

Eric Rhein: Cover Story

Artist Eric Rhein Merges Memoir with Monograph in a New Book
by Chael Needle
Photographed Exclusively for A&U by Stephen Churchill Downes

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Over the course of nearly twenty-five years, *A&U* has on occasion featured the work of acclaimed artist Eric Rhein. Most recently we spotlight his Summer 2019 "Lifelines" exhibit at Institute 193 in Lexington, Kentucky, where he has family roots. In time for World Pride, the exhibit honored the 1969 Stonewall uprising in tandem with the memory of his uncle Elijah (Lige) Clarke, a gay rights activist and writer who died in 1975. Another exhibit ran somewhat concurrently at 21C Museum Lexington-MGallery.

The November 1996 issue is the first time his work appeared in our pages. Interviewed by Laurie Fitzpatrick, Rhein touched on many aspects of a recent illness and health in rebound, serodifferent sex, his prescient assertion that "AIDS is not over" in the era of protease inhibitors, as well as his egg-shaped pieces and penis portraits. Speaking of AIDS, he told the interviewer: "I don't like thinking that it's a big part of my identity because it's so limiting. But then my experience of the world and my life is largely influenced by things that have shown up for me through illness lessons that I've had. I wouldn't say my art is about AIDS, I'd say it's about issues that concern everyone...there are common factors, like pain and fear. The experiences are exactly the same, whatever brings you there."



Rhein reflected on what he said in the course of our interview: "I'd say that much of what I said in 1996 still feels true, but my consciousness of the reality of the impact of AIDS on my being has evolved through the years. Those words, which you quoted, came at a pivotal time: when I was acclimating to a renewed vitality (as a result of the effectiveness of the newly released protease inhibitors that I was taking.) It was a time—an experience—of being euphoric, having escaped death; a time when I was looking to broaden my sense of myself in the world, which had been deeply affected by AIDS. At the same time, I had just begun to include speaking about the influence of my HIV status on my artwork, in my conversations with the art world (a sub-culture where stigmatization of HIV was pervasive.) Conveying a universality of experience while mentioning AIDS seemed an avenue for inclusion.

"Through the course of the last twenty-four years, my surviving AIDS has undeniably impacted my identity. While it's natural to perceive limitations (given the practical concerns entailed in being positive, and how HIV can be stigmatized), living through the experience of AIDS and long-term survival brought to me a broadened vantage point to our complex human existence. Out of this relationship to HIV, both vulnerabilities and strengths are intensified, as if an intense light were shining on them. Being able to speak honestly, in that interview—from nearly a quarter-century ago—was a step toward the evolution of my embrace of HIV's impact on my life, artwork, and cultivating an activist voice. And now, through my just-released memoir-monograph, *Lifelines*, I am able to offer a new conduit for sharing my commitment to beauty, intimacy, and honesty."



Throughout the years, A&U has only been able to offer glimpses of Rhein's works and exhibit attendees and museum-goers have come to know Rhein's work in bursts, so it is thrilling that he has collected three decades' worth of his artwork in a 112-page hardcover book, a "monograph-memoir," as the artist calls it, entitled *Eric Rhein: Lifelines*. Across various media, including assemblages, watercolors, wire drawings, and photography, the works explore the sustenance of connectivity—connectivity through physical touch, the healing power of nature, people who have been important to him. Rhein deftly entwines the personal with the universal.

Photographs of friends and lovers, as well as self-portraits, explore a tender, intimate and life-affirming journey through the artist's years of living with HIV, from diagnosis to almost dying to stabilizing his health. The photographs create a narrative of nurturing—lovers embrace, a man snuggles with a dog, mosquito netting protects a bed, individuals are near-naked or naked as if they want nothing to separate them from the sensual world.

The book also features selections from *Leaves*, an AIDS memorial, each wire drawing representing one of 300 individuals whom Rhein knew and lost to AIDS-related causes. Some of the leaves represent his uncle Lige's friends, as well.

