

Edward Lightner interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

Los Angeles, USA, 20 February 2008

This is a verbatim transcript of a recorded interview. It retains some grammatical errors, which are inevitable features of spoken conversation. Edward has reviewed and approved the transcript and kindly provided some additional information.

Paul Sendziuk: The first question I've got for you is why and when did you start to make art?

Ed Lightner: Oh, that goes back into high school, that's just what interests me. I mean, it's real simple, it just always interested me. It's nothing fancy or anything like that, I just gravitated towards it and I always did. Some, I mean, I've got sidetracked with jobs and work and that type of stuff, and parents not really interested in it and that; but I always came back to it.

Did you have a particular skill for drawing, or taking photographs, or painting, that made you feel like you would do well?

I liked paint best; and so when I went to college and did my degree; my degree is actually in painting, but I use whatever means necessary to get the ends I want.

And where did you go to school?

Undergraduate work at Cal State [California State University] Bakersfield, in central California. And then I spent a year at University of South Florida in Tampa, and then graduate work at Cal State Northridge, here in Los Angeles.

Ok, so why Florida? It's the other side of the country for you.

Yeah, there you go, it's the other side of the country. It's somewhere other than here. And so that was fun; it was kind of the year of not really having any responsibility. You do art, and then you ended up with, beneficially, with a program through the school, of like seven weeks in New York City, where all you were supposed to do was go to plays and go to galleries. So that was great, you know. So it worked out fine. But when it came time to actually get into a school, they all wanted to... I had a Bachelor of Arts, but they wanted... schools are, like, "Well, we want you to get the BFA" so in other words they can knock you for another year's worth of money before getting into the Masters program. [So I thought:] You know what, I'll go back to California where it's cheaper, I can afford it, then I won't have to go into debt forever. Because I could already see that there was going to be no money to be made in art [both laugh]. So that's why I came back here.

And what sort of classes did you take? Were you interested in figurative landscape painting, or abstract, or...?

Well, I mean, it was just the basic stuff at Cal State Bakersfield, it was a little bit of everything; you know, printmaking and all of that stuff. No photography, but

printmaking, drawing, painting and the whole stuff. And then in Florida it was almost a kind of almost like a self-guided program. So I wasn't really in any program, so it was kind of self-guided, in a way. There was an advisor, and then in Cal State Northridge it was... the concentration was in painting, but one of the advisors on my committee was a sculptor, so I kind of bounced back and forth. So some of the work tends to be sculptural, also.

Can you think of a particular teacher that was influential for the style that you've adopted?

Oh, well, George Ketterl from Cal State Bakersfield. He came out of a very conceptual based style of work, where it; whatever it was, you did it the best you could; you know, you always pushed the edge, but you didn't really care what you were doing. You didn't have to be a painter, or a photographer or whatever; you just used it all as a means to an end. And so that's what really [inspired me]. And he used a lot of language, actually, too. So that attracted...

So, text in the work?

Yeah, I mean, I use it differently than he did. And I've picked up other things from some other instructors, too, but he was the biggest influence. I think he still teaches there, as a matter of fact. He lives over in Venice Beach. So he's kind of an L.A. local. [*Postscript:* George Katterl passed away in late 2010.]

We were at Venice Beach the other day; it's a pretty interesting place.

Yeah, he's down there; he's a buddy of Ed Moses and some of the old-school L.A. crowd; artists and stuff.

And what tends to inspire you and motivate you to make art? Do you get a lot of inspiration from reading material, or current affairs, or personal journeys?

A lot from current affairs. I mean, current affairs for some of the subject matter, and for the looks of pieces, just stuff that I would like to see. I mean, more and more of the work, I've tried to make it pretty, if you will, but almost sickeningly pretty; over-the-top sweet pretty – saccharine. But still with a lot of social commentary, political commentary; a lot of it from the AIDS type of situation. It's kind of evolved from that directly, but that infused a lot of the subject matter early on.

