

Albert Winn interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

Los Angeles, USA, 25 May 2004

This is a complete transcript of a recorded interview. The text has been slightly edited to correct some grammatical errors (which are inevitable features of spoken conversation), but only where this was necessary to aid comprehension. Al Winn also generously provided some additional comments in the corrected transcript.

Paul Sendziuk: Albert, can you briefly recount your education and training in terms of making art?

Albert Winn: Well, maybe it's easier to go backwards. I have an MFA from California Institute of the Arts, which is in Valencia, California (just up the highway from LA). Before that, I took some photography classes at Massachusetts College of Art in Boston for about 2 or 3 years. Just to give you some dates, I graduated from Cal Arts in '91, started there in '89. I was at Mass Art from about '86 to '88. Before that I took a few photography classes at the New School in Manhattan. (I believe the full name is The New School for Social Research, but it is commonly referred to as the New School.) Long before that I took art classes and photography classes as an undergraduate at Pennsylvania State University. That was back in the '60s.

Why did you choose photography?

Well... [laughs] I suppose the anecdotal story is that when I was about eight years old my brother was thirteen and when he was bar mitzvahed he got two cameras and he couldn't use both of them so I just took one [laughs]. It was an Argus; you know the ones with the flash on the side, those things that look something like an old Rolloflex [camera]? I just started taking pictures and I always liked it. But I got a lot of resistance from my family because I think they expected me to become some sort of professional. But I nevertheless always took pictures. I was always fascinated with the camera. And then at some point, probably in the '80s, I had a kind of mid-life crisis and I decided that this was what I really wanted to do: I wanted to just pursue photography. That's kind of the short part of it. I was always fascinated with what happened in the dark room and I've always been fascinated with seeing. I like to look and I like to compose with my eye and to see how it turns out in a photograph. That may not necessarily answer how it came to be the way it is right now but that's how I got started.

Have you ever dabbled with other mediums?

I've certainly done drawing and I've painted and I've written and I've done spoken word. I've done a few installation pieces. I even made a film once. I still find filmmaking interesting. There're a lot of things, in terms of the arts, that I find interesting. I find spoken word and radio performance very interesting, much more so than television for instance. But it has primarily been photography.

Who would you say have been your major influences, be they mentors or other photographers or other artists that you admire?

There are a whole bunch of photographers that I admire, whose work I think is really fascinating. Some of the people I'll mention are not necessarily the ones who I think of as being the most influential but they're people who come to mind. I have to mention Nicholas Nixon first, because I studied with him. We haven't stayed in touch, although I wish I had, but he was my teacher and I liked his work. It resonated with me. I studied with another instructor by the name of Roswell Angier, who's not as well known as Nick. He teaches at Tuft's University [Boston] now and has become a good friend. What I like about him was the way he spoke about photography and the way he looked at it and analysed it. That really resonated with me very strongly. At the time he was more of a documentarian. I wouldn't say that his work is like that now. [Dog sounds in the background.] Hold it, I've gotta stop this. [Momentary pause in interview.]

I also like the work of Walker Evans and I like the work certainly of Diane Arbus. I'm also fascinated with her life. There are all sorts of other people who I really like, like Brassai. Certainly Nick's work, I'm influenced by that.

Can you recall when Nicholas Nixon did the show at MoMA and there was the ACT UP demonstration? That would have been about 1988-89. [See overleaf for examples of Nixon's photograph]

I recall that very well because I was his student when he was doing that work and so he used to bring work into class and we used to look at it. I had a couple of different reactions to it. At the time I was the only person in the class who was 'out'. There may have been other gay people there but they certainly didn't admit it. So there were times when he would bring that work into class and I would say to myself 'why is this work not resonating with me when it seems like I'm the one who it should be resonating with the most?' Again you have to go back to those days when AIDS was strictly perceived as a gay disease, and here was this very straight guy who was doing this work. I certainly understood why people demonstrated against it, were protesting it, but I didn't think this was warranted because I didn't think it was such a black and white issue. It seemed to me that the demonstrators saw it strictly as a black and white issue. That is, he was showing people with AIDS in this gruesome, awful light. You only see them as sick people. Certainly there was validity to that argument but I also thought 'but wait a minute, this guy is out there at least making people with AIDS visible in a very, very public way, in a very elevated way, there at the Museum of Modern Art'. I mean Nick was privileged, there's no two ways about it, in that he had access to the Museum of Modern Art whereas other artists who might have been doing work about people with AIDS didn't have that access. But that's also just the way it was.



