

A Handmade's Tale

ANDREA BOWERS BEARS WITNESS TO THE EQUILIBRIUM BETWEEN

ART & ACTIVISM

by Annie Buckley

You don't see black women," begins Jada Harris, manager of special projects for the AIDS Memorial Quilt, "or black people, chaining themselves to the White House, but something has to be done. Why not start with a needle and thread?" Harris draws connections between the history of AIDS activism and the current face of AIDS, but she isn't rallying a crowd. Rather, her image is projected onto the pristine white wall of a contemporary art gallery as she sits alone, amidst folded sections of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in the NAMES Project Foundation's headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. On either side of her, the camera slowly scans metal shelves lined with sections of the Quilt. A moment of silence ensues before another speaker appears, but all the while, the camera's invisible eye silently and actively roams up and down the vault-like rows. This three-channel video projection is one part of a powerful multimedia exhibition, "The Weight of Relevance," by artist Andrea Bowers.

Working within in the frameworks of conceptual and feminist art, Bowers is deserving of a new category of her own, perhaps compassionate conceptual; whether interviewing abortion-rights activists of the early sixties or carefully drawing renditions of newspaper articles on the Iraq War, Bowers is passionate about the topic she takes on and does exhaustive research for each new body of work. The title piece in her

current show is culled from more than forty hours of interviews that Bowers conducted with staff at the NAMES Project Foundation. "I almost always make

"The Weight of Relevance" includes videos, drawings, an installation of a panel of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and a detailed handmade book including newspaper clippings and photographs that address the complex and emotionally laden history of the Quilt. When cofounder of the NAMES Project, Cleve Jones, started the Quilt with friends in 1987, it was meant as an activist tool, a way to put a face on the disease that was quietly decimating the gay community. Their early efforts resulted in one of the largest pieces of community folk art and an important form of nonviolent activism and in the twenty years since, the Quilt has grown to include more than 91,000 names. Four years ago, in a much publicized and controversial move, the NAMES Project Foundation terminated Jones's position as founder for life over creative differences. Initially, Bowers made several calls to Jones requesting an interview, but decided to focus on those taking care of the Quilt now when her calls went unreturned; she was interested to find that most of these are women.

In another section of the video, Harris, an African-American woman, says, "What is the number-one killer of black women? It's not cancer. It's not heart disease; it's AIDS. Now how can that not be alarming?" Her words have a terrifying echo in the recent past. In "The Weight of Relevance," she and other staff at the NAMES Project Foundation express their current efforts to reach out to women and people of color, to build awareness and healing in these



Still Life of The AIDS Memorial Quilt in Storage (Blocks 4336-4340), 2007, colored pencil on paper, 6 by 3 feet
Photo by Gene Ogami. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

work about activists," she explains, "and I often tend to focus on women activists." In particular, she is interested in nonviolent forms of protest.

communities as the Quilt has done in the gay community since its inception.

Bowers seems to see more historical connections than differences. She says, "AIDS has hit all of those people who are

because you weren't faithful.' It's like this reappearance of this villainization; it's happening all over again." As outspoken as she is about her beliefs, Bowers's work shows a willingness to slip to the background of her subject matter—it is elegant, understated, and powerful. Her respect for the caretakers' varied perspectives, and curiosity about their day-to-day work, is evident throughout the exhibition.

One particularly compelling piece, *Continual Maintenance and Mending* (2007), includes a video projected from above onto a rectangular mattress. The bird's eye view shows a small woman, dressed all in black with short blonde hair, opening a section of the Quilt and proceeding to move lithely around it, sewing, smoothing, mending, and folding, until she returns it to a small square. The seamstress, Gert McMullin, was one of the first volunteers to work on the Quilt and has continued with it ever since. This self-professed handmaiden of the Quilt spends her days mending and sewing to keep the huge memorial alive, remembering friends and anticipating the day that they can sew in the very last piece, one also memorialized in Bowers's exhibition through a black lightbox lying on the floor.



***Continual Maintenance and Mending*, 2007, single channel video (54:49 minutes looped, projection size: 60 by 107 inches), 1 handmade quilt, Edition of 3 + 1 AP**
Photo by Gene Ogami. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

In a unique blend of art and archive, memorial and memory, Bowers often utilizes drawing to carefully hand-make replicas of artifacts. "The Weight of Relevance" includes renderings of pieces of the Quilt as well as one three-by-six foot drawing, the same dimensions as the panels. Based on an African-American quilt pattern, the drawing references the AIDS Memorial Quilt through a listing of materials used in its making, and she is at work on more drawings in this series. Bowers says poignantly that, "Part of [the project] for me was about recording this very fragile equilibrium between something being art and something being an activist tool—and trying to have it maintain both of those positions."

"The Weight of Relevance" was exhibited at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects from May 5–June 16, 2007. It was also shown earlier in 2007 at the Secession in Vienna, Austria, and a portion of the exhibition will travel to ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, in December 2007.

seen as the other, who are disempowered or disenfranchised or looked down upon, I mean, gay men were villainized. And now, in a way, the Bush administration is villainizing women with their religious, faith-based AIDS policy. So it's the same thing, it's like, 'You just have to be faithful. You have AIDS

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