So when did you first start making work that referenced the epidemic?

Early '90s.

Early 90s.

Yeah. And it's after my own diagnosis, so it was pretty direct and blunt and a lot of photography; just really direct stuff. And then it's...

What do you mean by direct?

Well, it just referenced a lot of death imagery. I have some pieces with actual medication in it, and stuff like that; but that was even before I was on medication. So it is just kind of to the point.

[The interview is interrupted momentarily.]

We were just talking about when you started to make works that spoke about the epidemic, and you said that that started once you were diagnosed as HIV-positive yourself. What year was that?

About 1990.

The real peak in AIDS deaths in the United States is around '91, '92, so when you're starting to make that work I suppose it is a tough time.

Well, I don't know, I guess it was. Yeah, I just thought of it in my own terms. 'Cause I didn't know anybody, artists or other people, that were dying of it at that moment. [Brief interruption while Ed's cat is removed.] And it's just trying to deal with it on my level, basically; I don't even remember exactly what I was making at the time, but, you know, obviously I was upset and whatever. It took a while for things to filter into the work. I then started using a lot of explicit sexual imagery, taken from porn magazines and stuff. Re-photographed, appropriated; things like that. Being as that's how I became [HIV] positive. So it kind of became a, you know, two sides of the same coin [i.e. pleasure/creation and pain/death], you know, that kind of thing. [And I thought:] If I'm going to be over the top, over the top... so it was really graphic stuff. And I used that for a number of years until basically I just got bored with it.

As one does with porn!

Well, I just got bored with using the imagery. I still use it occasionally, but only sporadically now and then. [I visited] New York one time with some work, showing it to galleries. I showed it to one gallery and their response was, "Well that's fine, but there's a lot of people doing that, so what?" You know, and they were very cold and callous, and that's like, ok, well, ok, so all right; so maybe it should be about something more than just that. So I had to think more, and work through some other things.

Did you receive any feedback or even criticism by, say, AIDS activists, who felt that equating sex with death, or sex with AIDS, was a negative way to view things, and that we should be celebrating sexuality more?

No, never heard from any activists, period.



Edward Lightner, 'see only what you want to see' and 'digging fresh graves', acrylic and lettering on foam board, both 24" x 24", 2003.

So were you then feeling particularly despairing about sex, because of the way you became infected?

No, it was just sort of a matter of fact; it's almost like a third person viewing the situation. You know, a lot of the work appears that way, I think; just step back. It's almost like it's happening around you, in front of you, but you're not really involved; that kind of thing. And then a lot of the direct references to the AIDS stuff started phasing out a number of years ago when finally the doctors said, well, you've got to start thinking about long-term things. The medications, and so... But it's always kind of there in the work. A lot of the stuff is life, death; the same kind of things. The nuclear explosions pieces are 'death' but a different kind of creation; you know, a different kind of plague, if you will. So it's not nearly as directly referenced any more, but that's just because once again, after a while I just became... I'm just kind of, "Ok, I'm tired of that." The same imagery all the time; it's changed where there's very less influence or less associations to the actual AIDS epidemic, but not because any activists said anything or anything like that.

Can you think of any of the work that other people were doing in, say, the 1990s, when you first got infected or first were diagnosed; any other work which had an influence on you, affected the way you thought about your own life, your own body, your experience of living with AIDS?

Well, I mean, Wojnarowicz and Mapplethorpe come to mind; directly, I mean, they obviously died from it. And some of their work was angry, and some of it was matter of fact, almost third person looking at it as in Mapplethorpe's case. It's almost like he's standing back from his own body, looking at what's going on, a lot of it. And some of it... I mean, not that I went and studied any of that work or anything like that, but I was aware of it, you know, that type of stuff.

Anyone else, in the visual arts?

Not directly. A lot of how I dealt with it was with industrial music. There was a club here in town called Club Fuck! – great name for a club...

