

REVIEW

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A Day Without Art

Blood Fairies vs. The Monster of Chaos

by Joe Vojtko

At the entrance to *A Living Testament of the Blood Fairies*, Artists Space's provocative exhibition of works by artists living with AIDS, and a few who are no longer living, sits a curious apothecary jar containing 200 pounds of honey. Like a magical object from the *Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, etched with the single word, "Initiation," the jar possesses an uncanny allure that supersedes all rational explanation. It is only upon closer inspection that one perceives the floating hypodermic needles suspended in its viscous, golden depths.

Though I had promised myself I would not attempt to review this show for fear of plunging into territory so close to my heart, I would wind up wearing it on my sleeve, I now find myself about to do just that. What can I say? The jar seduced me. What have I got to lose? Whatever I once had to lose I've already lost.

All of my closest friends are ghosts. My apartment is a mausoleum filled with shrines to the dead. My living room contains the ashes of three burnt human beings. I'm sure this isn't unique, but how can anybody consider it normal?

The world of AIDS is a series of initiations. The final and the easiest one is your own death. I have spent so much time with the dying and the dead that people on the outside now seem strange to me — infantile, deluded, frivolous. I'm certain this confession is inappropriate in this context, but I'm helpless. The jar is making me do it, and the dust of all those dead boys out in Never-Neverland.

"When the first baby laughed for the first time, the laugh broke into a thousand pieces and spread over the entire world and that was the beginning of fairies." These are the words from Peter Pan, projected onto the glitter-encrusted gallery floor in a work entitled *Citizen Pan*, 1994 by Elliott Linwood (who also created the *Initiation* jar) in the Blood Fairies show. Beneath the J.M. Barrie quote, Linwood has added the words: "But all the fairies are dying now because people know such a lot that they don't believe or laugh anymore."

Though the twelve artists in the Blood Fairies exhibit all utilize both images and words to weave their respective spells, they are unified more through spirit than style. From Mike Parker's touchingly naive, post-pop, semiotic appropriations, to the savage lyricism of Rebecca

Guberman's collages with human blood and crucified birds, what the Blood Fairies all have in common is in their blood, not so much their collective seropositive status, but their uniformly genuine, shamanic response to it. You'll not find anything frivolous or deluded here — these are initiates.

One of Copy Berg's works in the show consists of a fax machine, intermittently spewing forth seemingly endless sheets of faxed line drawings onto the gallery floor. The viewer is encouraged to take one home, a romantically populist gesture which, though over the past two or three decades has evolved into an almost corny tradition and much-too-expected feature of all exhibitions that style themselves as moving against the current (The most classic examples of this I can recall are the complimentary Marilyn Monroe silkscreens, squeegeed on the spot by Mike Bidlo at P.S. 1's historic re-creation of Warhol's Factory in 1985, or Mike Roddy's \$5 pornographic fans, each consisting of an original, one-of-a-kind photograph backed by an original blurb of steamy fiction, that were offered to the overheated viewer at the now-legendary Times Square Show), still never fails to touch me.

In addition to this work, Berg is represented by six small watercolors, each divided into panels in the manner of comic strips, and a somewhat larger oil painting. His style is reductivist and economical, owing much to that tradition of American cartooning that holds as its goal the creation of a visual/verbal stenography capable of expressing a sentiment, a humor and a depth of feeling that all the complexities of carefully composed language and/or skillfully manipulated literal imagery seem always to fall hopelessly short of conveying. Owing as much to Road Runner and Pogo as to Thurber and Cocteau, Berg has invented an immaculately sharpened, new form — a kind of pop art haiku, as visually elegant as any Brancusi, as metaphorically open-ended as any Blake — and saturated it with a disconcerting brand of poignancy that cuts to the bone.

In his life as in his art, embodying the sort of pioneer personality upon which myths are based, Berg can claim the distinction of being the first person to successfully fight a dishonorable discharge from the Navy for homosexuality. The works in this show bear witness, with

their minimal texts and maximal subtexts, to this same fighting spirit. Even his titles, like *Die You HIV Scum*, 1991 and *Waiting for Sleep*, 1995, reflect a candor and determination to discuss certain aspects of his perilous predicament that our current social codes tend to discourage, in a transparently self-serving attempt to convince ourselves, and those we are losing, that this hideous scourge can somehow be normalized, and that business must continue as usual — even at the cost of what amounts to the total betrayal and abandonment of drowning companions.

