

Life long after the 'plague'

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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All of which is why "Coming After" comes as a thoughtful relief. Curator Jon Davies stewards us carefully through an experience that ranges from the quietly intense to the contemplative to the celebratory to the necessarily oblique, with a few laughs along the way (Glen Fogel's Glen From Colorado is the show's killer app, a hilariously self-deprecating leavening of its very serious subject. In it, a flat computer voice reads hundreds of letters the artist received over the years from friends and loved ones, berating, encouraging, admiring and otherwise. "Glen. I know I am not the first to be screwed over by you. But I wish I was the last. I know that isn't possible," the voice intones, as an array of fluorescent tubes pulse along with it, spelling out the name "GLEN." I loved it).

Whether the montage of images around him is atmospheric and forgettable, I'm not sure, but I'm left only with his face and his words: "I was 14 and I was terrified all the time . . . I realized if I was going to be a faggot, I would die of AIDS or worse. But it didn't matter, because in that moment, my 14-year-old body said yes to death, yes to a life of shame, of hiding in corners, loveless affairs, to dying skinny and alone in a hospital. Because that's what everything told me it would be like . . . but I knew it would be worth it, to open my body up to danger, to death, just to be able to live."

FULL TEXT

Sometimes, simple is best. That was the quiet, relieving sense I had coming to the Power Plant's "Coming After," which appeared to have set for itself the monolithic task - not to mention socially, politically and emotionally fraught - of cohering the state of gay art made a generation after the AIDS crisis.

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Thirty years on, hindsight allows us the privilege of dismissing such ideas as the absurd hyperbole they were - HIV-positive patients live for decades, and reasonably normally, with the help of significant drug advancement - but at the time, with the disease spreading rapidly and the prognosis almost always terminal, and swiftly so, ignorance-fuelled terror became a broadly polarizing force that all but obliterated even the best efforts to teach even the simplest truths.

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It would have been easy, so easy, to submit to a kind of hysterical rage, because what is easier than extremes, and who more than a community decimated by disease and demonized by the greater public because it has greater claim to such a response?

But Davies makes the always cogent curatorial decision to sidestep the pedantics and instead open a conversation that anyone can be part of. Davies has selected key works that help nuance the deliberate ambiguity of the show's title; his view is of that watershed era from a distant horizon, then unknowable, and works like Tim Leyendekker's *the Healers* see it as though through the wrong end of a telescope.

A director sits with two young actors on folding chairs in a quiet room, reading lines from a rote script about a pair of young gay men who hook up in a nightclub for easy, meaningless sex. Leyendekker cuts away to still photos of an abandoned club, the Cosmo Bar, its bulletin boards full of photos, empty coat check and silent bar.

Despite the still-twinkling lights, it is silent as a tomb. The evocation is both obvious and not. With the story's stiff, sterile delivery, Leyendekker casts recent history as distant and unknowable as the ancients; AIDS became an explosive force 30 years ago, likely before either actor was born. Leyendekker quietly plies an ungraspable disconnect, of futility in trying to retain cultural memory through those who have no experience of it.

Davies is neither polarizing nor comprehensive in his programming here, but his hand is nonetheless firm. You enter the exhibition as through a maze - *the Healers* is first - each room connecting to another, your journey through it quietly prescribed. Next is Susanne M. Winterling's silent, eerie text and light installation, which casts a quote by notable queer writer and filmmaker Jean Genet virtually unreadable but for the reflective quality of the pale words on a white wall.

This quiet moment is imposed on by *the Healers* on one side - sounds creeps in, reminding you you're a captive, which is a good thing - and *No Future/No Past*, a video work by Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz. It's a simple conceit: Four punk icons, Joey Ramone, Poly Styrene, Darby Crash and Alice Bag, gather for a scripted conversation. They're dulled down, stage-managed and fed lines by an androgynous narrator who reads in an uninflected monotone, taking the disconnected sense of the past seen in *the Healers* to a comic extreme. It is an exercise in comic futility that nonetheless rings with a leaden sadness, trying to imagine the unimaginable: a world where the only struggle was against conformity, not life and death.

While "Coming After" is rightly not slavish about its queer culture imperative - several works address the subject only obliquely, others imperceptibly.

Entering the large main space of the exhibition, you're immediately confronted with a video piece by Adam Garnet Jones, a young Canadian aboriginal artist. *Secret Weapons*, he calls it, and it's both the most wilfully direct piece in "Coming After," and in some ways its soul. Jones splits his screen in four, occupying one as the narrator.

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At "Coming After," it gets no more blunt than this. But in a show that thoughtfully explores distance and disconnect from decades-ago public outrage and the very real spectre of death, this is a potent, welcome foil. Jones pulls us in close and lets us know that, for all the time that has passed, this is personal, and formative and real, and no distance is far enough to make it otherwise.

Christian Holstad, whose work is featured in "Coming After," speaks at the gallery Jan. 18 at 7 p.m. The show continues at the Power Plant to April 12.

Credit: Murray Whyte Toronto Star

Illustration

Caption: Glen Fogel's *Glen From Colorado*, 2009, a powerful part of the Power Plant's current AIDS-themed show, *Coming After*. The installation view of Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz's *No Future/No Past*, 2011 at The Power Plant.

DETAILS

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