Is it still going?

No, it was about 1992, it was up in a bar and they were playing the hard industrial music, and a lot of actually... two of the co-owners and a lot of the people that went there passed away from AIDS. Ron Athey was up there just getting going in his performances and stuff like that, coming to terms with his HIV status before he got all the publicity and bad publicity of his blood-letting pieces and all that stuff. So he was up there, and it was a very... I won't say it was a family type environment, it was too S&M-ish if you will, for that. It wasn't, like, heavy S&M but it had lots of overtones; all the body modification people, modern primitives, and people that were up there, kind of doing their own thing; but everything was cool. And everybody was upfront about everything; which was really, really nice. And so that went on for a couple of years, and then the club got shut down and people went their own ways. A number of folks passed away. And that was [my] first real contact with people who were sick or dying or whatever. You know, obviously Ron Athey's work has gone on, he's doing his own thing now. And so that's where a lot of the stuff was right at the surface; a lot of edge and tension. And I did some installation things for him based on quotes from the Marquis de Sade and a lot of the, not visual pornography, but, you know, literature, pornography in literature, if you will. And everybody... it just became decorations and [added to] the whole atmosphere. And it was kind of an interesting club night on Sunday nights. [laughs]

Did anyone ever go through and photograph it, to try to document that kind of scene?

I don't know if it has been or not. The person you'd have to talk to about that would be James Stone. I don't know how to get hold of him anymore. He's the last guy who is left that was running it. He was here local and he then moved onto something called Cinematic which became more and more mainstream; they used to do a fetish ball here, I don't know if they still even do that. And [inaudible] would do performances and things like that at the fetish ball and stuff like that. And it got involved with, you know, the visual arts and the music and just the whole culture of that underground thing, which was really quite liberating, if you will, more than Wojnarowicz or Mapplethorpe. 'Cause I didn't know them, but there people I could really have contact with, so it was really kind of good.

Yeah. What about outside the visual arts, then? Things like theater, or film, or music; are there works – films, theater pieces – that you remember seeing in the 1990s that made you think differently about the epidemic?

Not film, that I know of. Music, a lot of the... not that people referenced the AIDS epidemic in music that much; Coil was the one band that did. It's just the people involved in that club, and the modern primitives, and a lot of the body modification people; it was all kind of on the surface there, 'cause a lot of people were affected, and a lot of people weren't but knew others were; and nobody cared. It was like, ok, you know, just be cool, and everybody was... it wasn't a lot of that "Ooh!", where Reagan wouldn't even say the word. There was a total opposite end of the spectrum from that.

And that was kind of liberating in the sense of how you just deal with it, and so... And then using text in my work up there, for their little displays; so I still use language in the same visual way sometimes when I put it on the surface of pieces and stuff like that, and usually just directly... the title usually is what I put on the piece, so people have to search for it, and things like that. It'll reference whatever it is.

Some people would call the AIDS Quilt one of the most important cultural products to come out of the epidemic. What's been your experience of the Quilt, and have you been to one of the 'unfoldings'? Have you ever made a quilt panel yourself?

No. I mean, I've seen some pieces of it, but I've never... I've always just been too busy to go see part of the Quilt or whatever; or it's been in another part of the country or something. So I haven't actually gone to a big unfolding. I think they had one at the Rose Bowl here. But I've seen some pieces here and there, and it's kind of cool and stuff; but it's more of a... you know, it's a goodbye to people who have passed away. Which is - nothing wrong with that - but I'm not particularly interested in saying goodbye to people who've passed away. I mean, it's about dealing with the here and now. I mean, one thing about being HIV is you got to deal with the here and now. I mean, dealing with what *was* is pointless, it doesn't get you anywhere. And so, I understand people have lost friends and loved ones and stuff, but... oh well, that's the bargain in life, I guess.

And how's your health at the moment, and how has it been?