Berg is having none of it and refuses to "go gentle into that good night," but unlike his peers in *Act-Up*, *Gran Fury* and *General Idea*, who choose to employ the broad, propagandistic techniques of Madison Avenue, he exhibits a preference for the subtleties of poetry in getting his message across, and at the same time recognizing the probable futility of even bothering to say anything at all. It's this latter quality, this wistful ambivalence, this undercurrent of resigned surrender to the ever-dependable and immutable injustice of life on earth, radiating like despair incarnate beneath both his sure-footed rage and his gentle wit, that ultimately gives this work its curious energy. In the bottom two panels of *Waiting for Bud*, 1995, a happy, generically rendered hot-dog, like the unspoiled, mischievous sexuality of a teenage boy, announces, "This time let's play . . ." In the adjoining panel, the thought is completed with the phrase, "by the rules," and accompanied by a sketch of a spike being driven through a hand. As with much of Berg's work, multiple readings of this skeletal narrative immediately begin to duel. The idea of playing by the rules calls to mind the concept of "safe sex", the image of the spike suggesting both kinky, sexual experimentation taken too far, as well as heroin use. The whole sentence suddenly reads as God's punishment on those who would pursue "unnatural pleasures." Perhaps the most painful aspect of living with AIDS is living with the knowledge that half the world believes you rightfully deserve the pain of both the physical disintegration and the social ostracism you will inevitably be forced to endure. However, the more obvious association of this image — the spike in the hand — represents the Crucifixion. Its meaning more accurately poses the question that in a world so ripe with evil, why do we crucify people for something as innocent as sexual gratification?

The icy, psychological mood of the late 90's, with its reactionary proscriptions of all manner of human

weakness, and its hard-boiled prescriptions for the stoic repression of any desire to defend one's inability to get with the program, makes the making of such statements of righteous self-defense, as can be found in this exhibit, treacherous territory indeed.

With even a certain, formerly dependable, progressive contingent having succumbed to a group-think of unforgiving neo-puritanism, disguised beneath the nouvelle standards of the encouragement of self-sufficiency and the discouragement of self-destructive behavior ("Tough love," I believe it's called), the very act of self-defense and the once inviolable right to speak up against unconscionable injustices in one's own behalf, have now become communally frowned upon undertakings for which one must a weighty, social consequence pay. Such actions now constitute, in terms of today's impossibly inverted pop-philosophy, consummately selfish and unhealthy behavior that is clearly demonstrative of weak-willed, parasitic personalities who have obviously chosen their own victimhood, and who want nothing more than to spoil life's lovely party for the rest of us who have already proven our own strength of character by playing by the rules.

This kind of thinking literally makes me ill. It places the individual facing a crisis of catastrophic dimensions between a very hard rock and rock-hard place. For the artist who wishes to employ his/her medium as a tool to self-empowerment and social change, a diary of rage or simply a document of the kinds of hell, some human beings are bannished to experience alone, rest assured it will be a very lonely ride. If you choose to mourn, you will be accused of self-pity. If you dare to show your anger, you're sure to incite the contempt of any and all. And worst of all, if you've already achieved some modicum of fame or notoriety, they may offer you a raucous round of wild applause, never having heard your message, but walking away feeling that they've given you all of the support you were requesting.

I recall visiting David Wojnarowicz backstage at the Kitchen, after one of his monumental performances there, in I guess it must've been 1991. He had spent the evening spitting out words like gunfire — tales of personal terror, AIDS statistics, government cover-ups, the horrors of a body under siege from within, the pain of watching everyone you've ever loved disappear before your eyes. He screamed until he was hoarse, until the veins popped out all over his neck and his face turned purple, pleading for understanding as if his very life depended on it, which of

