Win Mixter Discusses His Last Address Tribute Walk Drawings

August 26, 2015 By Visual AIDS

Assotto Saint Last Address Tribute Walk drawing by Win Mixter

In anticipation of the Last Address Tribute Walk on August 29, Visual AIDS interviews illustrator and graphic designer Win Mixter, who has penned 20 moving drawings in tribute to artists who passed from AIDS for all of the Last Address walks that have taken place. At each stop at an artist's last residential address during the Tribute Walk, a drawing by Win and a rose are left, while special guests close to or influenced by the artists share a related reading. Though these may be the last addresses where each artist lived, the life of their work continues to inspire today's generation. The constellation of readings and roses, drawings and doorsteps of the tribute walks is a site for community-based remembrance and response.

We hope to see you Saturday, August 29, for this year's version of the annual event, which will take place throughout Chelsea, with readings in tribute to Assotto Saint, Vito Russo, Félix González-Torres, Robert Mapplethorpe, Tseng Kwong Chi, Hugh Steers and Chloe Dzubilo. Further event information here.

Describe your creative collaboration for the Last Address Tribute Walks? How did you conceive of the idea for your drawings, and how have they developed over the years?
I was prompted by Alex Fialho--a close friend and collaborator--a few years ago to create tribute drawings to some of our favorite artists who died of AIDS-related illness for the first of what has now been four Last Address Tribute Walks. It's a true collaboration in the sense that Alex is always a great resource for me to teach me about new artists and their significance and to point out seminal works if I'm not already familiar with them.

My style has become more confident and fluid over the years, but I still use a similar process; I begin by immersing myself in whatever material Alex sends, whether it's a collection of poetry by Assotto Saint or watching Vito Russo's famous Why We Fight speech on YouTube. Then I sketch out any strong themes or ideas I find repeated within the work, and go from there. For me it's a really creative and fulfilling way to understand more about these humans and their legacy in the artistic and gay communities and beyond.

In what ways do the drawings reference the artists who are being honored in tribute, and how do they abstract them? Why flowers and faces?
Flowers are traditionally left at gravestones and burial sites; a reminder of the ephemeral, fleeting, beautiful aspects of life. I remember when Alex first prompted me to do a set of drawings, he spoke of

doing a Last Address Tribute Walk and wanting to leave behind a single red rose as a symbol of both the disease that took some of our heroes away from us but also as a way to commemorate their life and last moments on this earth. That turned a few cogs in my mind.

As far as reference and abstraction, I usually take some signature stylistic or thematic element(s) from their work and recompose them. Sometimes it's a word or a phrase, sometimes it's a visual metaphor or symbol found in their work, or even a preferred tool or medium that they used to create. Some are more abstract and some are quite literal.

I draw their faces because it's important to remember our fallen brothers and sisters; AIDS is an ongoing crisis, after all, and I think sometimes our generation tends to forget the monumental struggle and heartache that we've already been through at this point in history because it's possible now to live a long and fulfilling life with an HIV-positive diagnosis. HIV is no longer a death sentence, but there's still so much stigma and suffering attached to it.

Do you have favorite drawings or artists that you've created for the walks?
Keith Haring was the first artist who really turned me on to drawing/ illustration/being gay and loving it, so he'll always be a favorite of mine. Aesthetically, I think I identify most with the illustration style of Martin Wong, and his semaphores really lend themselves to new and unique interpretations. He was also one of our first San Francisco artists to be celebrated, in addition to Jeroma Caja, for an exhibition the drawings were featured in called Doing Your Dirty Work at the Center for Sex & Culture in San Francisco. Marsha P. Johnson was such a vivid character and had so much charisma and personality. At first I was disappointed because the drawing came out kind of messy and scattered, but the more I looked at it and thought about it, it's a definite reflection of her personality. She's also someone I wasn't familiar with before prompted, so getting to know her story and struggle as a prominent trans activist was wonderful.

Of the current set for the upcoming 2015 Last Address Tribute Walk, Assotto Saint's poem "Writing About AIDS" really resonated with me. The drawing just came to mind fully realized.

How do you see the project developing into the future?
I'd love to do as many as I can before Alex gets tired of me. I'm thinking about revisiting some of them and adding color, and also compositing them into some kind of larger collage or wallpaper. Someday I'd love to make it out to New York for one of the walks as well. I've visited a few of the last addresses, but I'd love to feel the group's energy and understand the bigger picture.

What upcoming projects are you working on?
I'm working on a collaboration with my mom and sister called ZANMIXINC, a line of leather goods and collection of art prints for sale. My mom is a badass artist and constant source of inspiration so it's been fun helping her launch a business. Aside from that, I'm working on drawing more! I've got a lot of ideas in my head that I need to get out onto paper.

Win Mixter is a San Francisco-based illustrator and graphic designer, volunteer for the GLBT Historical Society, and Castro contributor to the San Francisco-based neighborhood news source Hoodline.com.
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