2015 Vanguard Awards: Jim Hodges Is a Sexy Genius

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Jim Hodges, Untitled (2011). Mirror ball, mechanics, computer, 4 lights, Bio Black Pond colorant and water. Photo credit: Ron Amstutz

The 10th annual Visual AIDS Vanguard Awards (VAVA Voom) recognize the contributions of individuals who, through their work, talent and dedication, strengthen our communities and reinforce the mission of Visual AIDS. This year Visual AIDS is proud to honor Luna Luis Ortiz, Julie Ault and Jim Hodges.

Since the late 1980s, Jim Hodges has created a broad range of work exploring themes of fragility, temporality, love and death, longing and loss and the formation of queer identity in the aftermath of the AIDS crisis, utilizing a highly original and poetic vocabulary.

Carlos Marques da Cruz has worked in Jim's studio since 2009 and is an artist himself who works between dance, theater, film and art. He co-directed the film Untitled with Jim and Encke King, which was distributed by Visual AIDS for the 2011 World AIDS Day/Day With(out) Art. In anticipation of VAVA, Marques da Cruz shares his experiences with Visual AIDS of working with Jim so closely over the years.

Describe a "typical" workday in Jim's studio. How many assistants are around and what roles do folks play? How does the creative process come to the fore?

It might be a very old romantic point of view but I believe that art is not just a profession, but a way of living. It doesn't start or end at the studio. It's not a 9 to 5 job. Most of the artists that work at the studio have their own practice as well, and share everyday their experiences and ideas. The studio is a place where dialogue stimulates creativity. Maybe that's why I never think about roles or codes, but rather the relation between sensibility, knowledge, experimentation...and some madness. For example, I love that I don't really know what to say when someone asks what is my role...it is always changing and evolving, challenging quite often everything I know.

The creative process changes as well as the workday, depending on the pieces or projects we are

working on, and which part of the process is being developed. Several projects may grow at the same time. A few might be almost ready, others just starting. Some are very complex, and involve consultation with engineers, architects, fabricators, and might take several months, even years to accomplish, while others are more spontaneous. Jim brings the raw material, the object, and we add questions, present various perspectives, we construct, deconstruct, and then, we construct again. But the process is not always the same: sometimes Jim draws for days listening to music. I would say that the "typical" day at Jim Hodges studio is a constant roller coaster of possibilities.

But there is one "typical" moment at the studio (maybe atypical for most Americans): When we stop for lunch, everyone sits and eats together. This daily moment brings us together, creates a very special intimacy.

You played a key role in installing Jim's Give More Than You Take retrospective throughout the country, and VAVA honoree Julie Ault also had a hand in installation and exhibition design in the Hammer's iteration of the show in Los Angeles. What were some of the central considerations of that exhibition, and what was the installation experience like?

Julie Ault and Martin Beck joined us on the last installation of Give More Than You Take at the Hammer Museum. Jim felt that after three venues it would be good to have someone that could start a new dialogue at the museum about installing his work in ways that normally wouldn't be considered. How could we increase the relation between the work and viewers? Museums tend to love when didactics frame the work, even at the risk of asphyxiation. So we started a totally different approach to the placement of the work.

The retrospective traveled to four museums, and there was a coincidence at three of those: The Dallas Museum of Art, the Walker Art Center, and the Hammer Museum were all designed by Edward Barnes. In the Hammer Museum he created a system of skylights that are often ignored and understandably covered due to the fragility that most art works have to being exposed to the sunlight. We created walls that protected the works on paper and other fragile work, but managed to keep the skylights open, exposing the full structure of the museum instead of going "against" its architecture. The game between natural light (cold blue) and artificial light (warm yellow) as well as the variation of intensity of the daylight created some parallel narrations. Works were also installed in the foyer of the museum, in order to expand the exhibition to more accessible public spaces, while trying to avoid the "decorative" effect that can happen when installing art in those spaces. There was a real discussion between Jim, Julie and Martin on where works should be at their best, and the sense of being installed in a certain way. With them the installation "politics" were as exciting as creating a new piece.

How do you see HIV/AIDS as playing a role in Jim's work?

Living in the eye of the AIDS crisis that was New York City in the '80s and '90s, the loss of dear ones in a terrifying way, and to the atrociously unfair and unjust system that stacked the deck against homosexuality and people with AIDS, exposed Jim to the fragility of living in those years. Jim is very involved, an activist, and his work is definitely scored by the crisis.

But I would use the prefix “trans” to talk about his work in response to the epidemic. “Trans” is a prefix meaning “across” or “through,” used to denote movement or conveyance from place to place (transfer; transmit; transplant) or complete change (transform; transmute); or to form adjectives meaning “crossing,” “on the other side of,” or “going beyond”--words that imply other worlds, perhaps better worlds.

You collaborated with Jim and Encke King on the video Untitled, which Visual AIDS distributed for Day With(out) Art in 2011. Can you describe the inspiration and process of creating that work, and your perspective on the distribution of the video during Day With(out) Art?

When in 2010, Artpace San Antonio installed the Félix Gonzalez-Torres billboards in several cities, they invited Jim to present a conference on Félix. Jim thought the best way to tell about Félix’s practice was through a collage of images, songs, and themes ranging from politics to Félix’s personal idiosyncrasies, and to let the material speak for itself. Jim didn’t want Félix’s point of view to end with his death, because the themes were too important, and because they continue. Jim was very good friends with Félix, so he began the project by sharing subjects that interested Félix. We also knew the work shouldn’t be presented in a temporal order. We started loose, and then let it flow. Then Jim, Encke, and I spent a very intense time doing research--at the incredible, generous New York Public Library research archive, watching videos--raw, unedited camera rolls as well as completed documentaries--as well as sharing films, music, and books. The material started to contaminate the process, and then we started editing, letting the voices in the footage amplify the historical record. In a funny way, a film that inspired a lot the “composition” of Untitled was Chelsea Girls by Warhol and Morrissey, even if conceptually the situationist films of Guy Debord were present. We split the screen in two to give us more space for different voices and to confront the multiplicity of realities.

Untitled cross-links many subjects not normally associated, certainly not by the mass media. The juxtapositions permit the audience to witness absurdities from the past. Still today, some of those absurdities are far from being resolved. AIDS is one of them, related to society’s behavior, human rights, the economy, but also friendship, love and courage. It is incredible how much material was not presented to the straight world. Today AIDS is part of a bigger picture, with pharmaceutical empires making fortunes on prevention pills, while an enormous part of the positive population don’t have access to medication. AIDS would not last for long if all positive people were on the right medication. Maybe we should have more Days With(out) Art.

What projects are you working on yourself these days? And what upcoming projects are in the works with Jim at the studio as well?

I finished a short film called Lovepuzzle, and I’m starting to write a script for a feature.

With Jim I’m working on several short films more related to documentary; a new piece with dancers and performers; and also all of the other projects, the sculptures, the installations.

Describe Jim Hodges in a sentence.

Sexy Genius!

Carlos Marques da Cruz has worked in theater, dance, cinema and fashion. He has performed, assisted and worked on the sets of Robert Wilson, as well as with Jérôme Savary, Damien Jalet, Francisco Rider, Encke King, Emanuela Not, Les Guzman and Luke Smalley. Carlos studied set design at the Accademia di Belle Arti of Venice and Art at the Escola Superior de Belas-Artes of Lisbon. He has been working with Jim Hodges since 2009. His most recent work, Lovepuzzle, is a video love letter to an ex-beloved in the age of crystal meth. Lovepuzzle assembles desperate pieces of passion, music and betrayal in a poetic song of despair and hope.

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