

Beyond Loss:

ART IN THE ERA OF AIDS

April 23 through June 13, 1993

Now, at the beginning of the second decade of the AIDS crisis and surrounded by numbers (mortalities, people with AIDS, HIV-positives, and future projections), statistics become almost unnecessary to fathom the effects of the disease on artists. Evidence of the far-reaching psychological, moral, and emotional toll of AIDS is present in the work of many artists, and the artworld has seen far more than its share of AIDS-related deaths. The visible signs are put into sharp relief through the work of activist-artists and collaborative groups such as Gran Fury, ActUp, and Visual AIDS (whose *Electric Blanket* is being shown in conjunction with this exhibition). The agitprop activities of these groups has been instrumental in establishing models for AIDS education. By addressing the pathetic deficiencies of government-sanctioned strategies and the bigotry underlying those strategies, they have refined the relationship between art and socially conscious action. Simply stated, AIDS has profoundly changed that broadly-defined thing called "The Arts."

In sheer numbers, the continuing loss of artists and the truncated development of many promising careers is a profound tragedy. This situation has forced many artists to confront issues of mortality, sexuality, and the fragility of the body in a more accelerated and direct manner than would have been the case if AIDS had never appeared on the scene—and the traces left behind in the work too often bear witness to the intensity of feeling caused by this quick evolution.

Any analysis of the disease's effect on artists is as problematic as the reliance on determinitives such as "divine madness" or "the presence of the muse" as explanations for the elemental makeup of art. Profound weaknesses lie in thinking that, on the one hand, "AIDS has been good for art and has produced new forms," and, on the other, that "Art lives beyond AIDS; we are lucky to have their work left behind as a memorial." True, both views touch upon central issues in the definition of AIDS as a cultural phenomenon but both also exclude a simple fact: that there are lives behind artworks, just as there are lives behind the columns of hard numbers used to explain the demographics of AIDS. *Beyond Loss* seeks to flesh out the diverse and rich quality of these lives, the reasons for concern, and the ways in which AIDS has deeply affected everyone it touches.

Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, DC

Notes on the Artists

CARLOS ALMARAZ born 1941 - died 1989

Primarily known as a painter of lush Los Angeles scenes and murals, Carlos Almaraz achieved a level of prominence which placed him at the forefront of Latino artists in the U.S. His poster for the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles catapulted him into national prominence and was partially responsible for the explosion of interest in Chicano art. Less widely recognized is the fact that Almaraz mixed the same exuberant palette with angst-tinged subject matter and symbols which, at times, contained imagery that raised questions about his own views of sexuality.

His career took early turns as a graphic polemicist for Cesar Chavez's Farm Workers Movement, to an exploratory period in New York City during the height of minimalism. In later years, Almaraz's relationship to the Chicano political scene in Los Angeles was strained by criticisms that he had abandoned the Chicano visual vocabulary.

The small work in *Beyond Loss* dates from a period of heightened self-awareness for Almaraz. Grappling with the knowledge that he had AIDS, he produced numerous darkly romantic images.

Carlos Almaraz died of complications related to AIDS in Los Angeles in 1989.

KENNETH BANKS born 1953

Banks' signature style—painting on pre-made ceramic and unfired clay vessels—is derived from Native American imagery, pictograms, and decorative motifs. A member of the Kumeyaay (Digueno) Tribe of Southern California, Banks focuses his energies on the creation of his individual imagery. The piece exhibited in *Beyond Loss* is a healing vessel made for a friend dying of AIDS-related conditions. Stylistically unique in Banks' work, its colors are unusual for him, and the symbols it employs are of a wider range than normal. Banks attributes this to his customizing of the vessel according to the wishes of his friend.

ROBERT BORDO born 1949

Robert Bordo arrived at abstraction via intensive study of figuration at the New York Studio School and experiments with abstraction during the neo-expressionist early eighties. Bordo encompasses both the modernist drive toward transcendent abstraction—particularly monochrome painting—and a postmodern approach that incorporates definable visual references. A current series, not shown here, uses a traditional quilt design motif as the structural matrix for a wash of monochrome. This approach visually diagrams the integration of public and private experience which is at the heart of painting: an acknowledgement which also refers directly to the experience of living through and within the era of AIDS.

