

BLACK ARTISTS IN THE VISUAL AIDS ARCHIVE

A Research Guide

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Holistically surveying Black HIV-positive artists represented in the Visual AIDS Artist Files, this guide aims to facilitate encounters between researchers and the artists of color represented in our special collections, offering a point of departure for novel scholarship.

Introduction

The Visual AIDS Archive collects artwork documentation, personal papers, and records pertaining to the lives and work of artists living with HIV and AIDS, as well as those who have passed. A subsection of the archive, and the focus of this guide, the Visual AIDS Artist Files collection consists of thirty-nine linear feet of materials documenting the lives and artwork of more than five hundred HIV-positive artists. The collection primarily consists of photographic documentation of artwork (both physical and digital), exhibition materials, publications, ephemera, correspondence, and personal papers and photographs.

In recent years, Visual AIDS has systematically worked to increase public access to its library, archive, and slide registry. In 2014, we launched a web-based version of the registry, which includes digitized images from the Visual AIDS Artist Files collection, as well as images uploaded directly by artists and estates. In 2024, we released a comprehensive finding aid to the Visual AIDS Artist Files, featuring for each artist a brief text with biographical information and a note on the scope of material in the collection. With so much information now available to researchers, our task in stewarding these materials has shifted from one of access to that of activation and engagement.

In 2025, Visual AIDS received funding from the Getty Foundation’s Black Visual Arts Archives initiative, which provides grants to survey, process, and digitize materials related to Black art in the United States in order to create more opportunities to publicly celebrate important but long underrecognized achievements. Dominant narratives of the cultural response to AIDS have too often marginalized Black artists, reflect-

ing the same systems of exclusion that have shaped both the art historical record and the epidemic itself. Addressing these gaps requires the intentional recovery and renewed visibility of artists whose work and histories have been overlooked. The Getty Foundation’s crucial support has enabled us to embark upon a year-long project to update and enrich biographies for a key cohort of Black HIV-positive artists and to hire an archive fellow to establish contact with and interview living artists represented in the archive. This guide is the culmination of that work, published in both print and digital formats to maximize discoverability.

Scope & Organization

The guide encompasses twenty-eight biographies: four of these—on Reverend Joyce McDonald, Michael C. Morgan, Luna Luis Ortiz, and Michael Slocum—emerge from research and interviews conducted by archive fellow Abena Osei Duker; the remaining twenty-four mine the archive itself to present thorough yet concise character sketches, rooted in biographical detail and the artists’ bodies of work. The biographies are organized by the medium in which the corresponding artists practiced most—grouping painters, collagists, illustrators, sculptors, photographers, performers, printmakers, and book artists.

Beyond these disciplinary bounds, several other notable thematics emerge. A number of artists in the collection came from backgrounds in fashion and textile design, including Bradford Branch, Edwin Lacend, Kenneth Mitchell, and Frederick Weston; Branch and Weston were both graduates of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. Others came to art from the fields of architecture and interior design, including Samuel Fleming Lewis, Phillip Patterson, and

Michael Wayne Ransom. A significant number were self-taught or first began practicing in art therapy programs for people living with HIV; in many cases, it was through these organizations that they were first referred to Visual AIDS. These artists include Raynes Birkbeck, McDonald, and Weston. Finally, for many artists, the reckoning with mortality precipitated by their diagnosis with HIV/AIDS spurred a vigorous turn toward religion and spirituality. Artists whose work reflects this devotional attitude include Mark Carter, McDonald, Berni Ortiz, Patterson, and Memphis (Mark Young).

It is also worth noting that several of the artists represented within the archive share communities or have encountered each other through their creative practices. For example, Milton Garcia Ninja, Luna Luis Ortiz, and Nelson Rodriguez met at the Hetrick-Martin Institute, an organization for LGBTQIA+ youth; Garcia Ninja and Ortiz went on to become notable members of New York’s Ballroom scene. Some also exhibited alongside one another; Branch and McDonald were both included in *A Time for Healing*, an exhibition of Black artists living with HIV presented at the Lt. Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Community Center in Harlem in 2001. Still others have been featured in past Visual AIDS programming; for example, *Release*, a 2003 exhibition collaboratively presented with the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA), featured Carter, Lacend, McDonald, Mitchell, Clifford Smith, and Weston. Other featured artists regularly contributed works to the annual Visual AIDS fundraiser *Postcards from the Edge*, some of which appear among their archival materials. Also frequently included within the artist files are submission forms and artwork for *Positively Art*, a calendar produced by Visual AIDS and Abbott Laboratories

from 1998 through 2001. The project was a point of contention within the broader HIV-positive community; the calendars were sent as marketing materials to physicians and did not acknowledge the profits accrued by Abbott as a result of the epidemic. Regardless, to many contributors—including McDonald and the Zion Kyakulaga and Grace Talitwala Collective—inclusion in the calendar represented a meaningful honorarium and a platform for their work.

These correspondences—from their parallel paths to artmaking to their encounters with other practitioners and organizations—deepen our understanding of these artists as makers and suggest a portrait of the social fabric through which they moved.

Further Research & Resources

The artists highlighted in this guide were selected based on the extent of their archival collections; particular consideration was also given to artists who have been largely underrecognized and whose histories remain to be written. Some established artists—such as Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Ronald Lockett—have been left out in order to platform those who have been overlooked. Other renowned artists of color, including Kia LaBeija and Tom Miller, are well represented in the artist registry but do not have physical materials in the archive. We invite researchers to contact us with inquiries regarding these individuals.

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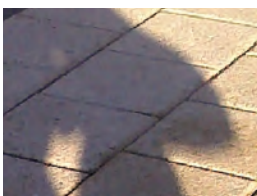
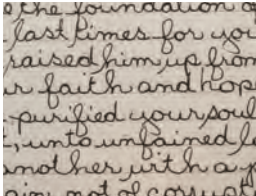
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Raynes Birkbeck, *Love vs. the Argument*, 2013. Acrylic paint on paper, 12 × 18 in.

Raynes Birkbeck

Raynes Birkbeck (b. 1956, Bronx, NY) is a self-taught painter, sculptor, draughtsperson, and poet whose watercolor, acrylic, and gouache works function as personal chronicles that are, by turns, fantastical and faithful to real-world events. The subjects of his narrative compositions range widely, addressing topics from environmental crisis, party politics, and warfare to social encounters and sexual intimacy. At times using his practice as an index of his research—for example, in a 2019 body of work, focusing on the segregation of the US military prior to 1948—his paintings are populated by historical, invented, and contemporary figures: Admiral Chester Nimitz, microbiologist Dorothy McClendon, General George S. Patton, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, members of the 761st Tank Battalion, and astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. Birkbeck’s frequently figural clay sculptures directly extend the worlds built in his wall-based work, operating as dimensional avatars for corresponding painted personas.

Birkbeck interprets a deeper spiritual significance in the contextual specificity of his paintings. He has stated that “even in the most mundane and commonplace things” he feels that a “force is always present.” He finds evidence for a di-

vine consciousness in “the fact that all things are made up of atoms and thus are created by, maintained, destroyed, resurrected, and governed by nuclear forces, states, conditions, and laws.”

Birkbeck participated in the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) art therapy program, which has also exhibited his work. He has been a long-standing member of Visual AIDS, receiving artist grants from the institution. He has shown at a number of galleries and institutions in New York, including the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, Apexart, and the Bureau of General Services—Queer Division. He is represented by SITUATIONS, New York.

Birkbeck joined the Visual AIDS Archive in 2001 and has contributed new materials consistently through 2020. His folders contain correspondence, a zine containing an interview conducted by Jackie Klempay, periodicals, exhibition brochures, and statements that outline the plotlines depicted in some of his works. These primary materials are supplemented by an original artwork submitted by Birkbeck to Postcards from the Edge, as well as photocopies and 35mm slides documenting his work.



(Left) Rodney Brown, *Untitled*, 2013.
Acrylic paint on paper, 24 × 18 in.

(Right) Rodney Brown, *Dancing*, 1995.
Pastel and photo print collage, 24 × 18 in.

Rodney Brown

Rodney Brown (b. 1954, Washington, DC) is a collagist and painter working with pastel and acrylic on paper to capture the gay male body in abstract fragmentation. By turns intimate and erotic, his painted and drawn compositions render sinuous anatomies and defined musculature in nonnaturalistic, primary palettes. Likewise, his collages incorporate hand-drawn and mechanical forms of duplication that iterate and defamiliarize the human form. Brown's work from 1985 onward has drawn particular influence from the assemblages of Romare Bearden. Reflecting on his oeuvre in a 1995 statement penned for the exhibition *Arts Communities, AIDS Communities: Realizing the Archive Project*—co-organized by Visual AIDS and presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, in 1996—Brown wrote, “Collage work allows me to blend diverse images, colors, and materials into something new, dynamic, and whole.” Turning his thoughts to the phenomenology of artistic practice, he added, “I feel that my art is a good reflection of how I feel when I do my work.”

A social worker by trade, Brown was involved in the New York art scene from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s, exhibiting actively in Brooklyn-based galleries and producing sets for productions at the alternative art nonprofit the Kitchen. Outside of New York, Brown's work has also been shown in Massachusetts and Ohio.

Brown's papers entered the Visual AIDS Archive in 1997. Spanning the years 1995 to 1997, they include biographical material and correspondence, as well as 35mm slides and a CD of digital files indexing his work. Brown also edited and published a book titled *Expressions of Color and Art*, which compiles reflections by HIV-positive artists and writers of color; material pertaining to the development of this project also forms a part of his archive, though the book itself is not included.



Edwin Lacend, *Self-Portrait*, 1997. Acrylic paint on vinyl, 29 ⁷/₁₆ × 33 ¹/₈ in.

Edwin Lacend

Edwin Lacend (1960, Puerto Rico–2013, New York, NY) was a figurative painter whose striking use of color, illustrative style, and dazzling ornamentation was influenced by his work with costume design. In his paintings, sleek Black figures preen and vogue against color-field, pointillist, and geometric backdrops that make reference to Keith Haring’s graphic style and Jackson Pollock’s all-over compositions. Borrowing from the aesthetics of fashion editorials, Lacend’s often female subjects are richly dressed, elegantly coiffed, and dripping with jewelry—performing self whether in domestic space or against obscure natural landscapes. Some works make reference to musical acts such as Christafari and the Supremes. Others turn to Lacend’s Puerto Rican roots. In one drawing, the face of an abstracted figure melts away to reveal a tropical coastline; along the left edge of the canvas, the work’s title *Boriqua* runs in varicolored block letters.

Lacend attended Parsons School of Design for his undergraduate degree. In his personal life and career, he worked in costume design, serving on

the wardrobe teams for television shows such as *The Fabulous Reggae Dogs* and personally participating in events such as the George Paul Rozell Fantasy Ball. His visual work was shown throughout New York City, appearing in exhibitions and displays at a range of venues, including Artists Space, the Williamsburg Art and Historical Center, the Lenox Lounge Jazz Hall of Fame, the East Harlem branch of Popular Bank, Edwin’s Beauty Supplies Y Mi Salon Unisex, and the Queens Independent Living Center. He was also included in *Release II*, an exhibition coordinated by Visual AIDS in partnership with the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA) in 2005.

The Visual AIDS Archive holds a robust file on Lacend’s life and practice. His materials feature correspondence and texts written by the artist, some of which solicit support for his visual practice; the program for a fashion show featuring his designs; slides submitted to Visual AIDS’s Positively Art calendar; as well as documentation of his work on 35mm slides, postcards, large-format transparencies, and a CD.



(Left) Kenneth Mitchell, *Spectrum of Love*, n.d. Acrylic paint, 38 × 24 in.



(Right) Kenneth Mitchell, *Venus Hottentot*, 2004. Acrylic paint and mixed media, 14 × 18 in.

Kenneth Mitchell

Kenneth Mitchell (1949, Brooklyn, NY–2008, Brooklyn, NY) had a passion for art and design that was evident from a young age. Raised in Harlem by his grandmother, Mitchell attended private art lessons and, in his teenage years, enrolled at New York’s LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts. He was granted a full scholarship to the School of Visual Arts and attended from 1967 to 1968, before going into fashion as an award-winning textile designer. In later years, he worked as a peer educator at the Program for AIDS Treatment and Health (PATH) Center at the Brooklyn Hospital Center.

Across paint and mixed media, Mitchell’s figural compositions celebrate African American identity through glamorously athletic Black physiques, while confronting stereotypes seeded by blackface minstrelsy. Engaging an illustrated, high-fashion aesthetic, his paintings are populated by sleek-bodied silhouettes that waver between femininity and androgyny. His all-over geometric sensibility responded

to the abstractions of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, while introducing a novel ornamentation that drew on his fashion background; his mixed-media assemblages glitter and shine with rhinestones and polyester ribbon. His work was featured prominently in *Release II*, an exhibition presented at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA) in collaboration with Visual AIDS in 2005.

Mitchell’s papers, which entered the Visual AIDS Archive in 2002 and span from that year until his death in 2008, include a number of LaGuardia High School students’ responses to a presentation of his work at the American Folk Art Museum in 2003 as part of programming for Day With(out) Art. Additional materials include 35mm slides of his artwork, as well as exhibition materials and announcements, his obituary, information on his memorial service, and an article in the Brooklyn Hospital Center’s magazine on his involvement in the peer education program.



