

Ana Flores

AIDS narrative murals*

THE VISUAL CONCEPTS for most of my community art projects are inspired by world mythology and folk art traditions: traditions that arise out of the people's collective imagination and voices. Through the use of art I also try to create a bridge between ancient belief and some of our contemporary concerns. In the fall of 2002, these concepts and my understanding of community were uniquely tested when I was invited to do an artist residency at the York Correctional Institution for Women, a maximum security prison in Niantic, Connecticut. Joe Lea, an educator, library media specialist and self-proclaimed arts administrator at the school for the prison wanted me to propose an idea for a collaborative HIV/AIDS mural project.

As I prepared for the project and read more about HIV/AIDS, I felt that this issue had such tragic and heroic proportions that a visual form was needed that forcefully conveyed the drama and urgency of the epidemic. The words 'tragic', 'heroic', and 'drama', words that come to us from Ancient Greek, provided the initial inspiration and key to the visual form. I turned to the tradition of Greek vases from the fourth to sixth centuries: these vases were not only functional objects, they served a larger role of providing a space for the culture's visual narratives. For a largely illiterate society without the flood of imagery we take for granted today, the stylized, visual narratives illustrated on these surfaces in the limited palettes of black on red clay, red on black or black on white clay carried the equivalent impact a billboard has today on a deserted stretch of road. The contemporary vases I would design with the York women would not be sculptural, they would be painted at life size – like a billboard – on wooden panels.

Before the project began it was required that I attend an introductory session on the unique social factors and restrictions of prison life. I was met by Mary, a small,

middle-aged woman, a veteran volunteer, who guided me through a series of six security stations, each with a set of massive metal doors opening and closing behind us. The last doors opened into a large well-lit corridor permeated with the smell of cut onions. Mary told me this was the entrance to the school and prison kitchen. Women dressed in baggy blue prison uniforms, wearing clear shower caps on their hair were pushing trollies loaded high with potatoes, and paper products. Several of the younger ones criss-crossed dangerously close to us, giggling as they played a restrained game of bumper cars. To the left doors opened into the kitchen, busy with the lunchtime meal being prepared by more women with plastic caps on their heads.

Mary said little but I could see she was closely observing my response to the inner workings of the institution. She led me to her office, unlocked her metal door and we walked into a space the size of a large closet brimming with crocheted handiwork: crocheted picture frames, tea cozies, baby blankets, hats of all sizes, afghans. The soft, delicate colored objects were strewn on every available surface, hanging from book edges, dangling from a lamp, stuffed into boxes pushed into corners, softening the hard contours of the cement block construction. With little emotion she told me 'This is what I do with the women', and proceeded to clear a space on her desk and pull up a chair for me to sit. I smiled and looked closely at the baby booties and hat that were on the edge of her desk. Upon inspection, I could see the unevenness of the weave but I deeply appreciated the slow, meditative, functional process that Mary shared with these women: these mothers and grandmothers.

We did not linger over the handiwork. Mary wanted to make sure I understood the history and regulations of the prison, with its strict set of rules of what not to wear, or say, or bring, and a list of objects and art materials that were forbidden: scissors and knives could be used as weapons, clay could be used to jam a lock. She told me I had been invited in to serve as a teacher and as a positive role model but warned me that prisoners were very quick at 'sizing me up', finding my weak points and figuring out how they could manipulate me, to ask me to bring illegal things in for them.

After my experience with Mary, I went down the hall to meet with Joe Lea. His office was full of light – maps, original artwork of Buddhist themes and photographs of modern dancers. He told me this was his growing, private collection of art which he displayed here for his enjoyment and for that of the women. In his office, he had also gathered a small group of teachers who would be exploring the interdisciplinary aspects of my project and how they could work it into their writing curriculum. They were already excited about the narrative aspects of the murals, the history of the vases and the discussing the etymology of words in the English language derived from Ancient Greek. During our brainstorming session, a number of writing prompts were developed to encourage the AIDS narratives from the students:

- Imagine you are the HIV/AIDS virus, what would you want to say?
- Explain to a family member or loved one that you have HIV/AIDS.
- Write a letter to a friend who has passed away as a result of AIDS.
- Share a memory or story with someone who has HIV/AIDS.

Excited by the compassionate and creative educators I had met, I began the project with a core group of women, members of an AIDS/HIV support group, and other students interested in participating. There were twelve in this small group. I showed slides of the Greek vases and discussed some of the myths and battles illustrated on them. We also spoke about the often invisible battle being waged against HIV/AIDS by themselves and loved ones. They began to see the parallels between themselves, and the stylized warriors, the gods and goddesses depicted on these ancient clay surfaces. Our studio was the back half of a large classroom used to teach a Health Aide Certificate Program, during 'open studio' sessions other inmates could come in and help or just observe. I also did short workshops around this theme with other groups of women.

The AIDS narrative writing theme inspired many personal essays and poems. From these we chose compelling anecdotes to act out. Using the hallway as a small theatre area, a small group acted out scenes of professional and emotional support, living with the disease and mourning the loss of loved ones. The actors would freeze in different positions which captured the essence of these situations. Students who were not acting would draw the actors at full scale by tracing their bodies and shadows directly onto large brown paper. These life size figures on brown paper were then composed into monumental vase shapes outlined on wooden panels. I had chosen to work with two traditional shapes found in Greek vases: the 'Kraters' – expansive, bold-shaped urns with florid handles used to commemorate victories in battle; and 'Lekythos' – tall slim vessels with minimal handles that held oil for libations to the dead.

