

Rob Anderson interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

San Francisco, USA, 5 February 2008

This is a complete and unedited transcript of an interview. It retains grammatical imperfections that inevitably occur in spoken conversation. Rob Anderson has reviewed and approved the transcript.

Paul Sendziuk: For the purposes of the recorder, this is an interview with Rob Anderson, it's just gone 7pm on the 5th of February and we're in a studio on Mission Street in San Francisco. Rob, if you can just start by telling me a little bit about your background and, I guess, two questions there: first, how you came to make art, why that became a passion; secondly, if you had any formal training, if you went to school to learn to paint and draw?

Rob Anderson: Well, I'll start with my background. My mother says that as soon as I could pick up a pencil I was drawing, so drawing has always been second nature to me, sort of my form of expression and my way of getting through the world and difficult times. It has helped me in many ways gain acceptance, you know, the savage little peers of elementary school! [laughs] I could draw so they left me alone! And I've never stopped drawing or painting, it's always been part of my being. In terms of formal training, I went to UC Berkley. I started in architecture but I very quickly realised architecture was too rigid for me and I discovered design, visual design, specifically silk screen printing – that's what I wanted to do. So I studied design for the rest of my time there which was about, let's see, I did one year of architecture and then I did three of design, let's say photography, print making, graphics, theatre set design. And after school my mother says, "Well, now you have to get practical." Oh God. [laughs]

What does that mean? [laughs]

That was a terrible thing for her to say, but I took it to heart and I went to work for Macy's Department Store. I was in their display design department starting out as, sort of a, somebody who made props and that sort of thing and I quickly rose to the point where I was doing a lot of design work. I was still considered, you know, to be in the lowly group, but they had me doing a lot of pretty extensive designing for them. I stuck with that for three years, but at the same time I had developed a business with a fellow who was my partner at the time – we had met at college – and it was the William James Art Company and we billed ourselves as a, sort of, general art company. If you had an art need, we would do it for you. And so much for diversity – it was probably a little too spread out, a little too thin but we did a lot – a lot of photography, a lot of graphics. I was with that for, let's see, ten years – I'd left Macy's in '79 and I stuck with my own company, the William James Art Company, until '85 and then I thought, you know, you're not really getting rich at this so I should – my interest was really always in figure, in people, in portraits, and my work even in my graphic design was tending more and more towards realism – so I thought, well, you know, why don't you do what you really want to do? Maybe you won't get rich at that either, but you'll still be doing what you want to do. So I closed down the business – Bill had sort of left already at that point – and I took a class – a couple of classes – one was in human anatomy, it was a year long course, that was at the then called California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, taught by a guy

called Vince Perez who was just, you know, an anatomy master, a very intensive class. Then I took a course of instruction with David Hardy who's at the school that I now teach at, the founder of the school, the Atelier School of Classical Realism [laughs]. It's a mouthful, but it's his name, so I studied with David for about 9 months and thought, ok, it's time to launch the portrait career, so I started, you know, to put the word out I was doing portraits and figurative work and things took off from there.

Ok, and so you support yourself by doing commissioned portraits now?

Yeah, commissioned portraits, and – there's a drawing over there that's a preliminary drawing for a painting that I did – so there's the portrait commissions and, as you saw, the catalogue with the Pergamon drawings – that was a commissioned project – I just finished. I haven't quite finished a project with Yale doing actual copies of a couple of colonial portraits which...copying is not my thing but I thought this would be an interesting project.

Has it proved to be interesting?

Yeah, it proved to be a lot more challenging than I expected because – I don't know if you're familiar with American colonial portraiture, but it tends to be a little on the clunky, primitive side – [I said] ok, these are pretty simplistic, this shouldn't be a problem. Well, the problem is that because I am copying them and I have to make them look like they're that; I can't do a simple brushstroke and make it look exactly like that brushstroke, I have to, you know, paint the brushstroke as if it is that brushstroke so it became a lot more complicated. A lot more complicated! [laughs] So I made two trips back to New Haven and I've had the portraits out here working on them and [pointing at a painting] there's a – I finished the one of – it's a couple, Jonathon and Sarah Edwards, I finished him and she's about 85% done. I've sent for them out here so I can finish her out here.

Are they happy with them so far?

So far, yeah, he's very happy with them.

Good. Have you lived in San Francisco all your life?