(Left) Berni Ortiz, *Christ of Ibaysions*, 2002. Acrylic paint and watercolor on board

(Middle) Berni Ortiz, *Our Lady of Kurzen*, 2003. Acrylic paint on wood

(Right) Berni Ortiz, *St. Luc*, 1994. Acrylic paint on wood

Berni Ortiz

Berni Ortiz (b. 1954, Martinique) is an Afro-Caribbean artist whose paintings reflect on the experience of living with HIV/AIDS through the lenses of divine grace and acceptance. Rendered in elemental colors on wood substrates, his works embrace a graphic sensibility, intermingling text with Catholic iconography—such as the figures of saints, the Virgin Mary, and the Christ Child—in mesmerizing fields of pattern. After the tradition of a monk studying devotional imagery, he sometimes replicates existing effigies; his work *St. Luc* (1994), for example, recreates a page from a seventeenth-century Ethiopian manuscript in which two disciples and two Abyssinian ground hornbills flank St. Luke the Evangelist.

Ortiz has studied painting at institutions world-wide and has been exhibited across the US. While living for a time in San Francisco, he was a member of Visual Aid—an organization distinct from Visual AIDS—which exhibited his work frequently. His paintings have also been shown in a Coptic Orthodox Church in his native Martinique. He currently lives and works in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Ortiz's materials were added to the Visual AIDS Archive in 2004 and include an artist's statement on his work and exhibition history, annual Christmas cards to the Visual AIDS staff, and 35mm slides documenting his artwork.



(Left) Gregory Russell, *The Rooms I Know*, 1982–83. Mixed media and collage on paper



(Right) Gregory Russell, *Magic Man Knows Love*, 1980–81. Oil paint and mixed media on paper, 38 × 50 in.

Gregory Russell

Gregory Russell (b. 1955, Washington, DC) works across collage, pastels, charcoal, and oil paint, reincorporating representational and narrative elements into a style influenced by Abstract Expressionism’s energetic use of color and form. He attended the Maryland Institute College of Art—from which he received his BFA and MFA degrees in painting and drawing—where he worked closely with Salvatore Scarpitta, a painter and sculptor known for dimensionally wrapped canvases and complex studies of motion. After graduating, Russell spent eighteen months in Harare, Zimbabwe, as a Fulbright-Hays Research Fellow, where he produced a Neo-expressionist body of work that emerged in response to a new “environment of different colors, different plants, people, and different smells and sounds.”

Beyond his artistic practice, Russell also worked as a social worker for disadvantaged youth, which brought him to a full awareness of the systemic biases endemic to American culture.

He later reflected that confrontations with “institutional racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and ageism” allowed him to “clarify [his] life’s vision.” Emphasizing art’s capacity to transform, he has said, “Art and artists can give vision, should instruct, should direct, give hope, and guide and lead.”

Russell’s work has been shown at institutions including the Alternative Museum, New York; the Baltimore Museum of Art; the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Philadelphia Civic Center Museum; Foundation Gallery, New York; and the Festival of Black and Hispanic and Native American Arts, Pittsburgh.

Entering the Visual AIDS Archive in 1997, his materials span the years 1977 to 2013 and include correspondence; artist statements and CVs; submissions to Postcards from the Edge, including pastels and dimensional, mixed-media works; information on his exhibition history; press clippings; and 35mm slides of his artwork.



(Above left) Remerro Williams, *Law Suit*, 1992. Garment bags with laser-printed paper, 60 × 84 × 3 in.

(Above right) Remerro Williams, *Nuba Feast*, 1990. Acrylic paint on canvas, 36 × 48 in.

(Below) Remerro Williams, *Dancing Couple*, 1989. Acrylic paint on brick, 74 ¼ × 95 ⅞ in.

Remerro “Trotsky” Williams

Remerro “Trotsky” Williams (b. 1953, Washington, DC) is an artist whose figurative work across painting, murals, installation, and assemblage dedicates itself to social justice. His practice is fundamentally informed by witnessing the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963, during which Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his speech “I Have a Dream.” Williams has reflected, “I want my legacy to be these powerful images from American history, which I think should be paid attention to.”

Williams trained as an artist at the Hochschule der Künste in West Berlin and at the School of Visual Arts in New York. He worked for a time in France, England, and Germany before returning to the US, where he lived in New York City for many years. His graceful, dynamic life studies—capturing weightlifters, club dancers, jazz musicians, and walkers on the street—draw from urban environments, photographs, and live models, influenced by the figuration of George Grosz and American painters including George Bellows and Reginald Marsh. Later in his career, Williams began to experiment with installation and mixed media, at times visually punning on familiar phrases as in his 1992 work *Law Suit*, for which he filled garment bags with legal documents.

Williams is best known for his 1989 mural, *Dancing Couple*, which was spotted outside of a Chinese restaurant in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan by singer-songwriter Bob Dylan after a recording session. With Williams’s blessing, the work was used as the cover art for Dylan’s twenty-sixth album *Oh Mercy* (1989). The same year, Williams learned that he was HIV-positive. Like many who received their diagnosis in that decade, he began to live hedonistically, believing his lease on life was soon to end. Progressively, however, he realized that death would not come. Through his work, he has come to reflect that, after being diagnosed as HIV-positive, there is still beauty and life.

Williams’s materials entered the Visual AIDS Archive in 1999 and include a CV; press clippings on *Dancing Couple* and Dylan’s album *Oh Mercy*; press clippings on a film by Williams’s former neighbor Jim Sheridan, *In America* (2002), which fictionalizes life in their shared apartment building; original artworks contributed to *Postcards from the Edge*; and 35mm slides documenting his artwork.

MIXED MEDIA & COLLAGE

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(Left) Bradford Branch, *Oranges/Pussywillows*, 1994. Paper and glue, 23 × 16 ½ in.

(Right) Bradford Branch, *Brunch*, 1992. Paper and glue

Bradford Branch

Bradford Branch (b. 1952, Brooklyn, NY) is an artist whose prints, collages, and drawings explore realism and representational abstraction through still lifes. His artistic inclination was evident from an early age; while still in elementary school, he received a scholarship to the Brooklyn Museum Art School. This experience primed him to continue to pursue the arts in high school and college—attending Newark High School of Fine and Industrial Arts and, in college, pursuing a higher degree at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. After graduating, Branch worked in full-time and freelance roles across the couture industry, in early years, as an illustrator and pattern maker, and, later, as a designer of childrenswear for brands including Anne Klein and Jacob Smith.

The shock of learning that he was HIV-positive led Branch to reevaluate his life and what he wanted to accomplish; leaving behind his design work, he turned to the visual arts full time. Returning to media learned in his youth while drawing upon the skills accrued over his years in fashion, he explored a vast array of processes including etching, monoprints, reduction linoleum cuts, cut-paper collage, *chine collée*, ink

drawings, and graphite renderings. He found himself increasingly drawn away from the iterability of traditional printmaking and toward methods that produced unique, painterly images. Informed by the work of Black artists Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, as well as Cubists such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Juan Gris, Branch's compositions celebrate color, value, line, and shape. Exploring the simultaneity of multiple perspectives, he deconstructs and reassembles objects such as vases, oranges, pussy willows, and forsythia. Of his work, he has expressed an interest in cultivating presence, writing, "If it can draw you in, you are in that moment. When you're there in the moment, you're not thinking about the future . . . you're not thinking about the past . . . you're simply there . . . and you can be grateful."

Branch has been an active member of artistic and social-justice-focused communities including the Art Students League of New York, which granted him a merit scholarship in 1993; the Harlem School of the Arts; and People of Color in Crisis (POCC), a nonprofit organization that was dedicated to serving New York's LGBTQ+

community of color. His work has been included in solo and group exhibitions, most notably in *A Time for Healing*, an exhibition of work by HIV-positive Black artists presented at the Lt. Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Community Center in 2001; a solo exhibition presented at POCC in 2006; and a solo exhibition at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) in 2008. Branch's prints have also seen commercial success, printed on the covers of publications produced by the Book of the Month Club and used in pamphlets for the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, an organization that spearheaded efforts to provide mental health support to those with HIV; mock-ups of some of these covers and announcements appear among his archival records.

Branch's materials first entered the Visual AIDS Archive in 1998; they span the years from 1992 to 2008. His collection includes exhibition announcements, press releases, periodicals, CVs, biographical texts, a resume, and letters of recommendation. Original artworks contributed to Postcards from the Edge are also included, along with photocopies and 35mm slides documenting his work.



(Left) Mark Carter, *Mary JB*, 2001. Leather, yarn, acrylic paint, paper, and glue, 15 × 12 in.



(Right) Mark Carter, *The Christ of the Viracept*, 2000. Leather, yarn, tempera paint, statuette, and glue, 22 × 16 in.

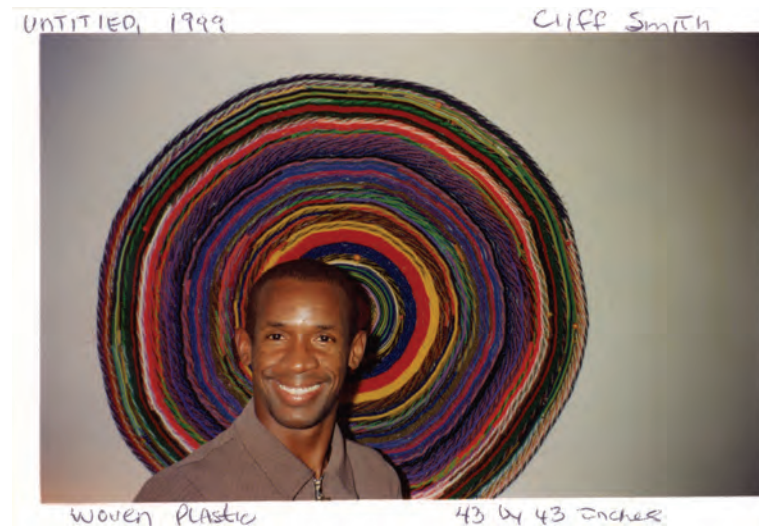
Mark Carter

Mark Carter (1954, Queens, NY–2005, Bronx, NY) was a professional nurse and lifelong art enthusiast who turned to artistic practice later in life, after an accident resulted in his yearlong hospitalization. Carter’s work incorporates a vast array of found materials—many-hued leather remnants and yarn alongside acrylic paint, tempera, and crayon—to build up richly textured, patchwork compositions. Focused in figuration, his oeuvre registers an expansive iconography that blends religious motifs with contemporary celebrities, often Black: Christ is placed on a plane with Tupac Shakur and Martin Luther King Jr.; nor is it accidental that other musicians he depicts share names with biblical figures, such as the rapper Eve and the pop star Madonna. Borrowing imagery from magazines, sometimes pasted directly into his collages, and frequently depicting the same figure in the same pose drawn from popular image culture, the works invite reflection upon the circulation and reproduction of the photographic image. Carter’s personal experience also enters his works, albeit more subtly, in impressions of Fire Island; a portrait of his niece; and personifications of Viracept, a protease inhibitor used to prevent HIV from multiplying in the body.

Through profound hardship—overcoming drug addiction and homelessness, and living with HIV—Carter understood his work to index the driving beliefs that animated his life: spirituality, his struggle for sexual freedom, and advocacy for equality irrespective of race or gender. He wrote, “Art is the mirror of your soul, which projects

the images that God has placed in your mind. It also allows you to express the rights of races, genders, and religion in your own way whether anybody agrees or not.” His work was shown in a number of exhibitions, most notably *Art & Ability: An Exhibition by Artists with Disabilities* at the Young Women’s Christian Center, New York in 2001 and 2002; *Weather Report: Artists Living with HIV/AIDS* at the Jewish Community Center, Louisville, Kentucky, in 2003; and *Release*, presented by Visual AIDS in partnership with Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA) in 2003.

In 1998, Carter donated material to the Visual AIDS Archive. Spanning 1996 to the year of his death in 2005, his materials and correspondence reflect a deep relationship with the organization and its staff. The collection provides key insight into Carter’s ideas on his work and that of his contemporaries; for example, a piece of writing that records his responses to the 1999 controversy over Chris Ofili’s painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), which depicted the Christian icon as a Black woman adorned with elephant dung. The collection also features photocopied, photographed, and 35mm slide-based documentation of Carter’s work and drawings, including a self-portrait and drawings of Malcolm X and James Baldwin. Also included are exhibition announcements, an exhibition catalog, biographies, artist statements, CVs, periodicals, and a program from his memorial service.



(Left) Photograph of Clifford Smith with his work *Untitled*, 1999. Woven plastic, 43 × 43 in.



(Right) Clifford Smith, *Untitled*, 1995. Woven plastic, 7 × 7 in.

Clifford Smith

Clifford Smith (b. 1955, Havelock, NC) is a self-taught artist who refigures quotidian materials—including eggshells, plant matter, plastic, synthetic cord, and natural fibers—as sumptuously textural abstractions. Prior to beginning to practice as an artist, Smith was a professional dancer, performing in New York, Chicago, Atlantic City, and Las Vegas from the late 1970s through the 1980s. In the 1990s, he began producing large-scale, circular weavings influenced by mandalas. Juxtaposing cords of different hues, weaves, and surface qualities, he achieved complex color studies and hypnotic designs. Smith has reflected that the fabrication of his compositions is a meditative act for which he must “balance mind and body.” This slow, labor-intensive process results in works that take time to see.

