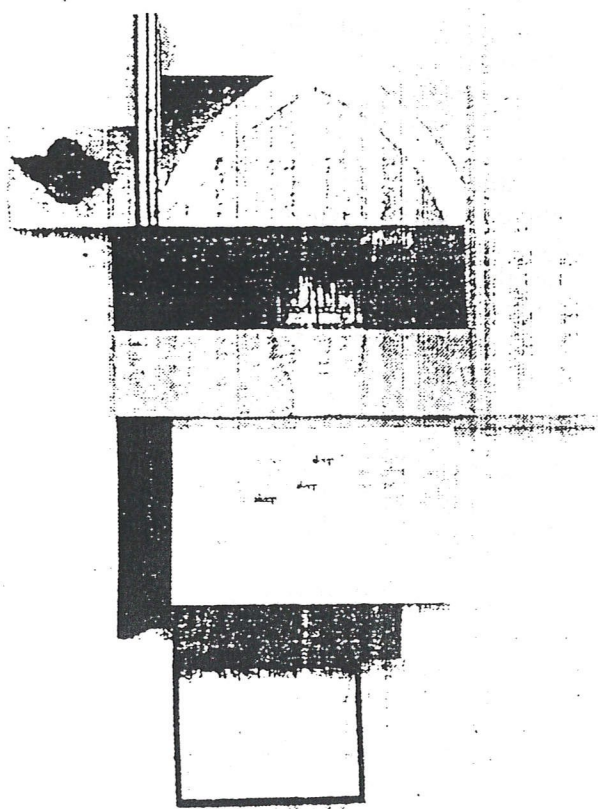


**Robert Farber:
I Thought I Had Time**
Artists Space
New York, New York
October 17 - December 2

Robert Farber's elegiac installation at Artists Space is a deeply moving meditation on death in the age of AIDS. Resembling a tomb, the gallery's walls and columns, painted in faux finishes or with decorative motifs, are faded as though water-stained, in a state of decay. Ten assemblages, in which AIDS is compared to the Black Death of the fourteenth century, are hung in the dimly-lit gallery. Fragments of architectural motifs—carved moldings, empty rectangular frames, Gothic arches, architectural renderings—that appear in the assemblages are repeated on



Robert Farber, *Westm Blot No. 9*, mixed media
(photo courtesy of the artist).

the gallery walls, amplifying the idea of a building that has been abandoned.

The restrained elegance of the assemblages stands in subtle contrast to the melancholy atmosphere of the room. In many of the assemblages, sections of gold leaf or evocative brushwork are juxtaposed with expanses of raw pine, simulated marble, granite, tar paper, or other building materials. Reminiscent of constructivist paintings, these works are characterized by a rambling, yet balanced, sense of geometry—a hodgepodge of rectangular, square, and linear elements. Some panels allude to modernist “action” painting by incorporating Twomblyesque scribbles here, slashes of paint in the manner of Klein or Tworkov there, and a lot of dripping paint everywhere else. The formal beauty of these structures, however, stands in stark contrast to the subjects that they address: death, and the indifference of others.

In Farber's unusually pointed, and poignant, version of postmodern appropriation, visual images are utilized sparingly. In *Western Blot No. 11*, a roughly-sketched eye glances at a text that reads: “In August of 1984, Steven noticed two spots on his ankle. . .,” alluding to the wrenching experience of a person who recognizes the symptoms of AIDS on his own body. (The title of the series of assemblages, “Western Blot,” refers to a test for HIV.) In *Western Blot No. 14*, a medieval gargoyle, leering downward at a group of activists who hold a banner reading “Fight AIDS!”, symbolizes the kind of superstitious fear that AIDS activists must combat to advance their cause. On an adjacent wall, a photograph of a bottle of an experimental HIV vaccine in a gold Gothic frame emblemizes medical science as a twentieth-century savior.

In all of these works, Farber juxtaposes quotations from the Middle Ages with modern accounts of people with AIDS (PWAs). *Western Blot No. 10*, for instance, pairs a 14th century Welsh lament with an AIDS volunteer's description of a PWA:

Death coming into our midst like a black smoke,
a plague which cuts off the young, a rootless
phantom which has no mercy for fair counte-
nance. Woe is me.... (1349 A.D.)

He was still walking, although he was in great
pain—he had no flesh on his body, no muscles
to support his bones. Before he became sick, he
had been a wrestler. (1989 A.D.)

Both quotations lament that vigorous youth has been struck down in its prime—performing an age-old ritual of condemning the incomprehensibility of death.

By incorporating medieval literature in his work, Farber embraces the ancient sorrows of humankind, attaining a poetic link with the past. In *Western Blot No. 9*, Farber quotes Boccaccio, who wrote of victims

of the Black Death (1350): "There remained no support except the charity of their friends, and those were few...." Essentially the same thing was expressed by a 22-year-old homeless PWA, whom Farber quotes in the same work: "What I want most is to sleep. To go home, lie down on a soft bed with clean sheets that just smell clean and sleep. . . ." Drawing an ironic parallel between the Black Death and AIDS, Farber expresses his anger at the "fate" of imminent death prescribed to AIDS patients. We live in a era of advanced medical science that could save us, he argues, were it not for greed and indifference—human vices that were hardly unique to the Dark Ages.

Notably, Farber, who was born in New York in 1948, was involved in the theatre as a performer and teacher for more than a decade before he began exhibiting as an artist. This experience undoubtedly shaped Farber's dramatic skills that are so evident here: his ability to project meaning into the words of others, to make sense of disparate images by fitting them into a narrative whole.

The skill and sensitivity demonstrated by the artist make the exhibition's conclusion especially painful. In an autobiographical piece near the exit, Farber addressed the viewer in a stream of text:

To look at me, you'd never know that I was HIV+. I mean I look okay. . . . I could be standing here beside you right now reading this like any other person who happened to walk into the gallery and you'd never know the chaos and menace I carry within me 24 hours a day. You'd never know that I must take acyclovir, Bactrim, AZT and ddI and many different vitamins throughout the day just to keep my head above water. . . . What a joy it would be to feel my feet planted on the sureness of firm ground where expectation and anticipation didn't always include a core of darkness and fear.

Half of this self-portrait is mirrored so that the viewer sees herself as she reads the artist's thoughts, provoking a moment of intimacy. In this encounter, it is Farber's honesty, with his concomitant demand for action and compassion, that breaks down the distance between self and other, or between those who are HIV-positive and those who aren't, that stands in the way of finding a cure for AIDS.

Carol Wood

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ART PAPERS

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