

Albert Velasco interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

New York City, 22 June 2008

This is a slightly edited transcript of a recorded interview. The text has been edited to correct some grammatical errors (which are inevitable features of spoken conversation), but only where this was necessary to aid comprehension. Albert Velasco reviewed and authorised this transcript on 9 February 2009.

Paul Sendziuk: I might just begin by asking you a little bit about your background, and particularly your artistic background. When did you remember getting interested in art, and particularly when did you know that you were going to become an artist?

Albert Velasco: My talent came from my father's side of the family. My grandfather was from Mexico and he was very skilled with building things. All my cousins have done things over the years from painting to macramé. My father is a carpenter, and always was a model builder; he even built the house that they live in now, did everything except the plumbing and the electrical work, and it's beautiful. I think they recognized right away that I wasn't athletically inclined [laughs], but they saw my artistic talent. Especially because they bought my sister and I - my sister and I were only a year apart - they bought us a chalkboard and I was always on it, drawing armies and worlds colliding. I was always getting my mother to come away from what she was doing to look at what I had done, and they always encouraged it. The biggest influence I had in my early years was my second grade teacher who, when we finished our school work, used to allow us to go up and take a flashcard out of the different decks she had. They were animals or insects, and you could draw them on a big sheet of paper. I was a really good student, so I finished my work fast, and did it well; but my incentive was to go copy these flashcards in colored crayons on the wall. And that just sort of continued through school. People recognized my talent. Everyone liked the calendars I did, the bulletin boards and things. In my small town of 1,200 people in California it was something that immediately became public knowledge. It saved me from public ridicule for not being on the Little League teams and being rough and tumble. In high school I was involved with decorating for the dances and the proms, and involved in art classes and doing things that got put up in display cases and things.

And did you decide at high school that you were going to be an artist, or did you have an idea that you wanted to enter another kind of profession?

First I wanted to be a scientist. I wanted to be every -ologist in the book. I wanted to be an entomologist, paleontologist, zoologist - covered them all. But then I had the misfortune that my first foundation science class was taught by a drunk. His idea of teaching was just reading things and then giving us a frog to cut open; and it was just so boring. I'm embarrassed to say that; I really thought that that was going to be how all science classes were, just, really dry and rote and not exciting. I knew science and medicine required so much schooling that I said "I can't do this, so I'll be an artist instead!" [both laugh] 'Cause I was already good at that, and renowned. In the '70s, when I was in high school, I started to experiment with drugs. My whole sensory experience started changing with my drug use, and my whole perception was changing.

I started relating to Keith Richards and Jim Morrison. And I started branching out to other influences like Genet and Burroughs and Warhol and his Factory scene. A lot of that went along with the zeitgeist of the times, which was sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll. I wanted to be bisexual. I wanted to be an artist, and I really felt that anything worth doing was worth doing with lots of people in bed and on drugs! [both laugh]

Ah, the seventies!

That's where I was at. And I'm really glad I'm not there now, but I'm glad I had all of these experiences; including my life and death ones, too, and even this disease that informs my life.

And did you study art after leaving high school?

Mmm. Yeah. First I was going to move right to New York and then I decided no, I needed to take a step; so I moved to San Francisco where I had an aunt and cousins. I went to the Art Academy in San Francisco for a year and I was an illustration and design major; and then I got hit by the car, and that sort of changed my life, and gave me other options. At the time I had an art teacher, John Morgan, he was my design teacher, and he recognized my talent and he actually allowed me to do, in addition to the homework assignments, to branch off and do whatever I wanted. He actually told me I was in the wrong school, that I should have been at the Art Institute, which was more freeform and avant garde, because he felt that the school I was at was too cookie-cutter. They were gearing illustration majors for Hallmark or Disney. He was happy I survived my auto accident, but just as happy to hear that I was going to move to New York, because it's someplace that he had spent time. He recognized my talent and he said "Just go for it." He was thrilled to hear that, when I got here, shortly after that, that I was Art Director at Tower Records hired with my own natural talent.

I know a little bit about your car accident, but just maybe for the purposes of the tape; can you relate a little bit about, well, as much as you want about that? You would have been about 19 years old...

Twenty. Going on twenty-one.

What happened?

It was August of 1981, August 1st, it was round 2 o'clock in the morning; I was working at a record store at the time, because I always loved music. I also had my Australian lover at the time. He's the one who actually encouraged me to go to art school, because he saw my talent. I used to make little cards for him, expressing my love and devotion. He said "You're going to art school." Lucky it didn't cost him anything, because my parents' income level afforded me the grants and things, but it was his encouragement and his motivation. He had to go back to Australia for immigration reasons, so that left me alone and still at the record store. So, I was coming home from a party. I was crossing... A car sped up to cross the big intersection. He had the yellow light. He sped up to make it across. Halfway through, the light turned red; green for me. Witnesses say that when he sped up to make it across I was already halfway across, and that's when he hit me. Luckily I don't remember a half hour before; it knocked me unconscious. I just

remember still being at the party; and then I woke up at San Francisco General ten hours later. I was there for 39 days with a severed jugular, fractured femur, broken clavicle, broken pelvis, lacerations, concussion; and in traction for a few weeks until they did the operation and implanted this - my twelve inches of steel - in my femur.

In your thigh?

Yeah, my thigh. With a pin attached. It can be removed they say. It'd be pulled out like a saber; but this elevator's so unreliable that I don't want to be stuck here. I'd be on crutches for two weeks.

And, I mean, I saw a photograph of the scar for that, and I'll just describe for the tape: it basically goes from your knee to your hip, the incision that was made to get that in there and to fix up what was wrong with your leg.

Yeah, it's a good one.

And the police report said that you were flung from the car about 100 feet, 110 feet.

Yeah, I'm quite proud of that, I think that's a world record of some kind.

Uphill, as well, it was slightly uphill!

Yeah, it was an uphill grade. Somebody has a world record for getting flown over a hundred feet; but then they were hit with the driver going 75 miles an hour. This fairy flew over a hundred feet! And at the max the driver was going 35 miles an hour; so I think I actually hold the record. And according to two witnesses that were in cars at the intersection that saw the actual impact; I not only flew but I did a couple of spins along the way! [both laugh]

So anyway, we can joke about it now, but at the time it's probably...what kind of effect did it have on you? Did you become very afraid...how did it change your life?

Well, waking up in the hospital was surreal, of course. Apparently I managed to come out of the fog enough to give the nurses my parents' number, and they came up the 90 miles to see me. I was on morphine every three hours, for almost the whole time I was there. I actually became addicted to it. I immediately knew that I was lucky to just still be anywhere, let alone in a hospital bed and only with, a fractured femur, and a broken clavicle and pelvis. To this day I keep hearing about people getting hit, cars going not even half as fast, and they end up dead, or brain-damaged, or paraplegic. My mother says I'm on my twelfth life. That really was just luck of the draw, or destiny, or fate. I came out of that able now to say that it's the best thing that happened to me, because I am here still. Immediately I started being grateful, counting my blessings, that I was still practically in one piece. It could have been a lot worse. I saw people, especially when I was doing physical therapy after they put the rod in; I saw people that were attached to boards, wearing neck braces. They had screws in their heads to keep these huge metal devices stable. It actually fuelled my desire to be a better artist and a better human being, and to be grateful for my family, my friends; for the blessings I have. It made me

realize how tenuous and fragile life is; and it can be taken away at any moment. Then a good friend of mine said she had lawyer for me. He started saying, "Oh yeah, you can get a big settlement for this. We can go to trial and get you even more," I knew my life was going to be changing. It wasn't about money then, it was just getting on my feet and living, really living. The money definitely gave me options. Instead of just existing as a minimum wage record store employee, heartbroken because my partner was in Australia; now I could go visit him and not continue back at the Academy and pursue my dream to move to New York where other friends from San Francisco had already come; especially the East Village, which was rockin' and... CBGB's was the place.