No, I was a child of a military father – Navy – and so I was born in Florida, moved to Virginia, couple of years in Virginia, moved to Santa Clara, which is in the South Bay area, lived there for a couple of years, then to San Diego, was there from second grade through sixth grade, back to Virginia, two more years, back to San Diego, finished high school and I've been up here since '71, the fall of '71. This is definitely home.

The anatomy class that you took, that was a pure anatomy class, it wasn't orientated towards artists?

Yeah, it was. There was no dissection or anything like that. In fact, the guy, Vince, he's a very well known medical illustrator and he said he's never done a dissection.

Really?

He's done it all through book learning.

In the olden days you'd have to get up to your elbows in blood to find out what you're doing down there!

[laughs] Yeah.

I read that you received an HIV diagnosis in a fairly strange way, I suppose, in that you had participated in a hepatitis B trial and they took blood. Can you tell me a little bit about, for the purposes of the recording, tell me a little bit about that? How you came to be informed about your status?

Sure. In '78 they started a hepatitis B vaccine trial and were recruiting gay and bisexual men in San Francisco through the City Clinic for the, you know, sexually transmitted disease clinic. Anybody that came through there, they would ask if you wanted to participate and I came through in '79 and they said: would you be interested in doing this? And you know, I don't – I'm not really that outwardly political, I don't – I'm just not – much more private – I thought this would be a good way to contribute because it's completely anonymous and so I volunteered to do it. So they had my blood draw, June 20th of 1979 was when I had my first blood draw, and then AIDS came along and they asked people – they started tracking people down and asking them if they would be willing to be part of the – this AIDS study. And there ended up being, I think, about forty of us that said yes, a lot of people had died, some they just lost track of, and some hadn't followed through with the hepatitis B vaccine trial so they were out of the picture. So, I said 'sure'. At first I didn't get my status, I didn't really want to know because in '85 there was no cure – well, there's still no cure, but there were no medications for it. So I didn't want to know, but my partner at the time, whose name was Douglas, they had asked me if – they were trying to make all these different correlations so they were studying partners as well as, you know, the primary people – and so he got his blood drawn as a participant and then he turned out [HIV] negative and I thought, well, if he's going to tell me what he is, I'd better find out what I am, it's only fair. So I went the clinic, "Yes, I'm ready, give me my results," and I remember the fellow brought me into this room, you know those little tiny interview rooms, and there's the little box of Kleenex [tissues] and this big book that he's got to flip through to find your name and your number and he says, "Well, I have to" [pause] he says, "You've been positive as of your first blood draw," which was June 20th of '79. And I just sat there and said, "Oh, ok," and the fellow looked at me – his name was Michael – he looked at me, like, "Well, are you going to break down, you know, the big cry or..." And I said, "Ok, thank you very much," and he seemed a little disappointed actually! [laughs] So I went home, I remember walking home from the clinic and I arrived home and my partner Douglas was there and greeted me in the kitchen and I said, "I found out my status and I'm HIV positive. Do you think I'm going to die of AIDS?" And he said, "No," and I said, "You're right," and that sort of settled it for me right then.

So you've been living with the virus since at least '79, when you had the stored blood sample. I imagine this has made a lot of people very curious about you because you're seemingly in very good health. Have people been curious to know what your secret is?

It's a funny thing. For a long time they were – for a number of years they were very curious and – 1992 I believe it was, '92 or '93, I think it was '93 – the whole notion of a long-term survivor became very big news. Up until then, they'd said, you know, you've got two years and then you're going to die, that's the max. [Then] they kept extending it out and they suddenly became interested in this group of us who weren't progressing and were still very healthy. I've still never taken medications but the other people at that point still probably hadn't either. And so they started interviewing me. I went to Japan for one of the AIDS conferences and spoke on a panel there. I've done a lot of media interviews all about it and that was all very good and they were real enthused. Then it sort of, you know, drifted off as far as their interest level. And what's curious is that they – the Clinic Study itself – decided they'd reached whatever conclusions they'd needed to reach so they pretty much stopped [studying us] except for this new little sub-group that they call the "Elite Controllers". I don't know if you've read about the "Elite Controllers"?

I haven't, no.

Sounds like a contingent of...

Sounds like someone should be fighting them.

[Laughs] Nazi accountants, that's what I've decided they are. Anyway the "Elite Controllers" are, let's see, they're like me in that they've never had – they're not doing medications, but their T-Cell count is higher and has never dropped any lower than – I forget what the number is. Anyway, I fell out of that group because my T-Cells have gone below their cut-off point, so they're no longer interested in me at all. It's funny because there's another fellow in my project who was one of the few of the group that still doesn't take medications either. We just get together and laugh about the absurdity of the whole thing with the "Elite Controllers", you know, we're gonna put out contracts on those damn "Elite Controllers." [laughs]

Do you feel a bit abandoned, though? I mean, the medical establishment was showing a lot of interest in you – "we care a lot about your health, we want to help you, we want to find out more about this..." – and then suddenly they stopped calling. You must feel...?