During the six weeks of the project, students were involved with all the phases of the work: preparing the panels, composing scenes, finding faces in magazines, drawing and painting. The communal working process created a place where personal stories could be told, expressed and woven into a larger whole. Slowly they each discovered an artist inside of themselves, a way to express their voices, to transfigure their pain and loss into something of beauty. One student, Annie, who claimed on the first day not to be able to draw evolved into one of the master artists on the mural. On the first day I helped her as she struggled to draw a dove – a dove to symbolize hope. After a few attempts and coaxing from me, she drew a very beautiful small bird that brought out a great smile in her. As the mural panels evolved, her small dove was enlarged and became the central motif on the panel entitled 'AIDS is a part of us all'. As her confidence grew she began to guide other women and protected the aesthetic evolution of each panel. In the end there were four panels: two were 8' x 8', two were 4' x 8'.

The mural project was made possible by the support from two excellent funding groups, the Concerned Citizens for Humanity (CCfH) and Community Partners in Action, both experienced with promoting and collaborating on arts projects in Connecticut prisons. These groups not only celebrate creativity as a way of healing and personal growth, they also believe that these incarcerated voices have much to tell us. They encouraged and engineered the dissemination of the visuals from the AIDS narrative as graphics for numerous health brochures, posters and calendars that were distributed statewide. The photographs of the process of making the panels became part of a traveling exhibition of prison art and the murals were permanently

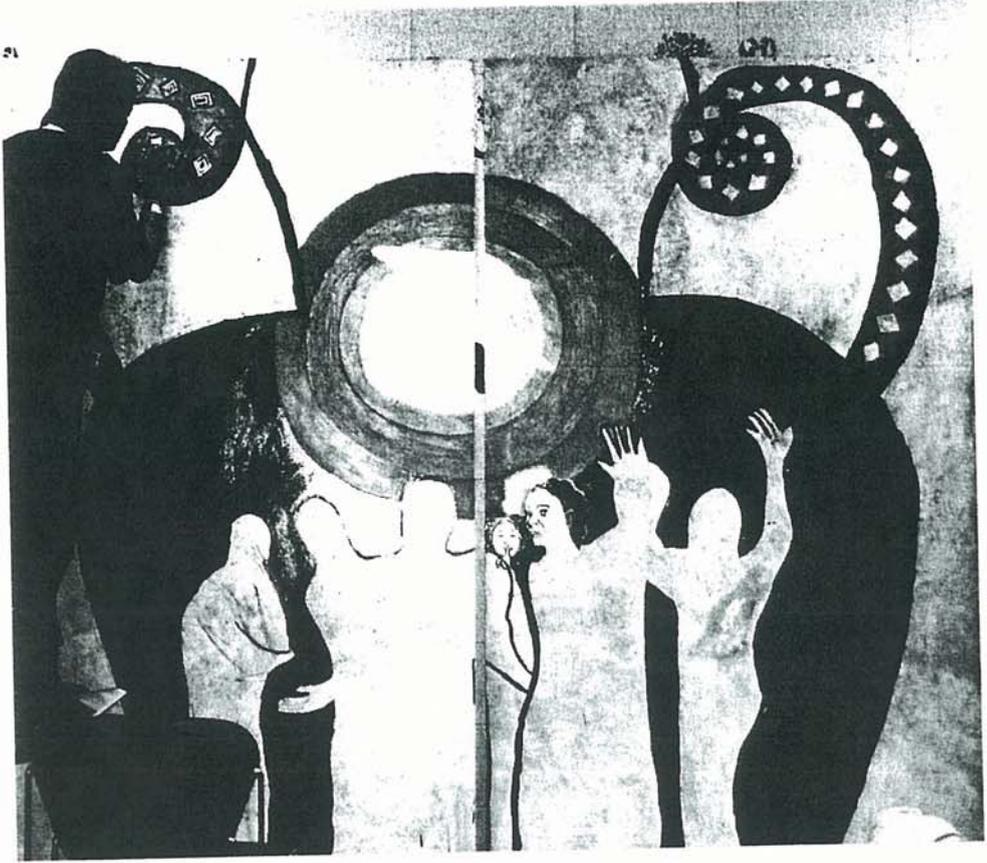


Figure 9 HIV/AIDS mural project in a women's prison in Connecticut, USA.

Photo: Ana Flores.

installed in the corridors of the York school. The compilation of writing that came out of the project was published in a booklet that was distributed for World AIDS day, 1 December 2002, the writing exercise was also the impetus for a 'One Vision, Many Voices' poetry jam, structured as an artist residency, with a visiting poet who helped the women write and perform poems about their experiences with AIDS. This project culminated in a CD, using an image from the AIDS narratives mural, which was distributed statewide on World AIDS day 2003. In the end, the dove that Annic drew flew free and high outside of the prison walls, and the women had shown us that the power of their collective imagination can never be caged.

Note

- * A collaborative art project orchestrated by visual artist Ana Flores and the women in the school of York Correctional Institute, Niantic, Connecticut, USA. Funded by the Concerned Citizens for Humanity.