Nicholas Nixon, *Nathaniel and Donald Perham, Milford, New Hampshire*, silver gelatin print, 8" x 10", 1988.



Nicholas Nixon, *Tom Moran, East Braintree, Massachusetts*, silver gelatin print, 8" x 10", 1987.

That's the art world, isn't it?

That *is* the art world. Once the work was finally completed it resonated with me more. But as it was a work in progress [inaudible end of sentence]. And part of the reason is that he had told us that – I could be completely wrong about this – he started showing the work to John Szarkowski and maybe a few other people – it might not have been Szarkowski – but people in that realm were trying to get him to enlarge the photographs, to make them big. I don't know if you know this but all of Nick's prints are contact prints from his 8 x 10 [inch] camera.

For the purpose of the listeners, what's a contact print?

You take the negative and lay it right on the paper and then shine the light onto it; there is no enlargement. You can do that with an 8 x 10 because the negative is big enough.

So he was using a big camera?

Yeah. I found as they got larger they lost their intimacy and I remember telling him that in class. Because he would show us the work enlarged and then show it to us with the contact print and I said that I just think it loses its intimacy. To me that was the point of the work. He might sue me if he were to hear me say this but Nick can be sometimes pretty arrogant and sometimes he and I used to yell at each other in class. I used to scream at him 'you're nothing but a heterosexist!' [laughs]. But I do believe that he has a good heart, to say nothing of a good mind, and a lot of talent.

There were people who also criticized him for maybe taking advantage of a new hot topic that he could photograph and make money off of, and that kind of thing. And maybe that's true, I don't know. Who knows what goes on inside people's minds all the time? But I do believe that he felt very strongly that people with AIDS were being stigmatized and this was a way to show the intimacy and the suffering. I was looking at those pictures just the other day. As I told you before [the recording began], I teach introductory photography in a community college. It is way out there in the suburbs and these kids are like brain-dead from going to the mall and they have no visual vocabulary whatsoever. So what I do is I give them a list of photographers that they have to look through, choose one, do a report on him or her and then try and imitate that photographer. And one of the girls in the class chose Nick Nixon, so I brought her the book that I have, and I was looking at those pictures again. Of course it brings back those days when that was the classic image of a person with AIDS, this wasting, dreadful look. But at the same time I thought the pictures still maintained a kind of intimacy. Yeah they were sad and somewhat pathetic, but I still thought that they retained what I thought was the message that he was trying to get across.

When they were eventually shown, did he choose to enlarge them?

No, they were shown in 8 x 10 [inch] size, what today passes for small. Because, as you know, gigantism is now...

Especially in full colour as well.

Right.

You then walk into that field, don't you, of representing a person with AIDS, with HIV, and challenging the representation of the sick, emaciated, hunched-over AIDS 'victim'. Was that a conscious decision, to photograph yourself and see where it led you?

Well, I started photographing myself before I got sick.

Before you knew that you were HIV positive?

Before I even knew. I started photographing myself probably like a lot of people. You have a camera, you take a lot of pictures, one day you're at home by yourself in your apartment and you look in the mirror and you take off your clothes and you start photographing yourself, you know? You photograph yourself beating off, doing all sorts of things that you wouldn't do in public.

[Laughs] You've got access to a dark room, why not?

And you live in New York where you can get anything developed. But aside from that kind of stuff, when I was at Mass Art [Massachusetts College of Art] – and I also took classes at The Museum School in Boston – I had a teacher there by the name of Elaine O'Neill, who I think is at Rochester now. I remember in one of her talks she was showing us photographs that she had done of her family, of her baby, and there was something that she said – I can't remember exactly the words – that she had gone through something, some sort of operation, maybe it was pregnancy, something where she couldn't get out into the world. So she started taking pictures of herself on a regular basis. Then there was another photographer, a friend of mine who lives in Boston by the name of Carl Baden. Carl has this incredible project, he has literally photographed himself every single day for, like, I don't know, eternity, thirty years, something like that. Both of them said 'look, I'm photographing myself because I'm accessible'. That just resonated with me. I thought yeah, and as immodest as it sounds, I'm the most interesting person I know right now. I don't want to go out and photograph a model. Again this was pre-AIDS when I was just interested in doing nudes and beginning in photography and all that sort of stuff. I thought this is the person I can be most comfortable with, in front of the camera and on the other side of the camera, because I don't have to say 'ok, lift your right hand and put it on your left ear', I can just do it, I can just perform. So I was doing it already. Then, when I got diagnosed (I was in Cal Arts, in graduate school) I thought 'I have to keep doing this, I have to make a record of what I'm going through, if nothing else just a record'. But I didn't want it to be just, for lack of a better word, a 'record', a 'diary'. I wanted it to be more interpretive.