The East Village is still rockin'! Slightly better hours, but...

And I got this place. Yeah.

So, the accident and then the decision to go to Australia; I think you went...was that for six months, that trip, or was it...?

Yes, I was there in December, I was there for Christmas. Christmas lunch in Australia, in summer.

It's hot!

Yeah. We had shrimp on the barbie [BBQ]. My lawyer actually called me and said, "When are you coming home, we've got to get this settled. They're anxious to get this behind them. He wanted his 40%. So I went back and he got that straightened out. And then I moved to New York in October of '82.

Ok. So you arrive here as a 20, 21 year old...

21 years old. Soon to be 22, yeah.

Into the East Village.

Mm-hmm.

And then what did you do once you got to New York?

After all was said and done; travels and expenses, I came with \$36,000. I felt like it was a lot, and I enjoyed living off it for a while; getting this place together; getting this place, with fifty people in line. I was the fifth. The broker thought I dealt coke; I said "No, I got hit by a car."

This is because, I think, you offered him a year's rent...

Two years' rent in advance.

Two years' rent in advance in order to get the apartment, because there was so many people looking for it.

Yeah. And the windows wouldn't open! The doors were off their hinges. The doorman was a junkie passed out. There were syringes in the hall; and I loved it! It was just round the corner from CBGB's so that was perfect! And fifty other people thought so too! So when I offered this; when I told him I got hit by a car and showed him the check I'd deposited, he said, "Oh, well, we'll get back to you, we'll let you know tomorrow." Of course I knew I had it, and the next day I got the call. I lived off my money while I decided what to do. Well, mostly I just partied and hung out, again feeling happy to be here, happy to be alive! I think my attitude about spending the money was, "You can't take it with you, and you never know when you'll get hit by a car!" [both laugh] If I come into a lump sum again I'll be much better at...

Managing it.

Yeah, at managing it! But then, I was young. People were just amazed that I could survive something like that. I can't watch any hospital shows now. I can't watch *E.R.* or anything like that, because it just brings it up; there's this bottomless well, a wellspring of tears. I think it's because I was so anxious to move on, to move on with my life. Everyone was telling me, "Count your blessing, count your blessings," that I didn't let myself feel the pain, feel the loss, to actually think, "Wow, what you went through!" I just bucked up and said, "Ok, let's party and let's celebrate being alive." Now, one thing I talk about with my therapist is how I amaze myself how sensitive I am to life and death on the news, even fictional things in movies and stuff. I end up just crying my eyes out. And I think that's because of what I went through. And also because of the AIDS thing. I've allowed myself now to feel a loss of a normal life. I've allowed myself, because I know that I didn't allow that when I got hit by the car; I just moved on, and just sort of repressed all that pain. But with AIDS, I try not to wallow in it. I don't consider myself someone who's dying from it. I consider myself living with it. I haven't called myself a long-term survivor in years; I call myself a long-term thriver!

So when did you find out about your HIV status?

After living off the settlement money and getting my bearings here in New York, I started working at Tower Records, as the Art Director, supervising a staff of four. After a couple of years of that I started getting burnt out. I was coming home and not doing my own art because I was too tired after spending fifty hours there, and then a concert or a party after. I was watching Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring become superstars. They were exactly my same age. I was sitting on the sidelines; and there was a whole East Village renaissance going on at the time that I was a drunken spectator to. That's when I decided I needed to get out of the business of art and just do my own art ... And before I knew it, it was 1985 and I was 25. I was drinking a lot, but it wasn't an issue then; even though I knew my grandfather was an alcoholic – he died from it. My mother was too, and my aunts and uncles on her side were definitely indulging too much, so I knew it was in my veins, in my genes. But it was fun; I thought it was just part of growing up, and being in New York at the time. Everyone was doing it. I hit a low point here because of the drinking, and because I wasn't doing my art here at home and I was doing some lame job to make ends meet. I'd had had such a good time in Australia that I actually went back and my partner, the one who was in San Francisco who was now in Australia again, welcomed me back. But that move was just to escape my problems, my self-created problems.

This is in '86, 1986.

'86, yeah. And AIDS had reared its head already in '82, I'd already lost friends. Then there wasn't a cure, it was a death sentence. There wasn't even hope. The only thing you could hope for was that you'd be given some time, a year or two. It was just a matter of time before we all ended up in that horrible wasting death, covered in Karposi's. And, so I went back to Australia hoping to escape and to get away from this drunken abyss that I had put myself in. But when I moved to Melbourne, Australia I immediately realized what I had left behind. Luckily I held onto this apartment. When I went there with the thought of living there, I realized how far away I was from my family, and from New York; and as much as I loved Australia, I started appreciating all the things that New York and America offered that Australia didn't have. [laughs] And so I gave it a go for six months. I spent half my time drunk, half my time hung-over. My partner recognized that I had left my heart here in New York. He was experiencing physical symptoms but he hadn't gotten tested yet. He said, "Well, what are you going to do? Are you going to go through the immigration thing, or are you going to go? I think that you never left." We had such a history between us that he forgave me for leaving. Later, when I was back in New York he called me and said that he had gotten tested and he had the virus, and he moved up to Sydney to be taken care of, because it progressed really rapidly. He got meningitis. He was going to come for one last visit, even though he was in a wheelchair. I was going to meet him in San Francisco, where we had mutual friends; but he lapsed into unconsciousness and he passed away in May.

May...?

'87.

'87, gee, that was very quick.

Yeah. I held off on getting tested, finding out the inevitable about myself until August of '87. I tested positive, which wasn't a surprise. After getting the positive diagnosis at a local health clinic, I got drunk; and went to a support group on 2nd Ave. I went up there and there were all these guys – I don't want to say whining, but they were. They were saying, "I'm so afraid, I'm going to die, I don't want to die, all our other friends are dying." I was drunk, but I came around enough to say, "I don't want to be here!" They asked, "What's your story?" And I said, "My story is I'm going to live!" I said, "You guys aren't helping yourself and you're certainly not helping me, sitting here moaning about dying; I'm going to live! I'm outta here". It was the best thing I could have done. The other thing I couldn't do was help ACT UP in their campaigns. I admired them from a distance but I knew that by being part of that energy which was so fuelled with anger, that that would kill me too. I couldn't maintain that rage. They were so filled with passion, God bless them. They made these life-saving medicines available. I really wanted to help too. So helping at Visual AIDS is my contribution. The other thing I didn't do was I didn't go to a doctor until 1990. I felt they couldn't offer me anything. I tried to ignore and repress that I was sick. It was my denial which I consider a healthy denial in retrospect: only because I survived. My partner then was a doctor. He was a doctor who treated AIDS patients at Riker's Island Prison and later at a clinic up in the Bronx. He knew Stephen, my Australian lover. Two weeks after I tested positive we met. And I told

him I was positive, and he said, "So? I could be too," even though he had tested negative. So the love just immediately grew. It grew and flowered because he was willing to walk through the fire with me, especially at that time when it was just a waiting game for this inevitable, horrible death. So God bless him. Although he's the kind of doctor for me, anyway if I said, "Oh, that hurts" he'd say, "Well don't do that, then." [both laugh]

He was a bit of a tough-love doctor for his partner!