I don't think I feel so much abandoned as I feel perplexed and rather disturbed. Here [are people], myself and Rick: we don't take any medications, we don't have any health issues at all and have never had health issues. His lifestyle regimen is completely the opposite of mine – I can tell you a little bit about him because it's quite extreme from mine – so we sort of laugh about what is it, that we share in common, that's keeping me alive and keeping [him] alive? So I find it rather disappointing that they have decided that we're anomalies or for some reason no longer valid for studying. I mean, if I was a scientist I'd say 'why is that guy still going', and I'd want to know. [laughs]

Absolutely. And what about pharmaceutical companies, have they shown any interest in you? I mean, I don't know if they work at the level of patients or whether they're just working on the cellular level, but...

Well, I believe that when my blood was being taken frequently for the study, that it was going to a lot of different research projects around the country. So, you know, they were probably feeding it to the pharmaceutical companies in some way, but I'm not really aware. As far as the pharmaceutical companies themselves, they've never really...nobody's ever approached me.

Ok. Well, you've mentioned your project "Rattlesnake in a Moving Car" which is a lovely, evocative title. It is a series of, I think, charcoal drawings that you do of long-term survivors like yourself. Can you tell me a little bit about the project and what the stimulus was, and how people came to be involved?

Sure. Well, as I said, I'd done quite a number of media interviews and some of them were really good, some of them were really bad, and the bad ones I felt that I was ripped off and manipulated as far as what I was saying. I remember one interview where – it was a phone interview – and I got a copy of the article and basically what the writer had done, he had taken my name, hardly any of my words, and inserted me saying something in the appropriate places to make his article flow and they were things that I'd never said and it wasn't even my particular manner of speech, so fuck you. [laughs] But you can delete that! [laughs]

No, that's fine! We encourage expletives on the tape. [laughs]

But then I had people like Dan Rutz from CNN who was just a marvellous guy, we're still friends, and Sheryl Stolberg from, she was with the *Los Angeles Times* at that time, she was great. She wrote just a wonderful, really insightful article on me that seemed to get what I was about. But what finally put me over the edge and started me on the path of doing my own project was I felt that I was not really being fully – my ideas were not being fully – expressed through these other media; that as an artist I needed to do my own project that could say in my own words what was going on with me. Why was I surviving? That was my basic question for myself and has always been one of the big questions. Why am I surviving and very much thriving when so many of my friends have died, and so many other people have died. Originally the project was going to be just about my personal story and then I thought, well, there's all these other people in the AIDS study and it would be a good idea to get some of them involved and have more diversity. I naively thought that they would all be like minded, like me, in their feelings about how to deal with HIV and what was going on with them, [but] the first interview I did was with this fellow, Bob – in the middle there...

Sorry, just for the purposes of the tape, this is a fellow who looks like he's got blonde hair, fairly sparse, quite a high forehead and he's got a moustache and looks like he's wearing a white shirt.

Yeah, that's a good description. [laughs] Very soft, gentle eyes.

Soft, gentle eyes, yes. [laughs]

