

Spirited Away

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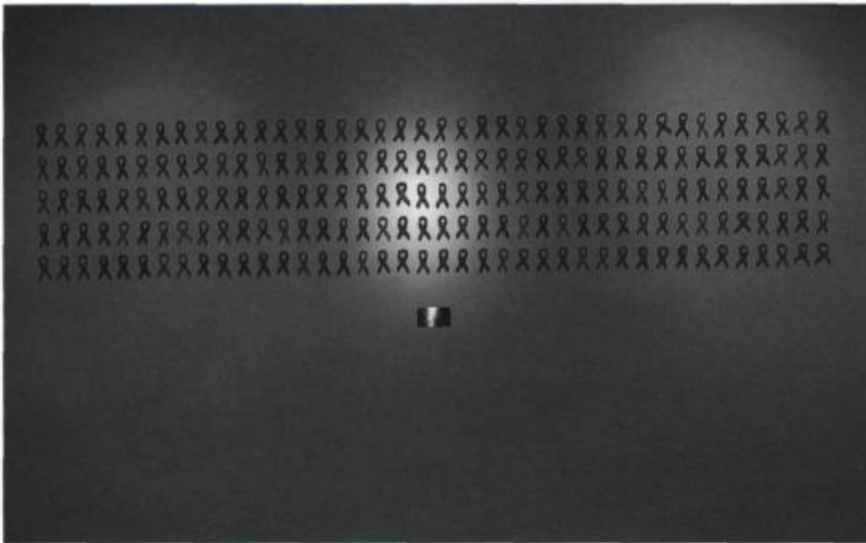
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Zachery Longboy, partial view of the installation. Excerpt from the video installation, *The Stone Show*, 1998. Photo: Ingrid Mayrhofer.

Barton Lidice Benes, *The Cremated Remains of Brenda*, 1993. Photo: Ingrid Mayrhofer.

As you enter A Space, you notice the smell first. It is difficult to identify — not overwhelming but pervasive, and decidedly not pleasant. You scan the walls and floors of the gallery space, looking for the source, seeing only a usual gallery exhibition — wall works and a video installation. And still the smell lingers, you never get used to it. As you approach the works to examine them more closely you see talismans, small vials of liquids, mini-vitrines containing pills and rows of small, grey AIDS ribbons on the walls. When you read the labels you realize that some of the works in this exhibit are made from blood and from the cremated remains of a woman who died of AIDS. And you realize then the smell that infuses the gallery comes from these objects: the smell is death,

captured and transformed into art.

This challenging exhibition features the work of Barton Lidice Benes and Zachery Longboy. Their works examine the concept of “spirit”, specifically how it is manifested within contemporary society and regarded by Western sensibilities, through use of money, pharmaceuticals, ashes and blood. Benes is an HIV+ artist, who lives in New York City. His work, which has been exhibited internationally, deals with the issues of HIV/AIDS and has been described as *confrontational, elegant and humorous*.¹ Longboy is a graduate of the Emily Carr College of Art & Design, whose multi-disciplinary work includes drawing, installation, performance and video.

These two artists both deal

with transformation in subtle and sophisticated ways. Despite the inclusion of materials which are controversial (blood, cremated remains) neither artist has created anything with a “shock value.” And were the materials not listed, one wouldn’t know what the works were constructed from. The works are thoughtfully, subtly and skillfully constructed with the materials supporting the content in understated ways.

The Cremated Remains of Brenda is the wall installation comprised of 192 AIDS ribbons coated with her cremated ashes. Brenda was a friend of Benes, and while it remains a potent and loving memorial, it also stands as a powerful icon for all who have died of AIDS and related complications. For while the AIDS-ribbon campaign brought awareness into our social consciousness and vocabulary, but it hasn’t stopped people from dying or brought about a cure for the disease. In one sense, the ribbons are a societal placebo; it is far easier to wear a red ribbon than to lobby the government and medical world for a cure. And while we keep wearing these red ribbons people, like Brenda, are dying.

Longboy and Benes have both created talismans for this exhibition. Talismans, being charms or amulets worn to avert evil, prove especially potent in the context of this exhibition. Benes makes talismans from AZT capsules juxtaposed with clay beads; then, he references Christ’s suffering and sacrificial death through his constructions of crucifixes and a crown of thorns. Yet, rather than being about an extraordinary person, or a savior, Benes’ work is about the average person whose death comes about from lack of medicine and lack of money. Longboy also creates works which synthesize symbols from Christianity but he combines them with natural elements from

sacred aboriginal rituals (stones, plants, earth). These are then further contrasted with AZT pill containers and other remnants from contemporary culture, which have become our current rituals.

Although the mediums used and the finished works are different, Benes’ and Longboy’s work share a strong thematic similarity. Neither artist preaches didactically but creates instead visual works which are evocative and encourage the viewer to “read between the lines.” They have each responded to issues which concern them personally but have made works which speak out to a larger audience.

The works by Benes and Longboy which make up *Spirited Away* draw upon the primal potency that art-making first had: sculptures which contained the power to protect one from evil spirits or to bring blessings and fertility to the owner/creator. Much of art’s “magic” has been spirited away, displaced by semiotics and discussions about aesthetics. Benes and Longboy have reclaimed this power of art in their sculptures and installations.

In dealing with the difficult issues which make many of us uncomfortable, such as dealing with death or sickness, or confronting the complex and nebulous areas of spirituality within a modern-day framework, these artists have returned to artmaking its potential to be magic. The art in *Spirited Away* is potent and primal, qualities which make it both current and timeless. ■

Spirited Away, Barton Lidice Benes and Zachery Longboy
A Space Gallery
Oct. 24–Dec. 5, 1998

NOTE:

1. *Spirited Away* brochure for A Space exhibition. Text by Andy Fabo.