



# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

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PLUS: ART & AIDS

# ART & ACTIVISM

## DO NOT GO GENTLE

United in compassionate outrage, group exhibitions in Africa and the U.S. reflect the ongoing struggle against AIDS across decades and continents.

BY STEVEN C. DUBIN

NOZAMILE NDARAH, a child strapped on her back, gingerly leans over a river as she pours off some water from a 6-gallon pail. She could be lightening her load or offering a libation to the ancestors. Behind her, the veld bursts with a brilliant new green. This portrait is part of the "Lusikisiki" series (2004), photographed by Gideon Mendel and titled after one of the most impoverished areas in his native South Africa. Another work, accompanied like all the prints in the group by a biographical wall text, depicts Nompilo Mazuza lying like a ghastly skeleton on the floor of her hut. Yet a shot taken just two months later shows her miraculously transformed into a robust 27-year-old who is able to care for her family. Nozamile and Nompilo are thriving because of successful treatment of their HIV/AIDS by anti-retroviral medications (ARVs). In contrast, 15-year-old Nomfumaneko Yako looks dreadfully sick. "Oh, my brother!" the text panel quotes her as crying. "My heart is very sore." She waited too long to seek medical help and died a few weeks after her picture was taken.

These images are included in the exhibition "Not Alone," now at the Iziko Goodhope Castle, Cape Town, its third South African venue. The 25-artist survey features about 50 works, including paintings, sculptures, photographs, installations, craft items, performance videos and digital works.



Pieter Hugo: *Nyameka J Matiayna*, from "The Bereaved" series, 2005, Lambda print, 24 by 19½ inches. Courtesy Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town.

### CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Not Alone: An international project of Make Art/Stop AIDS" at the Iziko Goodhope Castle, Cape Town, through Jan. 15, 2010.

Selections range from Little Travellers (tiny beaded figure brooches made by women at the Hillcrest AIDS Centre Trust near Durban, South Africa) to works by the internationally known William Kentridge. The show originated in 2008 as "Make Art/Stop AIDS," co-curated at the Fowler Museum

in Los Angeles by David Gere (a professor in UCLA's department of World Arts and Cultures) and Robert Sember (a New York-based artist, activist and public health researcher). The two were advised by a global team of contributing curators.

"Not Alone," somewhat different in

**SOUTH AFRICA IS A TERRIBLY APT EXHIBITION SITE. THE COUNTRY HAS THE WORLD'S HIGHEST NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS WITH HIV. SOME 380,000 PEOPLE DIE OF AIDS THERE EVERY YEAR.**

The exhibition comprises a number of thematic subsections: "What is AIDS?" "Who lives, who dies?" "Why are condoms controversial?" "Are you afraid to touch?" "When was the last time you cried?" "Why a red ribbon?" and "Are you ready to act?" Carol Brown, a Durban-based independent curator who helped formulate the show's contents in

larly spearheaded exhibitions and events addressing HIV/AIDS.

"Not Alone" has looked different in each locale: the Durban Art Gallery boasts several elegant spaces; the gallery at Johannesburg's Museum Africa, part of a converted produce market, is a white cube; and the Iziko Goodhope Castle, built in 1666 as headquarters for the Dutch East India



specific works though not in overall structure from the Fowler Museum show, includes pieces from the U.S., India, South Africa and Brazil. (The choice of countries, according to Gere, entailed both logic and serendipity. An American, he has worked extensively in India; Sember was born in South Africa. Brazil, a shared interest, has important constitutional provisions that guarantee AIDS sufferers access to treatment.) When asked the team's prime motive for mounting the exhibition, Gere replied, "It was not about the market. It was not about commodity. It was about activism."<sup>1</sup>

L.A., expedited the addition of many local works to the version that she co-curated when it traveled to South Africa this year.

Brown shares a lengthy professional relationship with Gere and UCLA. In 2002, she organized "Break the Silence" at the Fowler. Highlighting the link between cultural production and broader social conditions, Brown juxtaposed the museum's collection of traditional Zulu beadwork with contemporary dolls and AIDS pins. Moreover, during her 1996-2006 tenure as director of the Durban Art Gallery (DAG), she regu-

Company in Cape Town, features a series of contiguous rooms, prompting a sequential narrative-style installation. The underlying premise—"the AIDS crisis is still beginning"—is made explicit in press materials and the catalogue. The pandemic has been slowed by prevention and treatment campaigns in the West but continues to ravage other parts of the globe.