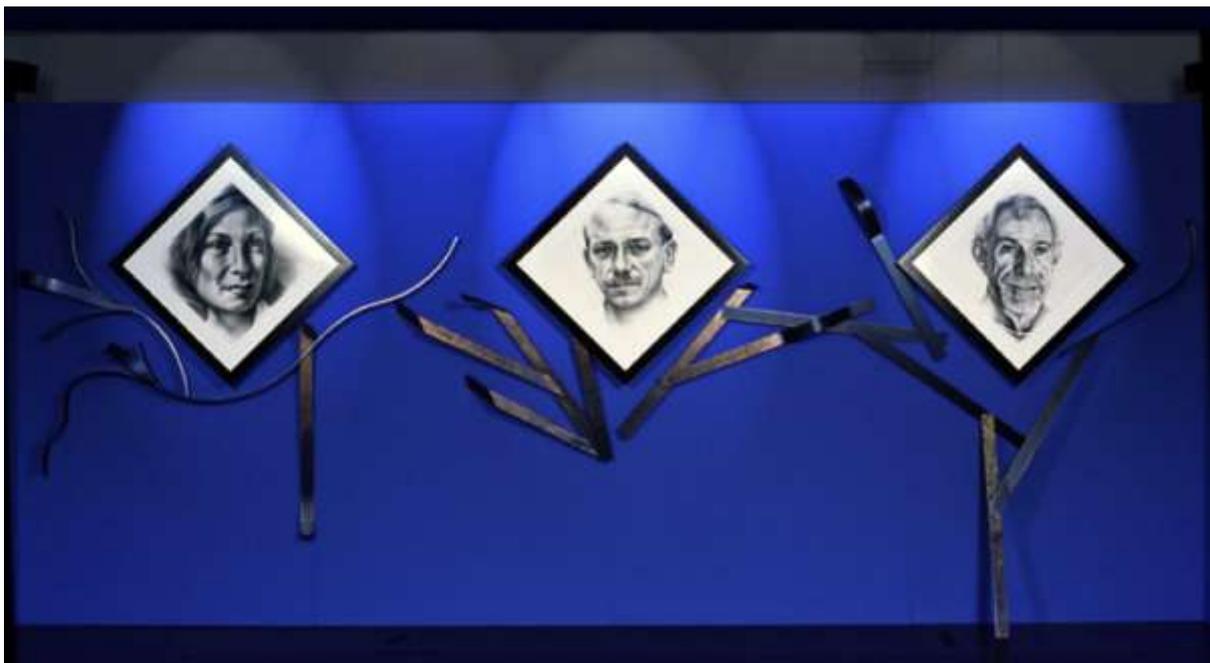
So Bob sort of blew me out of the water as far as his whole approach to it because he says "I've taken just about every medication there is." And, [I said] "Oh, ok I guess we're not on the same page there." And then I would ask him about how HIV has affected him and

changed his life and it pretty much sort of unfolded from there. With each successive story, I got a different slant on something that, you know, we shared some commonalities and then a lot of diversity as far as our overall philosophies towards it.

That's interesting: the scientists are trying to get this group together, trying to work out what they have in common and then hopefully something that they might be able to then replicate, manipulate, and then what you're finding out through art is how different these people are, going right against that grain.

Do you want to talk to me about how you do the portraits? Do [your subjects] come in here to sit for you or do you go to their place? What kind of control do they have over the portrait themselves?

Well, they're all – all the men are from the AIDS study, the men's cohort study. The women, actually Andrea here [pointing to a portrait], sort of muscled her way into the men's study [both laugh]. She's from Los Angeles and she insisted on getting in there and somehow they made room for her and another woman. There are a total of five women. The other ones came from the Women's Inter-agency HIV Study, which is a study that started in '85 so they're a little behind the men's study.



Rob Anderson, *Rattlesnake in a Moving Car* [detail, installation view], c.2008.

They're all from California?

They all had some connection to – they all lived in the Bay Area or still do except for Andrea who lived in Los Angeles. But, you know, they don't all come from California, and several of them are no longer in California. Through the Clinic Study – Paul O'Malley, who was the manager of the study, sent out a letter that I'd written asking for people who would be interested and I got – out of about forty people I got about half of them. For some reason I settled on the number of 20 for the portraits I wanted to make which

in retrospect was rather crazy [both laugh] 'cause it's a lot! But I started doing – let's see, I started recruiting people for it in '98, the idea I got in '96, in '98 I started recruiting people for it, 2000 was when I actually finally started drawing, Bob being the first one, and as the time went by, some of the people decided to drop out because they weren't dying – they wanted to go back into the closet as far as being HIV positive because of the possible stigma against them, which was, you know, it was fine, understandable. So what that did was, that allowed for openings for the women – it was a great, I think a great aspect of it that the women got to join the project.

Can you think of other reasons why they might have wanted to drop out? Other reasons that they expressed, or that you could imagine?

Well there was one fellow who opened a restaurant, so he did not want it known that he was HIV positive. I'm trying to think about the other ones. One guy just ended up moving around too damn much. God, I tried to track him down, tried to track him down, he was really interested and finally I just gave up on him, which was unfortunate because he was the youngest one of the whole study. Nice guy but a little unstable [laughs] as far as his living situation. Let's see – the other ones...One fellow just was not – once he got more information about the project, he wasn't really that comfortable with sitting for so long and telling his whole story, so he wanted to stay more private about it.

And for how long would they have to sit?

Well, I'd tell them that it would take about between 12 to 15 hours and usually I'd say about 12, because I didn't want to scare them off.

