John Hanning on His Own Terms

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Cover of John Hanning’s “Unfortunate Male”

In anticipation of the publications of John Hanning’s first book, Unfortunate Male, Visual AIDS friend Kyle Croft responds to the publication.

Don’t miss Hanning’s book launch at the Bureau of General Services Queer Division on Wednesday, December 9, at 7 p.m. Jackson Davidow, Camilo Godoy, Ted Kerr, Kris Nuzzi, Esther McGowan, Lucas Michael, Fredric Sinclair and Aldrin Valdez will join Hanning in reading passages from Unfortunate Male, telling the strange tension between the incomprehensibility of medical records and the crispness of Hanning’s articulation of memory.

John Hanning’s Unfortunate Male recollects the artist’s AIDS diagnosis and hospitalization in 1995, at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Between pages of photocopied doctor’s notes and lab results, Hanning contemplates this critical year of his life, supplementing the medical account of his illness with the emotional realities of hospitalization and healing. Though the medical records ostensibly contain everything there is to be measured about Hanning’s diagnosis, treatment, and recovery, Unfortunate Male gestures towards the role of sexuality and agency in his survival, presenting his illness on his own terms.

The book opens starkly, presenting several pages of doctor’s notes and test results, Xeroxed nearly to the point of illegibility. At first, these records function more as images--the blurred print and obtuse language recall the bewildering confusion and impersonal scrutiny of AIDS healthcare at the time. Studied closely, they begin tell the story of Hanning’s illness: a doctor’s visit about inflamed lymph nodes, the eventual AIDS diagnosis, a bevy of additional testing, x-rays, and thirty days in a hospital bed.

Next to this medical archive of crumpled paper and scrawled handwriting, Hanning’s writing is economical and frank. He provides the parts of his story that couldn’t be measured, tested, and diagnosed--the cold, the tiredness, the loneliness and despair. He writes about suspecting that he is positive, but being to afraid to see a doctor. He writes about being chastised for not having a “plan” after three days in the hospital, and then being told he may only have six months to live. There is a distance between Hanning and the hospital staff, no doubt a function of stigma. Social workers would interrogate him with mundane statistical questions: “Where did you work? Do you have any assets? Do you have a history of drug use? Do you have sex with men?” This line of questioning echoes the coldness of the Xeroxed test results, reducing Hanning’s life to a set of numbers and check-boxes.

Unfortunate Male grows out of a strategy Hanning developed in response to these questions. He would silence nagging social workers with graphic stories of sexual encounters, nights fueled by coke and ecstasy and messy with piss and fists and shit. Hanning wields these stories as a way to stake claim to himself as more than an epidemiological subject, more than an accumulation of test results. By folding these stories between the records of his illness, he seems to be suggesting that no account of his recovery would be complete without considering the role of sex and desire.

Repeated throughout Unfortunate Male is the desire for agency--to live and die on his own terms. Hanning ran away from his family in Arkansas to live in New York City as a young man, following his desire for a life as a gay man. He writes about the friends he made there, friends who were dying of AIDS, other young men who were also living on their own terms. Men who had moved

from their families, to acknowledge their “need to be held and to hold someone.” Even while he describes this desire as staining his body, the source of his illness, he has no regrets. In fact, desire is the means by which Hanning finds himself able to continue living. Lonely and feverish in the hospital, he finds solace in memories of past lovers. And when finally discharged, it is his sexuality that enables him to continue on living: “I remember thinking--since I was able to cum, I was going to be OK.”

Twenty years later, even as medications become more and more effective, the sexuality of people living with HIV continues to be stigmatized and criminalized. As Hanning suggests, survival requires more than pharmaceuticals. Unfortunate Male is an honest and intimate account of exactly what it took for one man to overcome illness and move on.

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

John Hanning is a collage and digital artist born in Arkansas. His work has been exhibited in numerous group exhibitions including Queer WAH, WAH Center, Brooklyn; The Queer Feeling of Tomorrow, Art Gallery Guelph, Canada; Powerful Babies: Keith Haring’s Impact on Artists Today, Spritmuseum, Sweden; Color Dot Connect, Mixed Greens, New York; and in alternative spaces throughout New York City. Hanning is also the creator of Cosmo, his stick-figure-alter-ego and virtual avatar, and the author of Unfortunate Male, his first book. He lives and works in Brooklyn. View the video dot dot dot, about Hanning’s work, on Vimeo.

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