South Africa is a terribly apt exhibition site. The country has the world's highest infection rate, and the largest number of individuals with HIV. No one remains untouched: AIDS destroys families, shatters communities, weak-

ens the economy and threatens the viability of this new democracy. Some 380,000 people die of HIV/AIDS annually in South Africa, and 500,000 more become infected. The total number of South Africans living with HIV/AIDS is over 5 million, out of an estimated 47.9 million people—a roughly 10-percent infection level, with some locales registering well above the overall average.

bar]. Nearly all the show's artworks were produced since 2000, and several reflect the introduction of ARVs, which can change HIV infection from a death sentence into a manageable illness. So where despair once reigned, a degree of hopefulness is now evident. But poignancy remains. While HIV/AIDS may not be the manifest subject of every piece, "Not

addressing a rally at the Federal Drug Administration (1988); an ACT-UP demonstration outside New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral, captured in a snippet from the documentary *Stop the Church* (1989)—recall the heightened emotions that ran rampant two decades ago. But three early Gay Men's Health Crisis videos convey other emotions. Pathos pervades a



Above, view of the exhibition "Make Art/Stop AIDS," 2008, at the Fowler Museum, UCLA, Los Angeles. Courtesy Fowler Museum.

Opposite, view of "Not Alone: An international project of Make Art/Stop AIDS," 2009, at the Durban Art Gallery, Durban, South Africa. Courtesy Durban Art Gallery.

Contrast this with the U.S., where less than half a million people are living with HIV/AIDS in a population of over 303 million—around  $\frac{1}{10}$  of 1 percent. In other words, South Africa has about one-sixth of the population of the U.S. but more than 10 times as many of its people are infected.<sup>2</sup> It is a sad irony that at the same moment South Africa emerged from the nightmare of apartheid it was cursed with a new scourge.

LARGELY ABSENT from "Not Alone" are the unmitigated fury and anguish that fueled many of the earlier artistic responses to this disease [see side-

Alone" unmistakably dwells on the conjunction of desire with danger, the fragility of the body and the profundity of personal loss.

Some flare-ups of past rage can be seen in American artist Jean Carlomusto's shrinelike *Offerings* (2008). Carlomusto set up a computer screen flanked by 36 flickering electronic memorial candles, each connected to a button that triggers an audiotape interview or a video clip. Push one button and all the other candles go dark while the selection plays. Some of the vintage segments—the late activist Vito Russo

safe-sex piece that depicts two handsome men lying together in a bed; one sings a slow, sorrowful rendition of *Red River Valley* as the other gently caresses and kisses him (1985). Humor builds as a man camps it up while receiving a makeup consultation on how to cover the lesions on his face (1987). And sassiness prevails as

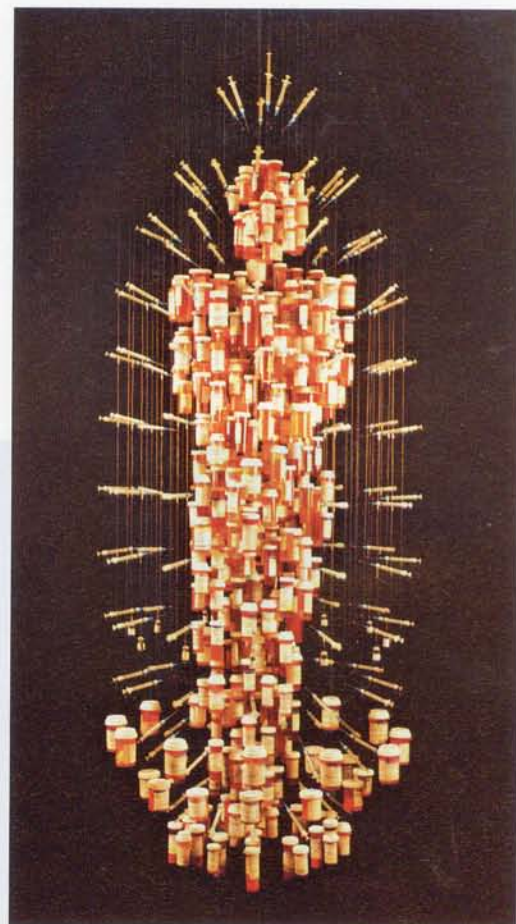
young black men vogue in New York City near the Hudson River (1991).

A number of works explore the complex and charged nature of cloth. Both social and individual in nature, fabric can transmit collective meanings through color and pattern, and can also cover the body, absorbing personal odors and discharges. In an example from his "Icarian" series (1993), a piece shown only at the Fowler Museum, Daniel Goldstein (U.S.) removed the leather covers from workout benches at a gay gym in San Francisco. The accumulation of sweat and body pressure had formed ghostly outlines of the users' bodies, so that the leather recalls the sheets and pil-

lows in Félix González-Torres's iconic rumpled bed photograph (1991).

