

## Finding spiritual power in unlikely artifacts

By DOUGLAS BRITT Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle

July 22, 2010,

A haunting installation in the Station Museum of Contemporary Art's group exhibition *Because We Are* houses some of the most unusual prints you're ever likely to see.



Entering a room devoted to artist Daniel Goldstein's *Icarian* series, you're surrounded by ghostlike images of human forms encased behind Plexiglas in wooden boxes reminiscent of reliquaries. Well-worn, yet mysteriously luminous, the human traces call to mind the Shroud of Turin — a comparison Goldstein has heard more times than he can count.

However, Goldstein discovered these artifacts not on an archaeological dig, but in a popular San Francisco gym he frequented during the 1980s and 1990s. Recorded on pieces of leather that once covered the gym's equipment, the impressions reflect the former presence of not one human figure, but thousands of men who once rested against them as they sweated through their workouts.

Like Goldstein, nearly all the men whose body weight and perspiration contributed to a collective, unconscious form of printmaking were gay and HIV-positive. Unlike Goldstein, most of them didn't live long enough to witness and benefit from the pharmaceutical breakthroughs that transformed HIV from a death sentence to a chronic but manageable condition.

Surveying art made by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered artists during the past 20 years, *Because We Are* features a wide range of styles and subjects. But many of the museum shows that have featured Goldstein's *Icarian* series has been organized around religious themes.

"Though related artistically to the genre of found objects, and to developments in photography, (Goldstein's *Icarian* works) evoke and discuss death without any of the cynicism or irony which characterizes much modern artistic comment on the subject,"

wrote Mary Charles-Murray in the catalog for the 1998 exhibit *Beyond Belief: Modern Art and the Religious Imagination* at the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia. "By their humanity and their humanism they negate contempt, and by their relationship to other ghostly images of the religious tradition, particularly that of the suffering Christ, they go further, even suggesting an element of hope."

Other observers see formal and spiritual significance in the fact that it was natural leather that once covered the gym's equipment.

"It is through the process of touch, one flesh to another, in this case one human and living, the other animal and dead, that a transformative temperament of mind takes place: from anguish, fear, doubt and denial, to serenity, strength and hope," David Maxim wrote in 1993. "Only natural leather is able to record this process. Other covers such as vinyl or Naugahyde are completely insensitive to their history of human contact."

For Goldstein, part of the *Icarian* pieces' meaning comes from where - and by extension, why - the leather underwent its transformation.

"A sort of town square for the men who had come to San Francisco to live and love openly, in those early plague years (the gym) also became the place to exchange information, to find out who was ill, who had died," Goldstein has written. "Working out took on an even greater ritual significance as gay men struggled to maintain the exterior appearance of health and to gain some measure of control over the disease which had begun to destroy them from the inside."

Even the exercise machines' brand name from which Goldstein took the series' title - Icarian - has spiritual resonance, evoking the mythological youth who fell to his death after flying too close to the sun.

*Medicine Man*, another Goldstein artwork in the Station show, originated when Goldstein began taking AIDS treatment drugs and saving the empty medication bottles without knowing why. Invited in 2006 to contribute work to an international exhibition called *Make Art/Stop AIDS*, Goldstein worked with collaborator John Kapellas to assemble hundreds of their pill bottles into a suspended totem-like figure.

"When the figure was complete I knew that it needed something more," Goldstein wrote. "Out of 139 syringes we created a mandorla, the traditional almond-shaped halo that surrounds depictions of saints and deities in the iconography of many traditions."

Depending on your interpretation, the cloud of syringes could be attacking the figure, or they could be holy rays of light emanating from it.

[douglas.britt@chron.com](mailto:douglas.britt@chron.com)