

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Linda Yablonsky, "Artifacts | The Activist Inside Us," *New York Times: T Magazine*,  
November 30, 2011.

## Artifacts | The Activist Inside Us

CULTURE | By LINDA YABLONSKY | NOVEMBER 30, 2011, 2:00 PM



*Courtesy of Visual AIDS*

A film still from Jim Hodges's "Untitled," with collaboration from Encke King and Carlos Marques da Cruz.

The first World AIDS Day, in 1989, was called "A Day Without Art." Museums and galleries closed or hung black streamers in place of significant artworks, or hosted memorials for the thousands whom the H.I.V. virus had already killed. Initiated by **Visual AIDS**, a support group, what was to be a national day of mourning actually signaled the start of the '90s culture wars.

Led by a rabidly homophobic Christian right, which didn't want government money spent on what was initially identified, in 1982, as "gay cancer," the battle was fought largely on moral grounds in Congress, churches and streets. That was a painful time. Every day brought news of another death, as the lethal virus decimated a generation of artists in every discipline. I remember going to memorials almost every week, visiting sick friends in hospitals that didn't want to give them beds and attending exhibitions of angry, poignant and pointed art about AIDS that was anything but mute — a necessary ploy in the face of the misguided indifference and outright hatred that first greeted the outbreak.

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Now comes "Untitled," an emotionally powerful hourlong montage of archival film footage documenting grass-roots protests that finally spurred public and private interests to come up with the money to develop treatments for AIDS-related diseases and programs to combat the confusion they created.

Official inaction through three presidential administrations is the subtext of nearly every moment in the film, which has been cobbled together from an enormous cache of source material by the artist Jim Hodges and two collaborators, Encke King and Carlos Marques da Cruz. But "Untitled" is not so much about attitudes toward AIDS or gay rights as it is about social activism across the political spectrum. "Who are governments serving today and who creates them?" Hodges said the other day, during a break from his duties as the director of the graduate sculpture department at Yale. "We are complicit in all these horrors by supporting them."

Presented by Visual AIDS, the film will screen tomorrow at over 55 museums, galleries, colleges and community groups across the country. It is teeth-gnashing from the start. Scenes of virulently anti-gay preachers and politicians railing against homosexual or "alternative" lifestyles collide with images of 9/11 dust clouds, the Rodney King beating, testimony of the tortures at Abu Ghraib and demonstrations that call to mind recent Occupy Wall Street confrontations. One clip virtually replicates last week's pepper spray attack by campus police at the University of California, Davis. Yet it was shot during protests at the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle.

"The necessity of the film is not to let anyone off the hook," Hodges said, and it doesn't. Declarations both outrageous and outraged abound, but so do expressions of compassion as people come to terms with their losses.

Hodges, 54, made "Untitled" partly as an homage to Felix Gonzalez-Torres, an artist who died from AIDS in 1996 at the age of 38. The film ends with a searing story by Miguel Piñero, a writer Gonzalez-Torres prized, about two mountain climbers who are torn apart as they fall to their deaths, but never fail to protect each other on the way. "I wanted to make a film that would create the environment Felix was living in," Hodges said, "and that would show how gestures of strength and beauty survive horror."

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Gonzalez-Torres was known for strings of light bulbs, billboards of empty beds and stacks of wrapped candies that speak to the fragility of life and a lasting sense of love. The mournful beauty of his work is one that Hodges brings to his own as well.

In his current show at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, Hodges merges the ephemeral with the timeless, wresting an uncanny expressiveness from objects as indifferent to human experience as stone. One piece sets four large granite boulders of roughly the same size in a snug circle under a skylight, where they convey the impression of a Stonehenge-like burial ground that has been used for a secret ceremony. It has a presence that is hard to characterize, except as a metaphor for transcendence.

The surface of each uneven rock is patched with a brightly lacquered sheet of stainless steel that reflects the light from above and the shadows of people moving around it. Viewers need patience for another work, in which Hodges cut a five-foot-deep hole in the concrete floor and filled it with water. Over twenty minutes, a disco ball slowly descends into the well and rises back up again, showering the surrounding walls with a revolving constellation of stars. The next room is literally raining bright blobs of paint that plop from the ceiling at random moments.

All of these works came out of a six-week trip through India last year that for Hodges was profound. "Seeing the amount of devotion expressed through a flower or a color or a piece of tin foil added up to a wake-up call," he said. "The combination of suffering and joy was everywhere I went, and I came alive in it."

Watching his film, which is as celebratory as it is brutal, you are likely to feel the same.

*"Untitled," by Jim Hodges, Encke King and Carlos Marques da Cruz, will play Dec. 1, every hour on the hour, throughout New York City. Go to [creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/daywithoutart](http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/daywithoutart) for a list of the screening sites.*

*Hodges' show at **Barbara Gladstone** continues through December 23, at 515 West 24th Street and 530 West 21st Street.*