Yeah. And also I was drinking a lot, which was actually part of my denial. I think it was unconsciously a slow suicide. I would rather have been hit by a bus or stumble into moving traffic than have that wasting death. I told myself I was just getting on with living and celebrating and just being alive, but I was an alcoholic and I was drinking like an alcoholic.

How much would you be drinking, sort of, every day?

He and I drank together; there were a lot of great clubs still going on still, so... But then he slowed down, 'cause he's fifteen years older, and then it was just me, going out. I could go for a week, two weeks without; and then of course I'd think I deserved a reward. Two drinks was the magic number. Actually, three was the magic number. Two were fine, I could be ok, get home, nothing would happen, if I only had two.

Two drinks, or...?

Two drinks, yeah. Beers, cocktails, whatever. But the third one, it was 'Albert has left the building!'

So you'd have three and then you'd have to go have more, and...

Yeah. Three would lead to three hundred and the inevitable blackout; hours would go by. I'd wake up and I'd feel that horrible feeling of "Where am I?". I was always surprised when I'd wake up in our bed or in our apartment. Sometimes it would just be in front of the door. And I wasn't surprised if I was someplace else; with someone else. I'd be soaked in my own urine, a hundred dollars would have been spent and not recalled how I spent it or where. I've busted teeth, I've ended up with stitches - I found out head wounds really bleed.

Albert, Albert, Albert...

So anyway...

So you weren't really drinking in the day, though; it wasn't like you had to sit at home drinking. It was more... it was partying.

Partying... which would sometimes last for two days, three days. And then the hangovers were two, three days, four days. For Tim, it was the excuses; the apologies. Wondering if I'd come home, wondering how I'd come home. I kept saying, "I'm young, I'm in New York, I've got this disease, give me a break; I don't know when I'm going to die! I'm dealing with this stuff. I'm going to funerals, I'm dying!" But I realize now, I was

killing myself. It was a slow suicide to avoid that other horrible death. I was almost setting myself up for something to happen, alcohol related. Getting hit by a car...

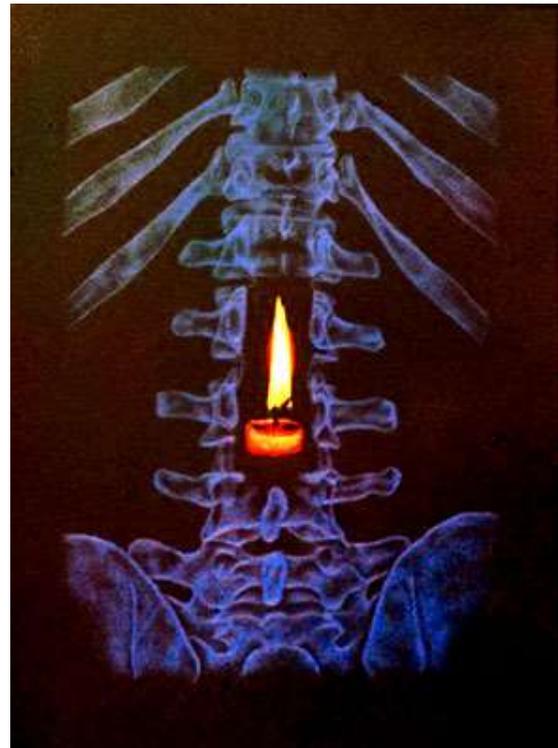
Are you able to make art during this point; like, from '87 to '90?

Some, yeah, some of it. Those drawings I did, the radiology things. Those pencil drawings are ones I did in the hospital; I did a whole series. That was my life-preserver, by doing art... See, because all my partner, the doctor, ever asked [of me] from day one, was that I'd be healthy and happy. He said I didn't have to work, because he was making a really good doctor's income; and he knew that I had artistic talent. He knew I had this thing, this disease; this specter. And he knew it was terminal; people were dying. And so; that's all he ever asked. Which compounded my guilt, because that's all he ever asked, and yet I was coming home and giving him all these worries. And spending his money, or losing it. And killing myself. He was the first to say "You're killing yourself", "You're going to die of this before you die of AIDS." So I used to do art to decorate the apartment, to put things on the wall to show him that I was doing something, I wasn't just drinking. Also because when I was engaged in my art I was intoxicated by that. I know I can't draw when I'm drunk or stoned. I lose all my technical ability, which is all self-taught, especially my drawing skills, rendering, which I pride myself on. The biggest compliment I still love getting and I guess I strive for is, "You drew that? That looks like a photograph." I love that. I am really proud that my art does display a natural gift and ability. And doing things that were meticulous- I am a neurotic perfectionist -not only did it give me something else to do beside look for the next party and the next high or the next drunk. It gave me something to live for each day. To have a work in progress was another way to escape the reality of a terminal disease. It gave me this focus that required my complete concentration and attention. Time would just evaporate and I'd be lost in it, and the end result would always remind me of how happy I was to be alive; how much I looked forward to being alive, to do the next one - because of course the next one was going to be even better! My art is and was my life-preserver and lifesaver, just as it was from the earliest days, when it helped me not get picked on by kids in school. It even assuaged my parents when they were throwing up their hands in disgust and despair because of my drinking and sexuality. They still had the things they could admire hanging on their walls. But it also made them sad when they thought I was wasting my talent. And later in life when in fact I was wasting it by partying so much; when I did do it, it was the perfect escape and remedy, the perfect medicine. It got me out of myself as just poor Albert waiting to die. It was "Wow", "Wow, you did that?"

What about some of the themes and subject matter of that art, particularly after your infection? Was that a way of trying to work through some of your feelings about having the virus, or feelings of dread or, you know, other things like that?

Yeah, I've always been a sexual person, loving the human body... And as the scientist that I wanted to be when I was kid, I was always drawn to our set of encyclopedias or things on television about the body, the world, the universe, planets. After my accident I got to bring home a set of my X-rays that showed the rod in my femur and all of that was just fascinating. I think I always gravitated towards paintings that had dark backgrounds where things came out of the darkness or the shadows. Or red backgrounds. I didn't equate it with blood at the time or passion, but it's something that always just clicked and resonated. I always gravitated towards those, versus landscapes

or pots of flowers and big-eyed kids and whatever. Or abstracts. I was going to the library and looking at art books. I started really feeling a connection with artwork like Da Vinci's life studies of the anatomy; or Greek sculptures, Roman sculptures. Whenever I'd see X-rays or things about the body's internal workings and the cellular level it was always fascinating. Without any conscious thought, it just sort of all started to come together. I think the skull with the rose was the first one I did. The response I got was that it really was a thought-provoking and strong image. To me, the rose represents the human potential, Spirit; and that just led to others.



