

Longtime Survivor Eric Rhein's Art Book 'Lifelines' Marries '90s Gay Portraiture and Delicate Collage Art

By Tim Murphy



"Kissing Ken" courtesy of Eric Rhein

Beautiful young men, sick but not visibly so, wrapped naked in each other's arms. Fragile little sculptures composed of wire, buttons, jewels, and other found objects. And penises—lots and lots of penises, most in a state of peaceful repose. All of that is to be found in *Lifelines*, a new collection of about 30 years of work from Kentucky-bred, longtime New York City-based artist Eric Rhein, 59, who nearly died of AIDS in the mid-'90s before the protease treatment revolution brought him, along with so many others (if not all), back to life and health.

From his longtime studio in New York's East Village, Rhein—whose book was published and is being sold by Institute 193 in Lexington, Kentucky (as well as via

Amazon and other online booksellers)—chatted with TheBody about assembling into a book this body of work that is both a chronicle of grief and loss and a testament to survival and spiritual growth.

Tim Murphy: Hi, Eric. Thank you so much for talking to us today, and congratulations on your book. What would you call this—a monograph?

Eric Rhein: I refer to it as a monograph-memoir because I approached it as I do all my work, as a memoir of the psychological and spiritual ramifications of my life. There's a not-for-profit arts space in Lexington, Kentucky, called Institute 193 that really focuses on presenting and championing the work of artists from the South. I was introduced to them by the Faulkner Morgan Archive, which preserves gay and lesbian heritage from Kentucky—which includes my uncle, Lige Clarke, a very significant gay activist in New York City from the 1960s and 1970s [who died in 1975], who was from a small town in Appalachia called Hindman, Kentucky.

Paul Michael Brown, the former director of Institute 193, asked to be connected to me through the Faulkner Morgan Archive. So he came to my studio in August 2017 to see about us doing an exhibition together. And my studio is very much like time travel, going through my art back to the early '80s when I first moved to New York, through to my leaves [made of wire], each one of which represents someone I knew who died of AIDS. And Paul was very taken with a portfolio of photographs of me and my friends that I had taken during the height of the AIDS epidemic [in the early-mid '90s]. He felt they expanded consciousness of what intimacy was like at the height of the epidemic, versus his own [gay] coming-out process post protease inhibitors.

It was poignant, because as we looked at the portraits, we realized that he was about to turn 27, which was my age when I found out I had HIV in 1987. And I had saved this body of work [of photographs] and waited for the opportunity to show them with a sense of the consciousness that I felt they held. So we decided to do an exhibition of them at 193 in Kentucky, which we did last year, but that then we would do a larger scope of my work in a book.



"First Guardian Angel" courtesy of Eric Rhein

TM: The book encompasses a wide variety of work—both photography and collage sculpture—across about 30 years. How did you curate and sequence it?

ER: I wanted the book to tell the story of the life that I've lived through different periods of artwork. So the sequence is roughly but not exactly chronological. The more recent wire pieces are interspersed throughout.

TM: So, in terms of the photographs, we are seeing about five or six young men along with, or in addition to, you, in these photos from the '90s and the aughts. Who were they, and are they all still alive?

ER: Some were friends and some were lovers. Two of them are not alive—one of them, William Weichert, died right after protease treatment came out. The one of Jeffrey Albanesi holding the black cut-out of the leaf—he was HIV negative, and that piece, “Negative Space,” alludes to the fact that for this young HIV-negative man, it wasn't an issue for him to get involved with me, an HIV-positive man. I think I was his first boyfriend.

TM: What feelings did it bring up looking back through these photos of a time when you and some friends and lovers were quite young but sick and probably thinking you might die soon?

ER: Looking at them wasn't a new experience, because this portfolio has been part of my life ever since. I think mostly I felt a sense of satisfaction that I now had a vehicle [the exhibition and then book] to present them in the way that I felt about them. I had not wanted to show them piecemeal. Over the years, I would show them to gay men in their early 20s, these images of how ill we were when we were their age. I've lived a very full and rich life since then, but in some way my life, and my perception of it, stopped at that time. Or it changed.

