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From camp to gay to queer: David McDiarmid and HIV/AIDS art

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Abstract
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David McDairmid’s exuberant artworks help us understand the changing face of HIV/AIDS art. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

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I want a future that lives up to my past (1994) - David McDiarmid. Collection of the McDiarmid Estate, Sydney
In the early 1980s, when I first came out, we felt like we were under siege.

I remember very well the meeting that established the Victorian AIDS Council in 1984. It was a packed auditorium at the Melbourne YMCA. Adam Carr, then deputy editor of the national gay magazine OutRage, made a passionate speech, which was later published in his magazine under the title “Dare To Live”.

In it he said:

We are the only people with the power to stop AIDS, and this is our one great strength, our one ace. The doctors cannot stop it, the scientists cannot stop it, the government cannot stop it, except by helping us to stop it. Only gay men themselves can bring this situation under control, and we have the means to do it. If we publicly pledge ourselves to this objective, and if we achieve it, we will succeed not only in saving ourselves, but in saving the whole community, from the scourge of this dreadful disease. And the political consequences of such a victory will be as beneficial to us as the consequences of our failure to act would most certainly be calamitous.

We were fighting a war. And although as activists we made rallying speeches, we were not at all sure we were going to win.

Carr was right. The way we as a community responded to HIV/AIDS had a profound effect on the evolution of the fight for LGBTI rights and the transformation of LGBTI cultures.

In 1992 Sydney artist David McDiarmid designed a huge sprawling multi-coloured skeletal puppet figure as the centrepiece for the HIV Living group’s Mardi Gras float. It drew on Latin American traditions of Day of the Dead and it was at once monstrous, perverse, gauche, fragile, daring and beautiful.
It is a key moment in McDairmid’s personal and artistic journey and a key moment in the public celebration of the epidemic in Australia.

The NGV exhibition shows that McDairmid was always pushing boundaries, celebrating contradictions and working with juxtapositions.

In a speech that he gave at an AIDS conference in 1993, two years before he died of HIV-related conditions, he talked about his approach to art-making:

My priority as an artist has always been to record and celebrate our lives. Having lived through an extraordinary time of redefinition and deconstruction of identities, from camp to gay to queer; and seeing our lives and histories marginalised every day, we all have a responsibility to speak out. To bang the tribal drums of the jungle telegraph – “I’m here, girlfriend; what’s new?” We’ve always created these languages as we’ve shaped our identities.

It is this progression from camp to gay to queer that is so effectively mapped in the retrospective of McDairmid’s work.
In McDiarmid’s early collages and fabric work we see him bringing together different elements of his identity: Scottish tartan, Americana, gay porn, Australian kitsch.

In his later work we see vibrant strength and hilarious candour. His multi-coloured aphorism poster series, with slogans like “Demented queen remembers name, forgets to die”, are unique artefacts of hopeful rage.

McDiarmid’s work was completely structured around his emerging sexual identity and then his encounter with HIV and AIDS activism. He is a seminal figure in the evolution of LGBTI culture in Australia and has made one of the most significant contributions to the culture of HIV/AIDS internationally.

As he noted in the quote above, his work arose out of a very specific moment when LGBTI people felt under threat. It produced a uniquely cohesive body of work with a daring passionate flair.

So where is this generation’s McDiarmid?

AIDS2014 hosted a number of HIV-related exhibitions. One of the most interesting, Vital Signs, saw a group of contemporary LGBTI artists work with the collection of the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives to produce a series of reflections on our past and future.

Another exhibition, Transmissions: Archiving HIV AIDS, displayed a range of material from those archives and juxtaposed it with several artworks that had originally been displayed in the important 1994 National Gallery of Australia exhibition on HIV AIDS: Don’t Leave Me This Way.

The urgent art of McDiarmid’s era was at first playfully trying to find a language and then suddenly was speaking loudly into the face of death.
Less than twenty years after McDiarmid’s death LGBTI artists are exploring identity from a very different position. The threat of hate and prejudice is by no means resolved. Mortality still obviously impinges on us all. But the urgency is gone.

The LGBTI artists in Vital Signs are no less passionate than McDaidmid but their “redefinition and deconstruction of identities” comes from a different place. It is more reflective and moves us back and forth along that spectrum from camp to gay to queer, engaging, celebrating and questioning.

Deborah Kelly’s piece in Vital Signs, Acting Up 2014 (in memory of the Floral Clock action, 1991), is a colourful collage of floral imagery that recalls the 1991 protest action of AIDS activist group Act Up, in which they replaced the flowers of Melbourne’s floral clock with a planting of white crosses. In Kelly’s work the flowers are replanted and re-imagined. Her collage trades on the multiple registers of floral imagery as both funeral wreaths and tokens of love.

Formally, Kelly’s piece would sit well next to McDaidmid’s work. However, there is a much deeper connection between the work of these two artists. Both artists are deeply concerned with the themes of identity and social justice and both artists worked collaboratively with engaged communities as part of their art making.

Kelly’s Hey Hetero series, a collaboration with Tina Fiveash, which appeared on Sydney bus shelters as part of the 2001 Mardi Gras, is probably the most significant piece of Mardi Gras public art to emerge from the festival since McDaidmid’s Day of the Dead.

But while McDaidmid’s work is focused almost entirely on sexuality and HIV/AIDS, Kelly’s work is much broader, ranging across an array of social concerns and engaging with diverse communities as her recent piece in the Sydney Biennale attests.
It is fascinating to speculate how McDairmid’s work might have evolved if he had survived through to the era of antivirals and HIV as a chronic manageable infection. Would he have found ways to keep mining the archive of gay identity or would his interests have broadened to engage with other issues and other communities as Kelly does?

We, of course, will never know. What we do know, and what the vitality of the NGV exhibition shows, is that in his relatively short life McDairmid produced a powerful body of work that opened up the space of LGBTI art and culture in Australia to wider vistas. Contemporary LGBTI artists like those in Vital Signs continue to build on and expand this tradition.