Both drawings: Albert Velasco, *Untitled*, color-pencil on paper, 1996.

Can you remember when you drew that?

I think it was sometime in the late '90s. The second one I did was the clown, the chest. By that time I already had a collection of books from medical stores specifically about radiology. The other one I did, the third one, was the legs with the snake. Which of course, I'm sure I intended as a phallic symbol. [both laugh] I'm sure. The black paper background, to me that was novel. And it worked. But I actually have grown since then and changed... I don't think I could do things like that anymore.

What are you using to draw with, there? Is it a pastel, or a pastel pencil?

It's a brand of colored pencil called Prismacolor. They're pretty sturdy pencil leads, and they're very sort of creamy and buttery, so that you can really layer them on. Unfortunately you can't erase without really tearing up the paper, so whenever I made a mistake, and there were more than a few mistakes; I'd actually have to get an X-Acto knife, with a number 11 blade, and actually pick off my mistake. That fed my neurotic perfectionism. And also made me realize I'd be very good at restoring things because I repaired so many of my own accidents and mistakes.

How long would something like that take you to draw – like, the skull with the rose, perhaps, or the legs with the snake?

Well, they're all based on pictures. Of course when I'm looking at them, I would say, "Oh, I can do that, it won't take long". But to this day, whenever I say that, "It won't take long," it usually takes ten times as long. [laughs]

Than what you think.

I really do put in the effort. I put in the effort because I know I have the skill and the ability to capture the details that are in the picture that I'm using as a source. Surprisingly, I do have that patience. I won't rest until I've captured it either like the picture or like I envisioned it. As you can see, sometimes I've changed the colors. That's actually a picture of Ronald McDonald, the McDonald's clown.

This is the clown in the chest cavity.

Yeah. That's actually sold. Those drawings are very labor intensive. It's just not fun, but the end result's worth it. That's why I branched out to other mediums like my Anubians, my wrapped figures. I know I can draw, I've shown people and myself that I have this natural ability, so let's see what else I can explore; what other mediums. I haven't strayed far from the mortality, life and death symbolism as much as I've tried. I haven't done baskets of kittens yet! [both laugh]

And can you estimate how long it would have taken you to draw the skull with the rose? I mean, do you work on it for two months, maybe, or is it one week, or how long each day might you work on it?

About a month. The thing I've learned to do is put it away, and start another. I usually have two started, so that I can change things up. It's hard for me to stay focused on anything. I'm the queen of distraction! So I often have two or three different things going on. But I would say at least a couple of hundred hours, maybe. And then I put it away, and then I pull it out and I see areas to improve and make it stronger. To me they're my children, my babies. There really is a conception, a gestation period, and a whole growing, nurturing phase until you finally do let them go. Either frame them and exhibit them, sell them, or you just move on to something else. My children's books will be the best of both worlds, because they'll incorporate colorful, vivid, fun illustrations and stories that I've written, celebrating my Mexican heritage, but more than that, they're things that I'm making to give to the world, to make others smile; children, families, bringing them together. And that feels really great. If I have a legacy, I want those two children's books to be it, because it feels so good to do something that has actually been done to share and give. And because they're light-hearted, they're not about death, my death, or holding on. They're a celebration of my Mexican culture and the heritage of the Aztecs.

I mean, your work, although it does represent mortality and the idea of mortality, and we see X-ray-like drawings and pictures of skulls and we have sort of mummified Nubians...

Anubians. The god Anubis.

And even some of your other drawings and collages, you've got the naked figures hunched over or looking fairly distraught – the focus is on their body and them in some kind of crisis – but even with all that kind of imagery I still don't get the sense that they're about death, or that they are looking at the figure tragically, or that they're dwelling in pity. I mean, the fact that they have a rose in the middle of the skull...that does, you know, symbolize – or for me, anyway – that the body might be fragile but it's also a wonderful thing in itself, and look what it can still do, even when it's sick, and look at what the mind can still do when the body fails you, things like that. And you've got another one with a backbone and a candle coming out through the middle of the backbone. So again, what could be a very dramatic, melancholic piece, but there's a glowing quality about it as well, it's still celebrating the body. And I get that in a lot of your work; like you said, you still celebrate the fact that your body has still survived after having it gone through a horrific accident, as well as being attacked by HIV.

And alcoholism.

And alcohol.

I've been sober six and a half years. I never consciously said, "This is how I feel today, and this is what I'm going to do." I never do that. I'm always just moved by the moment and an image. It's always an image or an idea that just has to come out at the time. I never analyze and say, "Why this now, Albert?" It's only after those were done that I'd recognize, "Oh, this is a series." But I wasn't consciously doing it; bodies in fetal position, or hunched over, or cradling themselves, or being cradled... It's funny, that I've never felt that they were autobiographical; that they were expressing how I was feeling. It really was just all unconscious, subconscious. I see it now as my art, and what I needed to do at that time, and I don't have any regrets, everything led to something else. Where I'm at now is I don't really feel like I can do the same themes. I don't have the spirit or the same emotions; I'm not the same Albert to use X-rays as readily as I did before. To think of them as the first source of inspiration for my next piece. Or figures of naked men in fetal positions.

Has that got something to do with the fact that you have been sober for six and a half years and, you know, HIV medications have been around and can make you feel a fair bit more confident about your prospects.

Yeah, and turning 40. That's all I wanted, to see the new millennium and 40, which happened to be 2000. I said, "That's all I want." I lost so many people that didn't even see 30 or 35. So when I turned 40 it was like icing on the cake. I was so happy! I wasn't quite sober yet; I didn't get sober 'til 2002, but at least I made it to 40. And I'd been trying to get sober since I was 30, actually, and even went a whole year without drinking. But I knew that getting sober was the next step. And the medications came out in '95, and I went from – oh, this is another dubious distinction, besides being flung a hundred feet and living to tell – I had the highest viral load that anyone has ever heard of, anyone that I've told; and now I'm undetectable. It was 2,800,000 plus!

Jesus.

Yeah. That just happened to coincide with right when the antiretrovirals; the drugs were available on an emergency basis. My T-cells were 30, my viral load was close to three million; and my doctor got me availability to these life-saving drugs.

Were you part of a trial for the drugs?

No. My doctor just had the resources to do it. I'm so grateful.

What was your health like, up until that point?

It was good. I really didn't have anything noticeable... Oh, the other thing I didn't do was I didn't read the press. I didn't read ACT UP's manifestos or theories and controversies about who was doing what and who was not doing what and whatever. I didn't read the science and medical news about what was going on as far as research, what they were finding; because I thought it was so contradictory at times. Somebody would say one thing; AZT was, "Take it, you'll live." Other people were saying, "You take it, you'll die." It was so conflicting. And so I didn't add that to my emotional or mental mix. I believed in staying healthy by not adding that. And also, to not live in fear. There's a lot of people that wouldn't drink the tap water, everything had to be healthy and organic and vegan and stuff, but I knew that that wasn't a healthy way for me to live personally. What worked was doing my art. And I've always been blessed with being in a primary relationship with loving unconditionally, patient partners. They have really sustained me. In fact, love and my art are why I'm still here. And now, not only am I being loved but I'm sober, six and a half years. I'm truly acknowledging my own strengths, my own potential. And I am blessed to have a loving partner now who's negative. All my partners have been negative, except for Stephen, who passed away. Living alone since December of last year – I'd always lived with someone – that was sort of my next evolution, what I needed to do to continue discovering myself. I could do it, because I trusted myself that I wouldn't drink. But, more importantly, I wanted to find out what kind of life I would create for myself and also to have more room to spread out and do more art, which is the foundation for my life and living.