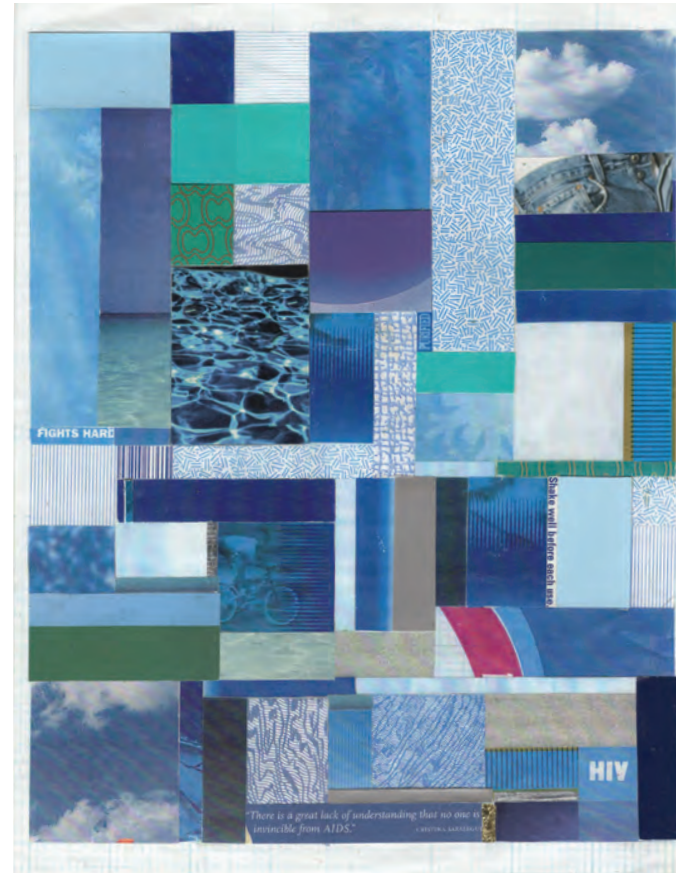
Smith began expanding to other media in the early 2000s, persisting with geometric, non-representational forms. Dyeing eggshells, he arranged them like mosaics in vibrant concentric designs symbolic of new beginnings. In the late

2000s, Smith applied this same methodology to irregular fragments of wood and plant fiber, limning each piece with halos of acrylic paint, after the fashion of Japanese *kintsugi*, to create intricate patterns that suggest rupture, restoration, and resilience.

Smith’s work has been exhibited at A Different Light Bookstore, New York; Tenri Cultural Institute, New York; and Broward Community College, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. In 2001, he contributed work to Visual AIDS’s Positively Art calendar. His materials entered the Visual AIDS Archive in 1999 and include professional materials, such as business cards and artist statements; exhibition materials for his 2000 show at A Different Light Bookstore; writing and artwork corresponding to Visual AIDS initiatives including Day With(out) Art and Postcards from the Edge; personal materials, such as a marriage announcement; portraits of the artist with his work; and documentation of his art in CD and 35mm slide formats.



(Left) Frederick Weston, *So-Bar*, 2013. Mixed-media collage on paper, 22 ¾ × 34 ½ in.



(Right) Frederick Weston, *Blue Bathroom Blues*, 1999. Mixed-media collage, 11 × 8 ½ in.

Frederick Weston

Frederick Weston (1946, Memphis, TN–2020, New York, NY) was a self-taught, interdisciplinary artist, who worked in a variety of media, including collage, drawing, sculpture, photography, performance, and creative writing. He was raised in Detroit, Michigan, where he participated in the club scene before moving to New York City in the mid-1970s. He was a graduate of Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan, where he was instrumental in founding the Zeta Beta Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha—the university’s first African American fraternity. He went on to study menswear design and marketing at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. There, he quickly became immersed in the gay scene as a habitué of Times Square, where he ran the coat check at the gay hustler bar Stella’s. Over the course of his time in New York, he developed a vast encyclopedic archive of images and ephemera related to fashion, the body, advertising, AIDS, race, and queer subjects. Occupying figural silhouettes and anatomical fragments, Weston’s works on paper hint at themes such as the permeability of the self and the fraught nature of representation. Weston was also a prolific poet, presenting his textual and visual practices simultaneously in multimedia presentations.

Weston was a long-standing artist-member of Visual AIDS—forging ties with the organization in 1998, while participating in the Village Care art

therapy program—and was the subject of a 2021 book published by Visual AIDS that surveyed Weston’s work through a long-form interview between Weston and author Samuel R. Delany. In 2017, an oral history with Weston conducted by Ted Kerr was published by the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art as part of the Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project. Weston’s work is represented by the Weston Estate and Gordon Robichaux, New York, where he presented his first New York solo exhibition in 2019. In 2020, Ortuzar Projects and Gordon Robichaux presented a forty-year survey of Weston’s work.

Materials pertaining to Weston in the Visual AIDS Archive span the years 1977 to 2023 and include a collection of zines, mail art, and invitations created by Weston, as well as correspondence, exhibition materials, press releases, CVs, biographies, loan agreements, press clippings, publications, and periodicals. Original artworks submitted to Postcards from the Edge are also present, alongside documentation of Weston’s artwork in formats including photographs, 35mm slides, and CDs. A number of recordings of Weston speaking at Visual AIDS-hosted events can be found on the organization’s website.



(Left) Memphis (Mark Young), *Quandary*, 2002. Digital Piezo print, 11 × 14 in.

(Right) Memphis (Mark Young), *A Free Lunch*, 2001. Digital Piezo print, 32 × 25 in.

Memphis (Mark Young)

Memphis (b. 1969, Southfield, MI)—whose given name is Mark Young—is a Los Angeles-based artist whose collage, mixed-media assemblage, and digital compositions celebrate diasporic African identities. Drawing subject matter and motifs from African tradition, Afro-Cuban mysticism, and contemporary African American culture, Memphis's works coalesce in richly referential matrices embellished with pastel and acrylic paint. Confronting past and present-day bigotry, Memphis appropriates and affirmatively recombines racial slurs and prejudiced representations from textual sources, photographs, and even antique objects. Reflecting on his process, he has written, “My work involves refashioning these bitter effigies in such a way as to render them powerless and serve as a launch pad for new cultural questions, introspection, tolerance, forgiveness, and self-love.” Memphis's work also borrows spiritual imagery from folk magic rituals including Vodou, Hoodoo, and Santería—the last of which was practiced by his Honduran grandmother.

Educated at the Atlanta College of Art, Memphis has exhibited internationally and throughout the US. In 2003, his practice was featured in a solo exhibition, *Pure Dee Misery and Other Work by Memphis*, at California State University, Fullerton. His work is in the collections of institutions including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); Southern University at New Orleans; Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City; University of Texas San Antonio Institute of Texan Cultures; and the Inter-University Program for Latino Research, Houston.

Memphis's materials entered the Visual AIDS Archive in 2003 and feature an artist statement and biography, a submission to the 2003 Visual AIDS exhibition *Share Your Vision*, and 35mm slides preserving his work.



(Left) Zion Kyakulaga and Grace Talitwala Collective, *The Destitute*, 1997. Banana fiber and tree bark, 48 × 30 in.

(Right) Photograph of Zion Kyakulaga holding a work made collaboratively with Grace Talitwala

Zion Kyakulaga & Grace Talitwala Collective

Zion Kyakulaga and Grace Talitwala (b. 1972, Jinja, Uganda) are self-taught Ugandan artists whose joint collective is dedicated to facilitating the work of young artists in their home country. After winning the Positively Art calendar contest in 2001, Kyakulaga and Talitwala used proceeds from the prize to purchase several acres of land near the source of the Nile River in Uganda, where they have since built an artists' colony for those living with AIDS and other terminal diseases.

Kyakulaga and Talitwala's shared practice focuses on figural scenes rendered in banana fiber and tree bark. Symbolically reflecting on their own experiences of living with HIV/AIDS, their representational works capture individuals confronted by arduous tasks—struggling under

a ponderous burden or standing at the base of a steep ascent. However, within these depictions of hardship, there are seeds of hope. Of their 1997 work *The Destitute*, they wrote, "Here the destitute carries everything he has . . . including his burden. The woman of Africa is also carrying something . . . a pot of water promising of life."

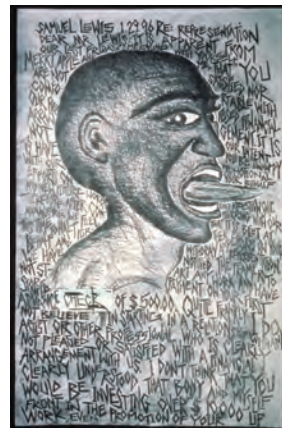
Materials corresponding to the careers of Kyakulaga and Talitwala entered the Visual AIDS Archive in 2000. Their file includes the catalog to the 2002 MoCADA show *Fusion: The Art of Contemporary Africa*, in which their work was exhibited; a dossier composed by the scholar Andrew Irving, who coordinated the collective's addition to the archive; as well as photographs and negatives of their artworks.

DRAWING & ILLUSTRATION

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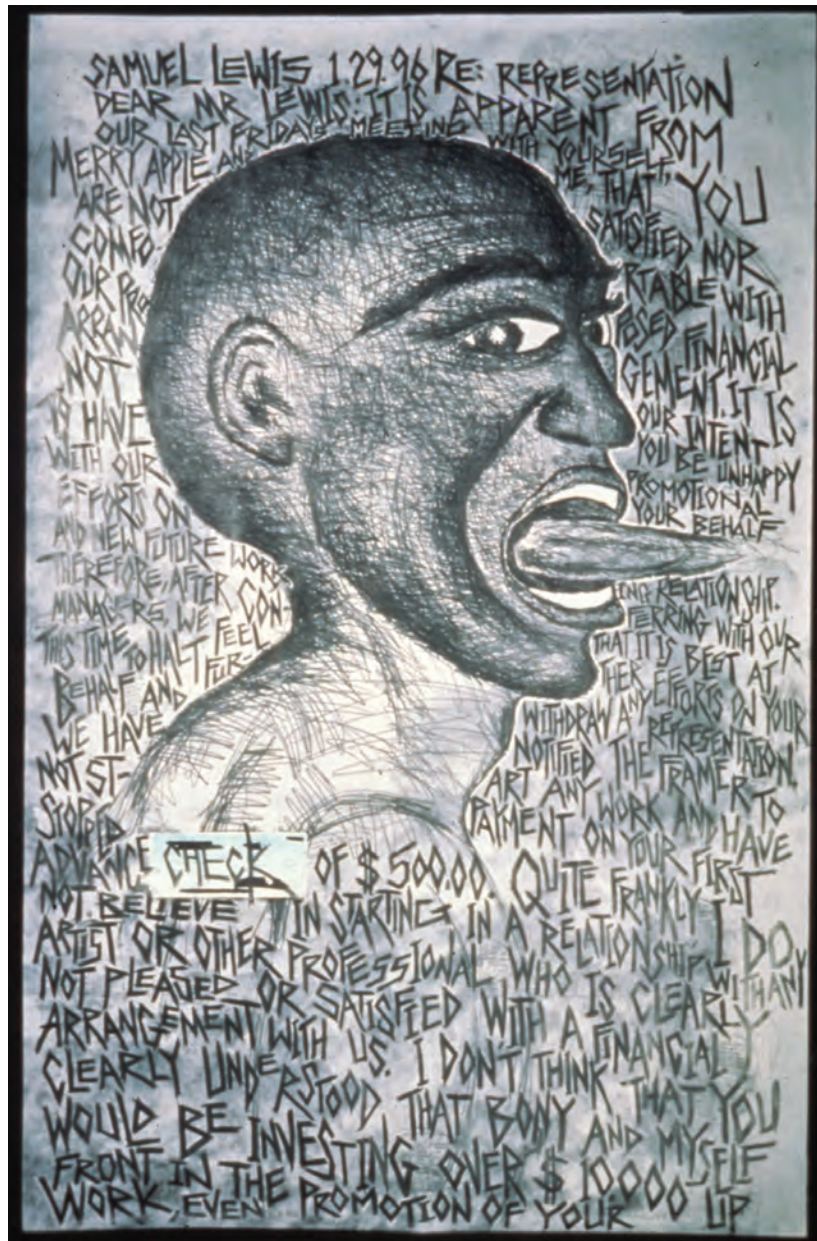




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Garcia Ninja's materials first entered the Visual AIDS Archive in 1998 and span the years 1996 to 2007. They include correspondence, exhibition announcements, CVs, periodicals, a biography, and an index of artworks in a range of formats including CDs with digitized images, photocopies, and 35mm slides. Several of Garcia Ninja's original artworks, submitted to Postcards from the Edge, also form part of the collection.

Samuel Fleming Lewis



(Left) Samuel Fleming Lewis,
The Angry Drawing, 1997.
Graphite on vellum, 72 × 48 in.



(Right) Samuel Fleming Lewis,
Poison, 1996. Blood and graphite
on vellum, 19 × 19 in.

Samuel Fleming Lewis (b. 1953, Los Angeles, CA) documents his experience as a Black, HIV-positive man in painting, drawing, and mixed-media collage. In raw, emotional compositions, Lewis responds to themes including race, politics, and sexual discrimination.

Lewis has spoken against racial ghettoization in the arts; one work *The Angry Drawing* (1997) tackles the subject head-on, recalling his own experience with a gallery, in which staff suggested that they emphasize his Blackness in marketing. Lewis writes, “I decided that I was not viewed as an artist but a screaming jungle monkey.” He began to draw self-portraits in which he took the guises of wild animals. The result of a year of sketches and studies, *The Angry Drawing* depicts a Black man, tongue extended from his mouth. Surrounding the figure, a rough, angular font reproduces and subtly comments on an edited version of a letter he received from the gallery informing him that his exhibition had been canceled.

Playing upon the affective associations of his media, Lewis occasionally incorporates visceral materialities alongside his graphic illustrations and cutting letterform contours. His

work *Poison* (1996)—in which the titular word is framed by a field of rusty blots of blood—exorcised negative feelings about the HIV-positive blood running through his veins. The work is composed with the artist’s own blood, drawn during doctor’s visits alongside other vials tested for cell count and viral load. Reflecting on the short span during which the virus can be contracted from externalized bodily fluids, Lewis wrote, “Exposed HIV-positive blood is poisonous.” Metaphorically addressing pervasive fears about infection, Lewis reflected that his “relationships with family, friends, boy/girlfriends, doctors, pills, government, and insurance agencies are a constant reminder” of his positive status.