TM: What would the younger men say about the pictures?

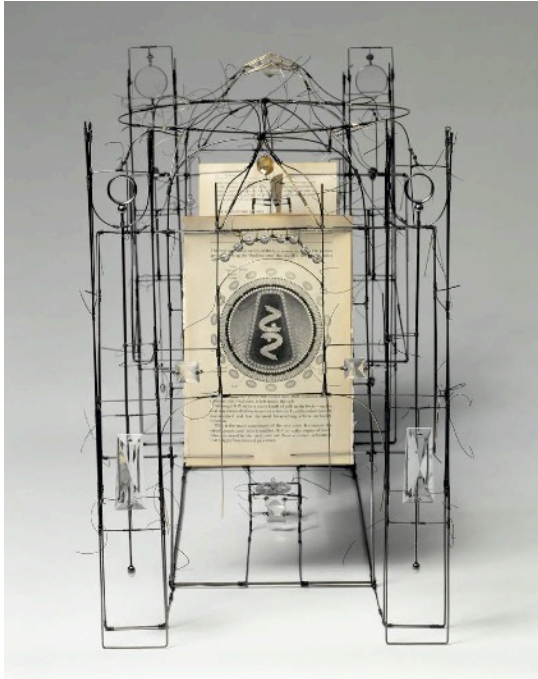
ER: There was this one young guy who came to my studio in July 2014 and showed me this *New York* magazine cover story on the new popularity of PrEP, called “Sex Without Fear” —

TM: Oh, haha, I wrote that story.

ER: Oh, you did? OK. Well, he asked me, “What was that time like?” And it threw me, because people who come into my studio know the context [of that time]. But this guy, who worked at an interior design magazine, had not a clue, but was interested. He said he and his friends didn't know anyone who had lived through that time.

TM: How did you reply?

ER: I was stunned. I don't remember how I answered. I think I felt overwhelmed by the question. I think I saw myself at his age before I tested positive. I think I also wanted him to know that it wasn't just a tragic experience, but as one that I'd approached as a path from which to grow. I didn't know where to begin in order to share what it was really like, but also not have it be just a downer.



“Viral Structure” courtesy of Eric Rhein

TM: Well—what is your recollection of that time?

ER: I went into a mindset where I was going to use the experience of being positive to grow and expand, to let my connection to creativity lead me through it. Even then, when I was taking the photos, I wanted them to be a reflection of an intimacy with myself and the people I was with. It's hard for me to encapsulate in a sentence the range of thoughts and emotions that go through the entire body of work for me, because different parts of it indicate different times.

TM: Right. So let's talk about a few individual works. I love this photo, “Kissing Ken.”

ER: I'm with Ken Davis there. That was the summer of 1996, a very significant summer because the past winter, Christmas of 1995, I was on a systemic IV drip, weighed 127 pounds, and had four T cells. Then my doctor, Paul Bellman, got me into a study for the protease inhibitors. And by the summer of 1996, anybody who saw me wouldn't have known that anything had ever been wrong. Meanwhile, Ken, my boyfriend at the time, who hadn't been able to get into a study, was declining. We were crossing paths. He was on an IV drip for his CMV retinitis [an AIDS-related opportunistic infection]. Today, he's alive and married. We're not really in touch. He probably knows about the book through Instagram. Looking at these photos, I have certain unresolved feelings about relationships that ended, as relationships do.

TM: Very often, when we look at photos of our younger selves, we think, “If only I knew then ...” Did you have any of that?

ER: It's natural to want to go back in time and have different dynamics in relationships. I have a certain sense of nostalgia in terms of how I view my life, I think in part because it veered in a very unexpected direction and had a lot of different turns. Some people's romantic lives have a linear direction. Mine hasn't. If I had continued along one path, I wouldn't have encountered other relationships.

TM: What about the sculptural piece, “Viral Structure”?

