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Robert Farber

Artists Space
223 West Broadway
(near Franklin Street)
SoHo
Through Dec. 1

Robert Farber's installation titled "I Thought I Had Time ..." approaches the subject of AIDS on historical and personal terms. One point of reference, as obvious as it is inescapable, is the plague that swept Europe in the 14th century. The other is the artist's own experience of illness.

The gallery walls have been painted floor to ceiling in ways that variously suggest fresco and modernist abstraction. Here and there the faintly drawn forms of Gothic tracery arches appear; elsewhere fragments of ornate molding are attached directly to the wall. The results are a cross between a walk-in painting and tomb architecture.

Within this context Mr. Farber has hung several multi-panel wall pieces. They include squares of marble and washy black paintings on Masonite. But the most arresting elements are often half-obliterated silk-screened phrases and sentences. Several of them derive from medieval plague chronicles; others from recent news articles. The one from which the show's title was drawn reads: "She said it's gone too far. I thought I had time. Room 409. Memorial Sloan-Kettering. 1990 A.D."

It is only gradually that Mr. Farber's own presence asserts itself. The footprints dimly visible in one of the paintings are his. He is the patient being injected with medicine (a vial of which sits under a gilded altarpiece frame nearby). His initials appear under a text, printed on a sheet of reflective Mylar, that reads in part: "To look at me, you'd never know that I was HIV+ ... What a joy it would be to feel my feet planted on the sureness of firm ground where expectations and anticipation didn't always include a core of darkness and fear."

In this piece, as in the installation as a whole, Mr. Farber presents an overpowering subject with immense restraint and poise.

HOLLAND COTTER