So just in terms of your health until, you know, just before you started taking the anti-retrovirals, the cocktail, in '95...

Combination. I don't say "cocktail", especially as a recovering alcoholic, cocktails are fun. I don't know how that started, who started that. It's a combination; the word 'combination' is more fitting. Cocktails are... there's nothing about taking a handful of pills two or three times a day that's...

That's the equivalent of a Cosmopolitan!

Yes!, that's euphoric, or merry-making. [both laugh]

So, but you never, I mean, going down to 30 T-cells would be an AIDS defining indicator in terms of that, but you've never had, like, pneumonia or a Karposi's sarcoma which would...

I have had Karposi's, I just got them recently. Yeah, talking about being exceptional, again! I'm in a group of men my age, who have had the disease for over 20 years now, undetectable, high T cells – my T cells are about 450 – and coming down with Karposi's sarcoma again! I've had three on my left foot. It was reassuring to read that I'm not alone; because my doctor had never heard of it, she was scratching her head, "What's going on?" I went through the emotional baggage of Karposi's, because that's what I saw as the final foot in the grave, being covered in those things, and the stigma. I even turned away if I saw someone with spots.

Well quite literally they're stigmata, aren't they, except of not the Resurrection, but of, you know, as I said, one of the final stages of AIDS, that's the way we viewed Karposi's sarcoma.

Yeah, the wasting, the Karposi...

And so what's... the view of the doctors? Why are you getting them?

Well, this disease is pretty clever, it always mutates. Put something in it to stop it and it'll go to the drawing board and come up with new strains. People are infecting each other with malaise and complacency. The younger generation; they believe that these drug combinations can be a cure-all, that you can take them as morning-after pills. Or some of them even want to get on benefits. I'm on benefits, I qualified when the government was more generous back then. I qualified for disability benefits, which I felt guilty about, especially when my health improved; but my parents reminded me, "That's money you've put in since you had your first job." They're the ones who say, "No, just do your art, be healthy and stay alive, it's ok." I said "But you waited for yours until you were 65." And they said, "But we're not going through what you're going through".

I think they're right!

Yeah. This last month I've had doctors' appointments, two or three a week! I would be fired if I had a job. So, what was the question? Oh, oh, yeah, so this virus, this mutation. I admit I'm guilty of it too, but positive guys feel that if they're with another positive guy that they don't have to worry about infecting anyone, so they can go bareback, and share things without the consequence of infection. And we conveniently forget about, you might have type C and I might have type D or whatever, and together they make giant type X. [both laugh]

As well as other STDs and stuff like that as well.

Exactly. That's the most common thing; positive guys want to be with other positive guys so they can bareback. I've done it myself. So this mutation of KS, the first one was, "Oh no, I'm dying, it's finally happening, my luck's run out". Thank God for my therapist I see weekly, and for the love of my partner. It is a form of skin cancer and that word 'cancer' in itself is frightening. I feel I really am, like my mother says, on my twelfth life;

on borrowed time. This really is icing on the cake. And I know that two-thirds of people in the world don't have access to these medications, or a doctor, or a clinic, like I do. People that do have access to them have to pay. My medications cost over \$23,000 a year and it's virtually free in my case. I'm so lucky in so many ways. I remind myself to be grateful and to do my best to maintain my health, and maintaining my health is doing my art; getting intoxicated with my art, my new creations, my new children; sharing them and sharing my love for my friends and family in other ways too.

I want to talk a little bit more about your art now, but do you want to take a break, just for a second, and...

Sure. How am I doing?

You're doing very well! I'll turn this off.

[The interview is suspended for a period.]

We're just looking at some of Albert's artwork.

I saw this style of pencil with erasure as texture for another layer, in a book. I created it before the medication came out and my health was failing. So thinking that my days were numbered I actually did this to confront it, and that's why I titled it *When we dead awaken*, trying to see what I thought would be my inevitable passing, sooner than later, as a part of the cycle of life and resurrection, and just sort of trying to embrace it with this drawing. That sort of coincided with this image, which is a photograph of a 5x5 painting. The image is of a sacrificial victim and an eclipse. The eclipse was my life being eclipsed by this disease. Darkened, and I was a sacrificial victim.

So just for the purposes of the tape, this is a naked figure, mainly torso and upper arm, and a bit of the hips, as if it was curled over a ball with the chest protruding upwards, and above it is an eclipse of a sun. It's a black and white photograph, but the eclipse of the sun is done with the red around the sun.

Yeah, that was airbrushed.

Is the figure, is that airbrushed as well?

Mm-hmm, yes.

And that's a photograph of the original, or that's the original work?

No, the original I actually destroyed. I didn't want to look at it anymore. I felt I wasn't in that space and it was too big to ignore, and I didn't want to just have it rolled up. I felt it was very cathartic, and part of my new emotional state to tear it up and say, "I'm not there anymore, it's not how I feel."

So that was done before the combination therapies, as well?

The tearing up was done after, later, when my health had improved. These two are illustrative of what I was going through at the time. These figures, using Mayan codices that I transferred onto the yellow paper. This is an Aztec goddess of the dead, and these figures are very indicative of the way I was feeling subconsciously, the underlying feelings I was escaping from by drinking. I raised myself from the ashes of my drinking by drawing. What I was feeling, what I was repressing and hiding underneath were pretty well illustrated by these figures.

And are they a transfer as well, or are they drawn?

No, I drew those.

Again, so just for the purposes of the tape, they're on a yellow paper; is that a handmade paper, or that's something that...

That's a handmade paper that I purchased, I didn't make it myself.

So it's yellow and then there's a red transfer of the Mayan and the Aztec sculptures and symbols, and then there's a blue figure, a naked figure, hunched over forward, with the head in the hands. I'll get a photograph of these, as well, so we'll have an image to go with it.



This is something I did for a friend who passed away in Mexico. He was raised Catholic, so there's the two Aztec gods and that's the same sort of figure lying in sacrificial state, or just a state of unconsciousness and rising. I sent a copy to his family; they loved it. It incorporates the cross.

I didn't even notice that until you pointed it out.

The two main gods of the Aztec cosmology, Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl.

And you can kind of make out the face, or you can see up through the nose of the figure; is that a representation of him, a sort of faithful representation of him?

Yeah. And that's white pencil on black paper. Those are line drawings on the black paper.



And you said that the parents, they liked it, or they were grateful, what...?

Yeah, they really were.

Can you remember what else they might have said about it, why; I mean, why did you send it to them in the first place?

Because he was a really good friend. He was a connection with my Mexican culture. He was from Mexico City. He had hosted us when we were there, visiting, and I'd met his

parents and his sister. He had told them that I was a good artist and so I wanted to express my feelings; respect for their deep faith, acknowledgment of Mexicans being a mix of indigenous and Spaniards. Mexico City is resting on top of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan. The figure could be interpreted as resurrecting or rising, not just dead or deceased. A male figure, their son and brother.