Lewis studied at Otis College of Art and Design, enrolling in classes on drawing and interior design; he also took courses in fine art at Los Angeles City College and interior design at the UC Berkeley Extension in San Francisco. With this background, he has worked in architecture and interior design offices, and has managed his own design firm for more than forty years. Lewis’s work has been shown in solo exhibitions at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California;

Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California; Gensler and Associates Design Firm, San Francisco; Vision and Magick Gallery, Petaluma, California; Sonoma County Repertory Theatre, Sebastopol, California; and Finley Community Center, Santa Rosa, California. He was also included in the group exhibitions *Textile Meets Politics* at the California Museum of Art, San Pedro, California, in 1998 and *Patterns, Textures, and Repetitions* at the Sebastopol Center for the Arts in 1996. He lives and works in Palm Springs, California.

Lewis’s materials entered the Visual AIDS Archive in 1997 and include correspondence with members of the Visual AIDS staff, a CV, a portrait, descriptions of his artworks, and 35mm slide documentation of his work.



Michael Mitchell, *Moving Day*, 2021. Marker and Prismacolor pencil on paper, 7 × 4 ½ in.

Michael Mitchell's (b. 1952, Chicago, IL) graphic, felt-tip illustrations survey the gamut of erotic tropes through elaborately rendered scenes, celebrating and uplifting smut in a catalog of sexual fetishes from voyeurism and exhibitionism to bondage and illicit, incestuous desire. Though often set in everyday scenes, his cinematic illustrations tease the borderlines between reality and forbidden fantasy; contorted into unlikely positions, exaggeratedly endowed, his figures push the limits of the socially taboo. Many of Mitchell's sketches hinge on a sexualization of real-world social dynamics, exploring power plays between teacher and student, patrolman and the apprehended, and customer and shopkeeper. These occupational subjects also consider masculine archetypes after the fashion of other artists such as Tom of Finland, fixating on firefighters, construction workers, and soldiers as both virile models and queer objects of desire.

Though trained early in life drawing, Mitchell's deeper artistic engagement with the male figure began in the fall of 1996, when he started

to participate in *Pork*, a weekly party at the New York leather bar the LURE. Live painting during the evening programs, he "would lure the LURE patrons up onto the stage to pose." Working quickly within confines set by his models' desire to "cruise, not to pose," the drawings emerged with a gestural immediacy. Mitchell enjoyed the arena of public performance, which allowed him "to reveal the process, to demystify the idea of creating art, to remove the focus of art as a commodity, rather than art as an activity." In 1997, Mitchell began publishing his erotic imagery alongside explicit stories in *Handjobs*, a gay magazine and newsletter. The same year, he also presented the exhibition *Propensity for Excitation* at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, featuring an installation of paintings on brown paper bags—produced in the LURE's basement—that later entered the museum's permanent collection.

Mitchell's artistic practice runs in tandem with a long career as a storyboard illustrator for advertising agencies, for which he trained at the Art

Institute of Chicago and the American Academy of Art College in Chicago. After graduating, he was a founding partner at Howell/Mitchell Design in Chicago, where he remained for three years, before deciding to relocate to New York in 1979 to pursue a freelance career. It is in relation to Mitchell's commercial work that we might understand his fascination with sketching automotive prototypes in his personal artistic practice—a topic that also teases questions of power and masculinity that are persistent in his erotic images.

Mitchell first joined the Visual AIDS Archive in 1997, and his records span the years 1996 to 2010. His materials include drawings submitted to Postcards from the Edge; correspondence; a 2009 article on his work in *The Archive*, a journal released by the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art; and 35mm slides of his artwork, as well as an extensive catalog of digital files.



Michael C. Morgan, *Are We the People? Series (16)*, 2005.
Mixed media, 4 × 3 in.

Michael C. Morgan

Michael C. Morgan (b. 1955, Charlotte, NC) works across painting, drawing, and mixed-media assemblage. His work engages heavily with social commentary, grappling with themes such as alcoholism, drug abuse, corruption within the Catholic Church, and homelessness. In his compositions, obscure amalgams of Black men cluster, their archetypal silhouettes suggesting the shame and secrecy that undergird queer life for so many, especially Black homosexuals in the South.

Morgan's work draws heavily from the daily dramas of life in Atlanta, reflecting polarities from children playing outside to the malign prevalence of narcotics. Through his work, he strives to draw attention to the afflictions of substance abuse and AIDS that oppress Southern Blacks. Of those in his community struggling with addiction, Morgan writes, "They come from all walks of life. . . . and what happened to them could happen to anyone."

Morgan's 2005 series "Are We the People?" addresses questions of economic instability

and gentrification through Impressionistic depictions of street scenes and portraits of displaced people who the artist has seen in "frighteningly increasing numbers on Atlanta's urban streets." The series acts as witness to the social ramifications of development initiatives undertaken by Atlanta in recent decades, which have caused systemic rent increases and, in turn, displacement and racial exclusion. Capturing the comings and goings of street-bound "survivalists," to borrow Morgan's term, he condemns the negligence of city government and gives "voice to the silence that speaks forcefully to those of us who care."

Other of his figural compositions confront homophobia within the Black community, vilifying the hypocrisies that lead Black men and women to be ashamed of who they desire or love. Several of his works censure the Catholic Church, which, while condoning homosexual attraction, decrees sexual activity with someone of the same sex to be a mortal sin. In *Jack in the Box*, a pastor preaches damnation to homosexuals, despite his



Michael C. Morgan

Two works from Michael C. Morgan's "Caged" series. Each: 18 x 8 x 12 in.

own coterie of young male lovers. Another work, *In the Garden*, draws on Morgan's adolescent memories of Piedmont Park, a popular nighttime cruising ground for gay men. Reflecting on the need to pursue desire under the cover of darkness, the painting captures the silhouettes of two figures—symbolic of repressed shame and guilt—who look on as men in the foreground engage openly in sexual intercourse. Through these works Morgan contends with and attempts to unlearn a self-doubt instilled by homophobic institutions. Though he has been open about his own sexual orientation since his mid-twenties, he continues to affirm that coming out is an ongoing process, reflecting, "I'm still learning about myself as I go on."

In addition to his two-dimensional works, Morgan creates unique shadow boxes that combine original drawing and painting with found objects, including action figures, liquor bottles, hardware, and beads. These altar-like sculptures look at first glance like folk shrines, but upon closer inspection their often melancholic imagery, subtle references to violence, and wired fronts feel more suggestive of caged inner worlds or shadow selves contained. They reflect the facades that men in his community have adopted to disguise their intelligence, compassion, and

need for acceptance from a hostile environment. Born in North Carolina in 1955, Morgan has been making art since childhood. He completed his high school education at the North Carolina School of Performing Arts and, in 1976, moved to Atlanta to pursue a BFA in painting from the Atlanta College of Art. He has since taught art in the Department of Adult Education at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, and at the Atlanta Preparatory School. In 1988, he was the recipient of a grant from the City of Atlanta's Bureau of Cultural Affairs. His work has been included in exhibitions at Atlanta-based institutions, including the National Black Arts Festival, New Visions Gallery for the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Gallery 100 at Woodruff Fine Arts Center, and the Piedmont Park Art Festival. He has also shown at the Tubman African American Museum in Macon, Georgia, and the Marietta Cobb Museum of Art in Marietta, Georgia. He continues to live and work in Atlanta.

Material pertaining to Morgan's artwork and career first entered the Visual AIDS Archive in 2005 and includes an artist biography, a CV, and 35mm slide images of his artwork that primarily correspond to his 2005 series "Are We the People?"

Michael Slocum

Michael Slocum (1956–1995, New York, NY) was a graphic artist, writer, and editor whose *Zander Alexander, PWA*, 1993. Published in *Newsline* (November 1993), a publication of the People With AIDS Coalition, NY

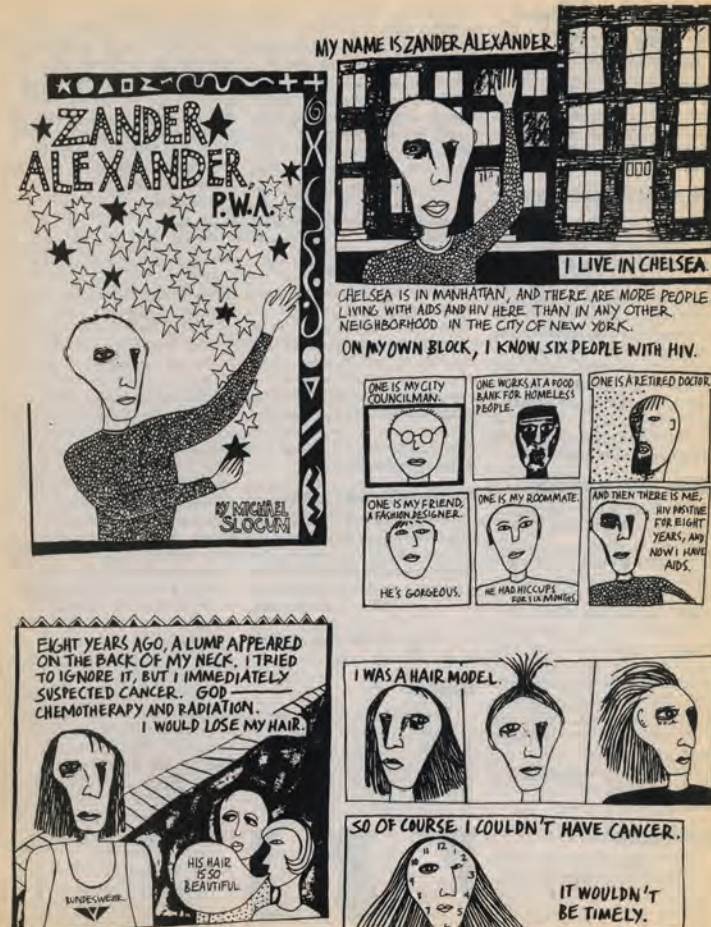
Growing up in the predominantly white town of Danbury, Connecticut, Slocum was the eldest of Alfred and Marie Slocum's three children. According to his siblings, though he experienced racism from his peers, Slocum was relatively popular and performed well in school. He graduated from Brown University in 1978 with a degree in comparative literature. Although he did not pursue art while in college, he was friends with art students at the nearby Rhode Island School of Design and, moved by their influence, began including hand-drawn illustrations alongside his academic essays. By the end of his studies, he was oil painting with supplies borrowed from a girlfriend who was majoring in the fine arts; he continued to produce Surrealist acrylic and oil paintings throughout his adult life. For a short time after graduation, he worked in Brown University's admissions office before moving to New York City and settling in the Chelsea neighborhood. He was accepted into and briefly attended an MFA program at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, but dropped out early in his studies.

Slocum eventually found his stride working for arts publications. His first significant position was at the magazine *Art & Antiques*, where he

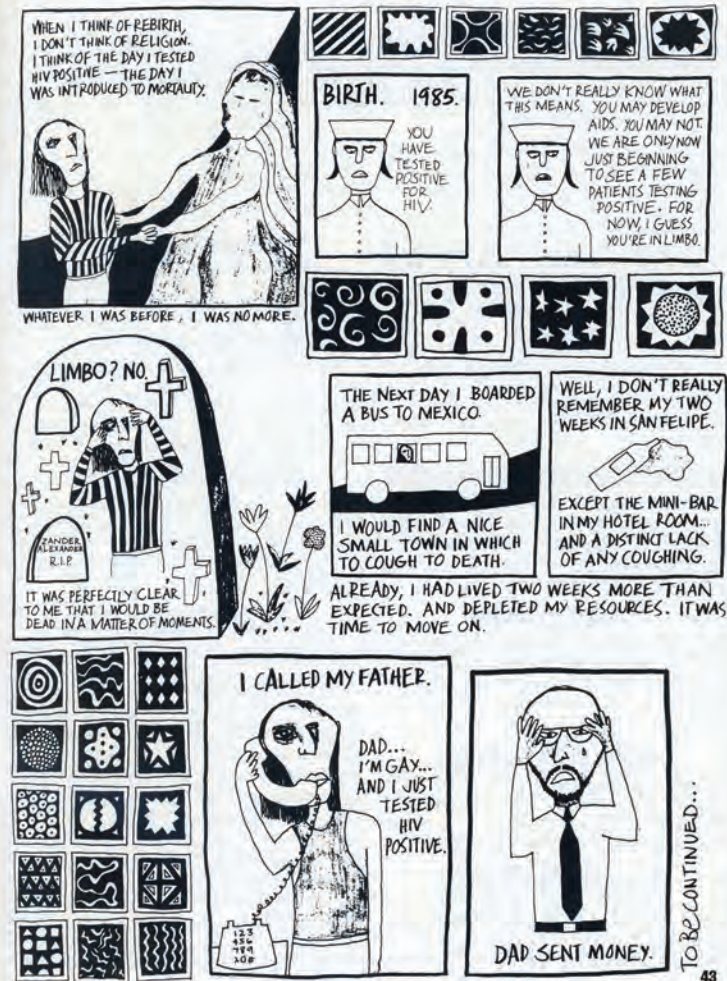
worked as an editor. While he found that editing suited him, he longed for more meaningful work that directly supported the Black community. During this time, Slocum also struggled with his sexuality. Seeking solace from these frustrations, he turned to spirituality and began following the cult figure J. Z. Knight, a medium for a spiritual entity called Ramtha. He left his position at *Art & Antiques* to move to Seattle, where he could be nearer to Knight. During his time on the West Coast, Slocum came out as gay; he also contracted HIV and was soon diagnosed.