Two Charles, seen here, refers to American painters Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth—two American modernists whose approaches to visually-derived sensual experience were markedly different.

NANCY BURSON born 1948

Burson's work of the mid-to-late eight-

ies used digital technology to "morph" photographic portraits into spectral composite images—forcing the viewer to find the individual, encrypted identities. *Visualization Image for AIDS-Related Pnuemonia* turns that technology around to affect the viewer and use the image as a means to catalyze the body's innate healing capacities, a now-common alternative cancer-treatment strategy. The work was originally made for use as a street poster and has appeared on kiosks and bus stops all over the world.

KATHE BURKHART born 1958

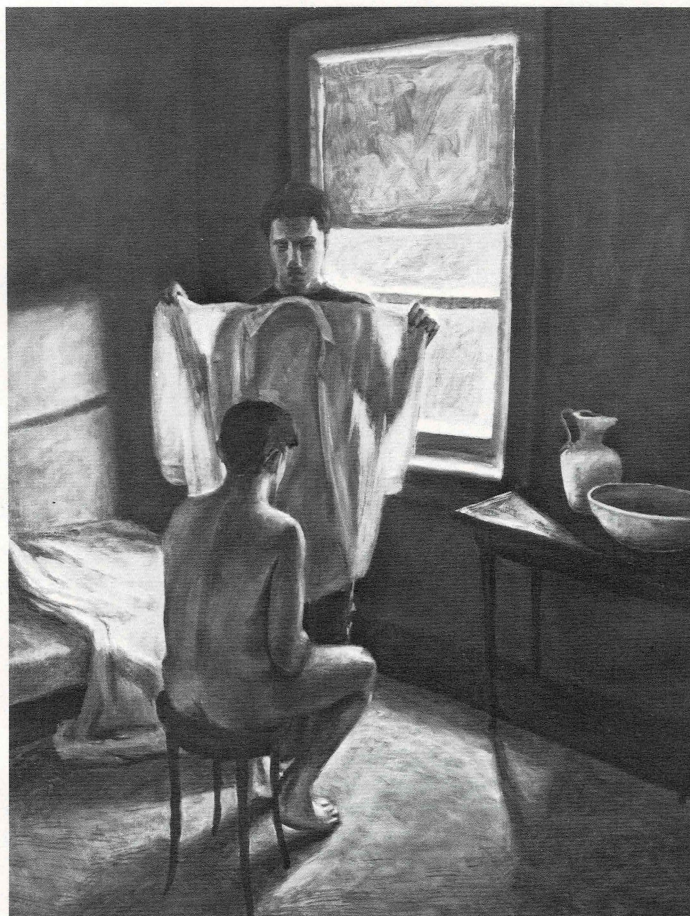
Kathe Burkhardt's mixed-media works chronicle the evolution of her fascination with Elizabeth Taylor as representative of a problematic view of feminism and of the misrepresentation of AIDS through the media and popular culture. In the artist's view, Taylor is both respected and loathed; the former for her unflinching courage in the face of public attention, and the latter for her victimization by the media and the film industry. Burkhardt sutures the "real" Liz Taylor and the cinematic Liz Taylor, conflating the two personae to create a figure of mythical proportion. Taylor's association with AIDS is likewise twofold: her leadership of AmFAR (American Foundation for AIDS Research) casts her in a central role in the molding of public perceptions regarding AIDS. On the other side, Taylor has been cruelly exploited by tabloid articles regarding her sexuality and her reasons for taking a public role in the fight against AIDS. The work in *Beyond Loss*, from a scene in *Suddenly Last Summer*, shows a morose, supine Taylor awaiting a hypodermic injection.

ARNOLD FERN born 1952

Taken from an ambitious series of related works, these paintings of huge, disembodied heads recall Titian and Mantegna and bear the marks of one whose belief in the craft of painting is unflinching. They are lovingly observed and carefully painted, but their quiet, classical elegance is a vehicle for a web of paradoxes. Expressions of mourning inhabit the visages which also convey a powerful and life-affirming message of the sensuality of human experience and of gay sexuality. Similarly, though the men are pin-up perfect, each gaze betrays the presence of a longing for nirvana and the confused fear of one for whom the innocence of sexual experience is a no-longer-attainable luxury.