Sculptures like *First Guardian Angel* and selections from *Hospital Drawings* remind the viewer of our tenuous grasp on life and the importance of creativity as a strategy of survival.



ERIC RHEIN

LIFELINES

Writes Rhein in an essay, "Note from My Tree House," that closes the book: "I'm blessed that my relationship to creativity continues as a healing companion, and takes me out into the world.

"My art voices the course of AIDS—speaking names—telling our stories.

"If the names of those who died of complications from AIDS aren't spoken, their stories told, they'll be forgotten. I do so as though in a panic, as if, somehow, documenting the shared overwhelming experience will ensure knowledge that we were here and our struggle mattered."

Beautifully constructed, *Lifelines* invites the viewer into this community of feeling.

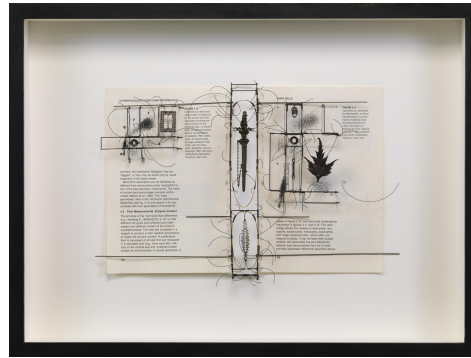
Lifelines also features essays by National Book Award-winning poet Mark Doty and former Institute 193 Director Paul Michael Brown, who meditate on the connective tissues that bind the art together as well as how they connect to themes presented across the works.

Earning his BFA and MFA at the School of Visual Arts, Rhein has been widely exhibited, including museums and venues such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Museum of the City of New York, the Leslie-Lohman Museum, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and American Embassies in Austria, Cameroon, Greece, and Malta. He is included in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art's Visual Arts & the AIDS Epidemic Oral History Project.

A&U had a chance to correspond with Eric via email about creating *Lifelines*.



Lifeline (self-portrait with Ken Davis), 1996, silver gelatin print, 16 by 20 inches



Uncle Lige's Sword, 1998, wire, paper, and found objects, 16 1/2 by 22 by 3 inches

Chael Needle: *Lifelines* is stunning. I love the interplay of your artwork and the text. How did the monograph-memoir take shape? What was the impetus and how did it evolve as you worked on it?

Eric Rhein: The book came about through a studio visit in the summer of 2017 by the curator Paul Michael Brown. This was just as he was becoming the director of Institute 193, an arts not-for-profit based in Lexington, Kentucky, that focuses on exhibitions and projects which document the cultural landscape of the modern South. Paul knew of my Kentucky heritage and of my uncle, Lige Clarke, who was a pioneer in the Gay Liberation movement during the 1960s and '70s.

Stepping into my studio is like traveling through a time capsule, with artworks on view that I created, dating back to 1980 when I moved to New York City at age eighteen. I relate to my body of work much as memoir: each sculpture, photograph, and wire drawing speaking of the experience of life, and collectively informing one another—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Paul brought his own life experience to the history in my work. As he writes in his essay in *Lifelines*, at some point we discovered that he was about to turn twenty-seven—the same age I was when I tested HIV positive in 1987. We spoke of our different vantage points on the AIDS crises, my long-term survivorship; and his coming of age after the 1996 release of the protease inhibitors; and the current considerations for a young HIV-negative man. It's my intimate self-portrait photographs and images of friends and lovers, taken during the height of the AIDS crisis, that particular struck him: he said that the tenderness and sensuality within the images transcended a darker narrative that he was fed when he came out to his parents. As he put it, "It feels important and serendipitous, and for a moment we live through the experience of the other. . . . In moments like this, I feel like we're family."

It's those photographs that became the thread throughout the book, complemented by other artworks. The essays, by Paul, the poet Mark Doty, and

myself, share an intergenerational perspective of the history which comes through these images.