And is this after you started the combination treatments, as well, or...?

Yes, it was. This is one of my favorites. This is really illustrative. The figure in this pose could be fear, could be lots of things – hiding, fear, guilt, repression. The tides, which is the cycle of life; the moon cycles which most of the world and nature are affected by, and governed by; and the skeletal images sort of side by side, not alone. I like to think that they're animated figures.

It's sort of suggesting that there's something - like you said, the cycle of life - there's something inevitable about the whole process of life and death and becoming sick. Was that your way of viewing that, that HIV infection is a part of a life course?

I recall I didn't think of it. It wasn't a catharsis for my illness or my feelings about my illness; the symbols just came together. It was only later that I titled it, I called it *Tides*. It was only after it was done that I saw what a potent illustration it was about my feelings.

This one was for the postcard benefit for Visual AIDS; I couldn't get away from that figure of the skeleton.

It's a male figure doing a reverse; a backbend, a naked figure. Why that shape, the backbend?

Again, it's sacrificial: offering themselves for sacrifice, the Aztecs. That's how they would bend people over to take out their heart. It's sort of provocative, and it's just a nice composition, a nice framing device...

And this postcard we're looking at, it's the figure bending over and done in a sort of a black or an olive green color; and the skeleton figure is done in red. And they're both drawn, I think.

No, this is transfer, solvent, and the skeleton is drawn. And this is watercolor, and the skeleton arm is drawn. The red pigment wash came first and then I saw it as an essence, you know, like a life essence that the skeleton hand was holding, and then it's being blown away. That was a postcard too, for Visual AIDS.

And both of these are done more recently, though, aren't they? They're sort of done in...

No, actually, these were done about five years ago or so.

Ok, sorry, but these are more recent than some of the other ones that you've just shown.

This is one of my favorites. I wanted to render it perfectly, so I did it in pencil so I could create more details. It's again the sort of stylized eclipse. The Acropolis as a symbol of learning, an icon of endurance, learning and knowledge. The body in this form is also resting or thinking. I like forms where the viewer can interpret what they're doing or what they're reacting to, or what they're illustrating. That there's room for the viewer to create their own dialogue.

And, again, for the purposes of the tape, that's like a 10x10 picture, it's on black paper and it's a white figure in an amazing pose; left arm up, sort of outstretched, the head turned away so you just see the backbone, the drawing of the backbone; and the flesh coming off it. And then above it you've got the Acropolis, which is in the shadow, well, effectively in the shadow of an eclipse, which is done as yellow, blue and red. And the original is much larger and that's a spray-painted picture. It is awesome.

Yeah, that was on stretcher bars on canvas in the loft I shared with my ex, the doctor. That looked really great against the brick wall that we had in the loft. This other piece was one of my first attempts at getting away from the labor-intensive drawing, and using mixed medium, to explore, because I am self-taught. In art school they teach you things that a lot of people have to spend the rest of their lives un-learning; but they do teach you shortcuts about tools and supplies, so you're not so overwhelmed at art supply stores, "What's this do, what's this do?" So I've had to learn all that on my own; how to use things and what supplies to use for the effect I want to get. So this was just about using different medium; using the collage that I had created initially, using gel medium, putting it on with a trowel, practically. And these are icons, these are called *milagros*, it means 'miracle' in Spanish. People would say prayers related to each icon. If they wanted stop drinking that would be a bottle. They would offer a prayer to the Virgin Mary. And then after, if the prayer was granted, they would either wear one of these or present it at the altar, as a sort of a thank you, a reminder that their prayer was answered. Then again the eclipse, which... it's such an amazing force of nature: beautiful, cyclical, necessary and yet so ominous and frightening at the same time. Very powerful, potent. So I use them a lot.

Tell me about these guys. How do you spell the 'Anubians', first of all?

Anubis is A-N-U-B-I-S, he's the god that was the patron of mummification; he was the one that they would evoke during the seventy days of the ritual mummification. And so I call them 'Anubians'. This was the first one I did, that's why it's a different shape than the others. I wanted to just get away, or branch out from just the pencil and paper, the 2D, and explore other mediums. I really relished the idea of having a form that was so potent and symbolic as the body and mummification; I'd always been intrigued with Egypt as well as the Aztecs and Mayans, and so this was just my way of continuing a ritual that celebrates life, resurrection, cycles of life, going on to a better life, a new life and immortality. I just wanted to add everything that I had experienced in my life, my experiences and emotions, and just see what I could come up with.

I know when I first saw these, I felt that they were a lot more... I saw them as – I had a very Western attitude to them – I saw them as, well, they're dead, they're, if you've been mummified you're dead. I saw it as a work about loss: the way you've painted some of them, some of the coverings of them look really actually quite oppressive, like they've been, you know, suffocated or something like that. But then you've pointed out that when you mummified something, it's not necessarily about death; it's actually seeing it as a different stage of life, about where you're going to go, and it's actually about preserving...

It's about preserving the body as a temple of the soul, as the vessel of the soul. That's why pharaohs were mummified, and laid in coffins and sarcophaguses, so that they would live forever, and be immortal.

And in another way, it's almost like another way of looking at the advent of the drug cocktail; the drug combination...!

Combination! [both laugh]

...which preserves the body, it allows the soul to live; and taking the drugs is like a ritual as well, as is the process of mummification that you go through.

Exactly.



Albert Velasco, *Anubians* (detail of installation), 2008.

And so, just again for the purposes of the tape, these are, I think they're action figures...

No, they're Ken dolls.

Ken dolls underneath...

Malibu Kens!

Malibu Kens who are stripped naked and then wrapped up in various different guises; and I know some of that is symbolic as well. One's been wrapped up in a corn husk; another one is wrapped up here with some Islamic looking script on it; what's the point of wrapping them in the different kind of textures and fabrics and designs?

Because it's limitless. My initial goal was to do one for each year of my life. So that gave me an opportunity to think of 48, and of course I want none to be the same, so that led me to explore things in the street; things in fabric stores; things in shops that sell specialized papers and just explore different techniques to make each of them different. And as I went along, I just became more familiar with the workings of the fabrics and the papers, how they molded. As I explored one medium I felt, "Ok, I've done it;" barbed wire, "Ok, I've done it; let's do something else." That shroud material, the X-ray, ok, done it, let's move onto something else. And these paper ones were something else that I did in between them. These are the action figures that were bendable. Malibu Ken, was just an upright guy.

He was only good for hanging out by the barbeque, wasn't he! And not really the action man type.

Yeah, putting his arm around Skipper and holding his surfboard. But these could really bend, and they were 3 for \$9.99 at K-Mart. I used their 'pose-ability' to create these images. And again, it was only after I had done this series that I saw a continuity; a link, a symbology... I really surprised and shocked myself how I do work so in the moment. I'm caught up with the inspiration, and the need to express myself with certain material. Only after it's done do I see it clearly.

What do you think that they are representing now, now that you look at them?

They're robed figures...they're expressing longing, need, searching, this one's almost like hiding or avoiding being struck down; this one's cowering, almost. They're all parts of me. They're the other part of me that I keep at bay. They're the things that are coursing through me; they're the things that are mutating in the virus, as well as the virus itself; all these emotions. They're the swirling eddy of emotions that really are at my core. Everything, all the positive things, all the positive emotions, all the gratefulness are just to keep these feelings of asking for help, longing, and fearfulness at bay.

