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Ravishing

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**BY NOEL ALUMIT**

I started doing AIDS work in the early 1990s. I was a young Filipino man raised to believe in charity. I started as a volunteer at the Chris Brownlee Hospice for People with AIDS. In the hospice, I was informed that people were there to live out the last six months of their lives. My job was to make those last months as comfortable as possible.

The only face of AIDS that I knew at the time was always gay and usually white. When I started volunteering, I was not prepared to see people of color and I certainly didn't expect to see women. I was shocked when I met a Filipina—a woman who resembled some of the aunties who raised me—dying of AIDS.

I think it was at that moment that I realized that AIDS, contrary to media indications, did

not belong to one group of people. It was something that was also ravishing women and children from everywhere.

When I say "ravishing," I mean this Webster definition: To seize and carry away by violence; to snatch by force. In those days, that's what it felt like. Once vibrant beings were being seized, carried away by diseases that appeared violent to the body (the rashes, the sores, the lesions), snatched by some unseen force until they were gone.

In the rooms of the hospice were photos of individuals before illnesses like pneumonia or kaposi sarcoma took over. In the pictures from their pasts, hospice residents had shining faces with strong bodies, friends and family surrounding them. Alas, this is AIDS. There's



Photo: Reed Hutchinson

## **Survival**

by Fiona Kirkwood

nothing like a stigmatized disease to see who truly loves you. Susan Sontag said it best in her book *AIDS and its Metaphors*, "The unsafe behavior that produces AIDS is judged to be more than just weakness. It is indulgence, delinquency-addictions to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant."

It was with this sentiment that friends and family went away, leaving volunteers like me to fill the void.

That was 1991.

Today, the Chris Brownlee Hospice for People With AIDS no longer exists. It did not fold due to mismanagement or lack of funds. It closed because no one was dying. Breakthroughs in medication came by to prolong life.

Upon entering the MAKE ART/STOP AIDS exhibition at UCLA's Fowler Museum, I was struck with the amount of time that had passed. It is 2008 and I am a not-so-young Filipino man of forty. The exhibition chronicles the last twenty-five years of artistic response to AIDS and we know things now. We know that in the United States, the cases in women have tripled since 1985. Women make up almost half of all people living with HIV/AIDS in the world. That's close to 15 million women. We know that the medications don't reach everyone.

Faces of women—about 45% of people with HIV/AIDS are women—are throughout the exhibition. Africa leads the global death toll in AIDS cases. The exhibition features South African images of a HIV-positive mother and her HIV-positive children and a lesbian infected through rape.



**On May 7th, MAKE ART/STOP AIDS and the International Institute will host AIDS|SIDA - Global Updates, Art, and Performance, from 1 to 5pm, Kaufman Hall 200. It will feature updates and art from Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa. Admission: free. For more information call Larissa Deckert at 310-825-4811.**

It is agreed that AIDS no longer favors one group; it affects people from everywhere. Artists from India, South Africa, Brazil, and the United States offered their voices to the chorus. South African artist Fiona Kirkwood flew in to personally lay hundreds of male and female condoms to spell out the word: Survival. Survival, explains Kirkwood, encases the words *viva* and *virus*.

Brazilian fashion designer Adriana Bertini offers her condom couture dress, an evening gown made of condoms. It raises AIDS awareness and, if condoms significantly reduces HIV

infections, addresses the question, Why are condoms controversial?

Jean Carlomusto's provocative *The Portrait Gallery*, is "an interactive multi-media installation that allows visitors to explore the evolution of a health crisis that forever changed medical research and public policy towards those with communicable disease." Carlomusto, an associate professor of media arts at Long Island University, provides moving images of fine women and men doing AIDS work. Their faces literally light up a room.

Some of the most moving pieces are by Indian photographer Dayanita Singh. She photographed thoughtful caregivers working with people with AIDS in India. It reminded me of 1991.

Looking at the exhibition, I believe it's ravishing. This time, I use this definition: to transport with joy or delight.

**Noel Alunit** is the bestselling author of *Talking to the Moon* and *Letters to Montgomery Clift*. His work has appeared in *USA Today*, *The Advocate*, and *A&U: America's AIDS Magazine*. He worked at the *Asian Pacific AIDS Intervention Team* for fifteen years before becoming the *Community Organizer for MAKE ART/STOP AIDS*.