course it did. He looked at me, exhausted and defeated. "They just don't get it, Joey," he said, "they think I was puttin' on some kinda show or somethin'." I felt guilty and helpless. We had been good friends and often performed together in the mid-eighties, but we had slowly lost track of one another. We shared the same birthday, parallel low-class backgrounds and similar Slavic surnames, and once he had phoned me in the middle of the night, years before his diagnosis, to deliver a mysterious message. There was a tremor in his voice, as if he were shivering. He sounded high or drunk, or maybe already in the throes of his first night sweats; I'll never know. He'd called to tell me that he'd had a dream in which my longtime lover, roommate and artistic collaborator (also named David) was lying in the middle of a highway with his legs on fire. I found it really creepy that he felt the need to report this to me at all, let alone at four o'clock in the morning, but the image continued to haunt me, and for a very long time, I would periodically wake with a start in the middle of the night, imagining the sleeping body at my side to be shrouded in smoke. Now it was years later, and it seemed like everything was burning down. For Wojnarowicz, the nightmare would soon be over. For my partner and I, it was only beginning.

Despite all the attempts of various public service campaigns to somehow neutralize the horror of this most unusual epidemic, for all of us whose lives it has distorted and disturbed, AIDS remains as awesome as the supernatural. With its symptomology so unpredictably multifaceted, grotesque and extreme, and science still basically at a loss to adequately explain, contain, control or cure it, it becomes difficult for even the most rational among us to view it as just another disease. I can say without the slightest exaggeration that nothing in life or naturalistic literature had prepared me for the strangeness or cruelty of this disease, as I helplessly watched it visibly devour the flesh of the human being with whom I'd shared so many, long, blissful years of my life. "I'm going up in smoke," I can still hear him screaming, "my legs are on fire!"

Copy Berg's POOF: *For All of My Friends Who Have Disappeared*, 1992, a barely discernable, dark blue, cartoon cloud and the word, "POOF" on an otherwise completely black canvas, testifies to the strangeness of this disease, with the banal and wholly inappropriate comix style and the goofy gallows humor of the Poof pun removing any taint of tear-jerk, maudlin sentiment from the statement and rooting the mystery of such a rude brand of death

firmly in the soil of mundane reality.

The same conception of death as a disappearing act is mirrored in the late Robert Farber's mixed media construction *Western Blot #19*, 1993. In this work, arranged on a sort of crazy-quilt grid of moldings and tiles of unlike materials, a contemporary text, by the late film scholar/AIDS activist, Vito Russo, is juxtaposed with a text by one John Clyn of Kilkenny, Ireland, written in 1349, which reads: "*I as among the dead, waiting till death do come, have put into writing truthfully what I have heard and versified. And that the writing may not perish with the scribe, I add parchment to continue it, if by chance anyone be left in the future, and any child of Adam may escape this pestilence and continue the work thus commenced.*" A footnote to Clyn's text explains: "*Written in another hand, the chronicle continued, 'Here it seems the author died.'*" The additional knowledge that the author of this conceptual assemblage has also died reminds us not so much that the dead can continue to talk to us through the documents they've left behind, but more of how death has suspended their last words in time forever.

In a similar vein, the late Brian Buczak's painting, *Trompe L'Oeil Death*, 1980, portraying a drawing of a skull without a jawbone attached to a closed ledger book with a push pin, seems to suggest that not only does silence equal death, but death most emphatically can only equal silence.

It's the perilously ephemeral quality of life itself that concern artists, Jorge Veras and David Nelson — that time itself is the sounding of a continuous, mournful death knell announcing the permanent loss of each moment as it passes, or as Allen Ginsberg once stated it, "Enough to cancel all that comes, what came is gone forever everytime." Nelson's hauntingly beautiful piece, *If Ida Knowd*, 1993, resonates with such an authentic effusion of grief, I felt oddly physically ill-at-ease in its presence, long before I even discovered what it was all about. Appearing at first as some sort of understated, idiosyncratic abstraction in the tradition of Eve Hesse, the work is actually the final product of an intense, private ritual — a Zen-like meditation on the passing of time to invite communication with the artist's dead lover. Employing a poem he remembered from his childhood as a kind of magic formula, Nelson carefully wrote out the words with the sand of broken hourglasses on photo-sensitive paper. He recorded the length of time it took each hour-glass to run out beneath the phrases of the poem, and then wrapping each vessel, now empty and broken in two, in a cocoon of rice paper like a little ummy, he hung each one on a string, attached to the point on the multi-paneled photogram where it had "died." It all sounds

boarderline crazy, eerily gothic, thaumaturgical and tragically weird. And it's all of these things, for better or worse, but nothing about it is fake. Nelson's art, at least as it's represented in this piece, is the very embodiment the highest ideal of the Surrealists: an art created out of pure dream-logic.