This was 1989?

Yeah. And then a lot of different things began to influence me. I began to think more consciously of things that maybe were already there. I did think about Nick's pictures and the way that he only photographed people who were ill. I thought 'ok, I do want to photograph myself because I'm ill, but I also want to be able to show myself in my life'. Also, part of a conscious decision that I made when I was diagnosed and when I got sicker was that I wanted to show my life – is that the right terminology? I'm not quite sure – that this was a part of my life, this was a part of who I am, but it wasn't the sum total because there were other things that were really annoying me. We had just, shall we say, come off of, although it was still going on, the Robert Mapplethorpe thing.

The charges of pornography against the gallery owner who was exhibiting his works and the NEA blocking funding for art exhibitions that were deemed to be pornographic.

But it was also the fact that gay people, of which I am one, were objectified in this way, that you were either this thing or that thing. If you were in Mapplethorpe's world you were part of the *demimonde* of some kind. If you were in Nick's world you were 'the sick and the wasting'. Or you were in some pornographic image. I would look at these images – and I do look at them, as does the whole world – and I thought 'I don't fit into any of these categories'. I'm just, like, this ordinary, gay Jewish guy with AIDS who does all this other stuff, who has a boyfriend with whom I've been with for now 17 years (whatever it was in 1989, 1991), and we were just struggling to get by. This is our life, we're happy, we're sad, we get angry at each other, we have our individual issues. This became the driving force. I saw myself as 'a gay person', as 'a person with AIDS', being objectified in a way that I couldn't identify with.

At the same time, I know that as ordinary as my life may seem, it does seem exotic to other people. Otherwise there wouldn't be all this hoo-ha about it, right? So I decided 'ok, I'm gonna do this. I'm going to let people look at my life. But instead of having somebody else do it, I'm going to do it, and that way I'll have some control over it'. One of the questions I always got asked when I did the work was...people would say: 'oh, you always have the same expression on your face, you're always looking back'. I'm not looking somewhere else. I'm not looking up in the air or some other weird gaze. My gaze is back at the viewer and that was a conscious decision on my part: I'm willing to open up my world to whoever wants to look at it but you cannot be a voyeur, you have to be engaged because I'm going to look back at you. You can come into my world, you can see anything, there's nothing to be hidden, I've no secrets, but we're going to have a conversation. You're not going to be able to just walk by and go 'that's what they look like, that's what they do'.

They can't take a sneak peek while you're not looking.

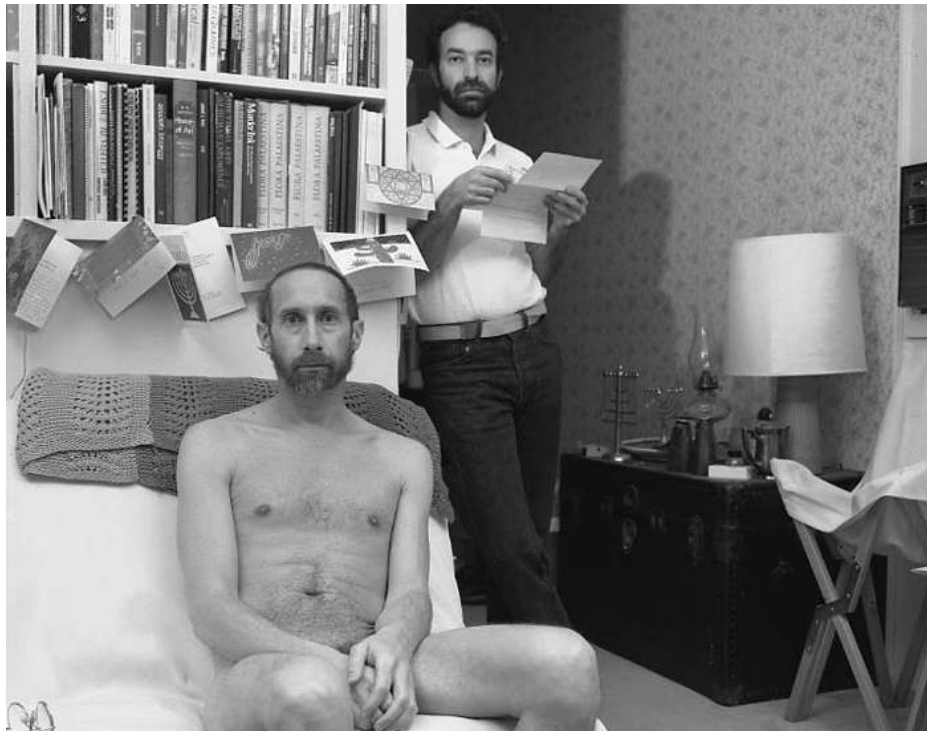
Exactly.