Moving back to New York, Slocum returned to magazine work with a sense of activist purpose. He began working at *Body Positive*, where he highlighted the voices of marginalized people living with HIV. With Jim Lewis, he co-authored *Body Positive's* now-famous and widely reprinted creed "You Are Not Alone"; this message of hope and solidarity to those newly diagnosed with HIV was first published in the magazine on December 31, 1982, and ran in every subsequent issue. As a respected figure within the HIV-organizing community, he was selected in 1993 to serve as the editor-in-chief of *Newsline*, a monthly magazine produced by the People with AIDS Coalition of New York (PWAC/NY).

This position met Slocum's intellectual needs and also provided him an opportunity to platform his creative practice, running his own irreverent and introspective comic *Zander Alexander, PWA* in the final pages of the magazine. The comic's graphically rendered frames offer a

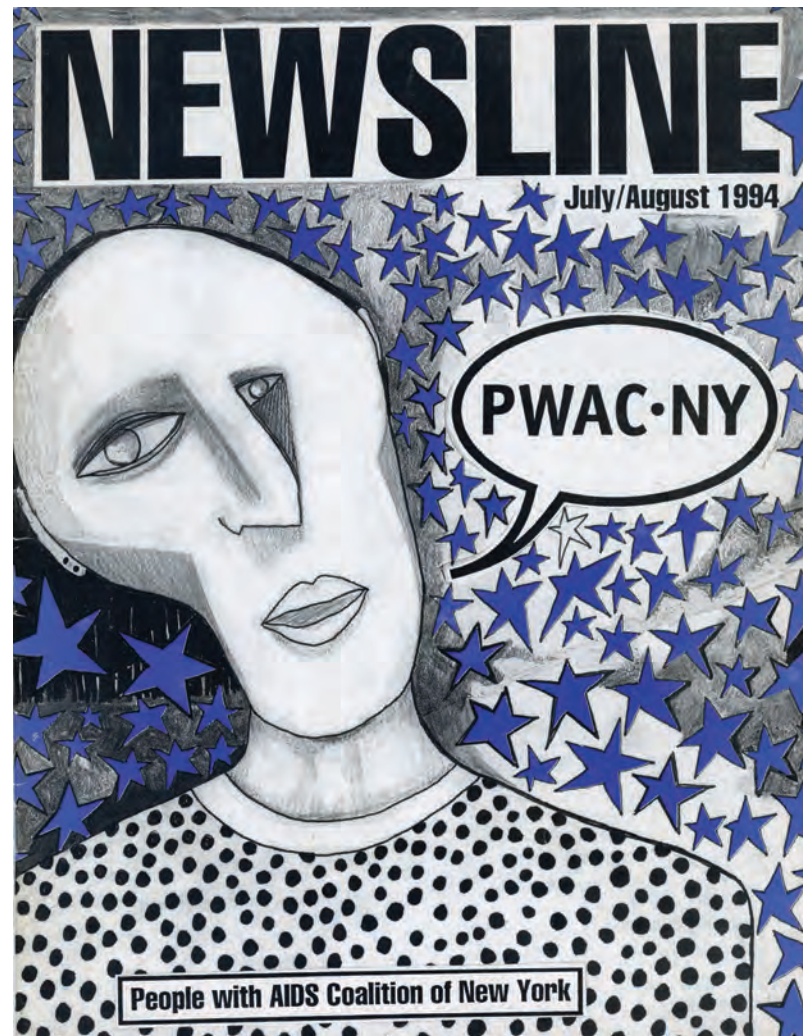


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Michael Slocum, *Zander Alexander, PWA*, 1993. Published in *Newsline* (November 1993), a publication of the People With AIDS Coalition, NY



Michael Slocum

(Left) Cover of *Newsline* (July/August 1994), featuring artwork by Michael Slocum,

(Right) Michael Slocum, *Zander Alexander, PWA*, 1994. Published in *Newsline* (September 1994), a publication of the People With AIDS Coalition, NY

humorous and poignant window into the meta-physical meditations and quotidian hardships of queer identity and HIV-positive status. Each installment of *Zander Alexander* takes the form of an anecdote, opening on an observation or memory from Slocum's life that is then probed over subsequent panels through dialogue, visual metaphor, and internal monologue. Slocum's emphasis on personal experience breaks from the didacticism of other contemporaneous HIV-related comics, which were focused on dispelling misinformation in order to reduce HIV transmission. *Zander Alexander*, by contrast, candidly reveals the realities of living with the illness. At times, these scenes depict Zander Alexander in community, expressing the viewpoints of wider demographics of HIV-impacted people, most notably those of women and people of color. Through these intimate and subjective depictions of the seropositive everyday, Slocum represents himself while recognizing the specificity of every individual's experience of HIV and AIDS. Deliberately ending each spread on a humorous note, Slocum allows his reader to face death without fear or regret, giving them the last laugh.

Executed in black and white with occasional shading, *Zander Alexander*'s distinct visual language coalesces elements of Expressionism, Surrealism, and Minimalism, which run in parallel to Slocum's signature combination of gallows humor and existential profundity. All elements of the comics—people, objects, and scenery—are outlined in the same dense line weight; textured crayon shading is employed to create visual interest and feeling, rather than to engender a sense of realism. At some drawings' margins, abstract designs inspired by African cosmology and West African adinkras dance and whirl, eliciting a sense of play while also suggesting obscure symbolic meanings. There is a Modernist

asymmetry to the characters, especially the titular Zander Alexander, whose angular, ovoid face and deep-bagged eyes call to mind Edvard Munch's 1893 painting *The Scream*.

Zander Alexander moves through an emblematic internal landscape, populated by allegorical figures, ghosts, and fantastical illusions of what might yet be or could have been. For example, in one panel from an early edition, Zander Alexander discusses his diagnosis as "the day [he] was introduced to mortality"; Slocum depicts him fearfully embracing a personification of death, represented as a wraith with flowing hair. Sparse scenes with few contextualizing elements—a bed, a street lamp—deemphasize setting and action, turning the reader's attention psychically inward. Likewise, the plot moves forward in anachronistic fits and starts, mirrored in dynamic panels that continuously morph size and shape. This intuitive, scrapbook approach to storytelling allows the narrative to meander between events and thoughts, reflecting the swirling, interconnected nature of Zander Alexander's stream of consciousness.

Slocum served as editor of *Newsline* from 1993 until his death in March 1995, working closely with Mary Cotter, Becky Trotter, and other HIV/AIDS activists. He is remembered for his significant work in pushing the publication to be more inclusive, adding a column authored by incarcerated people living with HIV.

Dating from 1993 to 2021, Visual AIDS's collection of archival materials on Slocum includes exhibition announcements, publications, ephemera, biographies, and documentation of his artwork in formats including photocopies and 35mm slides. Visual AIDS also holds several issues of *Newsline* in its library, spanning a partial run of issues from 1990 to 1998.

ARTISTS' BOOKS & PRINTMAKING

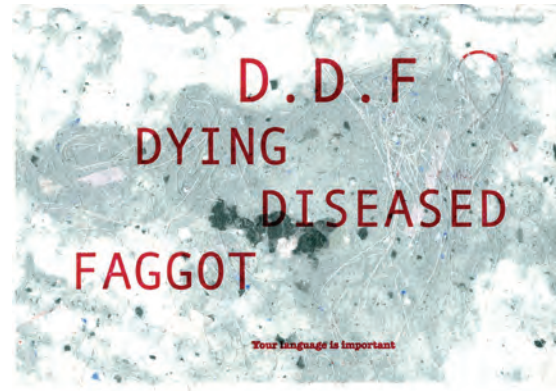
p.54 Paula "Affrekka" Jefferson

p.56 Charles Ryan Long

p.58 Phillip Patterson

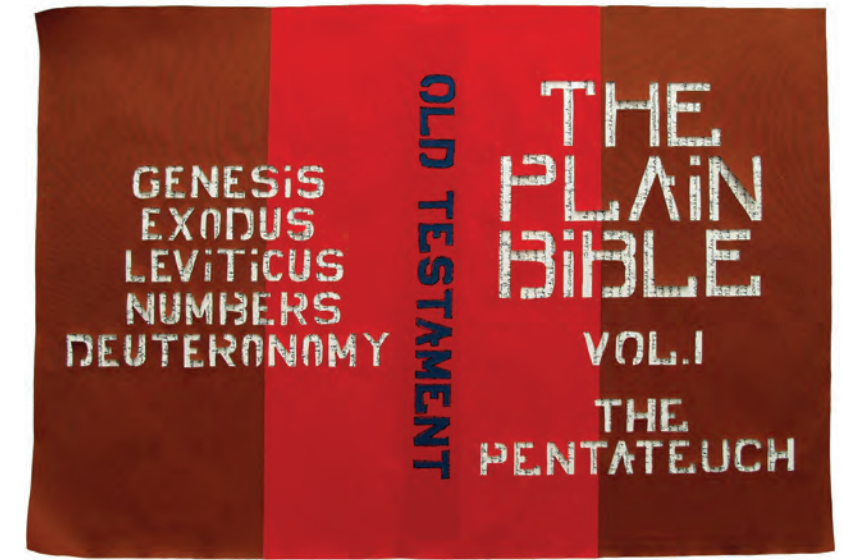


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(Left) Paula “Affrekka” Jefferson, *All That Glitters*, 1991. Linocut on paper, 14 ½ × 11 ½ in.



(Right) Paula “Affrekka” Jefferson, *Power of Performance*, 1997. Woodcut on paper, 14 × 11 ½ in.

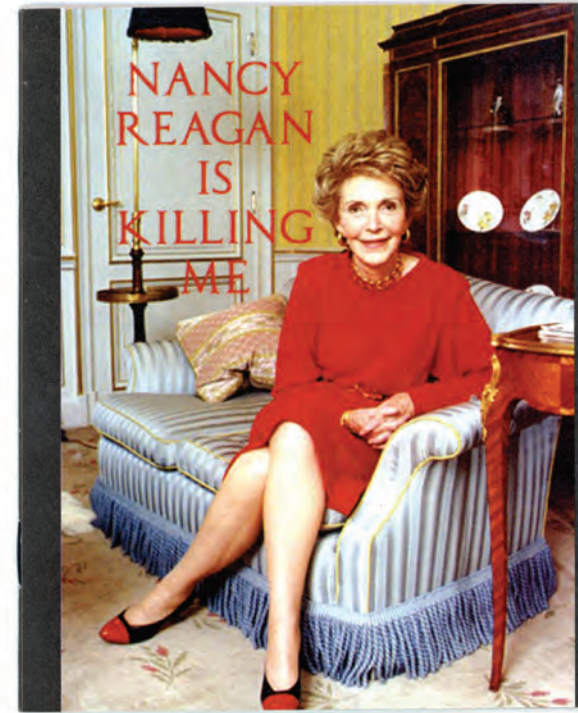
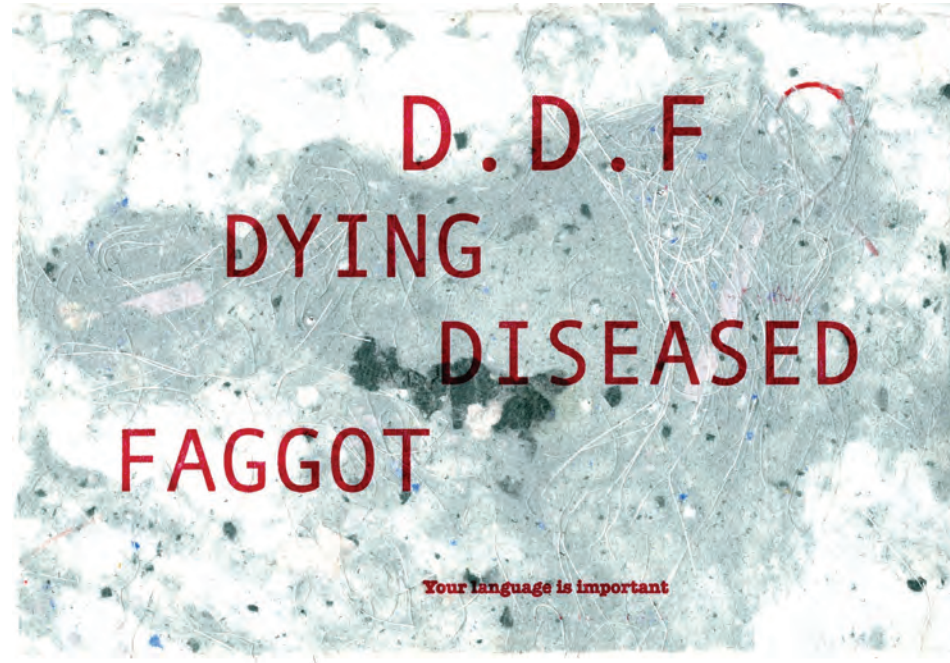
Paula “Affrekka” Jefferson

Paula “Affrekka” Jefferson’s (1950, Brooklyn, NY–2004, Brooklyn, NY) prints, drawings, and paintings pay homage to her family’s African past. A descendant of one of Thomas Jefferson’s plantation slaves, Jefferson began, at age thirteen, to call herself “Affrekka,” a name eulogizing the long-lost homeland from which her ancestors were torn. Born in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn to parents who migrated from the South in the 1940s, Jefferson came to the visual arts at an early age. After majoring in art at Washington Irving Campus High School, she enrolled in the advertising program at the School of Visual Arts. Later still, she continued her education as a lifelong member of the Art Students League and at the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop. She worked at the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, where her work is held in the permanent collection, and served as the art director of the Jamaica Arts Council.

