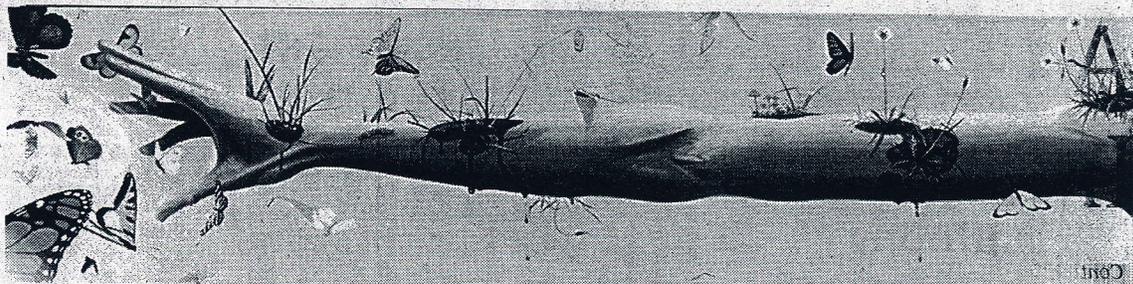


ART REVIEW

Defiantly Confronting The Plague

By HOLLAND COTTER



"Release" by Frank Moore is among the works in "Bodies of Resistance" at Real Art Ways in Hartford.

The history of American art at the end of the 20th century is at least in part the history of AIDS. Many artists died of the disease. Its presence shaped the image of the human body as a potent and volatile cultural emblem. Art played an aggressive role in battering away at the politics of denial that surrounded the epidemic.

Despite all this, AIDS went all but unmentioned in the recent rash of retrospectives. One reason is simply that, with the successful use of expensive palliative drugs since the late 1990's, the disease has lost its aura of emergency for middle-class whites in the United States.

This is not the case, however, for the rest of the world, where the devastation from AIDS has assumed hurricane force. In the United States more than half of recently reported H.I.V. infections were among blacks, who constitute only around 12 percent of the population. Last week the United Nations confirmed that some 70 percent of H.I.V. and AIDS cases worldwide were concentrated in Africa, with one of four adults infected in some countries.

At least some of the emotional weight of these figures finds its way into "Bodies of Resistance," an exhibition at Real Art Ways in Hartford organized by Visual AIDS under the curatorial hand of Barbara Hunt. Timed to coincide with the eighth international AIDS conference that opened in South Africa in December, the show draws together 17 artists of different generations and cultural backgrounds.

Most of the work in the show (including a temporary outdoor performance-based piece by Steed Taylor) was commissioned for the occasion, which is always a chancy way to go. But despite some unevenness and the problems of focus built into loosely defined group endeavors, the results feel individually thought through and collectively strong.

Although AIDS is the underlying theme, most of the work is metaphorically fluid rather than issue-spe-

cific, which wasn't necessarily the case in similar exhibitions a decade ago. Still, certain motifs are constants, and one is the body: present or absent, attractive or repellent, debilitated or empowered.

It assumes grotesque forms in the computer-manipulated photographs of human skin by the artist team Aziz and Cucher and in sardonic "Fantasia"-like cartoon scenarios fastidiously rendered by the painter Thomas Woodruff. A sense of physical vulnerability is generally pervasive.

Such is the case in Ernesto Pujol's photographs titled "Gulliver's Dream," close-ups of a bound nude man in which we cannot know whether the man has been bound for pleasure or punishment. Threatened violence is made real in Charles LeDray's "Patrick," a doll-size set of workman's clothes (the uniform of an auto mechanic, maybe, or a deliveryman), fastidiously hand-stitched but shredded to tatters below the waist.

The human presence is only implied in a beautiful abstract piece by Chuck Nanney in which hundreds of tiny cutout and painted canvas circles wind across the gallery wall like human cells on the loose. The same is true in Ken Chu's installation of shattered Chinese plates neatly arranged on table-size mounds of earth, as if a family picnic were about to take place in a cemetery.