ROBERT FLACK born 1957

Like Arnold Fern, Robert Flack celebrates physicality by acknowledging the body as a temple. His works, like Nancy Burson's healing images, visualize the invasion and defense of the body. Flack's vision is fueled by extensive personal research into Buddhist texts, arcane symbology and healing rituals, and a passion for activities which connect body to mind. The series shown here illustrates the *Chakras*—a tantric concept which identifies seven points through which pass the latent female energy lying coiled within



Hugh Steers, *The White Shirt*, 1991, Oil on canvas, 46 x 36"
Photo courtesy of Midtown Payson Galleries

the body. Flack visually identifies the seven *Chakras* with imaginary, cartoon-like decorative motifs which function as visible locators for each point. Not limited in importance to the pragmatic necessity of titling artworks, the titles infuse each Chakra with a specific function. Another, less arcane element in Flack's work is the pronounced influence of disco culture, which is present in the colored light which frames the decorative motifs and illuminates the bodies.

ROBERT GIL de MONTES born 1950

A central figure in Los Angeles' Chicano art movement of the seventies and eighties, Guadalajara-born and -raised Gil de Montes digs deep into the traditions of his culture of origin, and incorporates much of the Mexican pictorial and iconographic tradition in his work. His more recent paintings build on the Mexican tradition into which he was born and breathe new life into its symbols. Always intent on further exploration of his chosen vocabulary, Gil de Montes's work addresses the reality of personal experience and the nature of life in Los Angeles. Beginning in the early eighties, Gil de Montes acknowledged the AIDS crisis as a major influence on his work, which places his own relationships—sexual, romantic, and otherwise—in a central role. The figures which populate Gil de Montes's paintings are powerful and strong, but at the same time seem to look for comfort and reassurance in one another. In one of the works shown here, lovers walk hand-in-hand on a gray beach while the city behind them is engulfed in flames.

JUDY GLANTZMAN born 1956

While participating in the care of a close friend dying of AIDS-related conditions, Judy Glantzman went daily to her studio to create a record of what she had seen and sensed in the presence of this still powerful but physically-wrecked person.

These paintings became a valuable and necessary outlet for the artist's rage and her feelings of the ineffectuality of pitting the will to live against death. Certain formal constants

began to wind their way into her renditions of the figure: the body would begin as a vessel or an abstract organic form and would often end up dressed in a skirt. According to the artist, the purpose of these devices was, partially, to find a solid place in which the body could live on the canvas, but also to wrap it in a garment that seemed to keep the body whole. The skirts are also a moving gesture of adornment and infuse the paintings with the love the artist felt for her friend.

Glantzman also uses the wetly-painted surface as a direct metaphor for human skin. In the two paintings selected for *Beyond Loss*, the paint/skin depicts the ravages of AIDS-related symptoms on the body of David Wojnarowicz during the last weeks of his life.

TONY GREENE

born 1955 - died 1990

Tony Greene was fascinated by the function of memorials. Their stillness and passivity, anonymity, signifying function, and—most important—their latent erotic charge were qualities which he used to illustrate the structure of homoerotic desire. In his best-known work, Greene over-

laid rephotographed male bodies and facial features with garish organic motifs derived from 18th and 19th century European architecture and furniture design. These purely decorative elements, rendered in a viscous impasto, make manifest the process of glorifying the body and the means by which it is "adorned" with words, emotions, and desires. Related works, like the two "initial" paintings seen here, strip away most signs of bodily presence, leaving only cursory signifiers which imply an obsessive desire.

AIDS is a central concern in most of Greene's work, and both its substantive qualities and its psychological/spiritual effects inform his images. In some works, such as the untitled "pour" series seen here, Greene's medium itself becomes a stand-in for the vehicles of infection, surrounding the mouths of unknown men with a fluid which, though antiseptically cold in appearance, may be the carrier of the virus which will kill them.

Tony Greene died of complications related to AIDS in Los Angeles in 1990.

OLIVER HERRING born 1963

German-born Oliver Herring recently exhibited works from his series, *A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger*, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Two pieces from that recent installation are seen here. An ongoing project, *A Flower...* is dedicated to Ethyl Eichelberger, a flamboyant drag queen and noted New York performance artist in the eighties. Eichelberger committed suicide in 1991 after being diagnosed with AIDS.

