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How the Art World Responded to AIDS

The epidemic is the focus of 'Art AIDS America' at the Bronx Museum of the Arts

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It looks like something you might pick up in any well-stocked toy store. But the teddy bear in Charles LeDray's untitled 1991 sculpture is no toddler's companion.

Dressed in a white funeral suit, it lies in a tiny, silk-lined coffin—another victim of the AIDS crisis that was then tearing through the art world, and the world at large.

How artists grappled—and continue to grapple—with the epidemic is the focus of “Art AIDS America,” opening Wednesday at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. In some 120 works by close to 100 artists, the show captures the rage, anguish and overwhelming sense of loss that accompanied the epidemic at its height, along with the activism it sparked and its continuing reverberation through the culture.

“At first it was, ‘What the hell is happening and why isn’t anyone doing anything about it?’ ” recalled Hunter Reynolds, one of the artists included in the show. “It was like a war. You’re in your 20s and everyone around you is dying.”

There is anger, among other things, in “Love, AIDS, Riot,” Marlene McCarty’s unprintable riff on Robert Indiana’s tilted-O “Love” icon. A profound sense of mourning suffuses Keith Haring’s bronze-and-white, gold-leafed “Altar Piece,” its silhouette echoing medieval religious art. A dreamlike unreality haunts “Babies with AIDS (Bebés con SIDA),” Luis Cruz Azaceta’s vision of the epidemic’s youngest victims.

And Mr. Reynolds’s “Survival AIDS Series 2 ACT UP Chicago with Memorial Dress photographed by Maxine Henryson,” completed only last year, reveals a continued reckoning with a disease that hasn’t gone away.

Organized by the Tacoma Art Museum in partnership with the Bronx Museum, the exhibition features artists ranging from the familiar to the less well-known, including Jasper Johns, Annie Leibovitz, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Catherine Opie and Martin Wong.

It also explores the impact of the AIDS crisis on American art. For one thing, the show suggests, AIDS sharply reversed the 1980s trend of removing the artist’s presence from the artwork.

“All of a sudden, you’re not just talking about ideas and tropes and metaphors,” said Antonio Sergio Bessa, the Bronx Museum’s director of curatorial and education programs. “Death is not a metaphor anymore. It becomes a real threat.”

Artists “took every possible tool they could find to make expressions of their experiences,” said Rock Hushka, chief curator at the Tacoma museum and co-curator of the exhibition with Jonathan D. Katz, director of the visual studies doctoral program at the University at Buffalo, the State University of New York.

Approaches ranged from Madison Avenue-style advertising to the feminist position that all politics is personal. The show spotlights activist art collectives that took the lead in pushing the epidemic into the public eye—among them, ACT UP, Gran Fury and Visual AIDS, creators of the red AIDS-awareness ribbon and the international Day Without Art, still observed every Dec. 1.

Other exhibition themes include the body, the spirit and camouflage.

Camouflage?

With the late-1980s culture wars raging and funding pulled for controversial exhibitions, “artists needed to find ways to make it acceptable for people to talk about the AIDS crisis in a museum or gallery context,” Mr. Hushka explained.

The confined teddy bear is one example. So is “Drains,” a 1990 cast-pewter sculpture by Robert Gober. Resembling an everyday sink fixture, it hauntingly evokes waste, bodily fluids—and lives—literally going down the drain.

While the epidemic may have peaked, AIDS persists. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, roughly 1.2 million Americans currently live with HIV/AIDS, and close to

40,000 cases are diagnosed nationwide annually.

“We have some of the largest numbers of HIV in New York City, here in our borough,” said Bronx Museum Executive Director Holly Block.

With that in mind, the museum is looking to start a conversation with local residents about HIV, AIDS and related health issues.

Ms. Block called the effort “information sharing, using artwork as knowledge, thinking more broadly.”

Locally, there hasn’t been much public dialogue on the topic, said Mr. Bessa, due to “issues related to stigma and prejudice.”

The museum’s education and public programs include a three-week teen summer intensive, a Bronx Stories open-mic event and a panel discussion with local health-care providers. A mobile medical unit will be present for many events.

In September, Mr. Reynolds—a 32-year HIV survivor and a co-founder of the activist group Art+—will perform in conjunction with an exhibition tour led by independent curator Sur Rodney (Sur) and Art+ co-founder Lola Flash.

The involvement of long-term survivors reflects one of the show’s most inspiring takeaways: the resilience of communities and individuals in the face of HIV/AIDS.

That idea is movingly evoked in Deborah Kass’s 2007 canvas “Still Here.” Painted in bold lettering over a colorful background, the phrase quotes a song from the Stephen Sondheim musical “Follies.”

It is a message, said Ms. Kass, that “survivors of a lot of things can relate to.”

Corrections: The Bronx Museum’s director of curatorial and education programs is Antonio Sergio Bessa. An earlier version of this article omitted his surname in one instance. (July 10)