

Artists Space

ROBERT FARBER

I THOUGHT I HAD TIME...

INSTALLATION AND PAINTINGS FROM "THE WESTERN BLOT SERIES"

OCTOBER 17 - NOVEMBER 21, 1992

It is truly an honor for Artists Space to be able to present Robert Farber's installation and paintings from *The Western Blot Series*. The universality of the paintings and their insistence on illuminating the basic human tragedy underlying the AIDS epidemic could not be denied a forum.

I THOUGHT I HAD TIME..., the title which Robert chose for this exhibition, clearly alludes to imminent death. Yet, this is not a show about death. It is a show about strength, about survival, about the extraordinary ability of painting to communicate, to transcend. The undeniable harshness of truncated time is tempered, negated - in fact, by the sheer heroism of continuing to make art in the face of AIDS, by the colossal achievement of this installation.

Carlos Gutierrez-Solana
Executive Director, ARTISTS SPACE

As an artist living today, I have tried to communicate my sense of loss and grief over friends who have died from AIDS. I've attempted to record and set down my fear and frustration at a medical community that can give me no reassurance and a society that has responded with hostility or indifference. As I face my own mortality, I've tried to search out where I may find some solace and meaning. Turning towards history has given me a perspective on my own situation and has solidified my resolve to leave a record of what it was like to live in these dark times. It is my hope that my personal experience may translate into the universal and help to illuminate the basic human tragedy underlying this epidemic.

The similarities between the Medieval experience of the Black Death of 1348 and that of AIDS today is the subject of this series. In my research, I found uncanny analogies in the way the Black Death affected individuals and institutions existing just before the dawning of the Renaissance and AIDS' impact on us today. With this in mind, I've set about creating paintings that juxtapose these two catastrophic moments in civilization. The format of these pieces, which consist of separate rectangles and squares joined together, the use of moldings, gold-leaf, rosettes, all materialized as I studied the altarpieces, illuminations and Gothic architecture so prevalent in the late 14th Century.

In reading about the Black Death, I came across first-hand reports of the epidemic. These had a powerful impact because they cut through the historical distance and made the experience of the bubonic plague real and immediate. I've silk-screened these quotes side by side with the contemporary ones in order to emphasize the similarities between individuals' responses to the plague of the Middle Ages and AIDS today. What makes this comparison so chilling is that here in the twentieth century, we are faced with a medical crisis that seems to take us back to an almost Medieval mentality. A mentality that perceived most natural phenomena with mystery and fear since empirical understanding was still in its infancy - just like immunology today. So much is unknown about the immune system and viruses, the best that modern science can offer is reduced to guess work for a frightening and tragic problem.

By setting the themes of death and dying in an ornamental, even beautiful framework, my intention is to suggest some of the complexities of Medieval aesthetics and how they resonate with contemporary values. In the Middle Ages there was a definite relationship between beauty and death. Umberto Eco speaks of the Medieval sensibility towards "...the transience of earthly beauty," and how this "autumnal sense of the beauty that passes away (was) a sentiment prevalent throughout the Middle Ages." So questions of beauty inevitably led to considerations of mortality. Added to this, the Medieval frescoes and altarpieces were thought of as tools for the education of the illiterate laity. They were designed to attract, through visual pleasure, the attention of the worshipper in order to instruct. This seduction of pleasure relates to our contemporary situation. Our need for immediate gratification often obscures the dangers (sometimes mortal) inherent in such pursuits. One can be drawn in by the beauty of the magnified image of the AZT molecule or the lust for power and money, or even sexual pleasure, before one has a chance to learn of or register the possibilities of harmful consequences.

Robert Farber

Along with the ELISA test, the WESTERN BLOT is the assay used to detect HIV antibodies in the blood.