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CITIZEN JANE

Jane Lynch on Glee, new holiday CD.
Photo by Jake Bailey

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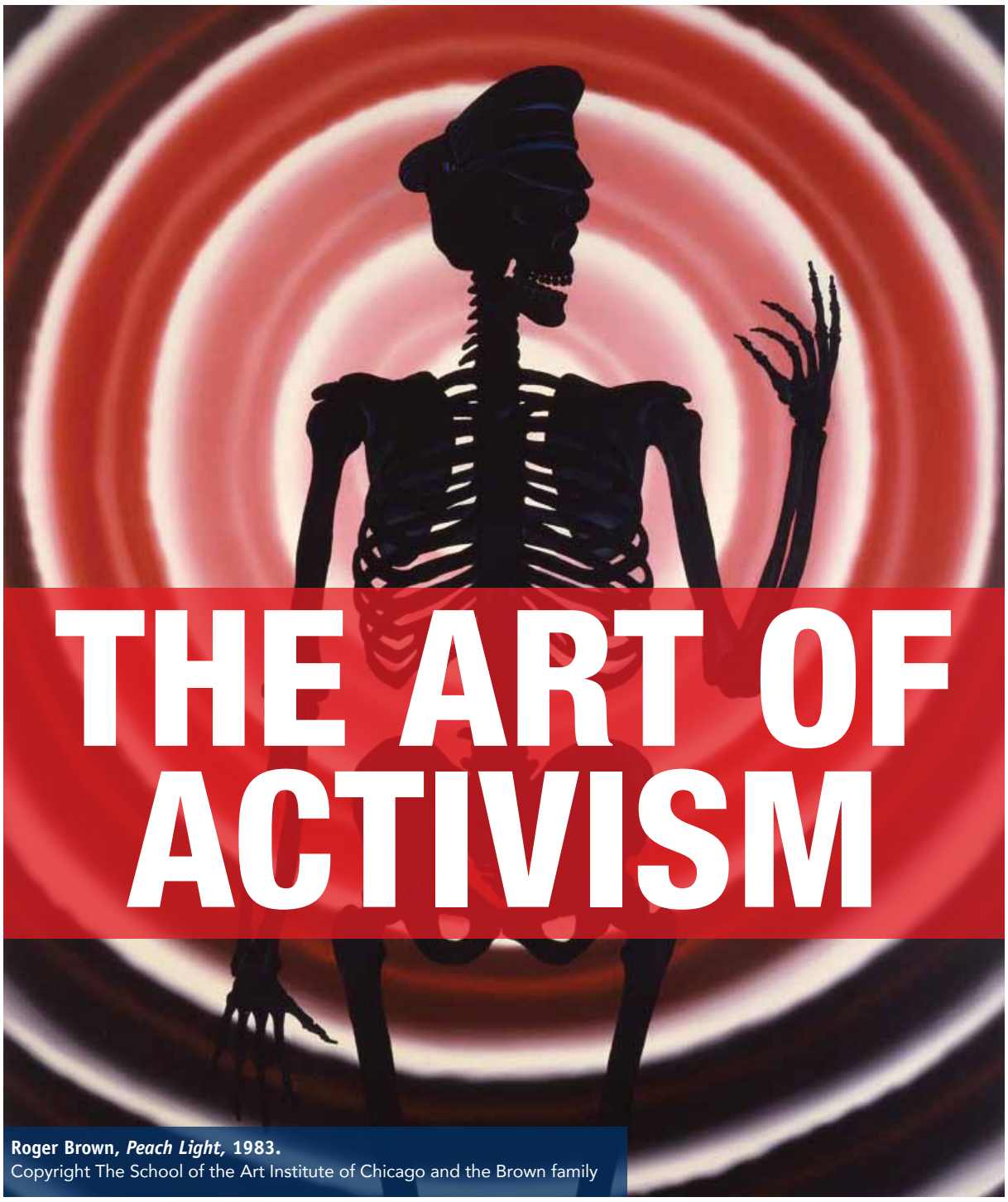

THE ART OF ACTIVISM

Roger Brown, *Peach Light,* 1983.
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Art AIDS America co-curator talks activism, exhibition

BY GRETCHEN RACHEL HAMMOND

On World AIDS Day Dec. 1, The Alphawood Gallery in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood will officially open the extraordinary and historic new exhibit for which the building was conceived and designed.

Since its Oct. 3, 2015 premiere at the Tacoma Art Musuem (TAM), Art AIDS America has been touring the country with pieces depicting the history of AIDS in the United States as seen through the uncompromising eyes and limitless creativity of the visual artist.

