



COURTESY MICTOWN PAYSON GALLERIES

Hugh Steers's "White Shirt" (1991), one of the gentler works in WPA's "Beyond Loss: Art in the Era of AIDS."

*Art*

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*Testaments  
To the AIDS  
Tragedy*

By Lee Fleming

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It's hard to imagine beauty engendered by the scourge of AIDS, yet beauty is precisely what distinguishes "Beyond Loss: Art in the Era of AIDS" from numerous exhibitions demonstrating the epidemic's impact on artists and art. Unlike previous Washington Project for the Arts shows that dealt with the politics of sex, race and/or gender, there is no generic agitprop in "Beyond Loss." Yet this is

not a refined, melancholic salon. The more than 50 works by 26 artists, male and female, living and dead, frequently serve up unlovely messages made palatable only by their well-wrought context.

A ground-floor installation by Cary S. Leibowitz (who signs his work "Candy Ass") is one of the first pieces viewers encounter. Purposefully un-aesthetic, it seems a refugee from a more politically provocative show—until one begins literally to read the space. Bright yellow walls flaunt banners with "Homo State" and "Go Fags." Scribbled wall stories chronicle the moments in the lives not just of homosexuals, but all those who hover on the fringe hoping for love's redemption. Leibowitz pushes the self-pity and romantic groveling of his persona to levels that clearly parody societal assumptions about gay relations and self-worth. Nonetheless, indirectly the piece also exposes the doubts and obsessions that consume everyone.

Upstairs, more controlled media yet no less complex messages reign.

Clothes do not make the man but evoke him in the work of Jim Hodges, Oliver Herring and Loring McAlpin. Hodges' exquisite installation "What's Left" extends a delicate silver-chain cobweb like a canopy of tears over a heap of clothing discarded by the departed. Herring's transparent knitted-tape pants and oversize sweater—segments of his ongoing "A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger"—mourn the suicide of a well-known drag queen with handiworks that may as well be grave offerings, since they will never be worn.

McAlpin's "Grauman's Circle," on the other hand, displays a mordant wit. A circle on the floor bears the imprint of eight pairs of shoes; suspended above each pair at groin height is a metallic ring inscribed with the name of a dead male porno star. Yet this is no one-liner: The mocking subversion of Hollywood stardom forces the recognition that behind these screen icons were men who are gone.

A broader black humor buttresses Masami Teraoka's vibrant watercolor takeoffs of Japanese *Ukiyo-e* prints. Contemporary situations are presented in traditional settings, loaded with anachronisms. In "AIDS Series/Kyoto Inn Waiting," condoms are clutched in the teeth of a samurai-businessman, littered across the floor and otherwise ubiquitous in this trysting place. Safe sex no matter what the circumstance seems to be the message, couched in terms that poke fun at Japanese *machismo*.

A more macabre stripping away of assumptions informs David Wojnarowicz's silver print and silk-screen "Untitled," created just before his death. The black-and-white image of bandaged hands, palms up, fingers curled in, suggests everything from leprosy and war wounds to burial shrouds; across this picture Wojnarowicz has overprinted in red letters a defiant, caustic, heart-piercing litany of what it feels like to be dying that ends with "I am disappearing . . . but not fast enough." Reading the last word, one realizes that the background of the image has gone from gray in the upper reaches to total black at the bottom—a transition that subtly underscores the message of vanishing.

A similar psychic pain marks Judy Glantzman's large, light-filled, pastel-tinted paintings. The glistening surfac-

es of her "Judith and Holofernes" and "Untitled" are seductive, but closer looks at the outlined feet, skirts and giant heads reveal a terrifying, almost bloody intensity: Hands make fists, mouths distort in pain, teeth blur with a passion that recalls the agonizing portraits of Francis Bacon.

There are moments of respite from such visceral intensity. One is Hugh Steers's lovely "White Shirt," in which a man helping his companion dress holds up a white shirt so light-suffused that it is possible to see his body through it. The transparent garment, minimal furniture, and window opening onto intense daylight compose a moving spiritual parable of departure and transformation. Another is Kenneth Banks's "Song Dance Healing Journey," a golden-rimmed ceramic pot made to promote healing in a friend. A visual anomaly in the midst of mainstream art forms, despite its bright colors and the artist's intent, it comes across as a poignant reminder of empty cures.

The undeniable standout of "Beyond Loss" is the seldom-seen (at least on this side of the border) Nahum Zenil. The simple outlines and unmodulated volumes of Zenil's subdued self-portraits suggest an untrained maker, although sophisticated compositions belie this disguise. Firmly rooted in Mexican folk art and ecclesiastical traditions, his is a unique brand of magic realism grafted onto European surrealism.

In "Esperar la Hora que cambiara nuestro costumbre no es facil" ("Waiting for the time when our custom will change is not easy"), a nude man crouches on a chair, arms wrapped around his knees, surrounded by a decorative but invasive canopy of moths, symbol of death and transformation. Rough twine stretched like horizontal bars across the picture plane between the cardboard-textured mat forms a cage behind which the man waits, bound by circumstance and convention. His expression is almost deadpan, yet the black eyes are mournful and direct. This is man the naked animal, suffering spirit exposed, asking for understanding and connection.

To greater or lesser degrees, understanding and connection is what all the art in this show seeks. The artists in "Beyond Loss" acknowledge the numbers that have died and mourn their departed. There is plenty of

pain, anger and even finger-pointing. Yet the raw emotions have been channeled into consciously, even lovingly composed products that resonate with both loss and hope—loss, because that is the reality the art mirrors, and hope, because the creative act, and indeed life, depends on it.

*"Beyond Loss: Art in the Era of AIDS," at the Washington Project for the Arts, 400 Seventh St. NW, runs through June 13.*