Holy Orders: Eric Rhein’s ’Ordained’

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Eric Rhein, “The Order” (2006-2015).Courtesy of Eric Rhein and Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York

Acclaimed poet Mark Doty responds to Eric Rhein’s exhibition “Ordained” at Pavel Zoubok Gallery.

Eric Rhein’s engaging exhibition at Pavel Zoubok Gallery makes an elegant argument about the shaping of a life’s work by the incredible pressures of the AIDS epidemic, the maelstrom of loss, change and struggle that has defined--in quite different ways--the lives of so many. Some of the oldest works in the show are photographs of Ken from 1996, and though I know nothing of Rhein’s life, these images seem portraits of a lover who is not well, their silvery black and white imbued with tenderness and sorrow. I recognize in them a quality of works of art that emerged from our community in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in photographs, video, poems and memoirs alike: they are at once personal and documentary. They are made out of the impulse to capture a face, a body, an aura while we can, but at the same time they turn outward, in an attempted cultural intervention. This, they seem to be saying to the world at large, is what you’re not seeing, the

sorrow, dignity, beauty and suffering of these particular irreplaceable ones.

Rhein is known for his wire sculptures; the delicate outlines of leaves rendered in wire. Three of them here, each a remembrance of someone lost, echo his piece formerly displayed at GMHC, where a whole wall of them speaks to both the particularity of loss and the overwhelming character of those years when person after person vanished. They look like mysterious drawings, and each is framed with other elements, layers of paper, shadings that complicate the frame. They are somehow understated and strong at once; the leaf may just be an outline now, the ghost of its living self, but it is metal, and therefore strong, and its three-dimensional quality makes it feel present, asserting that it is here with us in the room.

Rhein strikes a note of hope in the video piece ("The Mountain: a memoir from 1991," 1997) placed beside these. The screen is filled with a surface of moving water, a stream perhaps, shifting constantly while a likable, vulnerable speaker, a man (Rhein himself) who is HIV positive and has been avoiding sex because of it, tells us a story. He has met a man he really likes, and it seems the attraction is mutual. They have gone for a weekend together in the country, and find themselves standing closer to one another, desire quickening. But the speaker is in turmoil, because he has not told this new man his HIV status, and he fears what the consequence of disclosure will be. I won't give away the outcome, but suffice to say the piece is not really about plot, but rather a loving examination of the vulnerability of the positive at that moment, and it is wonderful how the water we are looking at, as the monologue unfolds, suddenly suggests rushing blood cells, or viral activity.

The conversation those two guys would have today, of course, would be a very different one. Of course plenty of men are concerned with maintaining their negative status, but it is just as likely they might both be on PrEP, or both positive, or that they met online on BarebackRT. How many of us now are wound in knots at the prospect of telling a potential bedmate our status?

Rhein's photographs, leaves and video are shown here with a fourth group of work: framed, intricate assemblages that refer to diagrams, early technical or scientific illustrations, and vitrines or retratos for the display of sacred objects. These have the feel of psychic souvenirs, objects built to contain and preserve memory, and perhaps to lift elements of memory into another realm by situating them, as Joseph Cornell did, within a space of their own. The title of one of these works, "The Order" (2006-2015), echoes the title of the exhibit as a whole, "Ordained."

That title feels right; there's a contemplative aura to this show. To be ordained is, of course, to enter into "holy orders,' but the term also refers to that which is dictated by authority or by the universe: an emperor may ordain, or, in a now old-fashioned way of talking about what happens, through no one's intention or design, we used to say that fate or the powers that be ordain. The unreadable, Oscar Wilde said, is what occurs. In our time, fate has ordained 30 years of struggle with a virus that has reshaped the world. Like any disaster, it has been both an occasion of misery and a powerful force for the education of the spirit. Eric Rhein's work is a lyrical chronicle of both that suffering and what it has to teach us.

Since the publication of his first volume of verse, Turtle, Swan, in 1987, Mark Doty has been recognized as one of the most accomplished poets in America. Hailed for his elegant, intelligent verse, Doty has often been compared to James Merrill, Walt Whitman and C.P. Cavafy. His syntactically complex and aesthetically profound free verse poems, odes to urban gay life, and quietly brutal elegies to his lover, Wally Roberts, have been hailed as some of the most original and arresting poetry written today. The recipient of numerous grants and fellowships, Doty has also won a number of prestigious literary awards, including the Whiting Writer's Award, the T. S. Eliot Prize, the National Poetry Series, the Los Angeles Times Book Award, the National Book Critics' Circle Award, the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for first nonfiction, and the National Book Award for Fire to Fire: New and Selected Poems (2008). A longtime resident of Provincetown, Massachusetts, Doty teaches at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

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