More than the direct gaze, what I find quite intriguing about you in the picture is the look on your face. It's an unusual look. You're not often smiling but you're not often looking serious either, or stern. It's not even a contemplative look. I don't know how to describe it.

It's sort of a blank look. Again, that's a part of it. Because I believe that people look at all artwork, particularly photographs, and they bring their own stuff with them. I don't like smiling in photographs, I think smiles are artificial. They're anywhere from corny to just plain old fake. So you can just cross that one right off.

But that would seem to be appropriate for you because you have a good sense of humour; you're an affable sort of fellow. It suits you more than a blank expression. A blank expression seems to be saying 'I'm not having an influence in this space here'.

But the blank expression allows people to wonder. I want people to be contemplative. Yes I am affable and I like to have a good time and I'm friendly – trust me I was socialised in the best of ways. I know how to be polite and all that sort of stuff, but my life isn't always happy. But also I don't want to be sad in the pictures and [have people] say 'woe is them', 'woe is him, he has AIDS, he's gay' or whatever, all these things that people project. So I'd just rather be blank. I think it helps people get beyond the surface of the photograph. Some people might argue the other way but I think that it helps people get beyond the surface of the photograph. When I say that, I mean it maybe makes them think 'what really is going on? Are they happy, are they sad?' If you've got a smile on your face it's like 'oh, look at the happy gay couple who have AIDS'. If they're sad then it also may seem a little too like melodrama.



Albert Winn, untitled photograph from *My Life Until Now* series, silver gelatin print, 20" x 24", 1991.

Absolutely. If you were smiling in those pictures you could almost dismiss the photograph, 'I know what that's all about', and then walk on the next one. It makes people work and think harder about the picture.

That's what I want, I want people to work. I'm a task master.

At the same time you're a photographer that's trying to almost deny representation; you're trying not to be representable.

[laughs] Yeah.

You were saying that you're waiting for the viewer to bring his or her own experience to the picture and to imagine what could be going on because you're trying not to give anything away. At least in your face, in the rest of the photograph I suppose you are giving things away.

Yeah. I mean I think the photographs are filled with information.

So is some of this reluctance to be representable, in terms of your face and your body, maybe influenced by what happened to Nicholas Nixon and wanting to avoid the backlash that he suffered, and avoid the sentimentality?

