

This profile, adapted from a longer interview conducted by Paul Sendziuk, was first published in A&U magazine (issue 124, pp.16-17, 18) in February 2005. The text was approved by Dui Seid.

Flesh and Bone

An optimist by nature, Dui Seid graduated from New York's Cooper Union and began making art which he describes as 'spiritual': immaculately constructed biomorphic sculptures that evoked the process of evolution. His focus changed in the 1980s when a close friend, and then another, became ill and died from AIDS. As Seid remembers, "my friend's progression towards skeletal emaciation was shocking to me. I would come home from the hospital and start to work. Of course I could not be making art that was like before. It was reflective of the emotional rollercoaster that I was going through. I started making works that were elegiac...they were visual prayers."

Paul Sendziuk: Tell me about those early pieces.

Dui Seid: I began making desolate landscapes, contained in small wooden boxes, that were made out of paper. All of the rocks, twigs, the skeleton, everything was made out of paper. I made *Playa del Fuego*, or 'Fire Island', in 1985. I had been invited to be in a summer exhibition about the beach and I chose to represent Fire Island, the gay utopian resort.

I made *Hourglass* in 1986. It consists of a slab of flesh in a conical shape that has a hole - a wound - in the top that you pour sand in and it comes out the bottom. It stands precariously on a pinnacle of sand. When you build on sand, you're building on something that isn't stable. It's like an hourglass, depicting the vulnerability and temporal-ness of flesh and life.

***U-Brace Against the Door*, tells a different story, doesn't it?**

Yes. That piece was created around the same time, in 1988. At the time, it was very taboo to speak about AIDS, and I felt that everyone was spending most of their physical energy trying to keep their blinders on. I felt that they were spending their time bracing against the door, to keep the truth out. I had friends that were HIV-positive who were afraid to admit it. Their art could not be related or about AIDS, even though it was the major thing that was impacting in their lives. They were in denial. This piece is about denial: about society not wanting to - like the Republicans - not wanting to mention the word AIDS, or take any action, governmental action, to confront this medical problem. And about people with AIDS that were in denial about their condition.

At the end of the 1980s you took a job which saw you caring for people with AIDS on a daily basis. Did this alter your perspective of the epidemic?

My view was informed by taking care of people 'hands on'. My concern was their daily health needs rather than the political fight. The art that I made was reflective of that. It was not so propagandistic, which, I would say, characterised the art of that period - the early 1980s running into the '90s. My work had a visceral quality. I was representing flesh and the fight of the body, while other artists, following the ACT UP line, were representing healthy-looking bodies and people attending demonstrations.

That caused some trouble for you, didn't it?

ACT UP picketed a show by the photographer Nicholas Nixon who, like me, was representing the physical ravages of the disease. I think the New York art establishment swallowed the ACT UP line. It was tough to get my work shown here.

I remember attending an AIDS clinic at a hospital in New York City. I was accompanying an AIDS patient with whom I was working. In the waiting room I recognised a girl. I recognised her from her photographs that showed her looking healthy. But she didn't look so good! And I said 'Oh, oh, she just became invisible!' I was very upset at that time that there was a moment at which people with AIDS become invisible.

Do you think that moment has passed now, particularly since the evolution of HIV medications?

Well, first of all, the art world has passed on. There aren't exhibitions about AIDS anymore. I don't know if an exhibition were to be curated today, whether or not the dogma, the manifesto, would apply. But what I do see is a lot more work that is diverse and personal.

In the 1990s you became involved with the Visual AIDS organisation and interested in the problem of preserving the work of artists with AIDS.

I did a piece called *Artist's Estate*, which is actually an evolving assemblage that gets bigger and bigger each time I show it. It came about after my neighbour told me about overhearing a conversation between a man and a gallery owner. The man said: 'I had this artist friend who died and left me all his paintings and I've kept them for years but I can't keep them anymore. There is so many of them. I'm willing to give them to you for free, you can do what you want with them.' My friend overheard this and said: 'I'd love to see them'. She went to the loft to see them and other people had come too – word had spread. The people were taking these beautiful canvases, going down the stairs of the loft, and ripping them off the stretches, throwing the canvas on the street and keeping the stretches because the stretches were very expensive, custom made, worth hundreds of dollars.

I thought about that, and I thought about all of the artists that have not made their mark and gained recognition. So I made *Artist's Estate*. I asked everybody I knew who was HIV-positive to donate something to this garbage heap. I had stretches, paints, photographs, rejection letters from galleries and museums, everything cascading out of a dumpster. And it had a Christmas tree with broken decorations because I find that Christmas trees are like dead bodies on the street – discarded corpses, valued for such a short time and then discarded. It is basically about life and about how lives are valued.

[Please cite this text in the following way: Paul Sendziuk, 'Flesh and Bone: Dui Seid', A&U, issue 124, 2005, pp.16-17, 18.]