CITIZEN JANE

Jane Lynch on Glee, new holiday CD.
Photo by Jake Bailey

34

THE ART OF ACTIVISM

Art AIDS America co-curator talks activism, exhibition

BY GRETCHEN RACHEL HAMMOND

On World AIDS Day Dec. 1, The Alphawood Gallery in Chicago’s Lincoln Park neighborhood will officially open the extraordinary and historic new exhibit for which the building was conceived and designed.

Since its Oct. 3, 2015 premiere at the Tacoma Art Museum (TAM), Art AIDS America has been touring the country with pieces depicting the history of AIDS in the United States as seen through the uncompromising eyes and limitless creativity of the visual artist.

The Alphawood Gallery and the city of Chicago will be the exhibit’s final home—a host to work that, for the most part, was never before seen until co-curators Chicagoan gay-rights activist/Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art President Jonathan David Katz (who is also director of the visual studies doctoral program at State University of New York-Buffalo), alongside Tacoma Art Museum Chief Curator Rock Hushka, began years of painstaking work.

Katz spoke with Windy City Times about that work and the life which gave rise to it.

Turn to page 23

UBER RELATIONSHIP

Couple unites, thanks to ridesharing.
Photo of Tanya Serrano-Bargas and Marisela Bargas
by Gretchen Rachel Hammond

20

HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

PART ONE 37-41

FIDEL CASTRO

Controversial world leader dies; LGBTs react.
Instagram photo

4

www.WindyCityMediaGroup.com
KATZ from cover

Windy City Times: When we talk about the birth of an activist, how did that happen for you?

Jonathan Katz: Coming of age in the early 1980s, it was very hard not to be pissed off—and I was very pissed off. The University of Chicago was relatively quiescent in terms of queer issues in those days. There was a gay group but it wasn’t very active. I got involved and, as it became more active, an organization called The Great White Brotherhood of the Iron Fist raised it’s very ugly head at the university and started counter programming queer stuff.

They took me aside to ask if they thought queer people would read like Ballet Today. (Why? I couldn’t begin to tell you) and they would very carefully split out the centerfold page and put, in some of the Discourse for AIDS Victims: come celebrate the death of the home.

They sent everybody in my apartment building a hand addressed envelope that said I was a convicted child molester with AIDS, theyout people who were closed.

The University of Chicago didn’t do a thing, probably because [then University President] Hanna [Holborn] Gray was a closet case. I complained and I remember her saying “The University is about free exchange of ideas, so sit across the dinner table and discuss your differences.”

They were covering my car with bumper stickers that said, “Clean up Hyde Park, stop AIDS, kill a faggot” and I’m supposed to have a conversation with them? It was horrific. It went on for well over a year. The postal inspectors got involved and determined it was against the law to harass people using the U.S. mail and [The Great White Brotherhood] were busted on federal mail charges. Then the University had no choice but to suspend them for a year.

The other part of what made me an activist was the feeling that there was a great deal more of what didn’t feature the body, sexuality, that didn’t look like art about AIDS at all. One of the artists in the exhibition Felix Gonzalez-Torres said it best when he paralleled his creative career to a virus. For an artist who is dying of AIDS to take the very disease that is killing him as a model of what he could do tells us something very significant. He said, “Don’t be the opposition. Be a virus. Enter the immune system, replicate like crazy and take over.” He made works of art that were the fundamental equivalent of HIV; that passed through the system of the art world’s immune system at the museum and replicated within its environment. He took a leaf from the AIDS playbook in order to fight it.

I think the thinking that I had since the late 1980s and then my co-curator Rock proposed the exhibition and it took ten years to pull it off.

WCT: How would you define the level of work that it took to get it done when so many pieces were created under the radar?

JK: It was really one of the hardest things to not only get artists but to find those works by the artists that were sufficiently under the radar that they didn’t look like works about AIDS but the viewer could see the theme in the work.

It was always a balancing act. We scoured all the work from the artists that were sufficiently under the radar for the entire story of American art. Where did it come from?

WCT: Why did it come from?

JK: I think from a dawning recognition that we got the entire story of American art wrong by understanding AIDS as a tragic tangent to the development of American art rather than as it’s motor. The more I looked into the art, the more I realized that American art had been profoundly influenced by AIDS but, like every tangent to the motor, it’s been marginalized and dismissed its import. I also understood that the bulk of work about AIDS never looked like it was about AIDS because it couldn’t look like it was about AIDS.

So what I wanted to do was make an exhibition that looked at all the different responses to AIDS especially those that didn’t feature the body, sexuality, that didn’t look like art about AIDS at all. One of the artists in the exhibition Felix Gonzalez-Torres said it best when he paralleled his creative career to a virus. For an artist who is dying of AIDS to take the very disease that is killing him as a model of what he could do tells us something very significant. He said, “Don’t be the opposition. Be a virus. Enter the immune system, replicate like crazy and take over.” He made works of art that were the fundamental equivalent of HIV; that passed through the system of the art world’s immune system at the museum and replicated within its environment. He took a leaf from the AIDS playbook in order to fight it.

I think the thinking that I had since the late 1980s and then my co-curator Rock proposed the exhibition and it took ten years to pull it off.

WCT: Give me the sense of the level of work that it took to get it done when so many pieces were created under the radar.

JK: It was really one of the hardest things to not only get artists but to find those works by the artists that were sufficiently under the radar that they didn’t look like works about AIDS but the viewer could see the theme in the work.

It was always a balancing act. We scoured all the work from the artists that were sufficiently under the radar for the entire story of American art. Where did it come from?

WCT: How would you define the level of work that it took to get it done when so many pieces were created under the radar?

JK: It was really one of the hardest things to not only get artists but to find those works by the artists that were sufficiently under the radar that they didn’t look like works about AIDS but the viewer could see the theme in the work.

It was always a balancing act. We scoured all the work from the artists that were sufficiently under the radar for the entire story of American art. Where did it come from?

WCT: How would you define the level of work that it took to get it done when so many pieces were created under the radar?

JK: It was really one of the hardest things to not only get artists but to find those works by the artists that were sufficiently under the radar that they didn’t look like works about AIDS but the viewer could see the theme in the work.

It was always a balancing act. We scoured all the work from the artists that were sufficiently under the radar for the entire story of American art. Where did it come from?

WCT: How would you define the level of work that it took to get it done when so many pieces were created under the radar?

JK: It was really one of the hardest things to not only get artists but to find those works by the artists that were sufficiently under the radar that they didn’t look like works about AIDS but the viewer could see the theme in the work.