

Daniel Goldstein: The presence of absence

In 1984 I became HIV positive. Up to this point I had been predominantly a printmaker and collage artist experiencing early success with my two dimensional work. Because AIDS was literally a death sentence in the 1980's, I realized that what I wanted to do with the rest of my life was to make sculpture, my first love as an artist. On the death of my life-partner in 1986 I committed myself completely to this task.

The presence of absence

The completion of a series of large translucent suspended structures made from expanded aluminum in the shape of towers, houses and cubes signaled the beginning of a theme in my work that I have called "the presence of absence". I called these pieces "Reliquaries". I often thought of them as spirit houses and they were titled with the initials of friends and loved ones who had died from AIDS. In those pre-AIDS drug years the streets of San Francisco were haunted by men on the verge of death. Skeletal and wasted, moving in a frightening borderland between existence and oblivion. Beside them the air was thick with the ghosts of their friends and lovers. This communal reality, this common experience of being half-dead and half-alive found its expression in these spectral constructions. They were hung so as to rotate slowly- now revealing, now concealing the contents of their interiors.



"Icarian Series"
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Icarian Series

During this time I worked out at a gay gym called The Muscle System. A sort of town square for the men who had come to San Francisco to live and love openly, in those early plague years it also became the place to exchange information, to find out who was ill, who had died. 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.

The gym equipment was covered in leather. Years of human weight, sweat and repetitive friction had abraded and marked them. I was able to obtain many of these skins (as I took to calling them) after the machines had been replaced by newer, vinyl-covered models. The mysterious and often abstracted human forms that had been imprinted on the leather reminded me of medieval relics. Unlike the Shroud of Turin, however, these were not the marks of one holy person, these were images created by thousands of men, first reveling in the development of their physical beauty and finally using exercise as a bastion against death. I knew there was nothing to be done with them but display them as they were with reverence and simplicity. Mounted on dark felt and contained in copper-

framed wooden boxes these became my second series of reliquaries- this time the term was literal rather than metaphorical. The name I chose for these works was the "Icarian Series". It comes from the brand name of the exercise machines from which the skins were stripped. That these machines in turn took their name from the mythical youth who fell from heaven after flying close to the sun added another layer of resonance and power.

The Icarian pieces, which are still being exhibited in museum exhibitions around the world, seem to evoke powerful emotions from viewers. For those who have lost loved ones to AIDS, the Icarian pieces allow the viewer the space and time to contemplate their losses. For others, I think, the pieces are a way into understanding that loss. Many of the museum exhibits which have included these pieces have had religious themes. I think this is due to the numinous qualities of the images that seem to link the struggles of living with the inevitability of dying. Two of the Icarian pieces showed clearly delineated mummy-like shapes at their centers. These almost abstracted human figures with their soft and permeable edges struck me as ideal shapes for sculptures. The question was how to create sculpture that had soft permeable edges. Having made hundreds of mobiles in my teens and early twenties I returned to the use of suspended elements, to the medium of hanging assemblage.

Return to hanging assemblage

My first foray was “Suspended Figure” constructed from individually strung pieces of bronze mesh. It resembled a phantom made of autumn leaves.

The second related sculpture, “Lazarus”, was made from cullet: the chunks of glass left over from the work of glassblowers. The creation of this piece coincided with the advent of antiretroviral drugs as well as the death of my second life-partner to AIDS. Up to that year all of those living with AIDS were expecting to die within a short amount of time. The protease inhibitors and the various drug cocktails gave many of us a new hope for life. We were like the Biblical figure Lazarus, being resurrected from the darkness of the tomb. The floating particles of glass and the spaces between them represented my tentative reentry into the world of the living—seemingly solid after so long and yet riddled with little voids throughout. I was partly present and hopeful and yet still living with so much absence. So many parts of my life had been lost along with those who had died. I had been brought back to life- but in a transformed state, a different body as it were in a very different world.



“Lazarus”
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Make Art/Stop AIDS

When the initial AIDS treatment drugs became available I started saving my medication bottles. I wasn’t sure why. In 2006 Professor David Gere, director of the Art and Global Health Department at UCLA, called me to say that he was co-curating an international art exhibition entitled “Make Art/Stop AIDS”. He was going to include one of the Icarian pieces and he asked if I would like to create a new piece for the exhibition. This request was the impetus for me to create “Medicine Man” with my collaborator, John Kapellas. We suspended hundreds of our HIV medicine bottles in the same iconic shape I had used for my previous suspended pieces. When the figure was complete I knew that it needed something more. 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.