Predominantly producing woodblock and linocut prints, Jefferson draws inspiration from the distinctive patterns and designs of African textiles and represents iconic Black figures from Bob Marley and Harriet Tubman to Nefertiti. However, she is equally inspired by artists from a Western art historical canon, citing the

influence of the painter and virtuosic printmaker Rembrandt. In a 2002 article by Lester Strong for the AIDS magazine *Art & Understanding*, Jefferson reflected that her artistic practice was an outlet for feelings about her seropositive status, commenting that it offered “a way of coping with the virus, a way to let out frustrations.” This contemplation of life and death, past and present, is evident in her 1991 linocut *All That Glitters*, in which she captures a portrait of her grandmother wreathed in jewelry made from miniature skulls. Explaining the work’s title, Jefferson remarked, “All that glitter is materialistic; it leads to death.” To live well, she believed, one required a strong foundation that transcended earthly riches and fleshly pleasures.

Jefferson’s materials in the Visual AIDS Archive include artist’s statements, press clippings, photocopies of published works, a submission form to Visual AIDS’s 1998 Positively Art calendar, and 35mm slides documenting her work. Beyond the scope of the archive, Jefferson’s work was also included in a 2022 essay by Julia Harris released on the Visual AIDS website, which compares Jefferson’s work to the feminist activist practices of Valerie Caris Blitz and Jerome Caja.



(Left) Charles Ryan Long, *DDF3*, 2016. Letterpress on handmade paper, 6 × 8 ¾ in.

(Right) Cover of Charles Ryan Long, *Nancy Reagan Is Killing Me*, 2016. Artist's zine, offset printed; overall (closed): 5 ¼ × 4 ¼ in.

Charles Ryan Long

Charles Ryan Long (b. 1979, Chicago, IL) is a multidisciplinary artist, activist, and Black liberationist whose work inhabits Black, queer, and feminist perspectives. Long's artistic work centers around artist's books, printmaking, and works on paper, using agitprop aesthetics and text to reveal the subliminal attitudes encoded within common terms and ideas—drawing attention, for example, to the way HIV serostatus is spoken about in terms of cleanliness (or dirtiness) and transmuting the acronym “DDF,” for “drug and disease free,” to “dying diseased faggot.” Long's visual practice is complemented by a long-term dedication to social work, engaging with people experiencing poverty, persons with disabilities, LGBTQ individuals, and unhoused persons, as well as those historically or currently

struggling with addiction. He has written that his “concern with material history is used to answer questions of what happens when individuals, places, and spaces are taken away from our reality and stand unacknowledged or on the periphery.” His work strives to resurface these marginalized people and sites in order to “move us to action.”

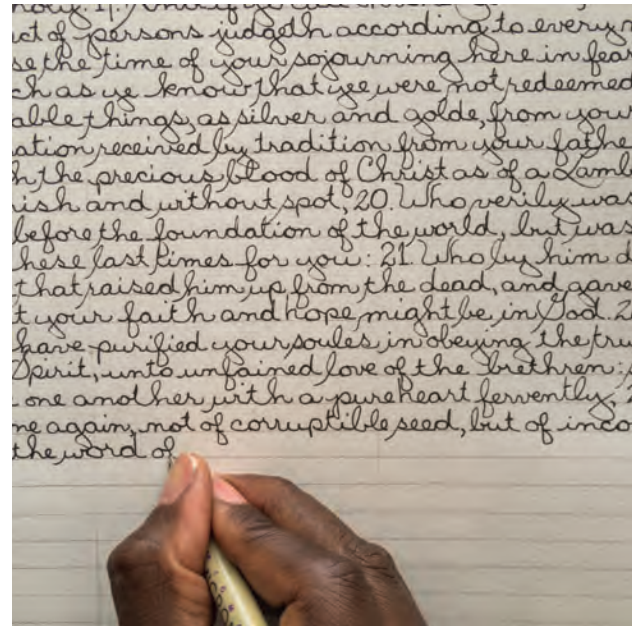
Long has produced a number of projects with Visual AIDS, including tote bags, broadsides, and a patch inscribed “Dirty & Proud” for the organization's Play Smart safe sex kit—all of which are included in the organization's institutional records. Long's own file in the Visual AIDS Archive includes copies of his 2016 zine *Nancy Reagan Is Killing Me*.

Phillip Patterson



(Above) Phillip Patterson, *The Serenity of Knowing*, 2007–13. Artist's book, hand bound and inscribed with archival ink on watercolor paper; page (each): 13 × 20 in.

(Below) Phillip Patterson in his home, transcribing text from the King James Bible. Photographs by Laura Glazer



An interior designer by profession, Phillip Patterson (1950, Queens, NY–2014, Philmont, NY) was a scribe and book artist whose practice centered on a deep study of Christian orthodoxy. Patterson's turn toward religion was spurred by a confrontation with his own mortality—diagnosed with HIV in 1985 and told he had five years to live.

Patterson—who was raised Catholic—decided to transcribe the Bible by hand when, in 2007, his long-time partner described the Muslim tradition of writing out the Quran. Motivated by a desire to better acquaint himself with the Bible's lore and to consider the impact of Christian ideology on Western culture more broadly, he committed the Books of Moses to paper in clean, cursive rows of India ink and archival felt-tip pen. Working methodically through the Scriptures, he began to develop

a system of belief distinct from doctrine, which brought its own shift in focus: “to enliven the debate of the Bible as an iconic tome.” Under the project's expanded ambitions, he embarked on a collaborative book with Laura Glazer, a photographer he met at the Albany Medical Center. In 2009, he returned to the gospel, beginning the project's final iteration, a transcription of the King James Bible. Despite waning health, he spent as many as fourteen hours a day laboring at his desk to inscribe the 1611 edition's 788,000 words. He wrote the final lines in May 2013 at St. Peter's Presbyterian Church in Spencertown, New York, now the permanent home of Patterson's Bible.

Patterson's materials joined the Visual AIDS Archive in 2010 and include an artist statement, press clippings, a handwritten page from the Bible, and CDs with images of his work.

PHOTOGRAPHY

p.62 Larry Eades

p.64 Darrel Ellis

p.66 Luna Luis Ortiz

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(Left) Larry Eades, *Home Sweet Home*, 1993. Photocollage, 14 × 30 in.

(Below) Larry Eades, *Flannel Denim Quilt*, 1998. Flannel and denim, 45 × 55 in.



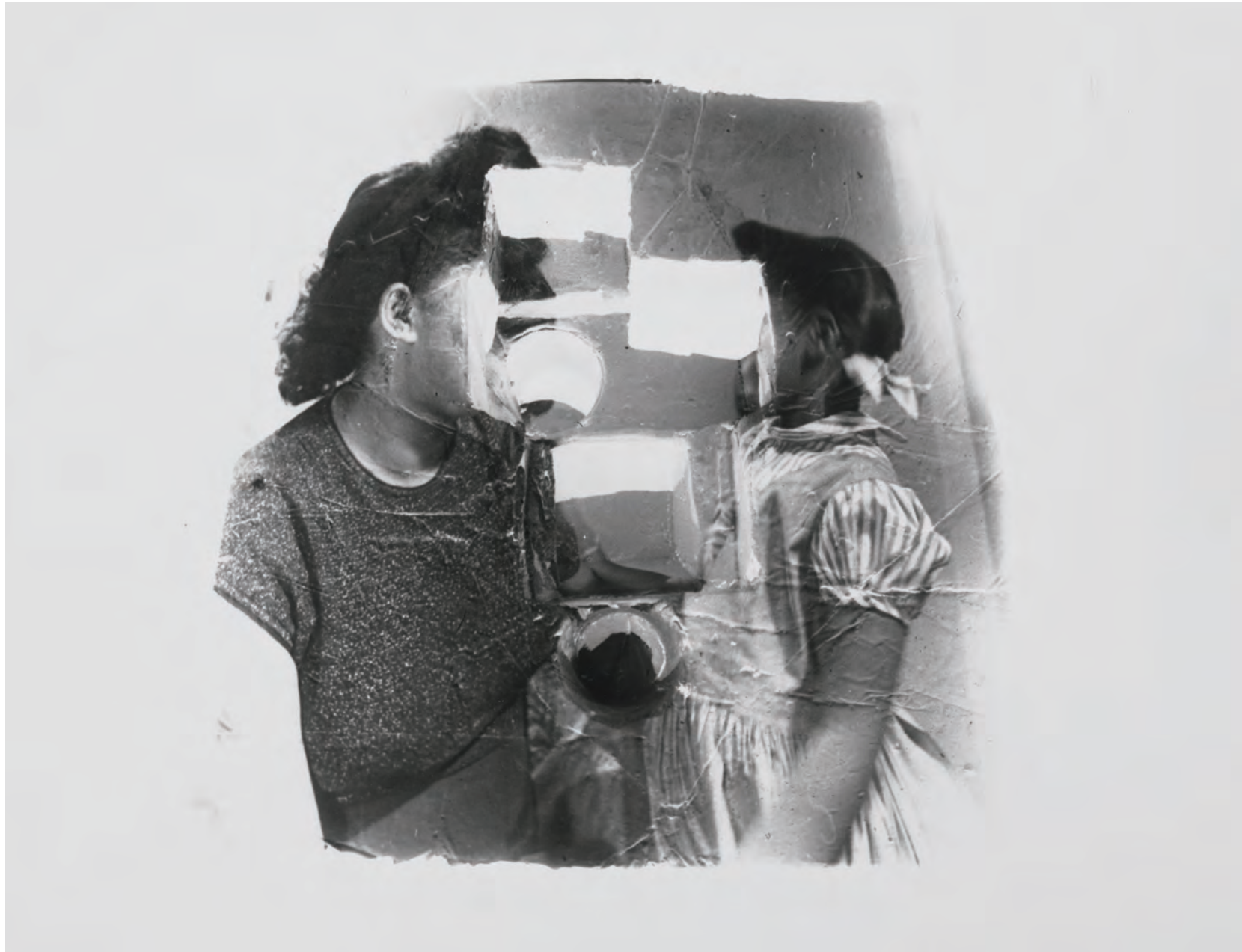
Larry Eades

Through photography, painting, and patchwork quilting, Larry Eades (b. 1953, Tarrytown, NY) captures the fragmentary quality of human attention. Eades studied at the Art Institute of Boston and later returned to artistic practice after participating in the “Straight from the Heart” Art Program, organized by Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC).

Frequently focusing on architectures—from urban infrastructures in New York City to suburban homes in the Hudson Valley—his photographs collage sequential exposures of the same subject. Rather than invoking the format of panorama, the assembled images repeat the same features at progressive levels of zoom, suggesting the itineraries of the lingering gaze. In these multiframe works, the camera’s eye becomes an index for the passage of time and place. Eades’s quilts reproduce a parallel assemblage within the gridded rigor of the patchwork medium. Playing upon the optical experience of composition and color, the textile works juxtapose patterned

sequences, drawing parallels between the ordered logics of plaid and polka dots, paisley and faux wood grain. In recent years, Eades has turned increasingly to the medium of paint to capture impressions of his environment and the fleetingness of natural beauty. While occasionally returning to architectural tableaux, his oil paint compositions more frequently celebrate the evanescent beauty of sunsets, flora, and bodies of water.

Larry Eades first contributed to the Visual AIDS Archive in 1997; his materials span the years 1992 to 2013. While featuring an artist statement, exhibition announcements, and correspondence, his files predominantly focus on images of artworks preserved in formats including photographic prints, proof sheets, 35mm slides, and CDs. Importantly, these are accompanied by image lists which also provide site information for his photo collages. His file also includes a submission to Visual AIDS’s 1998 Positively Art calendar.



Darrel Ellis, *Untitled (Mother and Laure)*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 11 × 14 in.

Darrel Ellis

Darrel Ellis (1958, Bronx, NY–1992, New York, NY), a mixed-media artist known for his experimental approach to painting and photography, explored the psychic terrain between surface, memory, and lyric self-representation. A devoted admirer of the European tradition of painting, Ellis expressively depicts family members both living and deceased. His works function as odes to time immemorial, considering the notion of how we come to know ourselves through image and relation, desire and distortion. Working from his own and his late father's photographs, Ellis developed a unique process whereby he projected, deconstructed, and reimaged his family history, creating uncanny portraits marked by voids and warps. His commitment to the self-portrait was no less inspired, particularly after his experiences of being photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar. Ellis was on the cusp of major recognition when his life was cut short by AIDS in 1992, at the age of thirty-three.

His work was included in the Artists Space exhibition *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, curated by Nan Goldin in 1989. In 1992, just months after his death, Ellis's work was shown in *New Photography 8* curated by Peter Galassi at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York; following the exhibition, his work entered the MoMA collection. A major retrospective of Ellis's work was mounted in 1997 at Art in General, curated by the artist Allen Frame,

Ellis's friend and, later, the steward of his estate. The show was circulated to five art museums across the United States.

Visual AIDS has also been an active proponent of Ellis's legacy. In 2021, the organization published a monograph on the artist. From 2022 to 2023, the Baltimore Museum of Art and Bronx Museum of the Arts co-organized *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration*, the artist's first comprehensive museum exhibition. The visibility and renewed public interest engendered by these projects have led his work to enter the collections of institutions including the Art Institute of Chicago; the Brooklyn Museum; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

The Visual AIDS Archive contains a collection of materials assembled between 1990 and 2023 by Frame and donated after the artist's death, including correspondence, exhibition materials, periodicals, and photographic and 35mm slide documentation of Ellis's work. Also notable are interviews conducted with artists Susan Spencer Crowe and Joe Lewis, and filmmaker James Wentzy on their collaborations and friendships with Ellis in advance of the publication of his monograph by Visual AIDS in 2021. The library also features catalogs to key exhibitions of Ellis's work—including those to his 1997 Art in General retrospective and the 1989 *Witnesses* exhibition—as well as an artist book Ellis produced with Appearances Press in 1986.



