Transforming our view of the AIDS experience

'Against Nature' is a powerful statement

By Christopher Knight

whether we knew it or not, we have all been waiting for the exhibition 'Against Nature: A Show by Homosexual Men.' Although emphatically not a show of art about AIDS, it will nonetheless change the way you think about the profound alterations in American life being forged in the wake of this devastating medical emergency.

The galleries at the artist-run alternative space LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) are currently home to more than three dozen paintings, sculptures, photographs, mixed-media works and videotapes, which together stand as an unprecedented curatorial achievement. Organized by writer Dennis Cooper and artist Richard Hawkins, 'Against Nature' is a gallant and persuasive effort.

The AIDS crisis has generated a number of events in the artistic community in past years. The reason is not difficult to grasp: Because the epidemic has, in this country, principally claimed the lives of blacks, Hispanics and gay men, the response to the medical emergency has been sluggish and flimsy.

By turns spirited, brave, celebratory, poignant and funny, the show is distinguished above all by an atmosphere of emphatic generosity. Even today, reports are regularly issued concerning the spread of AIDS in the general population, a clear if subliminal assertion that blacks, Hispanics and gay men remain excluded and restricted.

Artists have been among those who, in the face of everything from shocking indifference to outright obstruction, have mobilized themselves. To date, shows have been mounted in sharp and enlightened protest of the homophobia and racism that have impeded progress in bringing the medical emergency to a halt. Others have sought to diagram an activist response to the economic and political manipulations that swirl around the complex disease. Elsewhere, exhibitions have become the gentle dwelling for memorial conversions.

Most often, as with the 'Art Against AIDS' benefit and sale currently at the Pacific Design Center through Feb. 5, exhibitions have gathered together works of art for the beneficial purpose of turning paint and canvas, ceramic and steel into much-needed cash. The necessity for such private fund-raising exhibitions is perhaps the clearest signal of the utterly appalling public conditions in this society that have made activist responses essential.

Yet, none of these rejoinders has been quite like 'Against Nature.' However important these various methods and approaches have been — and make no mistake: They have been crucial — something has always seemed terribly lacking. You could feel it in the inevitable frustration that carries at the margins of such endeavors, a frustration carried along by the unspoken that nonetheless ubiquitous apprehension over the Grandiose magnitude of the dilemmas being addressed.

What has been missing from these estimable efforts is the beginnings of an unraveling of a tangled and complex knot. For the AIDS epidemic is reshaping experience in deep and fundamental ways, causing transformations in our culture that will
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not be fully played out for generations. Decades are being made that have only barely begun even to recognize, never mind address, and they pile one atop another at a relentless pace.

I'm not talking here about the effects of new and different terminal illnesses that works of art have the capacity to clarify and elucidate in ways unlike any other. Experience is being fundamentally altered by the proliferation of a virus called HIV. This is why, like many others, knowingly or unknowingly I have been waiting for an exhibition that would, at least in one small way, begin to illuminate that mysterious and elusive difference.

"Against Nature:" that is the exhibition. The lesson that something distinctive is happening lies in the atypical feeling with which the show is unfailingly infused. It turns spirited, brave, celebratory, point, and funny, it is distinguished above all by an atmosphere of empathy and generosity. More than a show that leaves the aural impressions of a question that is the inscription, I was unprepared for the buoyant and inspiring effect of this surprising presentation.

It should be emphasized again that "Against Nature" is not a show about AIDS. The epidemic and its social and political contours are certainly not ignored, especially in a beautifully composed and presented program designed by Michael Tidman, called "Health and Morality: A Desultory Discourse." (Reading its forcefully silent, horrifyingly dispassionate statements about the epidemic, I wondered whether this intense program could be surreptitiously sent throughout the vast electronic network that has come to link us all together — a computer virus whose exponential spread might help to halt another.) Instead, this pointedly without a show by Homosexual Men" is about the experience of a number of different people who share a common sexuality.

That shift in focus accomplishes two things. Given the epidemic and its direct impact among homosexual men, AIDS is everywhere, the subject of the show. What stands in the foreground, however, is not the disease itself but the sense of loss, the felt and expressed desire that is in the principal bond among homosexual men.

The homosocial spectrum reaches from the dizzying romanticism of Arnold Fern's lurid theater curtain to Kevin Wolff's descriptive paintings of sexual self-determination. Sculptures by Johnny Pitkere and Carter Palmer are both graphic and witty, while Nayland Blake's reliquaries including one for the charred ashes of a text by the Marquis de Sade put sex atop a martyr's altar.

David Bushell lets you visually wrap yourself in the American flag while grasping the word "promiscuity" under your heel, as though he were remarkably homosocial representations of soldiers and subhumanities in 1940s pictures clipped from Life magazine. The video selection is almost uniformly strong, with luminous high camp intermixed with cogent documentary.

Perhaps the subtext piece is a half-dozen small, unadorned plaster reliefs dispersed throughout the exhibition. Mark Roviso's exquisitely crafted harness decorations take the form of faun that prostrates gently in the center, a new term that might transform the shape into a new leaf, and throw off the shame that masquerades as modesty.

With its telling focus on sexual desire, "Against Nature" refuses to allow homosexuality to be defined by despair. It does so through an antirepudiation. We have seen, in California as elsewhere, repeated efforts at categorizing AIDS along with syphilis and gonorrhea as a sexually transmitted disease (STD). But it is not an STD, any more than the flu or the common cold — which will also be passed during intimate contact — are STDs. AIDS is a group of symptoms that characterize abnormalities in the immune system, and which have been generated by a blood-borne virus.

The distinction is critical. The misattribution serves only to hinder treatment and research — and, not incidentally, to provide a hateful weapon for the continued oppression and disenfranchisement of homosexual men. Indeed, the misattribution of AIDS as a sexual malady is merely a transference of the long-discredited claim that homosexuality is itself an illness.

With its attention clearly and candidly focused on sexuality and eros, the wide spectrum they encompass, "Against Nature" is anything but object and dispossessed. More than almost any individual work in the exhibit, it is the collective power of the display that carries such authority.

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... would expect to find an arrowhead or coin embedded in the wall, the artist has instead inserted blood and semen, both infected with HIV. The barren faith in purity and essences, in peeling back the complex layers of conflicted and disorienting experiences to find a saving distillation, a quintessence, a graceful soul resting at nature's core, here gets turned on its head. The lifeforce is now deadly.

Conventional wisdom asserts that AIDS has decisively changed — even ruined — sex. This exhibition unabashedly celebrates the deep mysteries of human sexuality. Instead of setting out all statistics about sexual practices among gay men likewise attest, that undeniably difficult and vexing alterations in sexual practices can, indeed, be successfully negotiated. Eros will survive.

Truly serious jeopardy is harbored elsewhere. For collectively, and with powerful individual works like "Sleeping Beauty" and Dennis Cooper's "Dear Secret Diary" (a short piece of fiction in the small but excellent catalog that accompanies the show), "Against Nature" recognizes something infinitely more potent and far-reaching than mere behavioral changes in the vicinity of sex.

The nightmares of political vileness and corporate profiteering, the thumping estrangement of art and reproducibility for invaluable human lives, the relentless reflux of dignity, the usurpation by a virus of the most ordinary and commonplace miracle of all — we are witnessing a physical, moral, economic, and social collapse.

For AIDS hasn't ruined sex. AIDS has ruined death.

"Against Nature" remains an event at LACE, 1904 Industrial St., through Feb. 12.