Really it was about 25?

[Both laugh] Yeah.

You know how I told you this interview would take 45 minutes, well...[both laugh]

But once I got far enough into them, into the interview with them, then they were generally pretty good about it. Sometimes they got a little bit tired of doing it – I remember DK, the woman I mentioned, I went there for what was going to be the last drawing session she said, "Rob, this has got to be the last one, I'm done." "Oh, ok!" [laughs]

You wouldn't work from a photograph?

No. You know, I've worked from photographs in my other work on occasion. I just don't like it. Photography flattens the image out, you know, it's a cyclops lens so you lose the stereo vision, you lose the depth of knowledge of the person that you gain from sitting with them for 25 hours listening to them talk. Most of these people I'm still in touch with. Some of them have become very good friends of mine and that for me was one of the nice perks of the whole thing, I got to know some really great people.

And would you record them as they're talking to you or would you have a more formal interview? Or would you get them to write their story down themselves?

It was all recorded. The interviews averaged about eight hours and I had a whole list of questions that I'd ask them. [In the] first session when I met them – because I didn't know any of them except for Emilio, the fellow there [pointing at a portrait], the older fellow with the goatee, and I just knew him briefly, but the others I didn't know before I met them – so my first session with them would be like an introduction. I would have them tell me their background, their life background, so we're not getting into anything too heavy at that point although some of them got right into a family history and it was like "Oh, God!" [both laugh] And at that point what I would also do were a series of small sketches of them in a couple of different poses and then we'd decide from there which one was the most appropriate to them, which represented them the most, and generally speaking the one that I liked the most was the one they liked the most. And then [in] the second meeting and the subsequent meetings we would just set up, usually at either their home or their business, and interview time, we would spend anywhere from two to four hours average talking and drawing. They would, you know, be free to talk the whole time except when I was – at one point where I'm saying you have to sit still so I can draw your mouth so don't talk, but for the most part – as you can see a lot of them have their mouths open – I tried to get the sense of their speaking so that they're not completely tight lipped. The eyes go in last. I always put the eyes in last so if you saw one that was not done it would look like they've got these ghostly orbs.

Is that common, to do the eyes last?

Probably not. It's something I tell my students, when you're doing a portrait, leave the eyes out until the end because the eyes [are], sort of that cliché, the window to the soul. It's completely true and if you put the eyes in the drawing first or even half way through, it animates the drawing and it becomes a distraction so it takes away from understanding the structure of the face. Just on a psychological, more intimate standpoint, by leaving the eyes out 'til the end I'm 25 hours or more – because it's not all just interview time, sometimes we're just bullshitting – I'm 25 hours into knowing them better and so I can show more in their eyes than if I just, you know, did them the first time.

When I was doing art classes at school I would always – mainly doing self-portraits at that stage, you've got the mirror in front of you – I would always do the eyes first because it kind of gave me the encouragement to finish it. Otherwise you would have this sort of blank face without the eyes, and you'd be staring at you looking not very good for a long period of time and I've always found that rather disheartening! Then I'd do the bits that I was good at doing, again, to give me a bit of encouragement.

They're in quite different styles – like this woman here [pointing to a portrait], I think you said the woman who's from Los Angeles, she's drawn in heavier, darker lines, almost like some of the Mexican muralists. She has that sort of shape, fully rounded sort of shape to her, whereas some of the others are more intricate and more delicately shaded such as the fellow with the goatee beard that you mentioned. Is that deliberate? You were quite happy to change your style with each person or...?

It's really just my response to them, you know, what seems the most appropriate. I maintain certain things about it that were pretty much set and that was the format, the

diamond shape [of the paper], and the charcoal pencil and the white paper, so I didn't want that to change, but as far as how it ultimately looked, that pretty much just evolved along the way. What I found very curious was that I used the same charcoal pencil for every one of them, maybe either a 4B or a 6B, but some of them, if you look at the charcoal it looks brownish, it looks bluish, I don't know how that happened [both laugh] but it did!

And these have been on display at least once to the public. Where have they been displayed and what kind of responses have you received from audiences and the people showing them?

I've shown it around the Bay Area as a work in progress a number of times because it's still not completed, the portraits are but the sculpture, the audio part hasn't been fully edited and there's still lighting design to put together. So I've shown it at UCSF – there I just had the portraits and that was it, it was some World AIDS Day event. I've also had it in Oakland at the AmFAR – their National AIDS Update Conference. I did have all of it at that point, all of what's done. And I've shown it most recently at USF, the University of San Francisco, which is a private university in the city, out in the avenues. It's a Jesuit school. It's been interesting to show it in different venues because the project has really evolved a lot.

