Self-Portraits

Artist and educator Camilo Godoy explores the self-portraits of artists living with HIV in Visual AIDS' April web gallery.

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I did not know the impact of the AIDS Crisis on art history until I experienced in 2010 at White Columns the group exhibition ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993. I was a twenty-year-old student interested in the intersection of art and activism. This exhibition introduced me to powerful examples of artistic and activist practices. Soon after I found myself at Visual AIDS occupied with researching and learning from the work of artists living with HIV and those who died of AIDS related consequences. I recall the generosity of Amy Sadao and Nelson Santos when I first stepped into Visual AIDS. They gifted me all kinds of ephemera, including the books Robert Blanchon and Arts Communities/AIDS Communities: Realizing the Archive Project both published by Visual AIDS. Over the years I return to these two books for reference and inspiration.

When I began to organize "Self-Portraits" I thought of photographs by artists such as John Hanning and Lucas Michael in which they confront notions of survival and performance. I had the pleasure of meeting both of them through Visual AIDS and we are dear friends today. I also looked for self-portraits in Arts Communities/AIDS Communities: Realizing the Archive Project. This book is the catalogue of the 1996 group exhibition by the same name. The exhibition included the work of over one hundred artists from the Visual AIDS Archive Project. Most of the catalogue is made of black and white reproductions of artworks with brief statements written by the artists. Flipping through this book I found that I had drawn a small heart next to a photograph of a self-portrait by Alma "Maritza" Cortes made in collaboration with Ann Meredith. Cortes' statement above the printed photograph read:

Hi. My name is Maritza. For twenty-three years of my life I have been sleeping. Today I have arisen and blossomed into a SOBER POSITIVE HISPANIC LESBIAN WOMAN with a beautiful lover at my side supporting me.

A black and white self-portrait of Alma, a femme non-binary artist with faded, short curly hair wearing a plaid long-sleeve shirt with their gaze fixed directly towards the camera with a stoic attitude, and their arms crossed in front of them resting on a Courtesy of Visual AIDS/Alma "Maritza" Cortes with Ann Meredith, Self Portrait, 1996, Black and white photograph, 16" x 20" Source: Arts Communities/AIDS Communities: Realizing the Archive Project

Alma Cortes' self-portrait is beautifully simple. The artist sits backwards on a chair and looks directly towards the camera. This self-portrait by Cortes reminded me of two photographs that Sunil Gupta posted on Instagram on July 20, 2020 with the caption, "Today is the 25th anniversary of my HIV diagnosis…" The post included two self-portraits of the artist taken twenty-five years apart. Both photographs were made to commemorate the artist's HIV diagnosis.

In the self-portrait by Linda Ellis the artist smiles and gazes back at the camera. As I look at this photograph I feel as if the artist is about to give me a strong hug. Ellis' photograph printed in Arts Communities/AIDS Communities: Realizing the Archive Project is accompanied by a statement that reads in part, "All my life I've been beat. But today I'm living even with the disease I have. I'm living today!"

A black and white self-portrait of Linda, a Black woman artist, shot with her hands wide open, joyfully. She has short black curly hair, and is wearing a plaid long-sleeve shirt. Linda has a bright, big smile with kind eyes.Courtesy of Visual AIDS/Linda Ellis with Ann Meredith, Self Portrait, 1996, Black and white photograph, 16” x 20” Source: Arts Communities/ AIDS Communities: Realizing the Archive Project

Self-portraits are a representation of an artist made by the artist. Inspired by the self-portraits created by John Hanning, Lucas Michael, Alma “Maritza” Cortes, and Sunil Gupta, I explored the Visual AIDS Artist+ Registry searching for self-portraits by artists using photography. I encountered photographs by Manuel Solano, Luna Luis Ortiz, Nelson Rodriguez, Jack Waters, horea, Liliana Maresca, Kia LaBeija, Kairon Liu, Jacqueline Barnes, Darryl Terrell, and Linda Ellis. In these self-portraits the artists document themselves in difficult, introspective, playful, and joyful moments.

Click here to view the full web gallery on the Visual AIDS website.

Camilo GodoyCourtesy of Visual AIDS

Camilo Godoy is an artist and educator born in Bogotá, Colombia and based in New York, United States. He is a graduate of The New School with a BFA from Parsons School of Design, and a BA from Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts. He was a 2018 Session Artist, Recess; 2018 Artist-in-Residence, Leslie-Lohman Museum; 2018 Artist-in-Residence, coleção moraes-barbosa; 2017 Artist-in-Residence, International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP); 2015-2017 Artist-in-Residence, Movement Research; among others. His work has been presented at the Brooklyn Museum, CUE, Danspace Project, New York; Mousonturm, Frankfurt; Moody Center, Houston; Toronto Biennial, Toronto; UNSW Galleries, Sydney; among others.

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