Veras' *Ginger Heaven*, 1996, a series of oversized black and white photoprints with scripted text, was originally installed at the Borough Hall subway station in Brooklyn. The photos catch fleeting glimpses of animated groups of people in mid-gesture as one might see them while walking down a city street or entering a crowded bar. Together with Veras' words, these images achieve a poignant urgency as brittle as dissonant jazz with its flashes of enlightened clarity, which in our urban nightmare will only show its face for brief and unexpected moments before becoming swallowed once again by the monster of chaos.

The monster of chaos is AIDS itself in three chillingly inspired, interrelated conceptual pieces by Valerie Caris, arguably among the most emotionally stirring works in the exhibit. *Poses*, 1993, a large collage of photo-portraits of the artist as a stripper, pages torn from her diary of dreams, lucid descriptions of both nightmare and splendor and medical reports discussing the state of her disease, like a bizarre, homemade shrine to some obscure movie goddess, is flanked on either side by two equally bizarre garments of dream couture. *Vestment*, 1993, a hospital gown made entirely of Caris' own bloodwork charts, sewn together and lined with satin, contrasts sharply with *Queen Sex Positive*, 1995, a meticulously fashioned Frederick's of Hollywood style, naughty, boudoir garment, complete with boning, embroidery and garters. Though something about all of this recalls the work of Carolee Schneemann, the specter of AIDS that hovers, just out of sight, drooling like an unrepentant vampire from a child's nightmare, renders this work entirely original. Among other things, implicit in the message of the naughty lingerie piece is a bitter send-up of all of those posters, ads and pamphlets featuring the pictures of healthy and attractive, young adults with blindingly white smiles explaining how learning they were HIV positive was just a wake-up call to start living right, and how now that they've finally faced it, they've never been happier. The text silkscreened across the front of the *Queen Sex Positive* outfit reads: "She who danced her way into the arms of Death draws you into the sylvan depths of Her sentence. Piquantly adorned in corselet and stilettos, Her erotic flesh reveals a lethal voluptuousness. Her Majesty enjoys your visitations,

Sovereign of Herself amidst the Holocaust." The self-effacing irony is nothing less than heartbreaking.

A more austere though nonetheless engagingly poetic approach to the subject can be found in Elliott Linwood's mixed media construction, *Resistance*, 1993. A stack of beekeeper's drawers sits behind a large sheet of glass upon which the single word, "Resistance", has been sandblasted. On the other side of the glass, a few dead bees appear to have gotten themselves stuck to the glass and died in the process of a futile attempt to get back to their home in the hive, a clean, white, pristine home, where one assumes bee life still continues, normal and undisturbed. At the foot of the glass, one perceives what at first appears to be an enormous mound of strangely glistening kitty litter, but very quickly redefines itself as thousands (Could it be tens of thousands?) of actual dead bee bodies. Sprinkled liberally into this startling insect necropolis are hundreds of sparkling anti-viral capsules.

Although the metaphors at first seem only too obvious, the absolute simplicity of the elements involved soon transforms the piece into a vehicle for several different symbolic interpretations. For instance, in one reading, the bees are CD4 cells that are dying despite the employment of anti-virals and the white hives beyond the great barrier of resistance is health. In another reading, however, the bees are virions of HIV, free-floating in the blood. The anti-virals are managing quite efficiently to kill these virions, but have no way of penetrating the wall of resistance where the remainder of the viral particles continue to hide out and flourish undisturbed. In yet a third reading, the bees are men and women dying of AIDS despite, or maybe even half because of the ingestion of the anti-virals, and the undisturbed white hive beyond the wall of glass is the hospital, the medical establishment, the White House, the little white house with the white picket fence where Mom and Dad live, the whole straight safe white world where everyone plays by the so called rules and no one ever goes up in smoke, and no one ever looks up to see who's dropping dead on the other side of the glass. And on the other side of the glass is Africa and Riff-Raff City and Dopeville and Fairyland. And everyone here is burning up and turning into fairydust, and sovereign only of ourselves amidst the Holocaust.



A Living Testament of The Blood Faries at Artists Space will run through January 4, 1997