border. Currently he lives, with his art making, in Portland, Maine. Although his engagement with the community he finds there, its resources, and anything passing through, provide soil for his flowering, our meetings have always been elsewhere, in New York: on the island of Manhattan, or Brooklyn, his second home. Traveling between Portland and New York are life sustaining for Derek’s adventurous creative endeavors, having him appear in full bloom.

As a visual artist, Derek’s styling and presentation are considered with meticulous thought and consideration to details, something I pay attention to, as does Derek, who’s even more astute in that regard, and has produced plenty of evidence. Derek is a good photographer; his photographs always sharp (he likes to use that word) and he knows well-composed from not, in whatever he is picturing. His garden as an expression of others, his self, his fantasies, inspired by a need to confront, expose, and explore are always present--his desire rooted in the soil that he’s growing in.

His visual imagery stands out with a lurking affirmation--this is part of who I am, this is what I love. Believing this, I become convinced his imagery is about disclosure with an aroma of desire more than anything. What fear factors he's forced to live with, as an adventurously creative queer Black male living his life with HIV, creates imaginable stigmas. What Derek does with them has me celebrating.

One of my last interactions with Derek happened with his presence at a Visual AIDS program on December 1, 2014, for a screening of his video "The Village" at the SVA Theater in Manhattan. Derek was among seven artists/collectives commissioned to create new short videos that were screened internationally on World AIDS Day. Waiting for the program to start had me thinking of a video Derek had presented years earlier, animating hundreds of images of himself captured daily over many months, creating a diary of images expressing his body language during his suffering over a lost love, and what was never said. Derek's newly presented video has us experience how fully engaged he becomes performing "The Village," a song by New Order (one of the more critically acclaimed and influential British rock bands formed in the 1980s) with Hi Tiger, a Portland, Maine-based punk art band he fronts. Derek's cover version of the song is performed at a much slower tempo with a feeling for the lyrics phrasing traditionally found where the umber soil of blues, rock and jazz find their funk. We hear the band's guitarist stretching cords, the drummer waiting for his entry point, while a fighting fit Derek, dressed in a black sleeveless T-shirt, black jeans, and knee high boots with spiked high heels, emotes the lyrics into the microphone.

> When a new life turns towards you ? And the night becomes a bay ? We shall remain forever ? Everyone who meets his way ? Oh, our love is like the flowers ? The rain and the sea and the hours ? Oh, our love is like the flowers ? The rain and the sea and the hours

The less upbeat tempo has us feeling somewhat sad and melancholy. As the program suggests, the video "...mediates on themes of love and loss, complexity and defiance." Derek is in full bloom here, and the picture is perfect in a stark white room with sound equipment, a laptop and sound board on a side counter, and a shy pulse of colored intermittent strobe lights. A line of light bulbs illuminate the lower borders of the video, in effect creating the front edge of his stage set (his meticulous attention to detail) reminding us that he's performing on a stage, for an audience.

In a discussion that follows, Derek speaks to his curious outsider status, shared with many of the Mexicans he grew up with in Texas who loved this music, an anomaly to the larger demographic of

fans of ’80s bands like New Order and The Cure who were predominantly white males, like the bands themselves. Reclaiming his past as a vehicle to find his voice brings Derek back to a song called “The Village.”

New Order’s “The Village” was originally produced in 1983-84 with lyrics open to many interpretations, one of the most assumed having to do with the lyricist’s love and relationship with a band member who eventually committed suicide. Noticeably absent from Derek’s performance are the last two lines of the song’s original lyrics:

Their love died three years ago ? Spoken words I cannot show

These words resonate differently in 2014 than they might have in 1984. My timeline memory highlights 1981 as the early beginnings of the AIDS pandemic, that was then seen as a new and potentially epidemic disease, an open policy area. Some of the most moving sentiments in Derek’s interpretation are his vocalizing the lyrics:

When the rain falls to the sea ? they’ll be waiting for you and for me ? and the sky reflects our image ? Trying to sleep though our lives

We may or may not be being watched but inevitably we spend our time trying to live our lives, while preferring the comfort of sleep.

Oh, our love is like the earth ? The sun and the trees and the birth ? Oh, our love is like the earth ? The sun and the trees and the birth

These lines evoke meaning to our sustaining of life, nature, and nurture in bloom. And, as the program notes have us reflect, in the context of HIV and AIDS, “The Village” has me thinking of a love letter, and flowers--to those who have died, and to behold the life of the living. Thank you Derek, for calling that to mind.

Sur Rodney (Sur) is enigmatically recognized as an artistic collaborator, writer and archivist. His last venture with Visual AIDS had him collaborating with Kris Nuzzi to co-curate NOT OVER: 25 Years of Visual AIDS at La Galleria LaMaMa. (2013). His three part essay “Activism, AIDS, Art, and the Institution” will be included in the forthcoming exhibition catalog AIDS Art America (2015).

Derek Jackson of Hi Tiger on ’’The Village’’ and finding his voice from Visual AIDS on Vimeo.

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