



Bruno Cuomo's "Sleeping Beauty" shows acrylic jewelry containing HIV-contaminated blood and semen.

## Transforming our view of the AIDS experience

'Against Nature' is a powerful statement

By Christopher Knight  
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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 Exhibi-

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 convocations.

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 (but nonetheless ubiquitous) apprehension over the Goliathlike 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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tions) 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.

Even today, reports are regularly issued concerning the spread of AIDS into the general population, a clear if subliminal



# AIDS

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not be fully played out for generations. Demands are being made that we 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 devastating claims being pressed on the medical system of this or other countries, or about the political maneuverings and concealments that even today are shamefully — criminally — causing the epidemic to spread. These and other topical issues are clearly worth paying the closest attention to; still, things more elusive and equally essential are at stake.

I am talking instead about the effects of new and difficult vicissitudes 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 some small way, begin to illuminate that mysterious and elusive difference.

"Against Nature" is that breakout exhibition. The clearest sign that something distinctive is happening lies in the atypical feeling with which the show is undeniably infused. By turns spirited, brave, celebratory, poignant and funny, it is distinguished above all by an atmosphere of emphatic generosity. More used to shows that leave the aforementioned residue of querulous frustration, I was unprepared for the buoyant and inspired 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 conceived computer program, designed by Michael Tidmus, called "Health and Morality: A Desultory Discourse." (Reading its forcefully silent, horrifyingly dispassionate statements about the epidemic, I wondered whether this incisive 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 subtitled "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 subtext of the show. What stands in the fore-



In a reliquary for the ashes of a text by the Marquis de Sade, Nayland Blake puts sex on a martyr's altar in "Against Nature."

ground, however, is not the disease at all. Homoerotic sexuality itself occupies center stage, the felt and expressed desire that is of course the principal bond among homosexual men.

The homoerotic spectrum reaches from the dizzy romanticism of Arnold Fern's baroque theater curtain to Kevin Wolf's descriptive paintings of sexual self-determination. Sculptures by Johnny Pixchure 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 grinding the word "promiscuity" under your heel, as Doug Ischar unravels remarkably homoerotic representations of soldiers and suburbanites in 1940s pictures clipped from Life magazine. The video selection is almost uniformly strong, with hilarious high camp intermixed with cogent documentary.

Perhaps the subtlest pieces are a half-dozen small, unlabeled plaster reliefs dispersed throughout the exhibition. Mark Ro-

mano's exquisitely crafted baroque decorations take the form of foliage that protrudes gently in the center — a swelling that quietly transforms the shape into a fig leaf about to 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 disease. It does so through an apt repudiation.

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 also can 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 erotic desire, and the wide spectrum they encompass, "Against Nature" is anything but abject and dispossessed. More than almost any individual work in the exhibition, it is the collective power of the display that carries such authority.

One work must nonetheless be singled out. Bruno Cuomo's remarkable "Sleeping Beauty" consists of several wall-mounted display cases, executed in woody, rustic style, for the exhibition of handcrafted cast-acrylic jewelry and paperweights. Where one

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would expect to find an arrowhead or coin embedded in the clear acrylic, the artist has instead inserted blood and semen, both infected with HIV.

The modern faith in purity and essences, in peeling back the complex layers of conflicted and disorienting experience to find a saving distillation, a quintessence, a graceful soul residing at nature's core, here gets turned on its head: The lifeblood is now deadly.

Conventional wisdom asserts that AIDS has decisively changed — even ruined — sex. This exhibition's unabashed celebrations of the deep mysteries of human sexuality insist, as all statistics about sexual practices among gay men likewise attest, that undeniably difficult and vexing alterations in sexual practices can indeed be accommodated. 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 villainy and corporate profiteering, the shunning estrangement of and reprobanation for invaluable human lives, the relentless refusals 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 on view at LACE, 1804 Industrial St., through Feb. 12.