

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

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Review/Art; Images of Grief and Rage In Exhibitions on AIDS

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"Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" at Artists Space (223 West Broadway, at White Street) has had a sustained, noisy, contentious and in some respects unwelcome buildup. Now the object of nationwide attention, it began as a low-key cry of grief and outrage from a group of artists, resident mainly on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

One and all of them had had to come to terms with the ever-increasing impact of AIDS upon their community as a whole, upon those closest to them and, in many cases, upon themselves. The show was also intended, according to Susan Wyatt, the executive director of Artists Space, as "a kind of testimony of survival, of keeping the faith, despite the insidious nature of the disease and the prejudice surrounding it."

As such, it could have taken an elegiac form, and sometimes it does. Jo Shane, for instance, shows two vanity tables that have been outfitted with photographs and personal belongings that turn them into portable shrines for remembrance.

If we yield to an almost universal instinct and pull open a drawer, a mirror hidden inside may reflect our own face back at us. Another drawer opens to reveal a group of glass vials whose function we can guess for ourselves. It may also be that one of the glass bottles on the table is filled not with perfume but with the blood of the dead victim. Even so, and despite the overtones just described, these are shrines that play by the rules.

It also happens once or twice that sheer beauty of an ironical kind irradiates what is in reality as unpleasant a situation as can be wished upon us. In Philip-Lorca DiCorcia's color photography, "Vittorio," an AIDS patient lies in a hospital. All around him are the marks of festivity. Colored balloons ride the ceiling. A vintage summer straw hat makes a cameo appearance. Focus is everywhere soft and sweet. For the time it takes to activate the camera, pain and despair and indignity are defeated.

It can also happen that an artist pulls back from the immediate and takes a longer, wryer view. In one of Allen Frame's two-part black and white photo-diptychs, we get a paradoxical glimpse of the boisterous outdoors. Next, he spells out what it means to grow a little older, in the United States, and yet to have much the same feelings about much the same people.

That is, comparatively, the fun part of the show. But most of it has a deeper, darker character. These are not people who go quietly and obediently. When they die, they die in rage. Foul in mouth and sometimes foul in body, they speak in hatred, and choking. Who are we to reproach them for "questionable taste"? The traditional rules of mourning nowhere apply. To have watched them die is, as one witness says, "like surgery without anesthetic." Notions of "taste" can play no part in it.

The little drawing called "What Happend to My Lungs ?" by Vittorio Scarpati is relevant to this. Made at a time when Scarpati's lungs had collapsed from AIDS-related pneumonia and when he was in great pain for months on end, it has a free-running sardonic humor that may be "in questionable taste." But it is as an instance of man's unconquerable mind that it stays in the memory.

Those who are dying of AIDS, and those who will die of it in the years to come, are entitled to wonder whether all that could be done about it is actually being done. Theirs is, in that respect and in no other, a privileged position. Whatever they want to say, we should listen to. And in text and image in this exhibition, they do say it. If what they have to say and to show is sometimes shot through with a corrosive

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and terrible invective, who can be surprised?

Yet in times of great and irreversible trouble, art can be on our side. So it is, at any rate, with the self-portraits in which Darrel Ellis starts from photographs of himself by Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar and readjusts them, subtly, in ink on paper. The truth of those photographs is self-evident, but the pen-and-ink drawings carry with them an emotional charge that is no less true.

Though doubtless disconcerting at times to visitors who would come in unaltered to the purpose of the show, the show is neither gratuitous nor merely sensational. Nor is it defeatist in its general tone. Clarence Elie-Rivera's photographs of daily life in the Lower East Side scenes have a tumultuous vitality. Stephen Tashjian's full-length portrait of a young man has a rakish style that in this context is all its own.

There is, too, something memorably calm and constructive about the long series of photographs in which Dorit Cypis had herself photographed, naked, by four women friends. So far from being prurient, the 28 images offer an affectionate but impartial account of what it means to live in one's whole body, instead of primarily in one's head.

It also emerges from the show that a key feature of the experience of AIDS is the immense loneliness that it leaves among the bereft. Shellburne Thurber's photo-portraits of empty motel rooms bring that out without a "story," so all-permeating is the emptiness before us.

"Witnesses" is not primarily an art exhibition. It is an attempt to bear witness in terms of art. If some of it is unpleasant and disturbing, it could not be otherwise. In mounting the show, Artists Space has remained true to its original ambition, which was to give artists a chance to show work that, as yet, no one had been willing to take on. And if, in the matter of AIDS, there are barriers between "us" and "them," it is for us to break them down, not to build them higher.

"Portrait of Mark Morrisroe," by Stephen Tashjian, is in the exhibition "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" at Artists Space.