I think one of the parts of it that I've enjoyed the most is how it has evolved with the input of a lot of people, not necessarily with them knowing it. Like at the USF show, you know, I had these wall units that are there but they wanted more portraits than I already had sculptures and walls for, so [I hung] 16 of the portraits, and some of them were just on their walls, and it was really just an interesting space and the lighting was great, as opposed to this [lighting in the studio] is a little harsh; ideally the light shines on the portraits and the sculptures are more subliminal. A friend of mine, he's an elder man who's quite poetic, came to that show and he wrote in the guest book how walking through it was like walking through a city, and it was a city of facades, but the facades were faces and he, you know, just triggered something in me as far as my notion of how I wanted the project laid out. Up until then I was thinking my ideal set-up would be a large octagon. You would walk in and there would be, maybe, a wall that would be a few feet in from the entrance and you go off in either direction and you'd walk into this big space with these portraits all the way around. But the problem with that was I was afraid that they would be so far apart with this big space in the middle, that it might dilute the impact. But after hearing what Serge had to say, what it inspired in me was the notion of a city that you would be walking through. So now, how I've altered it is: where these little corner units were only going to be like a temporary thing, there will now be four of those and there'll be four of these long units and they'll be able to be put in different configurations depending on the venue. So people will actually wander through it and, you know, turn a corner and discover a face, that kind of thing. I like that [greater] involvement on the part of the viewer.

Have you received any responses which allude to the way in which the audience is feeling about the subject, about HIV, maybe about long term survivors, or the way it's maybe challenged their preconceptions about what AIDS means?

Yeah, I've saved...actually from that show as well there was some really lovely responses from people about how – one actually put into a little short poem of rhyme, and I can't remember it offhand, but it was essentially that, you know, here it was telling this story of these men and women and that is going to have such an impact on the young men and women in this school seeing the project. So – there was another comment, a fellow who worked at USF wandering through and how he was very grateful for the show and that it gave him pause to stop and actually look at the work and not just rush through this library space where they were housed and to contemplate what these stories were all about. So it's had a really terrific impact where it's been seen and my hope is that it'll – once I'm done with it – it'll actually be able to travel beyond just the Bay Area. I don't really want it to just sit here in the Bay Area. It needs to move around.

Were some of these responses written down?

Yeah, the ones from USF – I'm trying to think if I have any from the library – I also had a show at the main library, I'm not sure if that one's – if those were written down, I'd have to go back and look at my archives here. I could probably send you some stuff if you'd like?

I would love it if you could do that because part of what I'm interested in is trying to prove that art does affect people, and that it's not just beautiful and then people disregard it, but rather that art, particularly about AIDS, can make us think about the epidemic in a different way than we were before we were confronted by the art work. But that is often very hard to prove. I mean, I think it's true, and when you talk to people, they say, "Well, yes of course, that's exactly the way I think," but historians love to have documents to work with, little bits of evidence to say well this is true, these feelings that people keep talking about are true. If you can find that feedback, and if you can make some copies for me, that would be really, really fantastic.

Sure. Make sure you prompt me on that one. Keep reminding me.

I'll be sending you emails daily. [both laugh] This one on the far left is again quite different from the others in that it's fuzzier, it's almost ghostly in its appearance. Is that just me or is that...?

Well, he's – his name is Lanz and he's actually the one who inspired the title. He's a counsellor, therapist, and talking with him – he's also very much into Shamanism and you know, Western Indian, Native American Indian philosophies and such religion, and he likened being HIV positive to driving with a rattlesnake in the passenger seat of the car. You can't stop to break and throw it out, you don't want to get it underfoot, you would have to learn how to live with the thing. I always liked that metaphor and so I asked him, "Would you mind if I turned that into a title in some way" – so I used his idea and made the title out of it. But as far as his drawing – it's funny, we did three sketches and this one was probably the last and he liked this one the best, he said not because I think it's the most flattering of me, and he pointed to another one and said now this one would be my public image, but this is who I am, and so we went with that one.

He looks weary, it's quite a weary look on his face. Or he's about to ask a question.