Luna Luis Ortiz, *Chleo: Man's Enemy*, 2001. Color photograph, 16 × 20 in.

Luna Luis Ortiz

Luna Luis Ortiz (b. 1972, New York, NY) is a photographer, performance artist, and activist whose work documents and uplifts New York's Ballroom and queer cultures. Ortiz was born in New York City in 1972; his childhood years were itinerant, with stints in the South Bronx, Harlem, and Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Ortiz contracted HIV at the age of fourteen. His diagnosis prompted him to start using a film camera that his father had given him the year prior, beginning with black-and-white photographs of himself and his friends. Inspired by old Hollywood glamour, Ortiz's portraits emulated depictions of beauty icons such as Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo. Using chiaroscuro and intimate, close-range vantage points to lend his subjects a sophisticated femininity, Ortiz subversively exalted his community of queer, working-class youths of color. He would later say of those early photographs, "I just wanted to take pictures of myself before I died of AIDS. I want people to remember me."

For one year, Ortiz attended the vocational High School of Graphic Communication Arts in Hell's Kitchen. One of his teachers there hosted a photography program the following summer; attending this, Ortiz gradually deepened his understanding of photographic craft. Through his diagnosis, he had also been connected to resources provided by the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth, later renamed the Hetrick-Martin Institute; there he met other gay creatives and learned of the Harvey Milk High School

for queer youth in the East Village. He transferred there in 1988, enrolling in photography classes taught by Lisa Ross. During this time, he met Nelson Rodriguez and Milton Garcia Ninja—both of whom later became Visual AIDS artist members—as well as other queer adolescents of color working in photography and other media. Newly surrounded by an LGBTQ+ community, Ortiz began to expand his photographic practice from his own life and body to the world around him.

In 1988, Ortiz had his first encounter with Ballroom culture. Brought by a friend to a ball in Greenwich Village, he remembers being transfixed by the performances. Ortiz has likened himself in that moment to Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, seeing the world in Technicolor for the first time. One month later, he joined the House of Avis Pendavis and, from then on, became a fixture in New York's Ballroom scene, performing as a butch queen and photographing the drag and Ballroom communities of which he was a member. While his documentary photographs thematically parallel images by contemporaneous lens-based artists documenting New York queer culture—including white outsider figures like Chantal Regnault and Jennie Livingston—Ortiz's work is particularly poignant in that it documents this world from within. This sense of interiority is emphasized in the way Ortiz's images collapse the distance between photographer and subject, suggesting a comparable disintegration of the barriers between performer and self. Through



Luna Luis Ortiz

(Left) Luna Luis Ortiz, *Visible Symbol of Beauty*, 2002. Color photograph, 16 × 20 in.

(Below) Luna Luis Ortiz, *Self Portrait Bewitched*, 1996. Color photograph, 8 × 11 in.



intentional blurring, he captures the movement and energy of the ball, immortalizing vibrant scenes of performers and spectators. Many of these images feature prominent figures from the 1990s New York Ballroom scene, including Octavia St. Laurent and “Godfather of Vogue” Willi Ninja. Coupling these with more intimate images of his community going about their day-to-day lives, Ortiz’s work indexes a rich archive of this multigenerational and familial queer community.

As Ortiz’s public persona evolved, he became increasingly involved with AIDS activism. Drawing on his experiences as an openly gay and HIV-positive teen, he mobilized his visual practice in service of community care and outreach to at-risk youth. Returning to the Hetrick-Martin Institute, which had been so instrumental to his own intellectual and creative development, he facilitated art therapy and taught photography from the late 1990s through the mid-2000s. Over time, Ortiz began to take on programmatic responsibilities at important bastions of the New York queer and HIV-positive communities, getting involved in social media and programming at Gay Men’s Health Crisis and joining the planning committee for the Latex Ball. Following the Ballroom tradition, in the early 2000s, Ortiz became House Mother of the House of Khan, and has since taken on the title of Overall Father to the house’s national and international chapters. With friends and collaborators, Ortiz also created new houses that emphasized strengthening shared cultures, co-founding the House of Frame by Frame Fierce, through which marginalized youth could learn animation, and Vogue Knights with Jack Mizrahi of House of Mizrahi, which connected Ballroom newcomers to reigning elders. In 2010, Ortiz conceived of the Luna Show, a series of videos

hosted on YouTube that records Ballroom history through interviews with performers, recordings of classes, and documentation of vogue sets.

Beyond Ortiz’s tireless involvement in his own New York-based community, his work has garnered increasing attention as the Ballroom and house scenes have entered the popular imaginary through shows such as *Pose*, which features a fictionalized version of the House of Khan. Ortiz’s photographs have been published in the *New York Times*, *POZ*, and the *Advocate*, and have also been the subject of a major digitization effort as part of Ballroom Throwbacks, a collaboration between Destination Tomorrow and Google Arts & Culture. Ortiz has exhibited at the Whitney Museum, Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of the City of New York, and the Bureau of General Services—Queer Division. He currently lives and works in New York.

Ortiz’s file in the Visual AIDS Archive spans the years 1990 to 2008 and includes materials pertaining to his past exhibitions and initiatives, including exhibition announcements, press releases, a biography, CVs, press clippings, periodicals, and miscellaneous ephemera. The archive also contains texts and artworks produced directly by Ortiz, from correspondence and photographs to materials submitted to Postcards from the Edge. His collection also includes 35mm slides that document a collection of his photographs. Accessible via the Visual AIDS website are interviews of Ortiz conducted by Zachary Frater in 2015—on the occasion of Ortiz’s being awarded a Visual AIDS Vanguard Award—and Ollín Rodríguez Lopez in 2019.

SCULPTURE

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Reverend Joyce McDonald, *Halleluya Ladies*, 1998. Mod Podge, acrylic paint, fabric, and jewels on air-dry clay, overall: 19 × 9 ½ × 5 in.

Reverend Joyce McDonald

Reverend Joyce McDonald (b. 1951, Brooklyn, NY) is a sculptor whose work lies at the intersection of artistic practice, therapeutic expression, and spiritual vocation. She was raised in the Farragut Public Housing Projects, one of seven children. Her parents, Florence and Willie McDonald, had previously lived in Decatur, Alabama, before leaving for New York during the Great Migration. McDonald remembers her childhood as a happy one; the McDonalds were active in their church and community, and known by many as “the Black Brady Bunch.” Creativity was deeply encouraged in the household, and, by her teenage years, McDonald had developed notable skills as a seamstress and milliner.

Despite the promise of her youth, McDonald’s early adulthood was marked by trauma. After dropping out of high school, she found herself living with an abusive partner with whom she regularly used heroin. Her dependency on the substance crystallized into addiction around the time of her father’s death in 1977, and the ensuing years brought on more hardship, including further domestic and sexual violence. Recovery from addiction proved dif-

ficult, but not impossible. McDonald credits her hard-won sobriety to a spiritual revelation that brought her back to the Church of the Open Door, the house of worship in downtown Brooklyn that she had attended with her family throughout her childhood. Reverend Mark V. C. Taylor, the church’s pastor, welcomed her back and, with her family, supported her recovery. At his encouragement, McDonald tested for HIV and discovered her status in 1994. She subsequently began working with the church’s HIV/AIDS ministry, beginning a journey toward spiritual leadership that also found expression in her burgeoning creative practice.

McDonald started working with clay around 1997, when she began attending an art therapy program for those with HIV facilitated by Robert Morrissey. Morrissey’s initiative was part of an integrated community treatment program run by the Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services, to which McDonald had been referred a year prior. Through painting, poetry, and eventually—and most significantly—clay, McDonald began to process and excavate the stress and pain of recent years.

Channeling her personal experiences, McDonald’s figurative statuettes range from self-portraits and depictions of family and friends to icons of racial injustice and personifications of complex ideas and emotions such as sadness, beauty, and strength. McDonald’s work can be read in the lineage of twentieth-century Black sculptors such as Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Elizabeth Catlett, and Augusta Savage, whose often mournful figurative works likewise explore race, gender, and pain. Yet McDonald’s clay figurines—in their intimate scale, economy of material, expression of labor, and use of color—feel more talismanic, occupying a space somewhere between amulet and monument. Primarily made with air-dry clay, McDonald’s sculptures are imprinted by the artist’s hand and physical labor. McDonald paints and often adorns her deeply textural sculptures with jewelry, beads, cloth, and other materials. Executed at a small scale that invites the viewer’s intimate contemplation, her works eschew the gravitas often associated with figurative sculpture, imbuing her subjects with a quiet dignity. Although many of McDonald’s figures suffer and grieve, they are equally suffused with a sense of hopefulness and faith. Fac-



Reverend Joyce McDonald

Reverend Joyce McDonald, *Covered with Love*, 2003. Acrylic paint and fabric on air-dry clay, 7 ½ × 6 ½ × 5 ½ in.

es and figures appear to emerge from their ground, as if blossoming from the earth. Many gaze or reach skyward, seemingly guided toward the divine like flowers growing toward the sun. Others clasp their hands in prayer, eyes closed as if deep in meditation. Once McDonald got started in clay, she was prolific. In 1998, she participated in her first exhibition, an experience that solidified her self-perception as an artist. That same year, she joined Visual AIDS as an artist member, after being referred by Morrissey to director Barbara Hunt McLanahan, who was actively working to represent a more diverse array of artists. As McDonald developed her artistic identity, she came to understand herself as a “testimonial artist”; suffusing her visual practice with the lessons of her spiritual journey, she hoped to bring others to transcendence and peace.

In addition to the opportunities she garnered through her affiliations with Visual AIDS, the Jewish Board, and other organizations serving HIV-positive individuals, she instigated other opportunities to exhibit her work in nontraditional spaces throughout the 2000s under the umbrella of a new entity, Joyce McDonald

Ministries. In churches and community spaces throughout New York City’s boroughs, she organized exhibitions, concerts, festivals, theater productions, and poetry readings, which often also functioned as fundraisers for HIV/AIDS research and organizations supporting the HIV-positive community; flyers from several events are included in her artist file at Visual AIDS. During this time, she also worked with the Balm In Gilead, Inc., a nonprofit organization working in Black communities to help churches set up HIV/AIDS ministries. This integrated practice culminated in McDonald’s ordination as a reverend with the Church of the Open Door in 2009.

In recent years, McDonald’s work has found greater visibility in the commercial and institutional art worlds. Gordon Robichaux began representing McDonald in 2021; this event has paved the way for other opportunities, including residencies that afford her a broader range of artistic media and further exhibitions in and beyond New York. Her first institutional solo exhibition was organized by Visual AIDS at the Bronx Museum in 2025. McDonald currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Within the Visual AIDS Archive, there is a wealth of material on McDonald’s practice and artistic career from 1998 to the present day. A significant portion of this material concerns exhibitions and events in which McDonald participated, as well as those that she organized in the early 2000s. These records include exhibition announcements, press releases, biographies, CVs, event programs, ephemera, press clippings, full periodicals, testimonials, and newsletters. Still other artifacts—including artist statements, correspondence, poems, and sketches—grant insight into McDonald’s artistic process and the conceptual evolution of her practice. Also included are several of McDonald’s submissions to Visual AIDS initiatives, including Postcards from the Edge and the Positively Art calendar. A suite of 35mm slides documents a selection of her work. Collectively, these materials paint a portrait of McDonald’s artistic development, as well as her energetic and enterprising efforts to create new platforms in support of the HIV-positive community.



Michael Wayne Ransom, *Remembering... Moments from a Life*, 1995. Wood, fabric, paper, thread, wire, and glue, 8 × 12 × 12 in.

Michael Wayne Ransom

Michael Wayne Ransom (1962, Dallas, TX–2009, Bronx, NY) produced miniature models from everyday materials, capturing scenes both invented and from his own life, from tiny diners and amusement parks to sumptuous homes. Of his constructed worlds, Ransom wrote, “miniatures are for me a way of stopping time just long enough to share that moment with someone else.” His tender maquette *Remembering . . . Moments from a Life* (1995) memorializes his partner Julio Exavier Leon through the room in which he lived and died. The work was exhibited at the American Folk Art Museum in New York.

Ransom studied architecture and interior design at the University of Texas at Arlington and Parsons School of Design. Pursuing design professionally after graduation, Ransom produced shop windows for Bergdorf Goodman,

Bonwit Teller, and Henri Bendel, later going on to work as a visual manager for Fendi’s New York retail storefronts. He also taught at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York and Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. His environments have been shown at the Tee Ridder Miniatures Museum, Roslyn, New York; Nassau County Museum of Art, Roslyn, New York; and on NBC’s *Today in New York*. His works are held in private collections, including that of Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Ransom first submitted material to the Visual AIDS Archive in 1997. His materials include artist’s statements on his work and biographical background; correspondence with the staff of Visual AIDS; a CV; copies of an issue of the magazine *Folk Art*, in which his work is featured; and 35mm slides documenting his work.