The magic of Herring's work rests in the delicate balance between his conceptual approach and his use of a traditional craft. Knitting luminous fabrics out of folded pieces of transparent tape, the artist creates impossibly delicate, metaphorical garments which, though sized to fit, will never wrap the body for which they are intended.

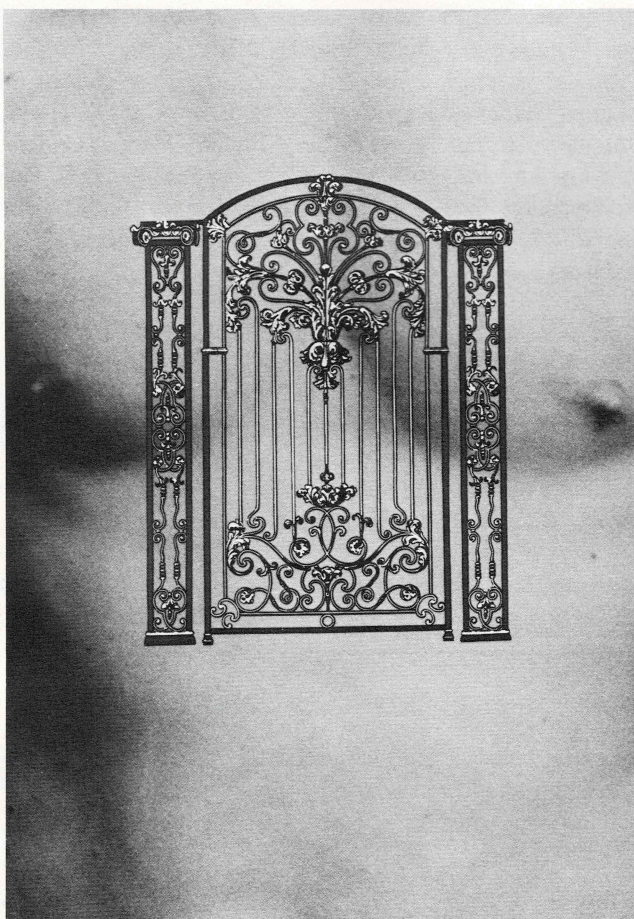
Appropriate in light of both Eichelberger's gender-breaking performance work and the non-gender-specific nature of AIDS, the garments could be considered gender neutral. However, they possess a feminine undertone through their association with the historically "female" craft of knitting.

JIM HODGES born 1957

The electrically-charged space left by the departure of a friend or lover is the energizing force behind Jim Hodges's work. The delicate spiderwebs woven from steel chain which he employs in most of his recent sculpture signify an unexpected and sudden disuse, neglect, and a loss of human presence which also takes into account the sadness and helplessness of those left behind.

Importantly, Hodges's spiderwebs also evince a judicious determination and diligence in their craft and refer to the building and rebuilding of lives. In reference to this, Hodges has mentioned his affection for E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, a sophisticated children's book in which a very direct explanation of death is countered by poetic and uplifting images of the cyclical nature of life.

The work in *Beyond Loss* depicts clothing discarded, seemingly in the heat of passion, never to be worn again.



Robert Flack, *Portal*, 1990, type C print, 40 x 30"
Photo courtesy of the artist

CARY S. LEIBOWITZ/CANDYASS born 1963

Cary S. Leibowitz's objects and installations usher the viewer into the world of Candyass, an alter ego who is "chronically in a bad mood" and needs to be honest with you about how he feels. Candyass speaks as a gay man in homophobic America, but there is little of the activist-artist in him. He would rather talk to you—through his work—about the embarrassment of a spontaneous hard-on in the high school locker room, or the nagging self-pity felt by one for whom being happy about anything isn't an option.

Unique in an artworld obsessed with speed, ego, and career-building, Candyass's stuff shows an almost complete *absence* of ego. Instead, it chronicles the neuroses and fears of one who needs to belong but who, at the same time, is positively miserable in a group. Kitchen wallpaper colors and the dull sheen of polyester allude to the offerings of a culture that can't supply contentment no matter how hard it tries.