With a team experienced in book production, I approached creating *Lifelines* the same way that I create my artwork: each component, the choice of images, the writing, all relating and informing the other. Nuance and subtlety were important.

As you constructed the book, did you glean new insights about your work or about the collaborative aspect of presenting your work? If so, could you please share them?

I wouldn't say that I gained new insights, as much as reinforced my understanding of how my work fits into a larger cultural and historical context—and that the book was an opportunity to share my work as a vehicle of record keeping, activism, and healing. I think of my relationships with the younger people in my life as collaborative. These smart and curious twenty-to-thirty year old queer artists, curators, and historians, who reach out to me for connection, seeking an understanding of the intensity of the AIDS crises I've lived through. Together, we affirm and reinforce that the paths of our lives intertwine. I had a strong vision for the look, and what I hoped to convey—and the intergenerational sense of purpose was primary.

It was inspiring to read the essays' intergenerational perspective of history, and your essay, like your art, pays homage to your uncle Lige, your mother, to other family members; and to friends and lovers; fellow survivors, and healing communities, among others. This interweaving of activism and remembering is underscored by something you write and that I mention in the introduction to this interview: "If the names of those who died of complications from AIDS aren't spoken, their stories told, they'll be forgotten." You mention: "curious twenty-to-thirty year old queer artists, curators, and historians" as the torch bearers—but what role do you see the viewers of art inhabiting in your and others' projects about "record-keeping, activism, and healing"?

By nature, viewers' engagement with art includes them in the history and consciousness that is being presented, whether they are aware of this or not. With *Lifelines* I think of it as "our book": those who are written about, and those who encounter it, as sharing in a collective history. The intergenerational aspect of the essays was so that the readers might recognize themselves and call to their own lives with a sense of connection. Some may already feel a kinship to recordkeeping, activism, and healing—and for others these may be newly affirmed.



Speaking of healing works, how did your series *Leaves* come about?

Leaves came about in the Fall 1996, while I was an artist-in-residence at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire. When I had applied to MacDowell at the beginning of the year, I was too sick to go, yet through the summer months I rapidly gained vitality (due to the then new protease inhibitors I was taking lowering my viral load to undetectable)—so I was in much better shape by the time my residency began in September. MacDowell is on a re-forested farm, and there my transformation into renewed health resonated with the turning leaves. Colors, scents, and sounds were heightened, and as I walked the paths of the woods I felt energy fields surrounding me that I recognized as the spirits of friends and lovers who had died, supporting me in getting accustomed to my renewed state. I pick up fallen leaves, identifying each as representing those spirits who were surrounding me. Drawing the outlines of the leaves in wire came naturally, as wire as was in my studio—and has become one of my primary mediums. Through all these years of honoring those I knew who died, the initial eighty-or-so tributes have grown to more than 300. There is a relationship between myself and those I seek to honor: they are a part of me, as I give form to their continued presence. The image on the cover of *Lifelines*, a photograph titled *Company*, shows me with the shadow of a leaf against my chest—and this work is another example of expressing my connection to the presence of departed friends and lovers.

When did you first become aware of the relationship between art and healing? And what was the first time, when making art, that you became aware of the healing aspect of it?

Art has been a constant companion all of my life, and—though I didn't have the words for it as boy—I know that the healing connection was fostered then. My father taught art education, and my sister and I were often with him in the university art studios, connecting with clay, printmaking, and paint. I was born in 1961, so this was the mid-'60s—a special era of exploration and consciousness expansion. I have vivid memories of joining my father when he photographed his organic forms of ceramic-ware in mountain steams, calling to the connection of art and nature. So my experience at MacDowell was seeded in boyhood.

In your essay, you are in touch with nature—even in the midst of New York City. Do you have favorite places to go to commune with nature inside and outside of the city?