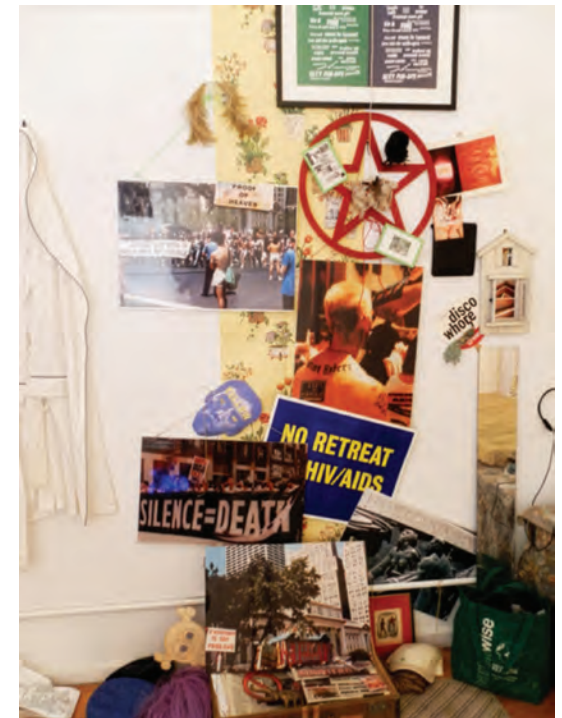
PERFORMANCE & FILM

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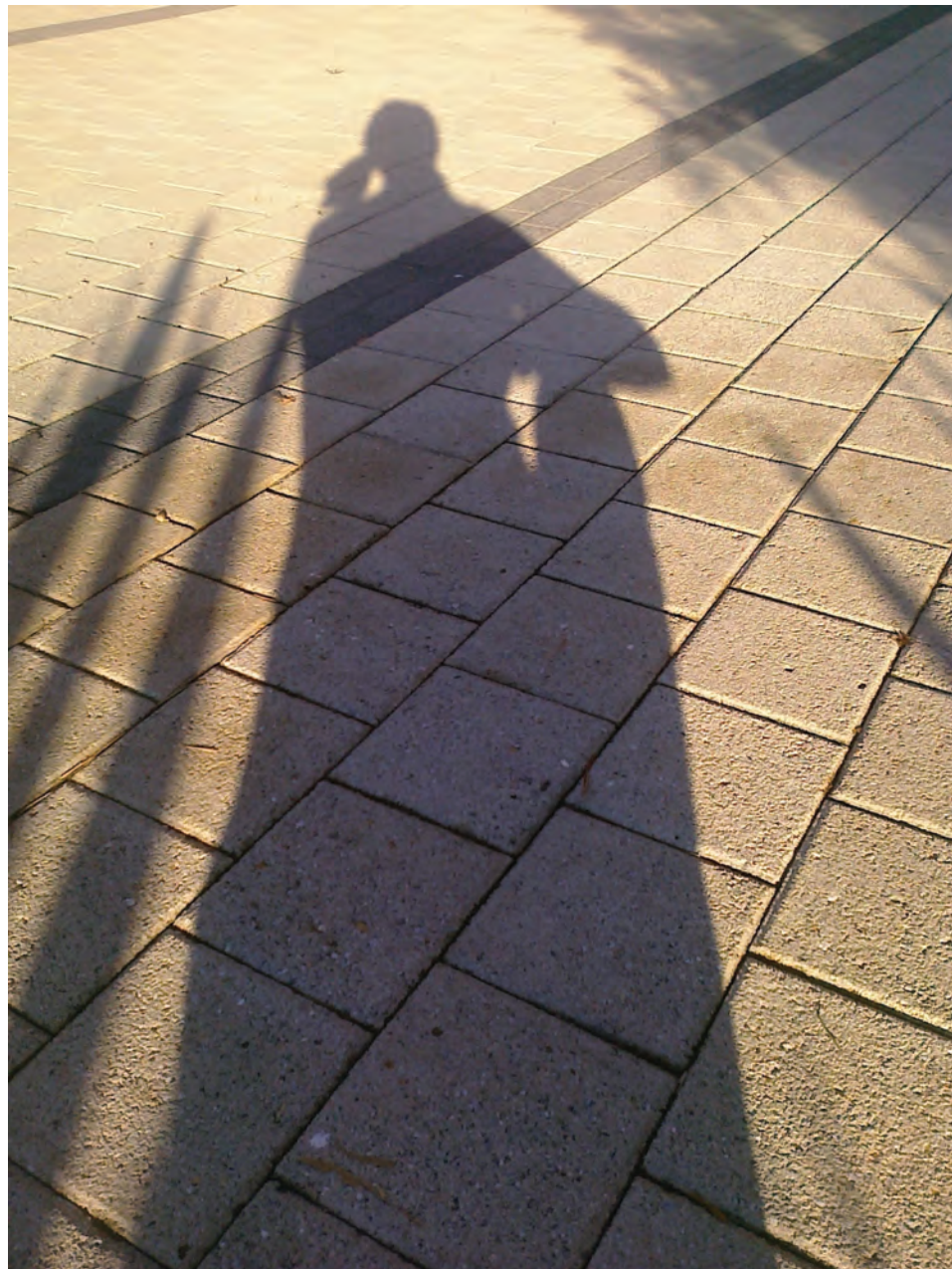
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Imani Maryahm Harrington, *High School & Kickin*, 2012. Digital photograph, 4 × 3 in.

Imani Maryahm Harrington

Imani Maryahm Harrington (b. 1958, Berkeley, CA)—also known as Iye and IMH—is a writer, editor, and artist whose work focuses on capturing the female experience of living with HIV/AIDS, while also addressing themes of social phobia, taboo, sexuality, violence, race, and motherhood.

Working chiefly in performance and plays, Harrington studied drama at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, while working in retail at Seattle Rep and regularly watching its stage productions. This formal and informal education flourished after she graduated and returned to the San Francisco Bay Area to pursue a career in acting, receiving acclaim for her performances in plays including Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Judy Grahn's *The Queen of Swords*. While acting, Harrington continued to explore other media, taking workshops in poetry with Kim Addonizio and Peter Gizzi, fiction with Dorothy Allison and Jewell Gomez, and nonfiction with Cherrie Moraga. These encounters with language prompted her to begin writing her own plays, which have since been published and produced onstage. Her theatrical scripts include *Love & Danger* (1995), *Bitter Fruit* (2005), and *Cut in the Blood/Ashes to Dust* (2009); her work has also been anthologized in *Positive/Negative*:

Women of Color and HIV/AIDS: A Collection of Plays (2002), of which she was co-editor, as well as in *The Communal Plays and Other Narratives* (2020). Harrington also trained under Augusto Boal at the Brecht Forum and has facilitated workshops on the methodology of the Theatre of the Oppressed.

Harrington later enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute, from which she received an MFA in studio practice. Through her visual practice—which spans photography, drawing, painting, sculpture, and digital media—she explores expansive themes, from beauty and spirituality to politics and injustice.

Harrington has participated in residencies and fellowships at Montalvo Arts Center and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and received support from Giorno Poetry Systems, the California Arts Council and National Arts and Disability Center, PEN Center, Serpent Source Foundation for Women Artists, and Poetry Flash. Harrington joined the Visual AIDS Archive in 2011 and continued to contribute material through 2013. Her file contains correspondence, artist's statements, grant submissions, ephemera, original artwork submitted for inclusion in Postcards from the Edge, and image lists.



(Left and right) Jack Waters and Peter Cramer, *Short Memory/No History*, 2013. Mixed-media installation

Jack Waters

Jack Waters (b. 1954, Philadelphia, PA) is a filmmaker, performance artist, choreographer, and writer whose practice is rooted in cross-disciplinary experimentation and social practice.

The fourth of seven children, Waters spent his childhood immersed in art and music, particularly blues and jazz; though neither of his parents was an artist—his mother working as a housekeeper and his father employed by the US government—Waters recalls that art and music were “as essential as food and clothing to my parents,” and they sent their children to train in the visual arts, dance, and musical instruments. His mother became acquainted with music journalist Chris Albertson and began to work for him as a researcher; that connection led to other friendships with musicians and, for a time, the jazz guitarist Elmer Snowden lived with the family. Politics and civil rights were equally vital in the Waters household, especially to the artist’s father, who served in the unsegregated US military at the end of World War II; alongside artists, Black Panthers were also frequent guests in the family home.

At sixteen, Waters fell in love with dance. Setting his sights on Juilliard—which he saw as his *entrée*

to New York—Waters auditioned and was not admitted. He spent the next year immersing himself in ballet technique; at his next audition the following spring, he was accepted into Juilliard’s dance program. He passed four intensive years in the conservatory and spent summers training at the Ailey School. Concurrently, he explored and developed his own choreographic language, largely influenced by José Limón, that brought in novel multimedia elements including lighting and projection. In 1981, after graduating, Waters started the performance collective POOL (Performance On One Leg) with Brian Taylor and Joan Karlen; Peter Cramer, who later became Waters’s lifelong partner, joined soon after, as did Christa Gamper and Carl George. Together, the group performed choreographies, improvisations, and theatrical rituals in public spaces, galleries, and nightclubs including the Pyramid Club and Danceteria.

From that time, Waters’s sphere of artists and collaborators continued to grow, as he became increasingly invested in New York’s downtown arts scene. Waters and Cramer soon became codirectors of the nonprofit ABC No Rio. Waters later went on to serve as cofounder and codi-



Jack Waters

Jack Waters, *Big Art Sale Tompkins Square Riot*, 2026. Acrylic paint, screenprint, and paper on canvas, 10 × 8 in.

rector of Allied Productions, Inc. and director of Naked Eye Cinema. Alongside Cramer, Waters founded and manages a community garden, Le Petit Versailles, on New York's Lower East Side. He has also written extensively as a journalist and critic, publishing articles on politics and performance in magazines including *POZ* and the *Movement Research Journal*. He was a founding contributing writer for the LGBTQ+ news publications *Color Life* and *LGNY*.

Waters's artistic practice also continued to develop and evolve. Often working collaboratively with Cramer, Waters produces multimedia installations, low-budget films, and speculative performances that syncretically combine visual art, language, and music. To borrow Waters's own words, his hybrid practice "refute[s] the arbitrary constrictions imposed by the strict boundaries of genre with the understanding that not conforming to recognized standards warrants control—and self-definition—of our own means of production."

Waters was diagnosed with AIDS in 1990. In addition to using his position at nonprofit organizations in New York to raise awareness and funds for HIV/AIDS research, his artistic practice also became an important outlet for his response to the epidemic. Waters and Cramer collaboratively created the multiform project *Short Memory/No History*, which has taken the formats of essay, film, and installation, documenting the AIDS activist movement, alongside landmarks in queer culture more broadly. One iteration of the work—included in the 2013 exhibition *Not Over: 25 Years of Visual AIDS* presented at the

La MaMa Galleria—recreated the artists' New York studio, pinning posters and photographs to the wall and, on a desktop computer, hosting documentation of gay American subculture, including the first gay newspaper and pin-ups of singer Ricky Martin. The installation was complemented by in-person activations that, using the visual materials included in the installation, narrated Waters's and Cramer's involvements in the history of AIDS activism. Proposals, diagrams, press clippings, and documentation for *Short Memory/No History* are included in Waters's artist file.

Waters's work has been shown nationally and internationally and is preserved by institutions including the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the New York Public Library's AIDS Activist Videotape Collection, the Film-Makers' Cooperative, and Allied Productions, Inc. Materials on Waters in the Visual AIDS Archive include a CV; press clippings; and a CD with documentation of Waters, Cramer, and Carlo Quispe's collaborative, multimedia installation *Lo vamos a hablar (Let's Talk About It)* (2006). The file also includes a copy of Waters's zine *AIDS OS Y Version 10.11.6* (2016); all issues of Waters's *Pestilence Comics* (2017–ongoing) are also in Visual AIDS's library. Interested researchers should refer to Waters's papers held in the Fales Library & Special Collections at New York University, as well as to oral history interviews with Waters and Cramer conducted by the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. A file on Cramer is also held in the Visual AIDS Archive.

CONTINUE YOUR RESEARCH

This guide is intended as a starting point. The artists featured here represent only a portion of the Black artists documented in the Visual AIDS Archive; the methodology and scope of this project are described in greater detail in the introduction. We encourage researchers to explore the complete Artist Files finding aid and to contact us with questions about other artists and materials in the collection.

Visit the Archive

The Visual AIDS Artist Files and other archival collections are available for research by appointment at the Visual AIDS Archive in New York City. Explore our finding aids online, or contact our staff with questions about artists and materials relevant to your research.

526 West 26th Street, #309, New York, NY 10001
archive@visualaids.org
visualaids.org/archive

Discover More Artwork Online

Visit the Visual AIDS Artist Registry to see additional artwork by many of the artists featured in this guide and to discover other artists in the Visual AIDS community. The Registry is a growing online repository of artwork by artists living with HIV and estates of artists who have passed.

visualaids.org/artists

<i>Raynes Birkbeck</i>	Box 5, Folder 6
	Box 5, Folder 7
<i>Bradford Branch</i>	Box 7, Folder 4
	Box C, Folder 9
<i>Rodney Brown</i>	Box 7, Folder 11
<i>Mark Carter</i>	Box 10, Folder 7
	Box 11, Folder 1
<i>Larry Eades</i>	Box 16, Folder 5
<i>Darrel Ellis</i>	Box 17, Folder 5
	Box C, Folder 5
<i>Milton Garcia Ninja</i>	Box 20, Folder 6
	Box 20, Folder 7
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<i>Imani Maryahm Harrington</i>	Box 27, Folder 5
<i>Paula “Afrekka” Jefferson</i>	Box 28, Folder 3
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<i>Zion Kyakulaga & Grace Talitwala Collective</i>	Box 68, Folder 11

Project Team

Kyle Croft, Executive Director
Abena Osei Duker, Archive Fellow
Nicole Kaack, Editor and Copywriter
Jacs Rodriguez, Community Archivist
Charitssa Stone, Graphic Designer

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by provoking dialogue, supporting
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because AIDS is not over.



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