They're the more fearful elements that's you're trying to suppress.

Yeah, yeah. And the other Anubians in the room are just an extension of different materials and ideas. My bedroom is filled with drawings and pictures: Frida Kahlo, Patti Smith, Keith Richards, Salvador Dali and Andy Warhol. Inspirations, influences, life stories that I need to wake up to, to remind me about all the human potential; what's been done, can be done.... My own version of Warhol, the dead Marilyn.

I like that.

That was fun. Yeah. And my collection of Day of the Dead things. I was collecting them passionately, and I ended up with over five hundred. I've given most of them away, saved my favorites. I moved away from the need to have that symbolism. I'm glad to have that as part of my culture. The Day of the Dead, the *Día de los Muertos*, is a necessary part of celebrating life and embracing death and honoring your ancestors, and it's wonderful. Going to the graveyards, cleaning the graves, spending all night having a vigil, knowing that the spirits are back; providing them with food and drink and tequila, whatever they loved.

It's something completely foreign to Western, well, American culture at least, where death is that horrible thing that you don't speak about, and that once it happens you block it off and try not to think, you know; don't have to remember it, and...

Exactly, yeah.



Albert Velasco with a selection of his work, including *Anubians*, 2009.

Now we're going to move away from your art and I want you to talk about your own responses to artworks that you've seen by other people. I want you to talk about visual arts, as well as maybe film, or theater, or music, or poetry; I want to know about what kind of AIDS-related artwork you have found moving, and how did it move you? What did it bring up within you, what did it help you deal with?

Well first, who really comes to mind is Keith Haring, because he was so prolific, because his work was all about sharing. His work was so public and so mass-produced, which is what he wanted, to share it. And it's so fun, it's so iconic, anyone can read it. The images: babies, dogs, flying saucers. I really like that, that he found something that really resonated with everyone, young and old. The other one is David Wojnarowicz. He really lived his life to the fullest. He's lucky he survived his own childhood. But not only did he do that, but he documented it, looked back, embraced it, shared it with the world in publications and things, and continued to live on the edge and be proud of it. And then put it into his self-taught art and in photographs and writings, and really screamed at the establishment, at society in such a clear, articulate voice; and he became famous and infamous and I really, really admire him, yeah.

David Wojnarowicz, in the canon of AIDS-related art, is very prominent, being there right at the start and making lots of angry works about AIDS, but also about oppression of homosexuality, which was entwined with AIDS; if you weren't going to acknowledge homosexuals, or you were going to discriminate against them and persecute them, then there was absolutely no way you were going to be able to deal with AIDS, 'cause that's... those two become intertwined. So his work is very political and is very much about AIDS. Keith Haring is tricky, though, because; well, he dies of AIDS, he makes his works available to AIDS organizations to be able to be used as their graphics; but there is not that many works about AIDS specifically, and he didn't... I'm wondering if you could think of any of his particular works which you think speak particularly about the experience of AIDS, or about...

Yeah, there's his *Silence=Death*, and his use of the pink triangle.

Ok, so Wojnarowicz and Haring...

Robert Mapplethorpe. He was an outlaw. He glamorized, and stylized sex. You could have a picture of a guy getting fist-fucked next to a beautiful orchid, and they're both sexual. And the fact that he continued to work until his dying day. It was very inspiring. And he's another person, like me, who had mentors and lovers that encouraged him.

So you find these people inspiring in terms of, maybe, their approach to making art. Keith Haring being sharing...

Prolific.

And prolific. Wojnarowicz being, just having a lot of integrity, and really living true and honestly and being angry...

Angry...an angry articulate voice.

What about other works, then? Again, you can...

Derek Jarman, his movies. They weren't about AIDS, except *Blue*, which was amazing. I actually have the CD of it. You listen as he shares that his vision was failing, as he was dying. He was a warrior.

Why is that amazing to you, the film, or the CD, *Blue*?

Because he found the words to be objective about his death. He found the beautiful words to express his fate as a filmmaker an artist, with his failing vision and dying body. Our eyes are what we need – or what we think we need – and yet he took something calamitous and used it as a vehicle; he turned misfortune, physical deterioration into creation.

What about works that allowed you to make better sense of the epidemic; your place, your responsibilities within the epidemic, perhaps, as well?

Eric Rhein's. His leaves are very potent. He uses real leaves to shape his wire figures. Each leaf is named after someone, so that makes this pandemic, this loss, very real. The falling leaves being a symbol we all know of the seasons. They illustrate the seasons of life. Eric found something that's really powerful and I really, really admire it. And it's so simple. He does it so beautifully and presents them beautifully. I'm really happy for his success. And I know he came back from the dead. He was on death's door. So they mean a lot to him.

So what do you see, when you look at the Leaf Project up on a wall and there's now nearly, like, I think 180-odd leaves (it started off as 70)? When you see them all up there, or even individually, do you see them as melancholic, or do see them as more... and a bit mournful, all these people who have died, fallen like leaves on a tree? Or do you look at it as something more transcendental; well these people have died, but it is a cycle of life? There is something quite beautiful in the deterioration of a leaf, as well, and that they still, even as they last clasp on life they can still radiate great beauty.

Yeah, I'm going to use leaves for my Anubians, wrap them in leaves. My first attraction is always to work that is skillful. I think that's what I noticed first about David Wojnarowicz's art, his craftsmanship, his painting, especially being self-taught. I think that's what I notice first about anyone's art: how well it's painted, what mediums are used, and if it's novel or unique. Those are my first responses. Eric's leaves are melancholy, bittersweet and mournful or funereal but they are beautiful too. Eric and I are two people that are happy that we're here to express ourselves in our unique ways. Eric doesn't do a lot of talking about his work, at least not to me. We always talked about everything else, but there's not a lot of things you need to say. The outline of a leaf and a name of someone says it all.

Can you think of some other works, other artists? As I said, other mediums...

Tseng Chi Kwang.

Tseng Chi Kwang?

Yeah, the Chinese guy that went around the world taking pictures in his little Mao outfit.

Oh, okay, yep, sure.

Yeah. The way he captured his otherness of being Chinese, exotic. He took himself on a world adventure and captured himself as a souvenir for himself, and to experience these places, but also elevated it to an art form. That I really admire.

I think he's got a picture with the camera looking up, a very low angle profile looking up at him in front of the World Trade Centre in his Mao outfit, in black and white. It could almost, could almost be a negative exposed image, like a nuclear bomb has just gone off and everything's gone X-ray; and it looks up and you can see the towers, these vertical lines, then him above it staring out like a Mao statue. It's incredible.

Yeah. Then there's Leigh Bowery and Klaus Nomi. Fantastic performers, artists, musicians; unique, out there, original, sexual, in your face; incredible!

And, I mean, all these people you've mentioned, except for Derek Jarman, at least, they're all East Village people in your neighborhood as well, aren't they?

Yeah. Leigh spent some time here although he's from Sunshine, Australia.

He's from Australia. Via London I think, as well.

Yeah.