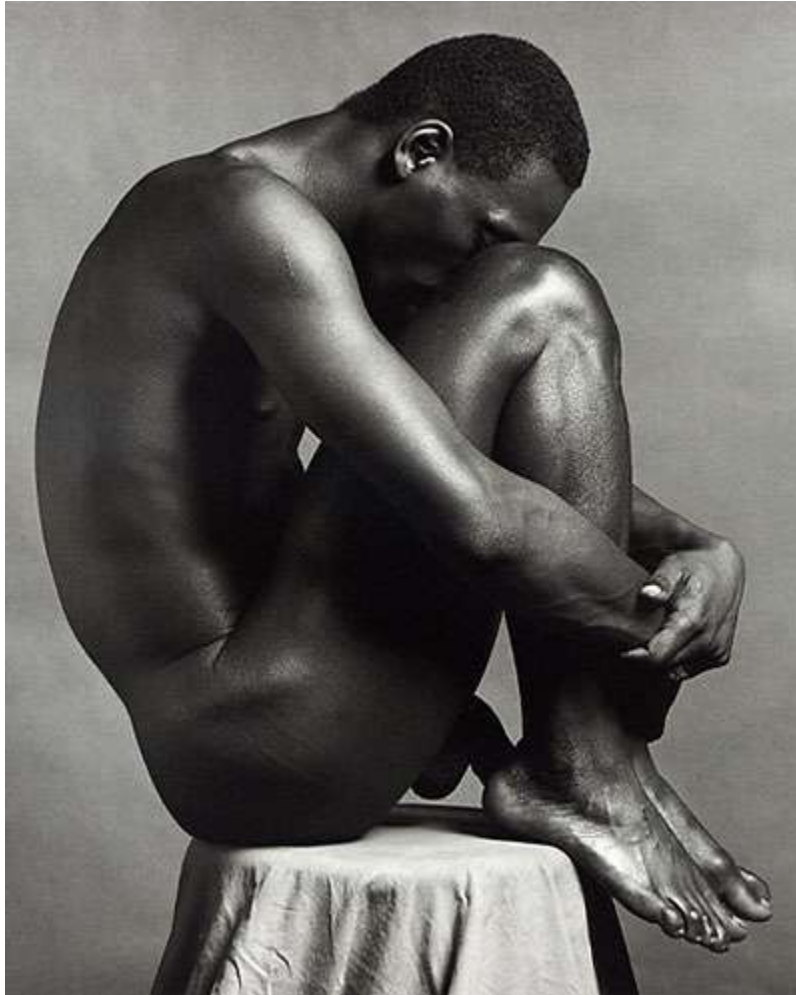
That's an interesting question. I wouldn't necessarily say that it's to purposely avoid something but certainly that's in my thinking. Because I think that whatever issue we talk about there's rarely one driving thing, one driving force behind it that made me do something. I like to think that it's a whole bunch of stuff. But certainly I did not want the sentimentality aspect because that just makes me ill. I wasn't so much thinking about Nick in that situation because I'm already within the – god, I hate this word – community. I'm already of that population, the AIDS population, I'm not the outsider. I don't think that I really had to be concerned with the objectification part, although you could say I'm objectifying myself. Whatever it is you can always make some argument but I don't think that, so much, was a big deal for me. But I definitely wanted to avoid the sentimentality.

There was something else that you said that reminded me of something. If there's a blank expression and people have to work to get beyond that and they do bring their own stuff, I think – if I can say this – one of the things that's most disturbing to some people about my work, at least at the time, is that when they did bring their own stuff some of the pictures became that much more ordinary. It was disturbing to me that maybe people went: 'oh my gosh they're just like me, so maybe being gay is not this awful thing'. It challenged people to question why they maybe don't want to see images of gay people. I think when you look, for instance, at Mapplethorpe's images [see overleaf], which are beautiful and wonderful and I'm not condemning them, you can say 'oh, that's *them*'. When you look at Nick's images of really sick people you say 'that's *them*'. But when you look at us in our kitchen, people might look at it and go 'oh my gosh, that's us'. It just happens to be two men and one of them has AIDS.

You felt that you didn't fit into those categories and that you didn't see yourself in those images, such as the pornographic images of Mapplethorpe and the sick, AIDS 'victim', but you've now created your own category in your more recent work: the gay, Jewish man with HIV.

[Albert laughs]

May I clarify something here? I don't and didn't think that Mapplethorpe's images were pornographic, I thought they were stunning and beautiful and sometime erotic but I was aware that some people thought they were pornographic. When I referred to pornography, I meant real pornography that is consumed by a lot of gay men and which becomes an ideal to measure themselves (ourselves) by.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ajitto*, silver gelatin print, 18" x 14", 1981.

You've brought Jewish ritual into the photographs and I find this fascinating. It's not something that I've seen addressed in AIDS-related photography.

And so your question is? [laughs].

That was more of a statement wasn't it?

Yes [laughs].

Is that just a part of being Jewish and having Jewish rituals and saying 'since I'm documenting my life and telling my story then that's going to be part of it', or was there more of a conscious effort to try to bring up issues of Jewish culture and how it interacts with the gay community or HIV?

