

David Wojnarowicz turned his rage to power

Artist and activist's exhibit is on display now at the Hall Art Foundation; documentary to screen on July 19

By Emma Stanton
Staff Writer

David Wojnarowicz, an American painter, photographer, writer, filmmaker, performance artist, and AIDS activist, turned anger and outrage into artistic freedom. He was a man born into the most unimaginably broken and abusive family, and suffered violence at a very early age. But from this tumultuous beginning, and the years of torment that followed him into adulthood, Wojnarowicz's spirit to create art, to create change, to be a voice of hope during one of the darkest eras in America, allowed him to leave behind a portfolio and a legacy that continues to burn on, decades after his passing.

A portion of his work, currently on display at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading, will be accompanied this month, on July 19, by a documentary of Wojnarowicz's life. This film, directed by Chris McKim, is framed through voice recordings, phone calls, and written passages by Wojnarowicz, and tells the story of his career and his personal struggle with AIDS, an illness that took his life in 1992, at the age of 37.

From being brought up by an abusive father, who went so far as to kidnap Wojnarowicz and his siblings to prevent them from living with their mother; to eventually running away from any semblance of a home life into the vile and corrupt streets of New York at the age of sixteen, where he supported himself by turning tricks and hustling — this documentary carries within it the weight of Wojnarowicz's life, and displays it in such a way as to force the viewer to understand that sometimes profound art and activism comes from a place of unimaginable pain and suffering.

Wojnarowicz's deep, haunting voice resonates throughout the film, opening with footage of him in his apartment in 1989, as the AIDS crisis raged on, barreling towards a full-blown epidemic, and queer and political art became the target of federal and societal attack. "We rise to greet the state, to confront the state," Wojnarowicz says in the documentary. "When I was diagnosed with this virus, it didn't take me long to realize I contracted a diseased society as well." This sentiment would become the ethos of

Wojnarowicz's art, his presence in New York, and the construction of this documentary. As he worked to understand his upbringing, the violence and cruelty he experienced on the streets, the creative world he was existing in within the East Village, and the friends he watched suffer and die at the hands of the very illness that was coursing through him — a rage and violence developed at the forefront of his art.

Employing a dense and private vocabulary of signs and symbols, Wojnarowicz's work often used allegory to critique what he saw as corrupt in society. He used maps, fragmented material, overlain text, and sacrilegious images to create an oeuvre that spoke to each ailment, frustration, and passion living inside of his mind. Wojnarowicz would utilize images from dreams and incorporate them into his visual art, saying in the biography "Fire in the Belly," by Cynthia Carr, "There's what you see in front of you and then there's this movie that plays in your head — the film behind the eyeball."

He would move across mediums, at one point leaning into the permanence of graffiti to communicate with the world. This work was mostly created in the late 1970s, partially as a means of promoting his band, "3 Teens Kill 4," that performed in the underground spaces of New York City.

Wojnarowicz left this band in 1982 to pursue more physical artistic endeavors. That same year, he created an early studio space from an abandoned warehouse along the pier, in the Meatpacking District, where he utilized the carnage and ab-

ject visuals of the neighborhood to inspire his early large-scale pieces — the most notable being "Gagging Cow at Pier."

After the completion of this piece, cows became a recurring image in Wojnarowicz's street art, as he would describe this subject as "exploding with fear" — a creature led to slaughter. A similar parallel can be drawn to Wojnarowicz's own existence, as he fought to secure medical treatment for a disease within a system that had no interest in helping him, and that in a way, led him to his own death.

Following these Ward Line Pier exhibits, Wojnarowicz began working on a new series entitled, "Metamorphosis," currently on display at the Hall Art Foundation. This collection is comprised of twenty-three plaster heads, each representing a pair of human chromosomes. This work does not depict human faces, but rather, brutish, alien-like forms, meant to serve as a powerful commentary on the corruption and transformation of humans by society and government. Wojnarowicz described this work as a series about the "evolution of consciousness."

In line with his pursuit of metamorphosis, Wojnarowicz said in the documentary, "Transition is always a relief. Destination means death to me. If I could figure out a way to remain forever in transition, in the disconnected and unfamiliar, I could remain in a state of perpetual freedom." It was this space of transition that he tried to hold on to, even as AIDS began to infiltrate his life and plant a seed of deep, paralyzing fear.

In a recorded conversation between himself and his brother, featured in this documentary, Wojnarowicz said, "I want

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Above: David Wojnarowicz's piece entitled "Untitled, Shark (1982)" is currently on display at the Hall Art Foundation, showcasing Wojnarowicz's signature style of utilizing maps and other fragmented material to produce something greater.

Emma Stanton Photo

At left: One of the heads featured in Wojnarowicz's "Metamorphosis" exhibition, currently on display at the Hall Art Foundation.

Courtesy of Maryse Brand

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to confront these things before I go. I want to clear the fear out of my head.” He continued, “At some point, I realized I was afraid of dying. Throughout my life, I tried to maintain some kind of complete control of myself, from where I’ve come from — all the scenes as a kid hustling, all the scenes in the streets, the times I came close to death, the times I nearly starved. Maybe my need for self-control was to mask this enormous rage that I carried from all those experiences. I guess I fear a loss of control would mean that rage would spill and become indiscriminate in terms of what it attacks. But really and truly, I think I’m afraid of losing my mind. I don’t want to lose touch with words. I want to be able to provoke

some change in whatever limited fashion, in people, in a person. Despite rage, despite illness, despite pain, I hope that my mind continues.”

According to Maryse Brand, director of the Hall Art Foundation, and Lisa Kaija, the docent supervisor, Wojnarowicz went on to become a staunch advocate for museum curators to display queer art, for politicians to listen and advocate for the queer community, and for the society he lived in to accept responsibility for the AIDS epidemic, and to work to fight against the systemic homophobia that plagued New York and America at large.

The documentary purported that Wojnarowicz dedicated

the last “good years” of his life to this cause, and never once turned to violence or cruelty. While his body was ravaged by the disease, and his mind eventually succumbed to a form of dementia, those closest to him felt he died with peace and happiness, after a lifetime of suffering.

A portion of Wojnarowicz’s collection is currently on display at the Hall Art Foundation, and McKim’s documentary will be shown on July 19 at 4 p.m. More information can be found at hallartfoundation.org.

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