LORING McALPIN born 1960

Loring McAlpin has written that the AIDS Quilt, despite its numerous positive qualities and the cohesion which it has given the gay community, "...tends to domesticate that which is most transgressive and affirming about gay identity—its sexuality." Like many of the artists in this exhibition, McAlpin is concerned with the creation of objects which memorialize, but takes this idea to its logical next stage—that of the public monument. His currently planned projects include a "Walk of the Stars" modeled on Hollywood Boulevard's *Walk of Fame*, which will immortalize gay pornography stars in terrazo and bronze. Like others in this exhibition, McAlpin is a founding member of the New York-based activist collective, *Gran Fury*.

JAIME PALACIOS born 1963

Chinese-born of Chilean/Mexican ancestry, Jaime Palacios has developed a singular vocabulary employing aspects of traditional Mexican painting and iconography in a manner which emphasizes their cross-cultural potential as universal symbols. To this end, his paintings are filled with recontextualized iconic imagery, such as *el corazon* (the heart), scissors, knives, cleansing rituals and devices, and graphic symbols which depict the body's organs and circulatory system. Palacios explains this trait in his work as illustrative of a desire to acknowledge a universal biological bond that cuts across gender and culture. His paintings stress the function of the body as a processing device and as a site of complex biological, emotional, and psychological flux.

Significantly, the works are also steeped in androgyny. Body parts are devoid of sexual signification, and some of the works seem to illustrate the results of a ritualistic stripping away of gender specificity.

BRETT REICHMAN born 1959

Brett Reichman's work consists of equal parts high camp, unmediated kitsch, virtuoso draftsmanship, and an acerbic critical sensibility. At first, the work seems deadly serious—and, ultimately, it is—but what quickly emerges out of the strange, irradiated palette and elegant draftsmanship is a view into a world populated by cartoon characters and the creations of the Brothers Grimm.

Reichman takes on the self-parodic and self-defeating aspects of "Gay Culture" and creates for it reflections in objects and characters which are lifted straight out of neverland. The three clocks in *And the spell was broken...*, with their long hands at, respectively, one minute before, one minute after, and precisely at midnight, seem to refer directly to the inevitability of death. But look closer: the clock's case is excessively ornate, stereotypically Germanic, and absurdly proportioned—a time-piece right off of the walls of Gepetto's shop, with Pinocchio possibly sitting on the workbench beneath. Quietly screaming, Reichman's work implores the viewer to get out of the fairy-tale world of self-perpetuating, internalized cultural stereotypes. Reichman's work is in many ways a call to action—but on an internal, self-aware level.

KAY ROSEN born 1947

One of the essential characteristics of Kay Rosen's paintings is their seemingly irreducible malleability. Her texts—words, phrases, palindromes, and truncated narratives—seem to take on an almost pictorial life at the same time that their meaning expands into an infinity of mirrors. The paintings (and, unlike much text-based art, her works beg to be read as paintings) become an environment where words not only stand in for meaning, but exist in three dimensions and possess form, weight, and texture: words not merely written, but sculpted.

The works in *Beyond Loss* were selected because of their ability to convey a *sense*, a latent presence, of the issue at hand. They are proof of the far-flung territory inhabited by the AIDS crisis, as well as its resultant effect on perceptions of the body and its meaning.

ANGEL RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ born 1955

Angel Rodríguez-Díaz explores the inner workings of the self and the results of the social forces which mold it. Central to his work is the evolution of personal and sexual identity through the family, social and moral customs, and mirror images of the self which often contain signs of hidden forces within. Definitions of beauty are also an apparent concern, and his portraits of others pointedly refer to physical, emotional, and psychological nakedness.

In *Remolino*, the artist paints himself within a cyclonic rush of air and dust, attempting to grab hold of a figure who seems painfully—and eternally—out of reach and whose identity may be that of the painter himself.

ANDRES SERRANO born 1951

Serrano, like Robert Mapplethorpe, is sometimes remembered more for his political significance than for the depth and visual beauty of his work. With his photo *Piss Christ* (1989), he created an image that brought the religious/political right wing into a battle surrounding government support of the arts which continues to this day.

Serrano's work is devoted to exploring the relationship between body, mind, and spirit. His use of bodily fluids (blood, semen, milk, urine) as the basis for much of the imagery in this body of work stems from a personal, spiritually-motivated drive to integrate the metaphysical with the corporeal. Paradoxically, his perception of the human body is seemingly objective: it harbors a detached quality which results in near abstraction and allows for multiple readings.