It's been fine. The doctor said, "Start making long term plans," so everything's fine! You know, so I do feel kind of looking at it from the outside looking in, in a way; 'cause I haven't been sick or anything like that, you know. So in that sense it is kind of odd and weird.

In quite a bit of AIDS-related art one encounters, the red ribbon is in some way referenced; it's in the corner, there's something made out of the ribbon etc. Your work definitely doesn't do that; the epidemic isn't so upfront in the work, and you avoid using the clichéd images like the red ribbon. What's your view of the red ribbon as a symbol of AIDS, and the way it's been, and can be, used?

I think it's fine, but now it's just become, as you say, clichéd; because now there's a colored ribbon for everything, and nobody knows what color means what any more, so it's like... it's fine, but I don't have any reason to use it in my work. It kind of just is another color, you know; they got the pink ribbons for cancer, and the yellow ribbons for troops over in...

I was going to say, there's ones for the troops, is it...?

That's based on Tony Orlando and Dawn, "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Ole Oak Tree", 'til they come home; so now people put yellow ribbons up when troops are overseas, and stuff like that. And it's like there's a color for everything. And it kind of cheapens the whole thing, if you will. And I was never into the red ribbon thing anyway. So, I don't know; up at the club there was more black leather than red ribbon. More leather and latex than red ribbons at Club Fuck!

That's really interesting; the support network that you found, or the comfort that you found, was seemingly with a hard-edged kind of community, people who were working at the extremes. And it's quite different from a lot of people who have found comfort in something like the Quilt, which is quite literally a comforting, warm, enveloping sort of sensation; and the craft, the craft making aspects of making quilts, or, you know, making red ribbons to disperse, is very different from the club scene. You found an interesting way to deal with the situation.

Well, the AIDS situation for me, as much as it is a disease, it's a political problem. Because if you say you have cancer, everybody's, "Oh, what can we do to help you?" And it's a medical problem; people support you. But when people find out somebody has AIDS, a lot of times – at least, it used to be – you get shunned. You know, because there's all the social baggage that comes with it which is, you know, not very good; but nonetheless, it comes with it. And so it's a political issue as well as it is a medical issue. So that's why I like the political parts of it, which allows me then to voice my views on other things, and weave it all together.

So would you call your art 'political', or would you call yourself a political artist?

I wouldn't call myself a political artist, right; I do work that I think is at least somewhat referenced in politics. I mean, I don't want to be so referenced to the point that in three months it's out of date; I do do some of that on occasion, I like it to be a little bit more lasting, if you will. Like I say, I'm using nuclear explosion imagery now, and that stuff's not going away any time soon, you know. It resurfaces over and over, but it's been round for 60 years now, and it's just not showing any signs of going anywhere. I use the Bible quite a bit, quotes from the Bible. Not so much to support or [be] against the Bible – [I'm] pretty ambivalent on it either way – but in context you know how it takes a political reference. And that's not going away any time soon either. So I like a little bit more ambiguity in that, than something based right out of a headline.

What was the attraction to the atomic bomb imagery? When did it start?

Well, it's just cool! I mean, it's death and destruction, but if you look at the images, there's an inherent beauty to them. And I've been attracted to them even before the AIDS thing, for years and years. And I'd used some imagery a long time ago, sort of put it on the back shelf, other things came up and around; and then it's just slowly crept its way back in. For one series - "Superstars" I call them, pieces shaped like stars - I was using a number of porn stars, which were all like a shooting star and referencing once again the sex and AIDS and how you get it that way; but the nuclear explosion had a certain phallic look on a number of them, depending on which one it is. And then it's kind of cool to put them together; so I did twelve of each, but they're totally out of context, you don't know which one's which except for how they're named. And so they started creeping back in. And so I'm more interested in those images than any erotic imagery right now.



Edward Lightner, 'Cameron Fox' (2004) and 'Mike Ivy' (2005), acrylic, paper and lettering on foam board, dimensions approx. 24.5" x 26" x 4.5".