*Baby in Red* (2000), a photograph by South Africa's Penelope Siopis, shows an infant loosely draped in a long strip of bright scarlet fabric that encircles the baby's forehead and mouth, and curls around its arm. The intense color explodes against its porcelain skin. The cloth may evoke a lifeline or an umbilical cord. But the infant has been silenced by this wrapping, and if the fabric were to be pulled tight, the child could suffocate.

Tracy Rhoades, from the U.S., elegizes his deceased lover in the videotaped performance *Requiem*



Above, Daniel Goldstein and John Kapellas: *Medicine Man*, 2007, plastic medication bottles, syringes, steel/nylon wire, latex, 100 inches tall. Courtesy the artists.

Left, Penelope Siopis: *Baby in Red*, 2000, color photograph, 27½ by 40½ inches. Collection Iziko South African National Gallery.

Below, Tracy Rhoades: *Requiem*, 1990, DVD, 14 minutes. Courtesy Rhoades Family.



(1990). As Rhoades steadily strips to his underwear, he describes the memories infused in each piece of clothing, either received from or posthumously bequeathed to him by his partner, Jim. Rhoades tenderly lays every item on the floor, creating a human silhouette; the sweater was once soaked with Jim's blood, the result of a homophobic assault. After Rhoades dances a mournful tribute, he gently rolls up the reconstituted figure and carries the vestige of his lost mate offstage. It is a heart-wrenching scene.

Two selections from "The Bereaved" (2005), a series of photographs by South African artist Pieter Hugo, portray black Africans who have died from HIV/AIDS, each head surrounded

by a blanket within its coffin. One man's face, endowed with a beatific expression, resembles a preserved museum specimen cushioned in white cloth. The other seems less peaceful: his colorful blanket is nubby with wear, and his visage could be mistaken for a traditional mask. Like Andres Serrano's series "The Morgue" (1992), these works remind us that picturing

mobilized more than 1,000 people from various communities to paint sections of what became a 1,600-foot-long banner.

Composed of photos hung in columns and rows, *Factory Crossword Version 4* (2008), by South Africa's Brenton Maart, depicts patrons of a male sex club devoid of clothing save footwear or a cap, a necklace

LARGELY ABSENT FROM "NOT ALONE" ARE THE FURY AND ANGUISH THAT FUELED MANY OF THE EARLIER ARTISTIC RESPONSES TO AIDS—PASSIONATE EFFORTS NOW RECALLED IN HARVARD'S "ACT UP NEW YORK."



View of Brenton Maart's *Factory Crossword Version 4*, 2008, pigment prints on archival plastic, plastic channels, metal cables, turnbuckles.

the dead body can be as transgressive as displaying sex.

Brazil's Adriana Bertini offers *Thandi, Tanya and Annelie* (2006), three stylish mannequin-mounted dresses made from condoms; displayed in a vitrine by Indian artists Thukral and Tagra are underwear and flip-flops that carry safe-sex messages (2007); and South African photographer Angelica Buckland's documentary image of a gigantic red ribbon wrapped around Durban's City Hall during the 13th International AIDS Conference in 2000 demonstrates how that project, curated by Brown, telegraphed awareness to a broad populace. The building also houses the Durban Art Gallery, whose staff

or a leather collar. Each has a numbered metal locker tag around his neck. Mapping a sexualized spatial geography, the pictures capture the furtiveness, anonymity and randomness of such gatherings: a tantalizing glimpse here, a chance encounter there. Occasionally a connection occurs: when "88" hands off a joint to "73," the obsessive search for intimacy and pleasure has abated for a moment.

Whereas *Factory Crossword* charts an ephemeral network of interactions, the shamanistic *Medicine Man* (2007), by Daniel Goldstein and John Kapellas (both U.S.), emphasizes sustained—and sustaining—social links. The artists, their friends and lovers contributed about 300 empty

ARV medication bottles to construct a composite model of a man. The containers are suspended by wires; the assemblage hangs marionettelike from a metal disk, and dozens of syringes hover around it, creating a nimbus. The figure glows with the amber of the containers, and bears an uncanny resemblance to the Oscar statuette. It radiates splendor and transcendence as well as a sense of fragility: this being would crumple if the wires that are its sinews were to be clipped.