The Alphawood Gallery and the city of Chicago will be the exhibit's final home—a host to work that, for the most part, was never before seen until co-curators Chicagoan gay-rights activist/Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art President Jonathan David Katz (who is also director of the visual studies doctoral program at State University of New York-Buffalo), alongside Tacoma Art Museum Chief Curator Rock Hushka, began years of painstaking work.

Katz spoke with Windy City Times about that work and the life which gave rise to it.

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UBER RELATIONSHIP

Couple unites, thanks to ridesharing.
Photo of Tanya Serrano-Bargas and Marisela Bargas by Gretchen Rachel Hammond

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HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE PART ONE

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FIDEL CASTRO

Controversial world leader dies; LGBTs react.
Instagram photo

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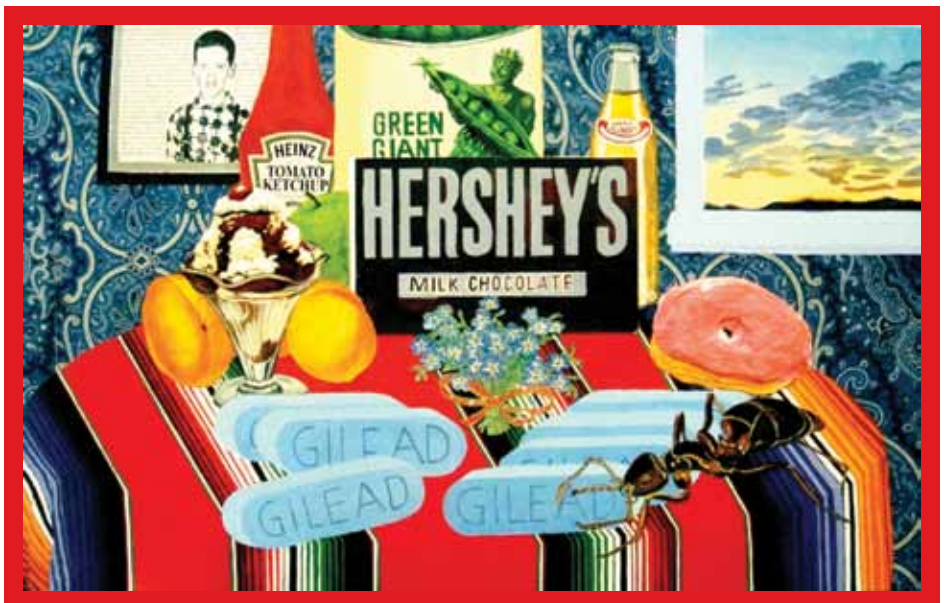
KATZ from cover

Windy City Times: When we talk about the birth of an activist, how did that happen for you?

Jonathan Katz: Coming of age in the early 1980s, it was very hard not to be pissed off—and I was very pissed off. The University of Chicago was relatively quiescent in terms of queer issues in those days. There was a gay group but it wasn't very active. I got involved and, as it became more active, an organization called The Great Whiter Brotherhood of the Iron Fist raised it's very ugly head at the university and started counter programming queer stuff.

They took magazines that they thought queer people would read like Ballet Today (Why? I couldn't begin to tell you) and they would very carefully splice out the centerfold page and put in something like "Disco Dirge for AIDS Victims: come celebrate the death of homos." They sent everybody in my apartment building a hand addressed envelope that said I was a convicted child molester with AIDS, they outed people who were closeted.

The University of Chicago didn't do a thing, probably because [then University President] Hanna [Holborn] Gray was a closet case. I



Joey Terrill, ***Still Life with Forget-Me-Nots and One Week's Dose of Truvada.***

complained and I remember her saying "The University is about free exchange of ideas, so sit across the dinner table and discuss your differences."

They were covering my car with bumper stickers that said, "Clean up Hyde Park, stop AIDS, kill a faggot" and I'm supposed to have a conversation with them? It was horrific. It went on for well over a year. The postal inspectors got involved and determined it was against the law to harass people using the U.S. mail and [The Great White Brotherhood] were busted on federal mail charges. Then the University had no choice but to suspend them for a year.

The other part of what made me an activist was AIDS. I started the first clinic in the city of Chicago with my then partner out of our flat in Hyde Park. There were no drugs. They would send us DNCB [dinitrochlorobenzene], which was supposed to boost the immune system and we would send this stuff out to people for free. I was really stupid. I tried to bring publicity to the clinic only to have the police close it down in six or eight months.

WCT: People who lived through AIDS in the '80s and '90s talk about the complete devastation of so many friends. Were you experiencing the same thing?

