



Interview with Eric Rhein and Silas House

Tom Godell

There's a lot more than fireworks this July 4th week in Lexington. Author Silas House (and his dog Ari) clue us in to several remarkable events including a new photography exhibit at Lexington's Institute 193. We visit the gallery and talk with artist Eric Rhein about the show, called *Lifelines*. WUKY Program Director John Lumagui gives us some insight into this year's July 4th celebration in Lexington and we leave no stone unturned.

Transcript:

Tom Godell: Welcome to The Agenda podcast from 91.3 WUKY. Each week we take an in-depth look at the most interesting and unusual events in Lexington and the region. This fourth episode is for the week of July 1st through the 7th. I'm Tom Godell. Let's get right to our first guest. He's a nationally bestselling author from Eastern Kentucky, including two of my very favorite books, *Clay's Quilt* and *Eli the Good*. In addition, his work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Salon* and the *Oxford American*. You can also hear him on both NPR and WUKY, where he hosts *On the Porch*, and he teaches writing both as part of the Spalding MFA program and at Berea College. Silas House, welcome to The Agenda.

Silas House: Thanks. I'm glad to be here.

TG: Your most recent book is *Southernmost*, the tale of a fundamentalist preacher whose life unravels when he begins to question some of the principles he's lived by and preached about his whole life. You've been on tours promoting the book, including the recent release in paperback. What's been the reaction so far?

SH: Well, I've really enjoyed meeting people and hearing their stories. You know, that's the best thing about being on tour is the book brings up their own stories, which they tell to me. So I love that, you know, they're giving me that piece of themselves. So a lot of them are telling me, you know, how the book reminded them of people they love and relationships they have and why it's important to stand up for others.

TG: Can you give us a hint about what you're working on right now?



SH: I'm working on this weird novel... that I don't know if it'll ever be published, but it's about a young man and a dog walking across Ireland after a cataclysmic event.

TG: Hmm, okay. Well, that's tantalizing. Definitely. I can't wait to at least hear some samples of it.

SH: Yeah. I hope, I hope I have some pretty soon.

TG: You were recently part of an event in Richmond with authors talking about fishing.

SH: Yeah.

TG: Tell us about that.

SH: It's this beautiful collection of essays. It's 25 writers writing about fishing. And I think most of us agreed to be a part of the book because it's raising — all the proceeds go to this great organization called CAST, which is an organization devoted to getting kids out to fish, which basically is getting kids out into nature, you know. And so I wrote an essay about my connection to fishing and people in my family who have passed on and how, you know, I have that connection to them every time I go fishing, they're with me. So everybody's writing about some different aspect to the way fishing has been part of their lives.

TG: Well, I know when we do the On the Porch programs, you always ask authors for recommendations. So what should we be reading and listening to this summer?

SH: Well, one of the best books I've read in a long time is coming out. I believe it's July 9th and it's called *Late Migrations*. It's about Margaret Renkl. And it's just one of the most beautiful essay collections that I've ever read it. It will give you chills. The other book I'm recommending right now is called *Any Other Place*. It's a short story collection by Mike Croley. He's a writer from Corbin and it's getting a lot of national buzz.

TG: Well, maybe we'll have some of those authors on the On the Porch show.

SH: Yes. We will.

TG: That would be great. So, to get around to what we really focus on here on The Agenda: What would you say are the top three things that are happening in this region, Lexington and Central Kentucky, during the week of July 1st through the 7th?

SH: One thing I'm really excited about is this initiative called Celebrate Independents. "Independents" with a "-ts" at the end, and that's July 1st through 7th. And that is just an initiative to get people to buy locally in Lexington. So, you know, during this week, if you can just try to put your money towards independent businesses, you know, local businesses.

TG: And if you don't, I mean, we've seen the consequences with independent bookstores in Lexington. If folks don't support them, these wonderful and very important businesses go away.

SH: Right. Yeah. And I mean, this would be things like your local bookshops and also, you know, locally owned restaurants, locally owned businesses of any kind — go out and support them during July 1st through 7th. So they see a big bump in their sales that week.

The other thing that I'm looking forward to is from now until July 27th. There's an exhibit going up at Institute 193 and — I hope I'm pronouncing his name right. It's a photographer named Eric Rhein. "R-h-e-i-n." And he is a Kentucky photographer who documented, largely documented the AIDS crisis, I believe is what the exhibit is focusing on. I've not seen it yet. I'm going out to see it tonight. And that's at Institute 193 and it looks like — I've seen some of the photographs and they're just really beautiful.

The third thing is the thing that I'm most excited about. Unfortunately, it will require a little drive up to Louisville, but it'll be well worth the drive. And this is on July 5th at The Bard's Town. Which is right there on Bardstown Road in the Highlands. And it's 7 p.m., Tiffany Williams, who is one of my favorite singer-songwriters, is going to be performing there. I tell you, you should — everybody should go see her while you can still get in these small little venues and see her. She's so good. Her songwriting is so tight and her singing is so beautiful. Look her up on YouTube or Spotify or wherever you find your music, you know, at your fingertips. And she's also performing with Twisted Sisters, which is a great duo. They are sisters and they're just — they, too, are just wonderful singer-songwriters. They're so much fun. And so it'll be an evening of, you know, really a lot of laughter and also a lot of really moving songs and stories.