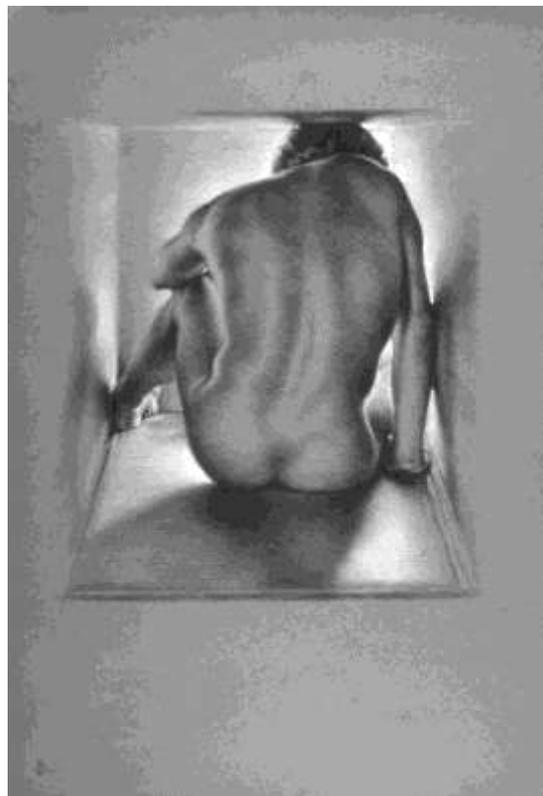
Yeah, he's that kind of person. Very contemplative, very deep thinker – likes to share that a lot.

Have you done other work which might be said to be explicitly referencing HIV as a theme?

Only one piece that I no longer have, although it's in the catalogue – I'll show you, I think it's in the catalogue here. [pause to search] It was in the show but not the catalogue – I can send you an image of it. [Pointing at images from the 'Man in a Box' series] Some of these models I worked with in the 'Man In A Box' series for a couple of years – and this was in the late '80s, early '90s – this is actually the same model who's in the drawing that I'm thinking of. When he started modelling for me – his name's Randy – we talked about it and he said that he was HIV positive and he had had some health issues. You would never have known it to look at this guy, he was just in beautiful shape, looked great. So we worked together for about a year and a half, became very good friends, but I knew that he was ill and they didn't have the medications back then. So there was a drawing that I did of him where he's – has his back to the viewer in the box – he's uplit from the...if I was turned around this way, he's lit from this way so it had the glow around it. It's called 'This Memory of Ours', and that was really the only thing that I've done as far as another HIV piece, and that was a tribute to him. [See image overleaf.] He subsequently died.

So how long ago were you doing those pictures then, the 'Man In A Box'?

The last one was about, let's see – I don't date things, that's the problem! [laughs] I forget, but I think the last one was around 1993 or – no maybe as late as '96.



Rob Anderson, *This Memory of Ours*, charcoal pencil and charcoal white on toned paper, 32"x22", c.1993.

Alright. Well I want to ask you a little bit about your experience as a consumer of art and viewing work that is particularly related to HIV and which has AIDS related themes in it, be it the visual arts – particularly the visual arts – but also maybe theatre work or music or musicals or films about AIDS. Can you think of anything that has particularly struck you, which has made you think about the epidemic in a different way, your responsibilities in the epidemic in a different way, or towards other people? Or maybe helped with a particular sense of loss that you might be feeling? You mentioned you’ve had friends who’ve died. Can you think of any work that’s been important for you in that regard?

I don’t know if it’s important for me exactly in that regard, but there were a couple of things I’ve seen – I don’t remember the title of this play, but I saw it in the, probably the late ‘80s – it was at a theatre called Project Artaud, which is quite well known here in town – I don’t even know if they do theatre anymore – but it was a great production. It was based in kind of like a medieval time but it was about the plague and the audience was standing, the audience was sort of surrounded at times by the players. I went with a boyfriend at the time – so this would have been actually even earlier than that, this would’ve been early ‘80s – went with a boyfriend and his group of friends who I’d become good friends with. I remember the final scene of this production is: they’re going, sort of, weaving through the audience with a cart – obviously just the actors and not the audience – but they would feign dropping dead and then they’d be thrown up on the cart. Since you’re, in a sense, part of that participation, it had a very profound impact on me, even more profound in that everyone of the people I went to that show with died within a few years, and I always think of that cart just winding through the crowd, loading the bodies on, and ultimately my friends were on that cart. [Pause] There’s a photograph I was telling one of my students about just the other day that I saw that was part of a United Colours of Benetton ad, and it was [set] in a hospital room and there was a man, probably in his late twenties, early thirties, looked rather Christ-like because he had longish hair and a beard. He was on his very, very last legs and his family was sitting by his side. He was totally emaciated, white sheets and, you know, this white room and his family was, sort of, this very – plump is a nice way to put it – American family, gathered round him. And the juxtaposition of this fellow – it looked like a, I forget what they call that in that particular part of the Christian theology, the Deposition or something like that – where he’s being...wasn’t being quite held but maybe they’re holding his arm or something, he’s just looking into space. It’s just a beautiful, very moving photograph. So I see little things like that.