JK: Yes. Dear Abby doesn't have an answer for "What do you do with an address book that's filled with the names of dead people?"

In the early days, what preoccupied me was the fact that Chicago hospitals were not allowing people who were openly gay to be doctors. Friends of mine who were in the hospital for neuropathy were in wards where everyone had to be in a Hazmat suit in order to enter the room. A friend of mine had neuropathy and he told me that he felt like his feet were on fire. All he wanted was someone to massage his feet but the doctors and nurses wouldn't touch him.

All of the homophobic metaphors that had been on their way out got tragically revived because of AIDS.

WCT: You tried to fight that narrative?

JK: I founded an organization called The Gay and Lesbian Town Meeting, which attempted to rewrite the city of Chicago civic code to guarantee rights for sexual difference. I remember the debates going on in City Hall. An alderman interrupted me when I was talking about the lack of access for queer people like renting an apartment. He actually said in public, "but everybody knows that queer sexuality involves copious amounts of excrement which befouls the carpets and the drapes so landlords have a right to discriminate." The activists among us were horrified but the audience was like "that makes sense."

My defining moment as an activist was when I was working with Harold Washington. The day he died, a group of us gathered in front of City Hall and I picked up a brick. I said, "We've got to riot because they're going to use his death as a way of consolidating the machine again." We knew that Eugene Sawyer was being considered as the new candidate put forward by the white machine as the token Black mayor. I was going to throw the brick though the window of city hall but I was dissuaded by a number of other activists who said, "This is not what Harold would have wanted."

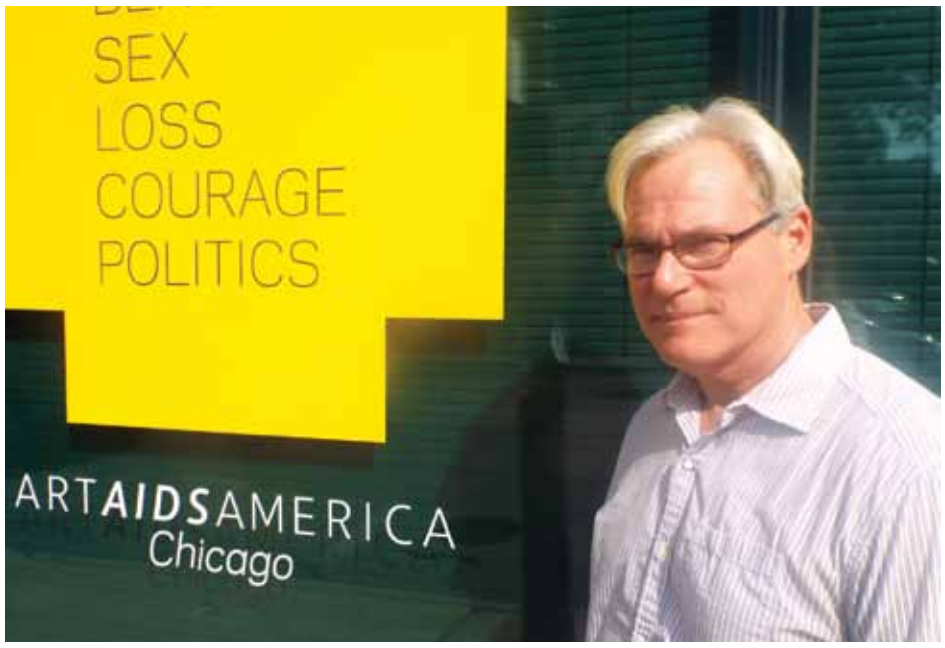
Later that night, Sawyer went on television and accepted the mayoral nomination. They asked him, "Why?" and he said, "Because I looked out of the window and saw a group of activists. There was a guy with a brick in his hand and, when he put it down, I realized it was safe to take the nomination."

That's when I thought, "I am never not going to riot again."

WCT: Do you recall your experiences with AIDS related art in the '80s?

JK: There was a brilliant play called The AIDS Play, written by Doug Holsclaw. These artworks travelled underground because the dominant culture refused to utter the word AIDS. There was such prejudice and hatred. At that moment, there was the profound sense that we were living in two Americas. One was in the heat of a war in which there was an astounding causality rate. The other America hadn't even the slightest recognition of what was happening. It was surreal to move through these two Americas. I had a front row seat to all of this because in '82 I was incorrectly diagnosed with AIDS. I was one of the few people who walked to the edge of the pit and walked back. Almost everybody else fell in.