ER: It was made for an exhibition at the Smithsonian at the turn of the millennium. The curator who invited me wanted objects that could’ve been put in a time capsule. This is part of a series of work called “Bloodworks” that had these illuminated manuscript-inspired structures holding pages of medical textbooks. This is made from pages of a book that had a chapter on HIV in it, so I used the pages of the book and suspended them within the structure, which evokes the remnants of a cathedral. It incorporates crystals from chandeliers and pieces of medical equipment. The piece reflects this reverence and care I have toward HIV. When I tested positive, I got involved in The Healing Circle and Friends in Deed and the Center for Living [all spiritual and wellness projects welcoming to people living with HIV]. I took on being positive as a spiritual quest, without discounting the loss and grief. So by creating the structure, I was paying homage to the multidimensional complexity of the experience of AIDS.

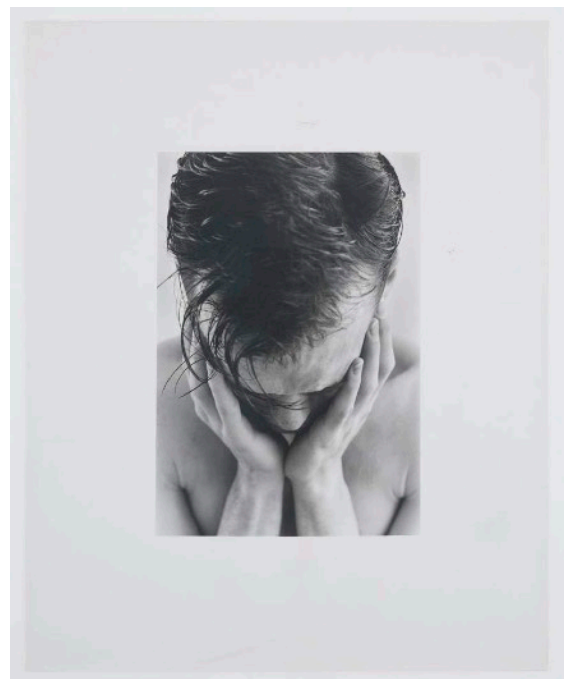
TM: Beautiful. What about “First Guardian Angel”? I really love this one.

ER: She was fun to make. I did a whole series of angels related to the idea of a series of guardians we have, companions that are shepherding us along the way down the path we’re on. They’re made from found objects that are not necessarily thought of as beautiful, but weaving them together transforms them in a kind of alchemy. And that relates to what we do with our own minds, taking things like HIV that might be seen as undesirable or pain-inducing and seeing them in a kind of light where there is potential and growth and even beauty that the experience can bring us.

TM: And I also love this self-portrait, “Rain,” which reminds me a bit of the iconic Peter Hujar image, “Orgasmic Man,” of a man whose face is contorted in what might be pleasure, pain, or both. Tell us about this image.

ER: I titled it “Rain” because it felt like the appropriate title for a work that evokes various emotions and thoughts. I set up my Nikon camera, which my mom gave me when I was in college, on a tripod with a timer. That’s how I did most of those self-portraits, or shots of me with other men, as well as using mirrors.

TM: Beautiful. And to finish, tell us a bit about how you have been surviving COVID times. Have you been creatively fruitful?



“Rain” courtesy of Eric Rhein

ER: In the first three months, while aware of the world's challenges, I took it on myself as a kind of artist's retreat in my own studio. I spend a tremendous amount of time alone anyway, but I was very conscious of being alone even more so. I took good care of myself. I started an exercise program in my bedroom and cooked myself beautiful meals without following recipes. Salmon, olive oil, lemon, rosemary, potatoes, sauteed spinach. As for creativity, I'd had a project set up before COVID based on leaves from Hyde Park in London. I integrated it into my HIV/AIDS memorial piece to identify artists I had yet to make my wire-drawn leaves for. I made one for Larry Kramer the famed author and AIDS activist [who died in May].

TM: Oh, that's sweet. What does that leaf look like?

ER: It's a proud oak leaf with some little tears and deterioration in it, which to me [symbolizes] the long and challenged physicality of his life. It's quite stunning. I titled it "Normal Heart Larry."