This last quality directly informs the image in *Beyond Loss*, which



Jaime Palacios, *Recordando (Remembering)*, 1992, Oil on canvas, 21 1/2 x 20 3/4"
Photo by Roger Welch, courtesy of Carla Stellweg Latin American and Contemporary Art

documents an arc of semen. There is an implicit violence in the work, but it is also a laudatory acknowledgement of the determinitives which drive our species.

HUGH STEERS born 1962

Hugh Steers's painting takes many of its cues from the American realists prominent in the 20's and 30's, such as Paul Cadmus, John Sloan, and Edward Hopper. Using elements of this painterly realism, Steers redirects its documentary nature to focus on the AIDS crisis and the manifestation of its effects upon the domestic sphere. His paintings depict patients and care givers, lovers in tense states of self-awareness, and solitary men exploring their bodies for evidence of the disease. A sense of intrusion is apparent in many of the works, reflecting both the tension created in the viewer by his/her own voyeurism, as well as the unwanted presence of another, darker force.

MASAMI TERAOKA born 1933

Masami Teraoka remolds the traditional Japanese Ukiyo-e form to function in a current-historical context. Rendering contemporary scenes and parables in watercolor, Teraoka places representatives from Western culture in the middle of a 19th century Japanese dreamland. Teraoka has been pointedly producing work about the AIDS crisis since the mid-1980's.

ANTHONY VITI born 1962

Anthony Viti's recent paintings signify his desire to "come to terms with being gay in a frequently hostile environment." While continually involved in gay activism through the group Gran Fury, Viti turned recently to making small-scale, wetly-painted abstractions.

His current body of work is based on the Iron Cross image found in paintings by American modernist Marsden Hartley. Viti uses this device to memorialize friends, lovers, and countless numbers of AIDS casualties, just as Hartley used the iron cross to memorialize his lover, a Prussian soldier killed in World War I. Many of the paintings contain the artist's own blood, which is consciously and deliberately used as a medium. Each piece in the series bears a distinct identity, metaphorically linking it to an individual victim of AIDS and symbolically ennobling gay sexuality.

Additionally, the works fulfill a revisionist function, as Viti sees his work as a means to "out" Hartley, whose sexuality is downplayed by the artist's biographers and scholars.

BRIAN WEIL born 1954

Brian Weil's book of photographs, *Every 17 Seconds* (Aperture), documents the AIDS crisis from a global perspective: from New York living rooms and Thai dance clubs to the black magic shops of Haiti and soldiers in the Zairean army. In *Beyond Loss*, his work is represented by a selection of images from New York, Zimbabwe, and Thailand—a small percentage of the heart-wrenching images that make up his book. The grainy, high contrast images in *Every 17 Seconds* have a stark feel,

but the technique also lends a sense of universality to their content. Weil's work is evidence of the commitment of a passionate and seemingly tireless AIDS activist who views his photography as an integral part of his activism.

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ born 1954 - died 1992

A painter, photographer, film/videomaker, and writer of intense, stream of consciousness prose, Wojnarowicz's creative output related almost solely to explaining, documenting, and remembering a life spent at the

edges of society. Wojnarowicz went through life as if it were a great experiment: going through periods of virtual homelessness, heroin addiction, life as a street hustler, and almost mythical journeys through the most desolate and spiritually empty parts of the American landscape. His books include *Close to the Knives* and *Memories That Smell Like Gasoline*.

Included in *Beyond Loss* is a work produced in the last year of his life, as he came to terms with his impending death from AIDS-related conditions. The piece reflects Wojnarowicz' ongoing obsession with death and a dry acknowledgement of his own body's deterioration. While aggressive in tone, the layer of text in the piece also reads as a moving elegy.

David Wojnarowicz died of complications related to AIDS in New York in 1992.