“Medicine Man” and artist Daniel Goldstein
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The syringe is also a loaded image and we used them very purposefully. Like the AIDS medications which both heal and can cause deadly side effects, the syringes serves as a delivery system for drugs that can save lives. However they can also be experienced as aggressive and threatening. It became obvious to me once the piece was exhibited that the visual impact of the syringes was just as powerful as their metaphorical impact.

If the viewer read the cloud of sharp points as moving in toward the figure then the ancient torture device known as the iron maiden could be brought to mind. Vice versa, if the syringes were read as emanating out of the figure they could be transformed into rays of light radiating from some holy presence.

Upon seeing the proposal for this piece, one of the co-curators from India remarked that it was the first art work about AIDS she had seen that gave her hope. “Medicine Man”, which traveled to three museums in South Africa after its initial unveiling at the Fowler

Museum in Los Angeles, has engendered diverse responses. For some viewers it is a revelation in regard to what it is like living with AIDS and the constant required intake of drugs. For others, particularly people in South Africa, it is a symbol of hope as well as kinship with others around the world taking those same, often toxic medications. In South Africa I was struck by people’s reaction to my openness about living with HIV. John Kapellas’ and my name were all over the bottles used in the sculpture. In a country where people living with HIV at that time were overwhelmingly stigmatized and ostracized, my openness

about being HIV positive was something new and challenging. People I encountered in South Africa who observed my healthy appearance alongside all of those pill bottles and syringes possibly had a change of mind about HIV medications. There is still a mistrust of Western medications in South Africa. In my opinion this fear has greatly contributed to South Africa having the largest percentage of HIV positive people in their population.

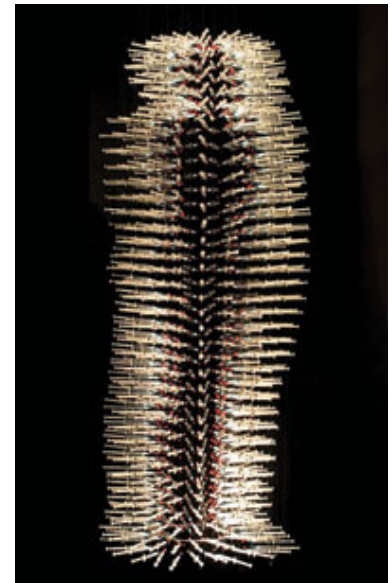
I was asked by the Durban Art Gallery to create a "Medicine Man" specifically for South Africa. Over a period of two weeks working with two South African assistants we created a new "Medicine Man" figure. In this sculpture all the bottles were from HIV+ South Africans. I also collaborated with the Umcebo Trust in Durban whose skilled craftspeople created small brightly colored spindle shapes covered in brilliant glass beadwork. These along with a number of syringes, surrounded the figure. The six colors of the spindles represented the six major side effects of the drugs being used in South Africa. The finished figure hovers over a white disc on the floor which has the six side effects spelled out around the perimeter in the same bright colors as the beaded spindles. HIV+ people who visit the exhibit are encouraged to write their own side effects on the white disc with crayons. By the end of the first exhibition the disc was completely covered in writing.

Including side-effects as a major component of this piece came about from my first trip to South Africa when I learned that many of the AIDS drugs available to South Africans were the drugs that I had taken years earlier in the USA. Some of these were drugs that had almost killed me and have left me to deal with permanent physical damage and ongoing side effects. When a group of HIV+ people visited the exhibit while we were assembling the sculpture in Cape Town, I invited them to write down their side effects. We sat around the white disc on the floor sharing the horror stories of our experiences with these drugs. It brought us closer together in an odd and incredibly poignant way. We instantly understood that we were all connected through a deeply embodied shared experience.

Injecting drug use and AIDS 2010

My most recent sculpture continuing in the theme of the floating human figure is "Invisible Man". It is made entirely of syringes. In this piece the figure's presence is made visible by its total absence. 864 syringes surround a human shaped void. The tips of each syringe are capped with a single red crystal bead. The piece was created for an exhibition at the 2010 International AIDS Conference in Vienna. One of the central topics of this conference is the spread of HIV among people who inject drugs in Eastern Europe. In this sculpture the syringes once again embody both danger and hope. When lit properly, the syringes have the appearance of rays of light emanating from a human shaped void. The invisible is made visible by the objects and forces which surround it.

I don't have any one audience response in mind when I make these sculptures, but I do want people to know that AIDS is still a major pandemic that has to be dealt with. Different sculptures engender different responses in different people. That's the power of art. There is no one true interpretation. Art is a powerful way to make AIDS emotionally, physically and spiritually real to people who have only known it before as an abstraction: something that is happening to someone else far away. For those living with HIV art can also be a confirmation and acknowledgement of what we live with. It can offer both a catharsis and a celebration of the human experience in the face of incredible adversity.



"Invisible Man"
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