I remember that picture actually stimulated a lot of controversy about it. Benetton, this multi-national corporation...ACT UP, I think, got hold of them and said ‘you’re exploiting people with AIDS, you’re using suffering to make profit because, in the end, why else are you attaching your logo to this image if not to reflect good on your company and hence to sell more clothes?’ And I think they did some with AIDS orphans in Africa as well and there was a huge argy-bargy [i.e. argument] with activists being really angry about this. But there were others saying exactly what you are describing: that these are really powerful, moving images that will speak to middle America, people who go to Benetton and buy clothes and who might normally be able to ignore this kind of stuff. And because of these images in such a public display, on public billboards, you can’t ignore these

things anymore. It's really quite interesting – you can never quite get activists in ACT UP to agree with each other [both laugh] but it's an interesting kind of debate.

Yeah, I thought it was a brilliant use of advertising which oftentimes I don't think too much of at all. I mean, you have the opposite of that with the pharmaceutical companies. You know, there's huge controversy about some of those ads showing the very handsome, healthy looking guys hiking at the top of the mountain, nonsense.

As long as you take your AIDS meds.

Yeah, as long as you take your AIDS meds – and I have far more issues with that than I do with Benetton.

What's your perception of the AIDS Quilt? People have called the AIDS Quilt the ultimate cultural and artistic response to the epidemic. Have you made a quilt panel before? If so or if not, what purpose do you see the quilt serving?

Oh, I think the quilt was an excellent way for a lot of people to grieve and to express their grief and be united in their grief. I think it was quite an amazing piece. My partner, I remember when his partner before me had passed away from AIDS and he finally had gotten around to – we met about a year and a half after his partner had died – and he had people coming over to our home to sign the quilt section that had been made for Bill and, you know, I was really touched by that because people were obviously very motivated and moved to make some sort of statement about it. The thing about the AIDS quilt is, you know, it is about people who've died and that's the one distinction that I wanted to make with mine, that is it is about people who are alive. It's funny, often times with HIV and AIDS there seems to be a misconception that they're the same thing. People will talk about my AIDS project – it's not an AIDS project, it's an HIV project. You know, I don't have AIDS, most of these people don't have AIDS. Some of them probably would consider that they do at this point, but I specifically wanted to do something that was about HIV and the living rather than AIDS and dying or the dead.

Just thinking of your portraits and using charcoal on the white paper, are you familiar with a South African artist called Diane Victor? Have you ever heard of her?

No.

She's not HIV positive, but she's a very prominent artist in South Africa and she's won a number of awards and does big shows. She's done an amazing series of portraits; they're called smoke portraits where she draws with the smoke of a candle, well, the carbon that comes off the candle, and she puts the paper above the candle, holds it in place and draws the portraits with the smoke. She worked with an AIDS clinic, it was a hospice with very sick people, and she did about forty of these portraits really quite quickly – you have to draw quite quickly with a candle. Drawing the portraits is very tenuous. If you get a bit too close it burns up, and not far enough away you don't get the smoke to be caught on the paper. She's very, very skilful – these are amazing, very realistic pictures. And the actual medium, you know, having the carbon on the paper, makes them very fragile as

well. I mean, *phew*, you can almost blow the image off, which really evokes the precipice that these people are on, there's a thin line between life and death for them. They are just amazing pictures, very skilful, but unfortunately pretty much impossible to transport because they are fragile, so I don't think they've ever left the country. You can see them – she's got a website and you can see them all on the website – but of course you miss the depth to them and just how really amazing and beautiful they are. But your portraits evoke that sense, although as you said, these are people who are living with HIV and her pictures are very much about people dying with AIDS.

Well, I've come to the end of my questions and I don't want to interview you for 25 hours... [both laugh]

Your wife might get a little upset.

Yeah, we might be missing that dinner appointment. But is there anything you'd like to add, maybe something we've talked about already that you want to add to, or something else you've thought about that we might want to talk about?

[Pause] I can't think of anything in particular regarding the project. You know, if you have any questions that you come up with later on I can certainly email you.

Absolutely. Well, thank you, I'll turn this off.

[End of interview]

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