Some exhibits, such as several *patta* scrolls painted by Indian

## SHOCK AND ART: ACT UP'S AGENDA

"ACT UP New York: Activism, Art and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993" examines the passionate efforts of artists and activists to make the AIDS crisis more visible to the general public. Focused on initiatives by and for New York's AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) during the anguished and tumultuous early years of the epidemic, the show encompasses more than 70 objects in a variety of mediums, and is supported by a program of lectures, symposia and videos. Intended to boost the level of AIDS awareness and jolt an apathetic government into responsible action, many of the provocative posters, photos and other items on view made an inedible mark on American culture. Today, while they still evoke the tremendous suffering, anger and fear that accompanied



folk artists, are straightforwardly didactic. In normal practice, their illustrated stories would be sung to audiences as the scrolls are unrolled. Hindu holy books were the source of the tales in times past; today, critical social issues are addressed. Look closely and you'll spot condoms and ailing bodies among the myriad elements in these colorful vertical cartoons.

Other works, like Kentridge's animated film *Tide Table* (2002), are more impressionistic. A healthy cow mysteriously appears from the sea, while others waste to skeletons. A hostel turns into a hospital. A man wistfully recalls cherished child-

hood moments. A baptism occurs, but death is pervasive, as humans wither as quickly as their cattle. South African artist Churchill Madikida's kaleidoscopic video *Virus* (2004)

opens with a single frame featuring the HIV pathogen. Next a man is trapped within it, curled in the fetal position. And then, with relentlessness as well as allure, the cell multiplies into complex patterns, intricate as those in elaborately detailed wallpaper. The breathtaking mechanics of this reproduction only thinly disguise the pathogen's deadliness.

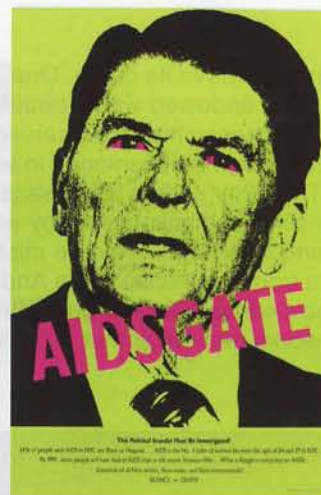
"NOT ALONE" has been presented to the public in ways that subtly echo the show's title and theme. Its opening at

the crisis, many have become emblematic of potent grassroots political action in general. Co-organized by Harvard's Helen Molesworth and Claire Grace, the exhibition also features the premiere of the ACT UP Oral History Project, containing over 100 video interviews with surviving members of ACT UP. The interviews feature accounts of ACT UP in its most aggressive period of civil disobedience, street marches and petitions, corresponding with the seven years covered in the show. Appearing while the nation is engaged in a heated debate over health care reform and during a global swine flu outbreak, not to mention the HIV/AIDS pandemic's continuing onslaught around the world, the show is a well-timed reminder of the uproar in the 1980s and early '90s against both the U.S. government's refusal to acknowledge the AIDS crisis and the unabashed profiteering by pharmaceutical companies producing the first generation of drugs to fight the virus.

Confronting the homophobia and fears that accompanied the AIDS crisis, artist collectives such as Gran Fury, Gang and Fierce Pussy gave visual form to the ACT UP agenda of consciousness-raising and education. In 1989, for instance, Gran Fury's photos showing same-sex couples kissing—"Read My Lips" and "Kissing Doesn't Kill"—shocking to some and thought-provoking to others, appeared throughout New York on the large ad panels

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Silence=Death Project: *AIDSGATE*, 1987, offset lithograph, 34 by 22 inches. Courtesy Avram Finkelstein.

Left, Gran Fury: *Read My Lips*, 1988, poster, 16 1/4 by 10 5/8 inches. Courtesy Avram Finkelstein.

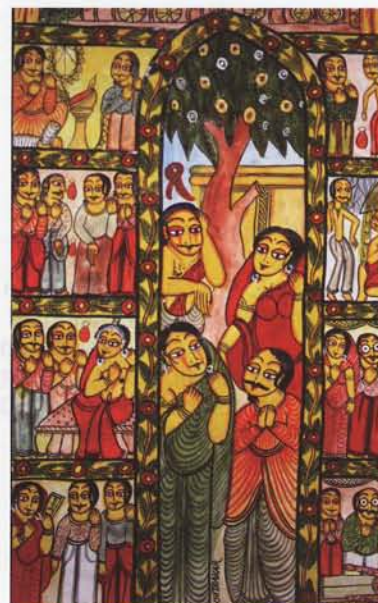
on the sides of public buses. Also included in the exhibition are the Silence=Death Project's sculpture in neon, which became a universal call to action, and *AIDSGATE* (1987), an image, echoing Warhol's famous acid-colored anti-Nixon poster, that is a condemnation of the apathy of the Reagan administration in the face of the AIDS crisis.