TG: Small venues are so wonderful. I mean, you and I have both been to the big arena shows. You see the great performers doing these big shows. And, you know, one of the most memorable recently was James Taylor here in Lexington. I mean, he really puts on a spectacle. It's not just singing. It's much more than that. But you cannot match this opportunity to sit, you know, almost as close as you and I to watch a young upcoming artist like Tiffany Williams. It's just — it's such a moving and powerful experience, and as you say, once these artists take off, you won't have that opportunity again.

SH: I remember when I was seeing Brandi Carlile at these small little venues in Nashville and Louisville and now, you know, she's on the Grammys and she's headlined the Railbird Festival, which I'm looking forward to. And I've seen her in every iteration but there's nothing like those small venues, those intimate little rooms.

TG: Yeah. Well, thank you very much.

SH: Thank you. And I just want to tell everybody, listen out there. You may have heard the clicking of little toenails, and that's because Tom was nice enough to let me bring my dog into the studio with me. And he's been pacing back and forth the whole time.

TG: And Ari is a welcome guest here anytime.

SH: Thank you very much.

TG: Thanks, Silas. For a closer look at the new photography exhibit, *Lifelines*, we went to the gallery in downtown Lexington to speak with Institute 193 director Paul Brown and photographer Eric Rhein. Paul, I'd like to start with you and just tell us a little bit about the gallery.

Paul Brown: Yeah, so Institute 193 is a visual arts nonprofit and publishing house that was founded in Lexington in 2009. And basically, our mission is to promote and preserve work by artists, writers and musicians from the American South with an emphasis on artists with a connection to Kentucky.

TG: And there's a New York branch, too, now.

PB: Yeah. So we opened a second kind of satellite location in September of 2018 to kind of serve as a bridge between the South and the art world at large.

TG: And Eric Rhein, your show is very powerful. I've had a chance to walk around and see several of the pictures. You were diagnosed with AIDS in the 1980s. What was your reaction when when you were told?

Eric Rhein: Well, in actuality, I was diagnosed HIV positive in 1987. I think an interesting or important differentiation is that one could become HIV positive. But an AIDS diagnosis actually is when your immune system becomes compromised enough to qualify for that diagnosis. Just to be correct. So when I tested positive in 1987, I was 27 years old. And I think I must have had this innate sense of a strong spiritual and metaphysical bent on experiencing life, because I gravitated towards this really strong spiritual quest to see what being HIV positive would enable me to live a more expansive life. So in actuality, I think hopefully a lot of the work in this show, which is titled *Lifelines*, is expressive of that.

TG: And what made you decide to document this experience in photographs and some of the other work that's here?

ER: It actually wasn't as much of a decision as something that occurred by osmosis. Somehow I — one afternoon in 1992, I set up a tripod and a camera on my tripod with a timer and started documenting my own physical state, which at the time was still very much of a young, healthy young man.

TG: Which comes through in the photographs.

ER: Yeah, so over time, of about a 10 year period. You can actually see some subtleties of physicality shifting as I became more compromised with my health. And then after the protease inhibitors, which came out in 1996 and transformed the treatment of HIV, there is this very rapid kind of miraculous recovery to a more vital state again.

TG: Now, one might expect a show like this to be somewhat clinical or maybe even uncomfortable. And there are certainly are uncomfortable aspects to it. But also, I see a great celebration of life here. There are pictures of you in bed with a lover. There are pictures of nature. There's much to celebrate here.

ER: Well, the show actually was conceived over two years ago when Paul visited my studio in New York. And Paul gravitated towards these photographs, particularly the ones of me coupling with boyfriends and intimate companions. Paul did actually in that visit express that he was struck by them, particularly because it had transformed his own idea of intimacy during the height of the epidemic that he had grown up with when he came out as a young man. So showing these intimate photographs are particularly important within the dialogue of this work.

TG: And there's nature photography as well. I mean, I think the photograph that stays with me are the butterflies at Fire Island. It's just it's so magical. And yet, amidst all of this other context going on behind it.

ER: That photograph is actually called *Visitation*. Fire Island is a particularly important place for gay history and for actual — even today — as a place of open expansiveness to experience being gay and in a very idealized setting. And in September, monarch butterflies actually migrate over Fire

Island on the way to Mexico. So the term “visitation” actually came about because it brings in this association with also Fire Island being a place where one could feel the spirits of people who died during the AIDS epidemic.

TG: And there’s great, as I mentioned with that photograph, great beauty, great celebration of life. And I just want to thank you for the art that you brought to us and this story that you’re telling visually.

ER: Thank you. You know, it means a great deal to me that it happens that this opening of the show is on the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. My Uncle Lige Clark, who I’ve dedicated the show to, as well as a companion show at 21c Museum here in Lexington, was a formative early gay rights activist in the 1960s. So showing this work with Paul here in Lexington, Kentucky, on this anniversary seems to me it’s kind of universally led.

TG: That’s Lexington artist Eric Rhine. His exhibit, *Lifelines*, is on display at Institute 193 on Limestone Street in downtown Lexington through July 27th. Institute 193’s hours are Wednesday through Saturday, 11 to 6.

[....]

This has been The Agenda podcast for the week of July 1st through the 7th from 91.3 WUKY. I’m Tom Godell.