These are the star-shaped paintings, and they incorporated a pornographic image, but they were enlarged and almost pixilated to such a degree that you couldn't really distinguish what the image was...

I use a topographic program on the computer.

And it turns the image into, yeah, topographic lines.

And it looks like a map.

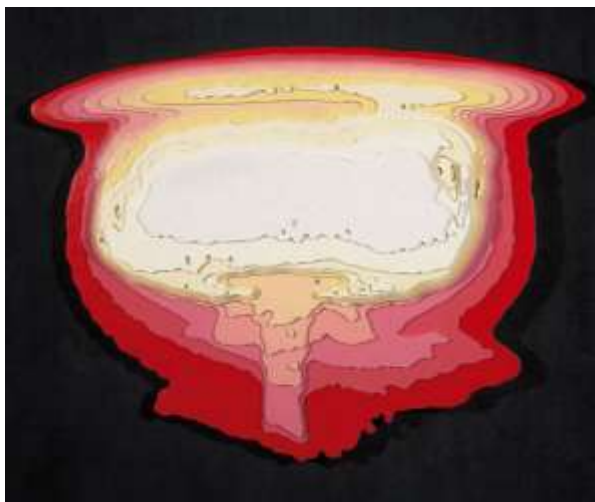
And almost like a climate weather map as well, where there's red spots and green spots and sort of blue spots, graduations.

I worked in an oil company for a while, map-making, so that [perspective of] looking at a map like that is interesting to me, you know, as a container of information, if you will; and I think that's interesting, whether the information is a map, or nuclear explosions such as this, or, you know, other things, whatever it is. But... this looks really cool.

I hope we can see one today, in the flesh, as I've only seen images of them on the internet. I think they're really successful in terms of expressing the idea that sex can be dangerous. Nuclear explosions, of course, mean destruction. And the way you've woven those two things in there; I think it actually speaks really quite powerfully about AIDS and HIV infection without directly referencing it, if you provide that context to the piece. And it's also really visually seductive; they look fantastic to look at, and it draws you in.

Yeah, that's where I want to get. Now, the content is what it is; I'm trying to work on the 'pretty' part of it. Not that I want a pretty painting, but I think that's kind of a, if you will, a seductive, you know, 'things aren't always what they seem' kind of situation. And a lot of the stuff, it's always... not always, but a lot of it's this sort of two edges of the sword,

two sides of the coin, you know, life and death. The AIDS thing is death, but you still have to live. You get it by being alive, you know, whether it's drug use – not to make commentary on how people get it – but you're doing, living, and you get this death and all that kind of stuff. So it's all the same, it's different sides of the same coin, basically. And the nuclear stuff, in my mind, sort of represents the plague, if you will; it's the modern plague, but even bigger, potentially bigger than this one, and it's obviously death also, but a strange sort of life, too. You can go to a track where they've done these explosions, and look at how these things come back and life grows again, and stuff like that. Actually, in the new series I'm going to work on, I'm going to introduce flower images, too, which are, of course, life; but then, you know, flowers at funerals. And they have to bloom and then the flower dies for the seeds to be... And so the whole thing kind of... But then they're pretty, and it's just removing it again, but they'll be mixed in with nuclear imageries, the new ones.



Edward Lightner, 'Houstatonic Dominic Blossom' (2009) and 'Purple Rose Blossom' (2008), acrylic and glitter on foam board and wood, dimensions 29" x 39" x 3" and 36" x 32" x 3.5" respectively.

You've sort of got a very organic view of the way the world works.

Yeah, I don't know if it's right or wrong, but it kind of gets... it's a good way for me to get into what I'm doing, that's all.

Ok, can we go and see some of the work that you've got in storage? And we'll let the cat out before it destroys the place. [laughs]

Yes, well, that's an ongoing thing.

Ok, I'll turn this tape off.

[End of recording]

If citing this interview please use the following:

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