THOMAS WOODRUFF

born 1957

Like many of the painters in *Beyond Loss*, Woodruff explores the relationship between life experience and symbols, icons, and archetypes. In the series of self-portraits shown in *Beyond Loss*, Woodruff appears in the guise of a

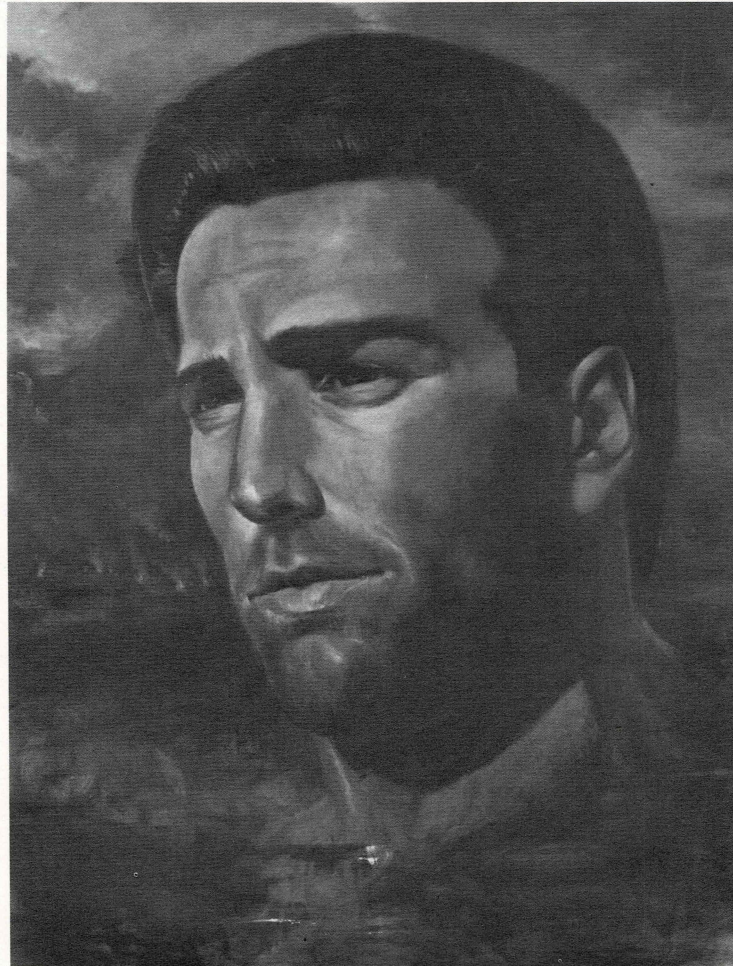
crying clown, gazing out from the canvas to display an expression filled with grief, lost innocence, and painful self-awareness. Much of Woodruff's work is concerned both with AIDS and body decoration as a metaphor for inner-directed experience, including an earlier series of paintings based on tattoo-derived iconography.

NAHUM ZENIL born 1947

The search for identity within gay men brought up inside of repressive and unwelcoming societal traditions is at the center of Nahum Zenil's mixed-media works. Zenil holds up his artwork as a mirror to himself, inserting characters from his own personal history that seem to always bear the artist's own image or traces of his identity. Zenil also courageously deals with the tension, indecision, and crises brought about by the cultivation of sexual relationships which go against the Catholicized norms of Mexico and Latin America.

Zenil's work is rarely seen in the United States.

*Introduction and artists' notes by Grant Samuelson
with input from Donald Russell and Michael Floyd*



Arnold Fern, *Head with Flames*, 1992, Oil on canvas, 72 x 54"

Photo by Peter Muscato, Courtesy of Feature, New York

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Beyond Loss: Art in the Era of AIDS is the result of a collaborative effort between Donald Russell, Grant Samuelson, and Michael Floyd, with the assistance of many individuals. Everyone involved brought to this project a drive, vision, and energy which is truly rare.

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Many people and businesses helped to organize the benefit celebration which opened this exhibition, including Saied Azali, Sal Fiorito, Robert Haywood, Philip Walsh, Angela Adams, Ann McNary, Emery Snyder, Terry Smith of J.L.B. Floral Design, Belmont Kitchen, Cities, Galileo, I Matti, New Heights, The Palm, The Peasant Restaurant and Bar, Perry's Restaurant, Peyote Cafe, Roxanne, Sushi-Ko, 701 Restaurant and Bar, Trumpets, and Fifth Column Nightclub. Brooke Alexander Editions and Josh Baer Gallery, Loring McAlpin, Brian Weil, and Hugh Steers generously contributed work for fundraising purposes.

We would also like to thank all of the artists and lenders collectively for their commitment to bringing this project to fruition and without whom there would be no exhibition.

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