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Art, Activism are Inseparable in "The Body, The Host: HIV/AIDS and Christianity" Symposium

Sadie Howard and Sydney Collinger • November 22, 2024



Photo courtesy of Mike Crupi

Students of Brendan Fernandes perform in the Allen.

"The Body, the Host: HIV/AIDS and Christianity" is a landmark exhibit at the Allen Memorial Art Museum celebrating works by artists that draw on Christian narratives and imagery in response to the AIDS epidemic. To uplift and celebrate this exhibition, Sam Adams, Ellen Johnson '33 curator of modern and contemporary art, organized a weekend-long symposium last Friday and Saturday, in which AMAM invited a host of artists and activists to perform and give speeches documenting their life and their work resisting HIV/AIDS.

The symposium was opened by keynote speaker Dee Dee Ngozi Chamblee, founder of LaGender Inc., an organization which provides support to transgender women of color experiencing homelessness, wrongful incarceration, health issues including HIV/AIDS, and discrimination. She was also the first Black transgender woman to be honored by former President Barack Obama, who declared her a Champion of Change as a part of his commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Chamblee's speech perfectly represented the ethos of the exhibit; she started by simply reading Bible verses that

had inspired her, before diving into her story of how she became an activist while also navigating life as a Black transgender woman with AIDS. She credited God for how she was able to get past her struggles, referring to herself as one of God's own miracles.

"To have our keynote speaker talk about God alongside sex work and STDs was an interesting way to acknowledge the role of faith in our culture, which often can get aligned with right-wing politics," Adams said. "[There are] some beautiful, beautiful, beautiful teachings of Christ and of the New Testament; just peel back the layers of politics that get applied to them and [you can] really see some of the beauty."

The symposium then welcomed speakers Jessica Beck and Creighton Baxter. Beck spoke about her essay "Warhol's Confession: Love, Faith and AIDS," and Baxter spoke about her work titled "a list of the present."

The exhibit itself is set up across two U-shaped galleries, one presenting art that engages more directly with Christianity, and the other featuring art that deals with HIV/AIDS. Brendan Fernandes, an associate professor at Northwestern University and director of its visiting artist program, presents his choreographed work primarily in art galleries. Fernandes worked with the students in two Oberlin dance classes, Queering Choreography and Contemporary II. Dancers from the two classes formed two groups which performed in both galleries, intermingling and pulling apart.

"I said to [the students], 'You're not this individual group; you're still working together,'" Fernandes said. "There has to be a connection that they still are supporting each other. I think it says that we are still in times where we need to find our freedoms and our civil rights, and especially now through this new election and this new incoming government, we need to — as marginalized queers, people of color — find solidarity. Also, in this world, we need more kindness. We need more generosity of bodies, supporting and taking care of each other."

The dance was largely improvised, but elements of the performance were inspired by a protest called Stop the Church, staged by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power in 1989. As the dance progresses, a voice bellows, "Fall," then, "Dance," coordinating the movements of dancers across galleries. Fernandes explains how the motif of falling and dancing speaks to the importance of queer community, both during the height of the AIDS pandemic and in the present day.

"We're still having to work harder now, but with collaboration, with community, we can do it," Fernandes said. "There's a resilience. There's a moment that we do fall, but we also get up again."

In bringing their expertise to the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Fernandes was able to resist the idea of what an art museum typically stands for, similar to how an exhibit such as "The Body, The Host: HIV/AIDS and Christianity" pushes the limits of what an art gallery typically contains. "In this space, we're thinking about the institution of the museum as well as the space of authority and how we can challenge it," Fernandes said. "Making a piece like this is challenging many people's [ideas] of what the museum normally does."

As both a student and as a gallery guide at the AMAM, College fourth-year Katie Baum has seen the progression of Adams' curation throughout their time at Oberlin and is saddened to be leaving just as Adams' curatorial career is on the rise.

"The symposium highlighted the ways that [HIV/AIDS and Christianity] are really intertwined," Baum said. "The speakers did a really wonderful and thoughtful job at highlighting that, and the performance [did] too, in the way that it moved between different sides of the gallery and the symposium. The symposium is a great way to give more context to the exhibition that the exhibition itself could not give, because it was mostly works from the Allen's collection." Chair of Art History and Associate Professor of African and Black Atlantic Art History Matthew Rarey shared similar views on the unique nature of this symposium.

"The diversity of both personal and methodological perspectives and identities that the speakers brought, in terms of centering the history of HIV/AIDS and its relationship with Christianity, [prompted] a conversation that very few people, if anyone, are having," he said. "To have that coordinated with a series of events that were both historically referential and disrupted what it meant to be in a museum space... No, I've never seen something exactly like that."

Baxter, a transgender artist based in Brooklyn, said that being surrounded by such a diverse array of voices was profoundly impactful to her.

"Now I'm going to go home and go to my studio and have all these different voices and perspectives and histories kind of bubbling in my little creative culture," she said.

However, at the end of the day, the symposium revolved around Chamblee. Being a Black Christian trans woman who is HIV-positive, she represents the foundation of the movement to fight AIDS, as well as the kind of voice that AMAM aimed to uplift through the exhibition and symposium. Spotlighting perspectives from people who have historically been marginalized is what made this symposium so special.

"The point of the symposium was to emphasize the role of BIPOC and trans artists and activists in the fight for HIV prevention and healthcare," Adams said. "A lot of students met some really thoughtful and impactful figures who are Black and trans, which centered those voices in the whole conversation. I hope that's what people come away from the symposium with." Collective healing and community support was also a pillar of the symposium, and a mobile HIV testing van provided by Central Outreach Wellness Center offered services outside the museum Saturday.

"The central theme of it, of the exhibit and the symposium, is love," Adams said. "That's why Dee Dee was so important as a keynote speaker, because I knew she would come and talk about how God loves everyone. That's how she survived as a Black trans woman, by learning that God loved her, that God is who created her, and that she was therefore created in God's image."

Chamblee received overwhelming support from a packed audience that had come out to AMAM on a frigid Friday evening to see her. Her presence, speech, and what she stood for turned a static exhibit into a living, breathing love letter to all of those struggling with and fighting against AIDS. She showed how art can bring people together in solidarity and resilience.

"This symposium helped me to see how those artworks are not bracketed in time as I thought they were," Adams said. "They are having an afterlife and a flowering. They continue to release meaning to us in new ways."