’The project commemorates those who have passed before their time by portraying their lives.’

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Lester Blum and Vladimir Rios discuss their photography project I Still Remember, on view at the the Pride Center of Staten Island through Saturday, January 23.

What narratives does the I Still Remember project develop and why is it important to you to share those stories now?
I Still Remember develops a typical story of an era. It takes a chance encounter into an open, loving relationship in which one individual becomes ill with AIDS, ultimately passes away, and is remembered.

The only way this lost generation can still be alive is in our memories.

It is important today for people not to forget the thousands who perished from complications from the virus.

Describe the I Still Remember photographs and the process behind their creation.
A concerted effort was made with all the sequences in the story to portray them as realistically as possible and to photograph them in actual locations. The participants in all segments were from all walks of life, many of whom remembered or related to the era. The sequences range from the initial meeting in the Meat Rack to other weekends on Fire Island to working the loading docks in the Meatpacking District to a sex club to cruising the boardwalk at South Beach in Staten Island to a drug segment on the street to the visits and testing at the doctor’s office to a powerful bedroom scene that shows both love and intolerance to the final memorial segment.

How does I Still Remember commemorate those who have passed from HIV/AIDS-related causes and help educate a younger generation about the early years of the disease?
The project commemorates those who have passed before their time by portraying their lives, both the joy and sadness. It is one fictionalized story created to represent a generation that was devastated by the virus.

The younger generation basically has no idea or understanding of what it was like to lose loved ones almost on a weekly basis, the constant mourning and memorials. Friends and lovers lost

except in our memories. They have to realize that they are not invincible and even today, with new medicines, they must continue to take precautions.

How did the reception on World AIDS Day resonate with the images and audience?
I Still Remember was an impactful presentation to the viewing audience. Many of the viewers, of all ages, were emotional as they walked around the gallery. The show ends with a current family portrait of the family of a close friend who died in the early ’90s of HIV related complications. His sister, nieces and nephews appear in the photograph holding his portrait along with grand nieces and nephews he never lived long enough to meet. That one image brought reality to the exhibit.

How have the Staten Island audiences responded to the exhibition of photographs, and how has the process of highlighting these narratives in this borough been for you?
The response to the exhibition has been extremely favorable. The Pride Center of Staten Island extended the exhibit by two weeks because of the viewer reaction. Although the exhibit was on Staten Island, people from different boroughs and Long Island attended the exhibit.

We felt that the presentation was meaningful and the exhibit in Staten Island has only proven our opinion. We are even more determined, than before, to widen the viewing audience with additional venues in New York, throughout the US and internationally.



"Meat Rack Rendezvous" (2014/2015). Photographer: Lester Blum, Creative Director: Vladimir Rios, Ultrachrome archival printsPhotographer: Lester Blum, Creative Director: Vladimir Rios

Lester Blum has been gradually climbing the artistic ladder since he began exploring photography 13 years ago. While this climb is steep and often wrought with challenges, he has excelled in

combining his knowledge of color, design and balance, which was honed during his years in the fashion industry, with his photography skills. Primarily self-taught, Lester photographs a diversity of subjects ranging from still life to portrait to travel to commercial work to artistic nudes to narratives. Images are immersed in a bath of light and shadow, which not only enhances the photographs but conveys an emotional impact to the viewer.

Vladimir Rios is a renaissance man of the 21st century—actor, model, creative director. I Still Remember is the fourth major collaboration with photographer Lester Blum where Rios conceived and directed the projects. With his diverse background, he has an appreciation and understanding for lighting and the camera lens. Thus he is able to create compelling works. Whether he is acting or creating artistic concepts, he brings his unique sense of creativity to every project. He is a liberated individual, living life to the fullest.

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