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A Sobering Look at How AIDS Changed Art in America



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Caption: Tino Rodriguez's *Eternal Lovers* (2010) is one of many pieces in the new exhibit *Art AIDS American* grappling with death during the AIDS crisis. Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum; Private collection



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Caption: Niki de Saint Phalle's *AIDS, you can't catch it holding hands* (1987) is a parody of a children's book teaching kids about the disease. Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum; The Lapis Press, San Francisco © 2015 Niki Charitable Art Foundation. All rights reserved Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY ADAGP, Paris



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Caption: Joey Terrill's *Still Life with Forget-Me-Nots and One Week's Dose of Truvada* (2012) is a post-cocktail-era piece. The cocktail is the newer medicine that extends the lives of those living with HIV. Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum; Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art



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Caption: Andres Serrano's *Blood and Semen III*, 1990. Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum and the artist



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Caption: David Wojnarowicz made *Untitled (Buffalo)* in 1988 while dying of AIDS. The photograph uses the 19th-century government-sponsored eradication of buffalo to symbolize the neglect of those living with AIDS. Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum; Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York



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Caption: Thomas Haukaas's *More Time Expected* (2002) features some horses without riders, in honor of the Native Americans who died from the disease. Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum; Gift of Greg Kucera and Larry Yocom in honor of Rock Hushka



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Caption: Kia Labeija, *In My Room* (2014). The 26-year-old artist was born with HIV, which she contracted from her mother. Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum and the artist



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Caption: Kia Labeija, *Mourning Sickness* (2014). Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum and the artist



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Caption: Shimon Attie, *Untitled Memory (projection of Axel H.)* (1998). Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum, the artist, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



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Caption: One of the most recognizable symbols from the AIDS crisis era is the pink triangle used by the activist group ACT UP for the 1990 documentary *SILENCE = DEATH*. Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum; Gran Fury and the New Museum, New York, William Olander Memorial Fund



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Caption: Keith Haring's *Altar Piece* (1990) was the last work he made before dying of AIDS-related illness. Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum; Denver Art Museum, Gift of Yoko Ono



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Caption: Bill Jacobson, *Interim Portrait #373* (1992) Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum and the artist



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Caption: Deborah Kass's *Still Here* (2007) is one of many pieces in the show that explores the experience of the survivor. Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum; Private collection © 2015 Deborah Kass Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



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Caption: Albert J. Winn, *Akedah* (1995). Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum; Scott R. Portnoff



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Caption: Robert Sherer's, *Sweet Williams* (2013) is painted in HIV negative and HIV positive blood on paper. Courtesy of Tacoma Art Museum and the artist

In the most literal way, AIDS left its mark on the art world. Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres are just a few of the well-known artists who died from illnesses related to the virus. And as a result, some of the art from the late 1980s and 1990s reflected the fear, mourning, and misunderstandings surrounding the epidemic.

[Art AIDS America](#), an exhibition that's temporarily up in West Hollywood and opening in full at the Tacoma Art Museum in October, looks at how AIDS inserted itself into the art world's conversation, leading to some very personal, local, and activist works. At the time, popular art wasn't all that biographical—consider Andy Warhol's screen printed homages to consumerism, or Jackson Pollock's abstracted paintings. AIDS changed that. It spurred artists to use the medium to tell the world about their crisis. "Here was art living out its ideal and making change and doing it in an unapologetic way," says Rock Hushka, the Tacoma Art Museum's chief curator.

While organizing the exhibit, Hushka had a mantra: "It's not about HIV, but it's never really not about HIV." The phrase, which the curator says he borrowed from a professor at the University of Southern California, is a handy framework for understanding how he and co-curator Jonathan Katz selected the 125 pieces in the exhibit. Kalup Linzy's video piece, *Lollypop*, for instance doesn't explicitly state anything about AIDS. "You have two men of color negotiating a sexual relationship, and if you look at that work of art with empathy you quickly realize that because

these men live in New York, and HIV is an intimate, constant, presence in their life, at some point they have to navigate HIV,” Hushka says.

Some other works are what one would expect—public art intended to raise AIDS awareness that then morphed into some of the most powerful graphic symbols of the era. The activist group ACT UP’s 1990 documentary, *SILENCE = DEATH*, introduced the iconic pink triangle. Another New York–based group, Visual AIDS, launched the [Red Ribbon Project](#), becoming responsible for popularizing the practice of wearing folded ribbons on lapels as a way of supporting a cause.

Art AIDS America is one of the first exhibits to consider work made both before and after the cocktail, the introduction of medicine that extended the lives of those living with HIV. Hushka argues that the post-cocktail era is especially important, because it kept the virus in the public consciousness. Kia Labeija, a 25-year-old photographer, contracted HIV from her mother at birth. Her glamorous self-portraits are a more celebratory, empowered interpretation of what it’s like to have the virus today, even though her condition is an integral part of the work.

Labeija’s portraits are a stark departure from the imagery of the 1980s. “If HIV is suppressed in the body, then you don’t see people with outward manifestations, who are blinded with sarcoma,” Hushka says. Yet Americans are still living with HIV. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports [1.2 million Americans](#) are HIV positive.