What about in terms of helping you with your – you know, you've had friends who have died from AIDS – your own sense of loss, particularly when you are thinking you were going to die before you began the treatments? Was there a particular artwork, or again, film, theater, music, which helped you deal with that sense of grief, and that sense of loss?

No. Not that helped me deal with it, except for *Blue*, by Derek Jarman, because he's so strong. You can hear his fighting spirit to stay alive, be alive, to make the most of life; even as he only had limited vision in one eye left. ... David Wojnarowicz's writings and things, about his story, how he survived every chapter of his life; before AIDS, and after... What was the question?

Can you think of artworks or artistic responses to the epidemic which have helped you come to terms with your own grief, or helped you with your own grieving process or sense of loss?

Mmm...artistic responses...

Cultural responses.

The Red Ribbon, seeing it proliferate to the point of, like, “Oh, he’s got one too.” In the initial days, especially before meds came out, when it was a new thing, it was very much a statement of people realizing what was going on, or acknowledging and wanting to share that, by wearing this. Especially celebrities at awards events and very public things; proudly wearing them and explaining to the media why they were wearing it, what it meant. That was very... fortifying, in that we weren’t alone; and that people did care, we weren’t pariahs. People were acknowledging this disease.

And so you can remember, visibly, when you saw people start wearing the ribbon and that you felt, you know, a sense of visibility and that you weren’t alone, and that there was...And coming from that, there might be more hope, that people were starting to talk about it and acknowledge the problem.

Empathy, yes. I confess, I rolled my eyes when I saw Lance Armstrong’s yellow bracelets. I admire him, his comeback from cancer ravaging his body; his statement, his mission. ... I always recoil against herd mentalities, and people that put things on because their best friend or girlfriend is, and it’s the fashion. I know I’m judging people and their intentions, but that’s me. As well as grateful and thankful, I’m a little jaded and cynical too, sometimes! [laughs]

The thing about Armstrong’s [wrist] band and lots of the other ribbons and symbols that have come to represent other diseases is that they were made primarily for fundraising; you bought Lance Armstrong’s band at the supermarket counter before you left the shops, for \$3 to aid cancer research, whatever. The ribbon was never meant to be sold, it was always meant to be given out. And if it was sold by organizations, it was only to cover the costs of the ribbon and the labor and the pin that goes into making it. Because they saw – the Artists Caucus at Visual AIDS who invented the symbol – wanted to do exactly what you felt from it; they wanted people to wear it and make people with AIDS feel like they weren’t alone; and they wanted to raise awareness. And all of that, to them, was actually worth a lot more than money for, you know, research. And so I think the ribbon is really quite different from those other things; it wasn’t just... And I think people’s responses to those other things, like the wristbands and all that, it’s not just because, “Oh, hasn’t this been done already, and isn’t this just copying an idea, and where is this going to stop?” It is also that it had different intentions, as well. I think there’s more honorable intention in the Red Ribbon.

Oh yeah, and that’s why I’m so proud; and I make it a point to tell people that I volunteer at the organization [Visual AIDS] that created the Red Ribbon and Day Without Art. And people are always knocked out when I say, “Yeah, it’s just a little cluttered office and two people.” I can’t think of any other AIDS-related art. I’m blanking out. I mentioned her, Karen...

Finley?

No, Gruber. What’s her name? Karen Finley I admire, but, oh, the one that did the gel medium things, remember?

Oh yeah, Guberman.

Guberman. Rebecca Guberman. Her things really spoke to me, in that she was using appropriated sources and layering them with gel medium, which I love – which I’ve done on some of my Anubians and things myself – and creating whole new vocabularies, loaded in powerful statements by layering different things together. I love that.

One last question, then: we’ve talked about the Red Ribbon; one of the other great symbols of the AIDS epidemic and a cultural, artistic response to the AIDS epidemic is the NAMES Quilt. And I’m interested if you’ve ever...first of all, have you ever made a panel for somebody? Second, have you ever seen the Quilt in the ‘flesh’, or been to an unfolding; and third, what purpose do you think that the Quilt serves for people who may be, sort of, like yourself?

I’ve made two panels; one for Stephen in Australia, and one for Klaus Nomi. Stephen died in ’87, I made it shortly after. I actually made Klaus’s first, because he died in ’82 or ’83. I needed to do them, especially for Stephen... They were included and I saw them in the great unfolding on the Washington Mall in the late ’90s, which was, I think, the last time it was unfolded in its entirety.

You traveled up there for that?

Down there, yeah, to Washington, with friends. They had a parade, and a march; and just seeing this... I was shattered, I really was. The roll-call of names. They had loved ones and parents and celebrities; just this vigil of listing names that were either names on the panels, or names that people would submit of loved ones that had passed. So you were looking at these panels that are in segments, and you’re walking around and through them. And admiring their creativity and cleverness and some of them making you laugh. But just seeing them and knowing that it was so big and yet only a part of the pandemic, and only a part of the pandemic in the States; forget the millions in the two thirds of the world that are in unmarked graves. I think that really brings it home, makes it real, and makes me grieve. Makes all my gratitude, thankfulness and forward thinking; all come crashing down to grieve for people, individual lives and their loved ones because of each name. A neurologist where I went to had a poster of the Quilt and I could see the one I did for Stephen in it. ... I know a lot of my tears and feelings of loss are because of Stephen, and my love for him. There was so much unfinished... He changed my life in so many ways, and he was so young. He was only 37. You can’t put your arms around a memory.

So did you find making the Quilt panel a cathartic process in helping you deal with his loss?

Yes, it was a tribute for him. It was so he wouldn’t be just a statistic, a number. He loved America but he was proud to be Australian. It was actually simple, on a red fabric. It was his name, Stephen Worthington... And then there was an American flag and an Australian flag.

The Quilt, as a whole, what function does it serve, do you think, in the community?

A reminder. It's very old-fashioned, as far as a medium. Quilting always was comforting, warm, inviting, keep you from the cold, embracing. It has all those qualities, especially because people have been really clever and sewn things on, sequins and things... But just the size of it, it's grid-like so it can grow, and so it's use as a tool to illustrate this pandemic which is still ravaging the world. ... The fact that unfurling it now, the whole entire thing, is just not logistically possible. Maybe a football stadium.

Oh, it would need 28 football stadiums.

And that in itself, its size, it expresses the magnitude of the loss.

Ok, is there anything that we've talked about that you want to add, or do you want to mention anything else before we finish up?

Well I just want to show you something that I collaged using two drawings, that one of Sergio and the other one that I did, I changed it from Silence = Death to Art = Life. You can have that, if you like.

Really? Oh, that's great. Now, where are these... so this is the image that you made for the man that died in Mexico?

Yeah, and this I did as a memento for my Aunt Charlotte who passed away two days after I started my sobriety. Instead of drinking to numb my grief, because she's my favorite aunt. I said, "If I can get through this, I'm on my way. And how can I get through this? By drawing, by making a tribute to her", which I gave copies of to my cousins. And then the pink triangle, which I point up - I don't like when it's pointed down. Up is empowerment. The Nazis pointed it down when they were persecuting and killing us. It should be up, and it always drives me nuts, like "cocktail". The triangle pointed down is the way the Nazis wanted us to wear it. Up is empowering; like the Egyptians built the pyramids, pointed to the stars.

That's fantastic, thank you. Ok, I'll turn this off.

[End of recording]