

ART AIDS AMERICA

An Exhibit

Frank J. Palella Jr, MD

Danger. Despair. Death. Shame. Fear. Hopelessness. Powerlessness. Isolation. Loss. Hope. These are some of the powerful themes apparent in the impressive and extensive visual arts exhibit [ART AIDS AMERICA](#), which closed a national tour in Chicago at the Alphawood Gallery in April 2017. Co-curated by Jonathan David Katz, from the University at Buffalo, and Rock Hushka, curator of Contemporary and Northwest Art at Tacoma Art Museum, the exhibit toured to critical acclaim—and some controversy—at the Tacoma Art Museum, Bronx Museum of the Arts, and the Bernard A. Zuckerman Museum of Art at Kennesaw State University in Georgia before its Chicago appearance.

Many of these works were produced in the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, when AIDS was the leading cause of death among US men aged 20 to 40 years and a growing cause among urban women of color. Life-saving potent antiretroviral drug therapy was still a distant dream. An HIV diagnosis was a death sentence, and having AIDS was, more often than not, a disclosure of sexual orientation, an unwanted “outing” in a world where being gay and having AIDS could result in the loss of a job, estrangement from family and friends, and even homelessness. Public health officials, including the US federal government, were slow to acknowledge or respond meaningfully to the crisis. Political and social action groups like ACT UP were vital but rare forces for public awareness and for political agitation using tactics that were necessarily loud, graphic, and unsettling. The art of the time reflects these circumstances and the prevailing social climate. Hence, many of the works on display in this exhibit are shocking and difficult to view, often deliberately so.

One such work is Jonathan Horowitz’s *Archival Iris Print of an Image Downloaded From the Internet With Two Copies of the New York Post Rotting in Their Frames*. The two upper panels are covers of issues of the *New York Post* that fondly memorialized Ronald Reagan, upon his death in 2004. Reagan notoriously did not utter the word “AIDS” in public until the late 1980s, well after thousands of persons in the United States had died of the disease. The lower half of the work is a black and white stark photograph of an emaciated young man in bed, cheeks sunken, eyes listless and bulging, seemingly near death, wearing a T-shirt bearing the words “IGNORANCE=FEAR.”

Another is ACT UP New York/Gran Fury’s *Let the Record Show*, a mixed-media installation originally from 1987, projected onto a large screen in the gallery’s cavernous main room. It includes such infamous quotes as William F. Buckley’s 1986 statement published as an [op-ed piece in the New York Times](#) that “Everyone detected with AIDS should be



Eternal Lovers by Tino Rodriguez, 2010, Mexican American. Oil on wood. Two human skulls lock in a mouth-to-mouth kiss, stylistically evocative of *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) images, but with the obvious reference to death replaced with love, life, growth. Courtesy of the artist.

tattooed in the upper forearm to protect common-needle users, and on the buttocks to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals.”

Not surprisingly, and probably necessarily, the exhibit featured works where sexuality and illness are equally prominent themes, intertwined, coexistent, even inseparable. Patrick Webb’s 1992 two-paneled painting *The Lamentation* and *By Punchinello’s Bed* are large dark canvases that depict, in the first, a man wearing an anguished facial expression crouched by the bed and holding the hand of his gray-skinned, painfully thin partner. The partner is masked, a reference to the 18th-century Commedia dell’Arte figure of Punchinello as an everyman character, emphasizing how AIDS crosses all demographics. In the second panel Punchinello is dead, and a suited man, presumably again his partner, is standing upright next to the bed, expressionless, stiff, seeming just as lifeless. Many of these works equate sex or sexuality with danger or even death. Roger Brown’s 1983 *Peach Light* is a large work in which the black silhouette of a human skeleton wearing a leatherman’s cap is

posed against a background of concentric reddish circles evocative of blood cells.

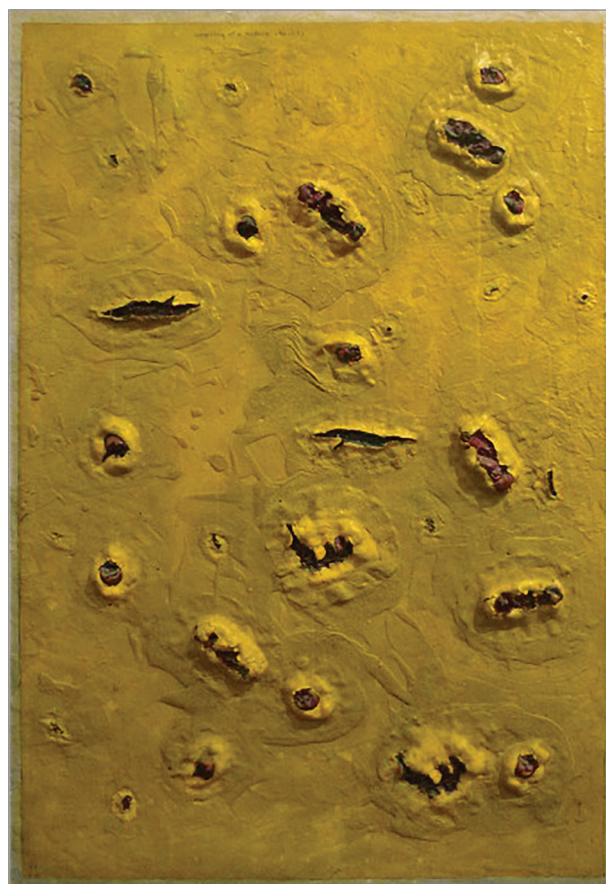
Some pieces boldly assert gay sexuality in spite of visible disease. One effective example is Mark I. Chester's 1989 photographic series entitled *Robert Chesley - ks portraits*. The first photo depicts the subject sitting bare-chested with multiple cutaneous Kaposi sarcoma lesions visible on his torso and arms. In the subsequent photos, he is shown donning a Superman costume and, in the penultimate photo, fully costumed except for his erect penis. In the final photo, he is similarly clad but bound in restraints, seemingly made impotent and powerless.