What art did was create a mirror in which the private torment that I was experiencing finally had recognition and representation in the world outside my own head but I didn't know about some of the earliest representations and



Jonathan Katz.
Photo by Gretchen Rachel Hammond

some of the earliest work in this exhibition until I began research on it.

WCT: How was the seed of Art AIDS America planted? Where did it come from?

JK: I think from a dawning recognition that we'd gotten the entire story of American art wrong by understanding AIDS as a tragic tangent to the development of American art rather than as it's motor. The more I looked into it, the more I realized that American art had been profoundly influenced by AIDS but, like everything else in regard to AIDS, we had marginalized and dismissed its import. I also understood that the bulk of work about AIDS never looked like it was about AIDS because it couldn't look like it was about AIDS.

So what I wanted to do was make an exhibition that looked at all the different responses to AIDS especially those that didn't feature the body, sexuality, that didn't look like art about AIDS at all. One of the artists in the exhibition Felix Gonzalez-Torres said it best when he paralleled his creative career to a virus. For an artist who is dying of AIDS to take the very disease that is killing him as a model of what he could do tells us something very significant. He said, "Don't be the opposition. Be a virus. Enter the immune system, replicate like crazy and take over." He made works of art that were the fundamental equivalent of HIV; that passed underneath the notice of the art world's immune system at the museum and replicated within its environment. He took a leaf from the AIDS playbook in order to fight it.

I'd been thinking along these lines since the late '90s and then my co-curator Rock proposed the exhibition and it took ten years to pull it off.

WCT: Give me the sense of the level of work that it took to get it done when so many pieces were created under the radar.

JK: It was really one of the hardest things to not only find the artists but to find those works by the artists that were sufficiently under the radar that they didn't look like works about AIDS but the viewer could see the theme in the work.

It was always a balancing act. We scoured images all over the country by hundreds of artists who hadn't made a name. We wanted to talk about the full span of work about AIDS, not just work by famous artists. Sure, Mapplethorpe's in the show but there's just one. It literally entailed looking at thousands of works. We had a wonderful research assistant Alison Aurer who spent four years working with us. We pulled together a group of leading AIDS scholars and we held a meeting asking for their opinions. There were multiple steps in thinking through what the exhibition would be.

WCT: So you were climbing the same kind of mountains as you did in the '80s but now with finding the art and securing permission to use it. Was there ever a moment when you thought the exhibition wouldn't happen?

JK: Plenty. Perhaps the most complex was that we sent out proposals to 200 museums to travel the show and there was just one rejection after another. Nobody wanted this exhibition. They didn't want it, in part, because it was not a proud moment in museum history which had been very complicit in the erasure of AIDS and queerness and I think there is a generalized cowardice on the part of art museums to engage anything of political relevance.

Museums tend to be run by boards of directors composed of rich people. They tend to be conservative and all these things conspired to make this show dead on arrival. The show did not go to San Francisco, which is pathetic, and it would not have come to Chicago had The Alphawood Gallery not taken it.

WCT: Did you ever push these larger museums on the reason for their rejections?

JK: Sure. But what I got was, "You have to understand it's not for us." Nobody would ever admit to what was actually happening. It's 2016 and this is the first nationally travelling exhibition on AIDS? This should've happened 20 years ago! Attitudes [towards AIDS] may have changed in other parts of the world but the art world is insulated. It's wealthy, privileged and deeply conservative. We think that the art world is sophisticated and advanced because the forms of art are that way, but the politics of art are absolutely backwards looking.

So Alphawood did something extraordinary. They made a purpose-built museum. I know of no other foundation in the country that would do anything akin to this.

WCT: How have you addressed the need for more artists of color, a perceived lack in the exhibition which was protested when Art AIDS America opened in Tacoma?

JK: My first response [to the protests] was "not true." I felt that the demand on the part of the initial protest that the level of Black representation equal the level of HIV in the Black community was an artificial standard. My exhibition was vastly more representative than mainstream exhibitions and I found it problematic, and still do, that there was a lot of attention about race in this exhibition when whole swathes of exhibitions at the Art Institute or the Whitney [Museum of American Art] can appear without any Black artists and nobody says a word.

The other response I had was, "Show me what we could have done." In time, through crowdsourcing, we found works [from artists of color] that I did not know about and they are now included in the Chicago exhibition.

This is the definitive presentation in terms of scale, interpretative context and representation. It is the way the show should look and I am very grateful that, finally in Chicago, we were able to do the show the way it should be. It is exactly the way I envisioned it.

For more information on Art AIDS America and for tickets, visit ArtAIDSAmericaChicago.org.