



ART & DESIGN

‘Once Upon a Time and Now’

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Art in Review

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

In 1989, when AIDS and the culture wars were slamming the art world, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center in New York mounted a big morale-boosting group exhibition on the 20th anniversary of the Stonewall riots. Of the 50 pieces — half by men, half by women, gay and not — in that show, a few were site-specific murals and remain visible, even as the interior has changed. A current show, “Once Upon a Time and Now,” highlights and adds to them.

A recent renovation, designed by Brian Ripel and Nicola Mongelli, has cleared out and lightened up the premises, a former public school, and left some of the 1989 works, however faded and fragmentary, framed in brightness. Barbara Sandler’s portrait of a lupine Nijinsky, George Whitman’s of Joan of Arc toting a fire extinguisher, and the racing women of Nancy Spero’s “Elegy” line the ground-floor assembly hall where Act Up first met, and emerge from freshly painted white walls like the monumental ghosts they are.

Several other pieces, however, are scattered through the building’s still half-hidden and funkier spaces. A big pink triangle painted by Robert Storr spreads out from a corner of a back staircase. A flight up, Thomas Lanigan Schmidt’s handwritten eyewitness account of the 1969 Stonewall event hangs beside a stained-plastic (as opposed to stained-glass) window, and further up,

a wall-filling painting by Martin Wong (1946-99) of a giant phallus composed of hundreds of meticulously painted bricks is both a yes and a no to maleness.

The center's current show, organized by Ian Alteveer, an associate curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, updates the context for these pieces by adding work by younger artists like Deborah Kass, Glenn Ligon, Julie Mehretu, and Kay Rosen. But as good as the new stuff is, the real attractions are still old school. One is the renowned men's room mural, "Once Upon a Time," painted by Keith Haring less than a year before his death at 31 in 1990. A passionately imagined panorama of sprouting, spurting, intertwining male genitals, it looks back to a sexual freedom that AIDS and censorship threatened to shut down.

And an alcove installation by Arch Connelly (1950-93) keeps the party going by covering every inch of its space with a cutout collage of hunks haloed in pasted-on gems. A little chapel of the libido, it's as small as a closet but as out as art can get from a time when out could be a mortal offense. A long-awaited survey of work from this era, "Art AIDS America," organized by the Tacoma Art Museum in Washington, will start traveling the country in September. Until then, and for the foreseeable future, there's this.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center

208 West 13th Street, West Village

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