Uninhabited space assumes a life of its own in Albert J. Winn's photographs of deserted American-Jewish summer camps where ramshackle bunks and empty lockers are eerily reminiscent of internment camps.

Architectural forms are the basis for two contributions by Rina Banerjee, an Indian-born New York artist who will be in the coming Whitney Biennial. In one, she has drawn figures of Indian goddesses over blueprints of ventilation systems at Columbia University's Center for Disease Prevention. (A hand-printed collage piece by Nancy Spero in the exhibition similarly invokes female figures as healers.) In the other work, a corner installation, a gilded Hindu home altar shaped like a house is invaded by sinister-looking

sari-wrapped tubes, leaving the question open as to what kind of energy is being pumped into or out of the domestic shrine.

One of the show's few entirely non-figurative pieces, "Untitled (T.W.) Virus," by the South African artist Kendell Geers, is also one of its more intriguing. A six-foot-square Pandora's box entirely wrapped in red-and-white caution tape, it feels at once threatening and magnetic precisely because it conceals its possibly lethal contents.

Tension produced by information withheld also enlivens the multipart installation titled "(Mis)communication" by Oladélé Ajiboyé Bamboyé, a Nigerian-born artist living in London who will make his New York solo debut at Thomas Erben Gallery in Chelsea this spring. A video of what looks like visual static, with figures occasionally surfacing, plays in the gallery. It was produced by a camera trained on a hotel room television tuned to a scrambled paid-view pornography channel.

The idea of voyeurism is further complicated by the continuous Internet broadcast of a live image of the gallery itself, along with the video and any visitors who wander in. With this electronic layering, two politically loaded concepts associated with AIDS — transmission and surveillance — are evoked without any mention of the disease itself.

Other entries in the show are less oblique in their approach. Skowmon Hastanan, in a small, powerful, non-nonsense installation, addresses the issue of Western sexual tourism in Thailand. Photographs by Sunil Gupta pair images of his own AIDS treatment with shots of gay clubs in London. (These pictures, along with others by Mr. Gupta, can also be seen at Admit One Gallery in Chelsea through tomorrow.)

The New York artist Barton Lidice Benes deals directly with physical traces of the disease in the context of gay culture. His pigeonholed "Art Reliquarium," one of many such pieces he has made, holds, among other things, a swatch of a St. Marks Baths bathrobe, circa 1971; funerary ashes; and a coil of the red ribbon used to make the first batch of AIDS

lapel insignia in 1991.

The original Ribbon Project, sponsored by Visual AIDS, was conceived by the artist Frank Moore, whose painting "Release" is one of the highlights of the show. The work was made under great stress. Mr. Moore, who has been battling AIDS for years, experienced a significant dip in health last year. (He has since rebounded.)

Walking in the woods near his home in Deposit, N.Y., near Binghamton, at the time of his setback, he saw plants growing from a rotting, fallen tree, and this image, with some adjustments, inspired the picture. The tree has become his bare arm, stretched impossibly long. Bleeding sores and lesions are turned into miniature ecosystems of plant and insect life. His handsprings open to release a cloud of butterflies.

Like much of the best art that has emerged in response to AIDS, Mr. Moore's operates on many levels, political, metaphorical and personal. This is true, in varied ways, of all the work here, most of which operates beyond the polemical content and essentializing ideas of illness, sexuality and social activism prevalent (though by no means universal) a decade ago.

But it is important to remember that history; much still proceeds from it. The psychic experience of AIDS has long since infiltrated the bloodstream of American culture. In all kinds of indirect ways it filters into new work, and it will continue to be an active component, both as stimulant and depressant, in a contemporary art world that has recently found global extensions.

Art itself, piece by piece, does not effect change. Art just is what it is: a Babel of visual data and disparate things trailing price tags and promises, dogmas and ego, taking up space and gathering dust.

But the spirit of resistance generated by art as a creative phenomenon, however overt or subtle, is a secret weapon of immense and long-acting power.

"Bodies of Resistance" remains at Real Art Ways, 56 Arbor Street, Hartford, (860) 232-1006, through Jan. 30.