I find that having elements of nature within my living environment is important, and healing. The essay you mention is my memoir, and it is called "Notes From My Tree House" because the East Village apartment (that I lived in when I wrote the piece) had trees reaching past the windows. In my imagination I was deep in the woods, and the interior of my apartment opened to this. With an affinity to traditional Japanese art and design that draws on nature, I live with river rocks, sculptural forms in tree bark, a seashell in which I burn ceremonial sage, and abandoned hornet's nests, and weathered farm furniture—these things keep me connected to the natural world, and inform my artwork.

You write that your writer/publisher/activist uncle, Lige Clarke, has been a longtime inspiration, and your artwork *Uncle Lige's Sword* is a powerful tribute to him. When did you first think about creating this work, and how did it evolve?

A profound gift, when making artwork, is when the unconscious comes through in the process of creating the objects we make. This was the case with a series I call "Blood Work" (which *Uncle Lige's Sword* is part of.) The pages of medical books, with illustrations of blood samples, inspired me to construct wire structures to support the pages and outline the blood references. This is done reverentially, and found objects were added, suspended within the wire framework. What was apparent, as these works came together, is that they resemble the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages—and draw a correlation between the AIDS crisis and the Black Plague. The sword brooch, positioned in the middle of *Uncle Lige's Sword*, belonged to my uncle, so it has his guardian energy. The phallic symbolism simultaneously speaks in several directions: to the sexual revolution he was part of during the 1960s and '70s; my survival from the "war" of the AIDS crises; and to the Knights of the Round Table.



You mention that your work across various media inform each other. Throughout your book, *Lifelines*, I see that you have paired works of sculpture and photography on facing page or next to each other—for example; the works, *Heathcliff* and *Orchids* [featured in this month's Gallery]. Do you find yourself drawn to photography for particular reasons, versus the reasons you are drawn to sculpture?

While the various media I work with have particular nuances, the themes with which they're engaged are the same: vulnerability and resilience, the tangible and the ephemeral, nature as a metaphor, and the sensual within the unexpected. Certainly within the photographs featured in *Lifelines* there's a personal, direct context and content. It seemed important to have (and show) a relationship between the raw, autobiographical subjects of the portraits, and the artworks that were created from that material. In the pairing you mentioned, the photograph *Heathcliff* and the wire drawing *Orchids*, there's a graceful, sensual mirroring of Heathcliff's nude body as he reclines at the base of the pine tree, and—on the facing page—the stem of orchids with their voluptuous blooms.

The everyday-ness of the images as well—like tending to an IV line in *Lifeline*, for instance, or sleeping, kissing, splashing in water—is powerful. You mentioned resilience. How has resilience changed for you over the years? Does it have a different quality now, compared with the early days of living with HIV?

The everyday-ness that comes through in the photographs was an instinctual motivation that I had when I first set up my camera on a tripod with a timer for my initial self-portrait in 1992, documenting myself, and my intimate companions in private moments. There was a need to fortify our identities as sensual beings in the face of nearly overpowering mortal vulnerability. The private is made public in the body of work that evolved into my book. I call *Lifelines* a "monograph-memoir" because of the revealing honesty with which I hope these subjects are pictured. I didn't anticipate that the series I was building would become a narrative about the contributions of tenderness and care in surviving AIDS. Perhaps an essence of acceptance, and living within the moment, comes through in these photographs taken during the height of the AIDS crisis.

When I first tested HIV-positive, I embraced a mindset: that there wasn't a predestined outcome to the virus in my body that would inevitably lead to death. I knew that having survival as the goal of "success" could be setting myself up for failure—especially during the years I was gravely ill. I was determined to avoid projecting doom.

I've found through the years of my survival that resilience can come from a determination, and willfulness—but also can come from a space of grace that is given to us from what I think of as the "divine" that wants our highest good for each of us. The universe can guide us toward a strength of resilience we might not have known that we had. I've found that my creativity continues to be a conduit in this communication.

For more information about the photographer, log on to:
stephenchurchilldownes.com.

For more information about the artist, visit: ericrhein.com. For information about the book, visit: www.institute193.org/publications-eric-rhein.

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