

'Cocktail Hour' at SF Camerawork

by Steven Jenkins

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The recent groundbreaking discovery of a crucial, previously elusive means by which HIV enters and infects cells has been touted by physicians as a major advancement towards the potential formulation of an effective vaccine against the virus. Like all similarly encouraging yet ultimately inconclusive AIDS-related findings, however, this one has been greeted with guarded optimism and the usual frustrated impatience. Two decades and countless losses into the epidemic, responses to even the most promising news still tend to range from cautious hope and ironic detachment to stubborn fatalism and perpetual outrage.

Reacting in all of these ways, contemporary artists have documented, interpreted and challenged the pandemic ever since it entered public consciousness in the early 1980s. Now, nearly twenty years later, protease inhibitors and other progressive "cocktail" drug therapies are profoundly improving the health and projected life-span of many PWAs (or at least those fortunate enough to have the required access, funds, and physiology). Reflecting on this recent, unprecedented change in treatment and prognosis, artists (and the rest of us) must now come to terms with new attitudes and possibilities as the understanding and

depiction of the disease shifts from an outmoded emphasis on victimhood and dying to the current focus on small triumphs and lives lived long and fully.

Which brings us to *Cocktail Hour: New Imagery in the AIDS Era*, a generous, heartening, if somewhat uneven group show on view at SF Camerawork. Intelligently curated by Bob Kelley, and featuring the work of 17 local and international photographers and multimedia artists, *Cocktail Hour* is mercifully bereft of the doomsday warnings and panic-stricken tone that characterized much AIDS-related artwork throughout the '80s. Rather, these artists engage personal and universal issues of dignity, fear, sex, and survival through a refreshing diversity of stylistic approaches, from straightforward documentary reportage and autobiographical revelation to poetic metaphor and irreverent eroticism. At its best, the work of these honest, innovative artists suggests that individual and cultural perspectives on living with AIDS are expanding in proportion to the advent of daring visual representations of illness, narrative and community.

Several of the artists have drawn on their own experiences, whether to comment on their own HIV status or on how they've been affected by losing loved ones to the disease. Clare Wren's spare, delicate photollages consist of cut-up Polaroids arranged in elegy to her brother and a close friend, both of whom died of AIDS. In the pointedly titled *Do*

Not Categorize, Organize, or Classify, Wren positions a hypodermic needle and other emblems of medical treatment in a cruciform, as if spiritual salvation might lend meaning to secular grief. Albert J. Winn more decisively incorporates religious tradition in his black-and-white photographs, in which he equates Jewish rituals with the monthly task of having his blood drawn. In *Falling*, a disarmingly humorous yet frightening photollage series produced during a two-week-long health crisis, David King pictures himself plummeting down the Grand Canyon and other deathly precipices. Retaining a sense of the absurd, King deftly filters his autobiography and uncertain future through the kitsch lens of a '50s teen exploitation flick.

Documentary photography is well represented in the exhibition, most notably by Thomas McGovern. Responding to Jesse Helms' typically heinous 1995 remark that PWAs are such because of "deliberate, disgusting and revolting conduct," McGovern offers *Bearing Witness (to AIDS)*, an eloquent portrait series that might actually shame, then educate, Helms and anyone else who remains unable to recognize the human face of illness behind their own hateful rhetoric.

Women with HIV

Mary Berridge's similarly point-blank series, *A Positive Life: Portraits of Women Living with HIV*, reminds us that the virus isn't always visible or noticeably debilitating, and that best friends, neighbors and relatives might be positive without our knowing.

Louise Roach's photo-text scrapbook project, *Friends, Family, and Lovers: Those Left Behind*, and Steve Hart's CD-ROM documentary, *A Bronx Family Album: The Impact of AIDS*, achieve the same effect, though the latter's high-tech application at times seems ill-suited to such gritty material.

Bay Area artists Frank Yamrus and J. John Priola both eschew straightforward documentation in favor of a poetic, metaphoric approach to difficult subject matter. Yamrus's stunning black-and-white photos of lone figures lying naked and abandoned in the sand dunes of Provincetown — historically a site of anonymous sex — refer to AIDS as a battleground dotted with fallen soldiers. By floating ambiguous, symbolically loaded objects — a spider web, a soap bubble, an extinguished candle — on silky black backgrounds, Priola conjures up the conflicting feelings of uncertainty and hope that surround new AIDS therapies.

These drug treatments are more directly depicted in Guy Kitchen's *Cabinet*, a medicine chest jammed with hypodermic needles and jars of medication, and by his gumball machine that dispenses multicolored pills. Alejandro Kuropatwa's emblematic color photograph, *Yo*, is an in-your-face image of a blue pill resting on an outstretched tongue, demanding to be swallowed every eight hours without fail. In the startlingly direct image-

text piece *I Popped*, Paul Fukui offers a sex-positive version of swallowing down pills: "I popped it into my mouth just as he shot, pumping a thick, salty gob of jism into my throat."

While many of the exhibition's savvy, undeniably committed artists incorporate barbed social commentary into their deeply personal investigations, they generally remember that aesthetic experimentation and a spoonful of sugar help to make the medicine go down. Arthur Tress's campy tableaux feature condoms as prophylactic heroes of the epidemic, while Kevin Hill's aqua-tinted photo grids transform the sexy promise of hot summer days by the swimming pool into what the artist calls "narratives of optic bliss." Jerome Caja, who died in 1995, is represented with a handful of cheerfully vulgar works, and Ken Probst scores with a series of behind-the-scenes photographs taken on the sets of gay and straight porn films. By revealing the workaday drudgery and technical mishaps intrinsic to shooting porn, Probst demythologues the industry's seedy glamour while stressing the ongoing importance of safe sex.

That said, Probst's excellent work doesn't necessarily fit within the context of this exhibition. Although AIDS and its attendant issues are of course far too sprawling to be represented by a single cohesive body of work or contained in a nice, neat package *Cocktail Hour* overflows with almost too many mixed messages to hold together as a cognitive whole. Still, until we're lucky enough to live in a post-AIDS era — during which exhibitions of this type will be seen as historical retrospectives rather than contemporary surveys — *Cocktail Hour* is as unmissable as a mid-night dose of Crivivan. ▼

Cocktail Hour: New Imagery in the AIDS Era is on view through August 8 at San Francisco Camerawork, 115 Natoma Street. For information, call 764-1001.