

Sleeping with the Enemy

Angels of mortality in a dance of pain

I remember some of the dead. Michael, the sexy, kind, in-the-closet sophomore who never would tell me he had a boyfriend. Dan, the middle school's headmaster. Mark, the pharmacist who worked with my mom.

It didn't take long. They got sick, and soon, you'd hear they were gone.

When I went to Corvallis to watch OSU's *Angels in America* a few weeks ago — a play I had somehow never seen — the time rushed back. I left at intermission, crushed by the weight of homophobia and the deaths of so many gay men.

But now, there are college students who were playing with Buzz Lightyear toys as Andrew Sullivan's "When Plagues End" came out in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1996. There are gay boys in high school whose first thoughts of sexual freedom aren't marked with the onus of death.

At the same time, heterosexual men and women in India, Russia, Thailand and a variety of sub-Saharan African countries die by the millions. The number of AIDS orphans choke social services in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Swaziland. Nor has the U.S. escaped: *The New York Times* just reported that in Washington, D.C., "one-in-20 city residents is estimated to have HIV ... and 1-in-50 have AIDS."



Lying with Death

And who's getting the drug cocktails that have tamed AIDS? Not the folks in the developing world; not the people who can't afford them here. Infection rates are falling worldwide, thankfully, but that doesn't mean no one's getting sick and no one's dying.

"I think it's still very much with us," says Clint Brown, the artist whose "Plague Drawings" show lines the walls of the Adell McMillan Gallery in the UO's Erb Memorial Union. The beautifully crafted chiaroscuro in his striking charcoal drawings contrasts horrifically with the subject matter: sleeping with death.

"Our desire for love, for intimacy, is at the root of our humanity," Brown writes in his artist statement. But AIDS (among other threats of sex — other sexually transmitted infections and, for some, pregnancy) throws despair and death in the way.

When he created the works in this show, from 1991 to 1995, the now-retired OSU art professor writes, "the message needed to be clear and accessible."

Certainly, the message is clear. In *Lying With Death* from 1991, a lovely young man, his flesh full and taut, relaxes in bed after sex. But on his outflung arm rests the skeleton that represents, in Brown's work,



Azrael, the angel of death. And as in most of Brown's work in this show, the contrast of those gorgeously drawn bones — sharp and scraping, hard and unforgiving, terrifying in European traditions — with the tender and unbroken flesh of the lover causes great discomfort.

It's a challenge to look at the monumental, near lifesize canvases like *Fatal Attraction* (1991) and the most powerful piece, *Hollow Embrace* (1991) and not turn away with shudders. Though in many of Brown's sex act drawings, the skeletons are clearly *fucking* the people (or being fucked by the people), *Hollow Embrace* shows an act of *making love*, with the receptive skeleton's mouth open in release and its hands reaching back for the rounded buttocks of its lover.

Brown skewers the denial of religious leaders in the "Ring Around the Rosie" triptych. The central panel (*Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down*) shows a robed Azrael ascending, carrying a small child, as skeletons beneath his feet cry out for succor. In the left panel (*Ring Around the Rosie*), a tightly closed circle of religious figures shut out anything they don't want to see or hear. And the right panel (*Pocket Full of Posies*) shows women and children trying to smell and eat flowers of death, their faces contorted and staring with fear.

Brown's powerful work might not be for the faint of heart, but neither is living. That damned statistic — the human race has a 100 percent mortality rate — faces us with every hand we extend, with every kiss, with every embrace. Brown reminds us that we have some choice in the matter, sometimes. With care, we can celebrate each other's sweet flesh without inviting Azrael to lie with us. As World AIDS Day occurs on Dec. 1, we can remember the dead — and celebrate the living.

"The Plague Drawings" stays up through Dec. 7, and a World AIDS Day reception for Brown is in the Adell McMillan gallery at 6:30 pm Friday, Nov. 30. The UO also sponsors a condom fashion show and variety show at 8 pm in the EMU Ballroom.

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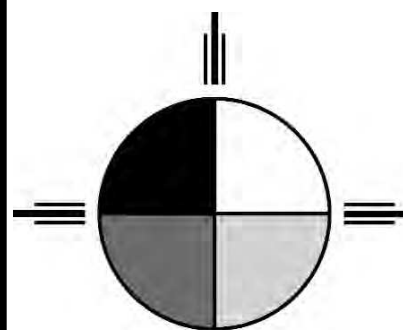
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