—David Ebony

## CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"ACT UP New York: Activism, Art and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993," through Dec. 23 at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts and the Harvard Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass.

Museum Africa was officiated by Edwin Cameron, an openly gay, HIV+ constitutional court judge. At the presentation



Detail of a contemporary patta scroll, 2007, by Gurupada Chitrakar.



Gideon Mendel: *We Are Living Here (HIV-Positive Mother Regains Her Strength)*, 2004, color photograph, 20 by 30 inches.

of the Keiskamma Altarpiece—a mammoth construction featuring embroidery, appliqué and beadwork, a collaborative project by 120 people living in the same general area where Mendel photographed “Lusikisiki” [see Front Page, Apr. '08]—students danced in traditional costume and sang songs about revitalization and humility.

The exhibition is just one outgrowth of the “Make Art/Stop AIDS” initiative. Gere calls another related project “ArtMoves,” a designation meant “to reference how we’re moved and transformed by art but also to point out that there’s no reason why it has to be in a gallery.” Participants in New Delhi have constructed an apparatus that fits onto autorickshaws so that posters bearing images of certain “Not Alone” artworks can be shown in open-air displays. Gere argues, “An exhibition can be seen as a solid form—it’s only itself if 98 percent of the works [originally] chosen are in it. But what has evolved is a flexible format. Things can come into it, things can go out of it. This gives us a chance to rethink and re-curate, and also allows works that are just being made to be included.” Another spin-off of the show will be presented at the World AIDS conference in Vienna in 2010. For that event, the curators have devised a strategy to make *Medicine*

*Man* a community-based endeavor. Individuals ranging from young people in Cape Town to delegates in Austria will be asked to contribute their own prescription bottles to create new versions of the figure.

Some works have spurred controversy. *Factory Crossword Version 4* was excluded from the Fowler and installed instead at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) after museum personnel expressed concern about groups of children coming through. Critics condemned this as a needless cop-out. Jenny Stretton, DAG’s acting director, heard no complaints about the piece. She notes, in fact, that a teenager repeatedly visited the museum and closely examined this work, perhaps making a visual connection to his own desires while safely within an institutional space.<sup>3</sup>

Some visitors have been disturbed by Hugo’s postmortem photos. The artist received permission from the families to make these images, accompanied by a member of the Treatment Action Campaign (the foremost AIDS activist group in South Africa). But DAG’s gallery guards report that a number of people found the images disrespectful to traditional beliefs; several visitors even requested they be taken down.<sup>4</sup> In a country as multicultural as South Africa (there are 11 official languages), such differences of opinion are inevitable.

At the end of the day, do exhibitions such as these make any difference? Brown readily admits that there’s a limit to what one may accomplish through art. She is adamant, however, that “each person in their own way has got to do what they can best do, in any situation.” And she thinks that work which is visually arresting is more likely to engage viewers and successfully communicate a message.<sup>5</sup> (DAG personnel report that visitors were electrified by Mendel’s suite of images in which Nomphele Mazuza seems to rise from the dead after taking ARVs.)

While also tempering his claims, Gere believes that artworks can at least instigate conversations, a critical first step to confronting problems: “I always hoped that the exhibition would be one of an array of approaches which, when all put together, can have a large social impact. It’s part of this overall nexus, not a magic bullet.”

When the itinerant village performer Monimala Chitrakar, seen in a continuously playing videotape in “Not Alone,” begins to sing from her *patta* scroll, she exhorts the audience, “Oh! Brothers and sisters, stay for a while!” In the most literal sense, she is asking people to listen to her story. But her invitation also suggests that what they see and hear might well prolong their lives. ○

<sup>1</sup> All remarks by David Gere are from an interview with the author, Johannesburg, July 19, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> For additional information on HIV/AIDS in South Africa, see [www.aids.org.za](http://www.aids.org.za). <sup>3</sup> Author’s interview with Jenny Stretton, Durban, July 9, 2009. <sup>4</sup> Author’s interview with guards Titus Mkhwanazi and Bheki Zungu, Durban, July 9, 2009. <sup>5</sup> Author’s interview with Carol Brown, Johannesburg, July 19, 2009.

“Make Art/Stop AIDS” was on view at the Fowler Museum, Los Angeles [Feb. 23–June 15, 2008]. “Not Alone: An international project of Make Art/Stop AIDS” appeared at the Durban Art Gallery, Durban, South Africa [Feb. 25–May 20, 2009], and Museum Africa, Johannesburg [July 19–Aug. 23, 2009], before beginning its current run at the Iziko Goodhope Castle, Cape Town [Nov. 15, 2009–Jan. 15, 2010].

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