There are works in which same-sex intimacy unabashedly shines through and is celebrated without a hint of the sense of danger or shame that pervaded gay life in America at the time. One is Michael Martinez's photographic still from the video *Lost Boys*, depicting the upper bodies and (partial) faces of two healthy appearing young men happily engaging in apparently mutually satisfying sexual pleasure, with the lower halves of their bodies out of the frame.

Religious iconography is utilized shrewdly and effectively in many of the works. In Jerome Caja's 1993 *Shroud of Curad*, a miniature work on a typical modern-day adhesive bandage, with a Florentine-esque gold and red oval frame, the central white art of the bandage bears a Christ-like facial image made of blood and eyeliner that is highly evocative of the one on the *Shroud of Turin*. Another is Catherine Opie's 2000 Polaroid *Ron Athey/The Sick Man (From Deliverance)*, which depicts two nude, extensively tattooed and pierced men, one black and one white, striking poses deliberately suggestive of the Madonna and dead Christ as depicted in any one of several well-known Renaissance versions of the *Pietà*.

More contemporary images are not entirely absent, including ones of apparently antiretroviral-treated persons who survived but are visibly and readily identifiable as HIV infected. In Boris Torres' 2009 *Love Forever* painting, two middle-aged nude men are half-immersed in a body of water, apparently recreating, and bear the tell-tale stigmata of HIV-associated lipodystrophy—protuberant abdomens, prominent dorsocervical fat pads, and the sunken cheeks of facial lipoatrophy. Such were the prices commonly paid by recipients of life-saving but more toxic earlier antiretroviral therapies.

The exhibit is wide-ranging in both form and content and includes works by no less than Keith Haring, Roger Brown, Robert Mapplethorpe, Judy Chicago, and Annie Liebovitz. But also, and possibly more importantly, it includes works by artists whose names are less recognizable, persons who sought to chronicle and draw attention to their own plight and/or to that of persons whom they cared about and often for. Not surprisingly, the exhibit can feel voyeuristic at times as a result. Many of the artists are deceased, a fact that enhances a sense of urgency and poignancy and that imbues the exhibit with a sense of wistfulness for lives lost and opportunities missed. Indeed, were it not for the works that include audio/video installations, one could imagine a reverent silence pervading the entire exhibit, as one would expect



Unveiling of a Modern Chastity by Izhar Patkin, 1981, American. Rubber, latex, and ink on canvas. Troubled by the sight of a group of young men with skin lesions waiting their turn in his dermatologist's office, the artist created this work in 1981, a year before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's first description of AIDS, to resemble the Kaposi sarcoma lesions he was seeing. He titled the work to reflect what he felt might be a forthcoming change in gay sexual culture. Courtesy of the artist.

at a memorial, and the voices of these artists being lost entirely to history.

By no means is the AIDS crisis over, nor has the urgency depicted in many of these images vanished. The need to address in a timely fashion the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of HIV infection is undiminished. In the United States, the faces and geographic locations of affected and at-risk persons have evolved and more contemporary works of art exist elsewhere to profile those persons—including photographs of and by urban contemporary HIV-positive persons exhibited less than a mile from the Alphawood gallery at Chicago's DePaul University Art Museum in a show entitled *One Day This Kid Will Get Larger*. This latter exhibit clearly stands on its own merits and has important images and unique perspectives to present, particularly regarding themes of race, youth, and pop culture in America at a time when the HIV epidemic is increasingly one affecting persons of color. Appropriately, there are considerably more images featuring women in this show than in the ARTAIDSAMERICA exhibit. In many ways, a show such as this one, in which images of death and despair and vanquishing illness are rare, is a descendant of the larger ARTAIDSAMERICA exhibit, and



Akedah by Albert J. Winn, 1995, American. Gelatin silver print. The artist wrote: "Every month ... I need to undergo a blood test. During the process a tourniquet is bound tightly about my upper arm. ... Having my blood drawn has become a ritual in what sometimes seems is a new religious practice, an AIDS ritual. Over time, I've transformed this ritual in relation to my Judaism. I wonder if like Isaac, I am being sacrificed. This time to science. I pray that an angel will intercede and spare my life... I look at the rubber strap and see *tefillin* [phylacteries]. ... Except for the needle stick the binding feels the same." Courtesy of Scott R. Portnoff.

was made possible by the advances in HIV treatment and resources that the earlier works screamed for.

Thankfully, ARTAIDSAMERICA, a particularly stunning, beautiful, and wide-ranging exhibit, is more of an emotionally moving historical chronicle and warning against complacency in the future than it is a depiction of contemporary abject despair. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than half of currently diagnosed HIV-infected persons in the United States are now aged 50 years or older and that the life expectancy for persons who are promptly diagnosed and effectively treated is approaching that of similarly aged HIV-uninfected persons. Such statistics are heartening but belie the fact that, in parts of the world hardest hit by AIDS, the epidemic continues barely abated. The power of art not merely to reflect but to effect much-needed responses to the AIDS epidemic in such places has yet to be fully realized.

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Section Editor: Roxanne K. Young, Associate Senior Editor.

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: The author has completed and submitted the ICMJE Form for the Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest and none were reported.

Additional Information: Many additional images are available at <https://artblart.com/2015/12/20/exhibition-art-aids-america-at-tacoma-art-museum-tacoma/>.

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