Yes. All of the above. Again, part of it was 'if I'm going to be doing my life this is part of my life'. And again it was 'I don't want to be defined as a Jewish artist, as a gay artist, as an AIDS artist. These are all things that make up my life. I still have my life and these are very important parts of it'. I could no more do work about my life and bring the AIDS issue into it and then exclude the other parts. I couldn't exclude my Judaism, I just couldn't. It's who I am, period. So if you look around my house there are these things there. I have a mezuzah on that door and on many of the doors. I've got a Hanukkah menorah up there on the bookshelf somewhere. These are there. I just don't take them out because company is coming [laughs]. They're just there, ok. I lived in Israel for five years on kibbutz, I've studied a little. I'm going to hide that? No, I'm not going to be in the closet about that.

Part of it has to do with my history. I was raised outside of Philadelphia and I went to a private school where I was one of very few Jews, a very WASPy private school. I knew what it was like to be discriminated against because I was Jewish, something that many people can't even believe happened or happens anymore. I went to a school where almost all the boys in my school – there were no girls – belonged to private clubs for tennis, for cricket, for golf, for whatever. They went to debutante dancing classes and things like that. I was not a part of that. I grew up knowing people who, believe it or not, hid the fact that they were Jewish because they wanted to be accepted. As a child and through teenage years I went through all of those things, all of those denials and I went 'this is crazy, this is a completely nutty way to live'. And so I realised that being Jewish makes up who I am. I'm not going to deny this anymore than be in the closet about being gay. I feel very scarred from that experience and, I think, in the same way that anyone who is gay feels scarred about always having to hide who you are. Some people go to extremes and it becomes like their bow wave: it's out there in front of them before you even meet them. I don't want to be like that about anything. But these things do make up who I am so they're in the pictures.

Having said that, when the AIDS epidemic started and really got going I became very much aware that the organised Jewish community – I'm not sure how to put that – was very ineffective about responding to it. So I purposely did artwork that was very directly about being Jewish and having AIDS. So the answer to your question is yes on both counts.

I notice more Jewish references in the later work, say '95-'97, rather than in the ones from '89-'91. Is that the way that maybe your thoughts developed on this issue; that as you went further on you noticed the absence of a Jewish response and addressed it?

Yeah. Also, I think that those early years of childhood certainly influenced me about feeling on some level self-conscious about being Jewish. But also particularly in the art world. It seemed to me when I was in art school, particularly at Cal Arts, that there was a sort of self-consciousness from other people who I knew were Jewish. 'I'll just push that aside', or 'that's not cool', or that Clement Greenburg notion that there's nothing Jewish that is of any art value. I don't know if you know that argument?

It sounds very odd.

It was a very strongly felt belief, I think, in the art world. There was a show that went around the country, starting at the Jewish Museum in New York, called *Too Jewish*. It was organised by Norman Kleeblatt, the head curator at the Jewish Museum. He put together this show called *Too Jewish*, like when is something 'too Jewish'?! It was an expression that I don't think you hear too much anymore, but certainly when I growing up it was 'you shouldn't be too Jewish'.

It's a bit like 'so gay'.

Exactly. It's exactly the same thing. But what he discovered was that there were these artists out there who were doing these things that incorporated Jewishness, Judaism, in their work but that they were maybe considered 'too Jewish' to be seen in the 'serious' art world. So he put together this really fantastic show which of course everybody panned: all these student art critics, many of whom were Jewish, saying 'oh it's so Jewish' [laughs]. But it comes from that Jewish dilemma that still exists in the United States, this self-hatred and self-criticism, and I wanted to look at that. So in my work, as time went on, I became more and more aware of the lack of the Jewish response to people with AIDS. But the other thing was, are you familiar with the piece *Akedah*? Do you know what that's all about?



Albert Winn, *Akedah*, silver gelatin print, 20" x 24", 1995.

Isn't it connected with the prayer book?

Those are tefillin [also called phylacteries], it's bound around your arm. What I found was that, particularly as I was getting sicker, it just felt like I was living a life of chaos, just complete chaos. It's not that I didn't get up in the morning and eat breakfast, it's not like the sun didn't come up in the morning and go down in the evening, I mean that I didn't know

what was going to happen next. [I was thinking:] Am I going to be sicker today than I was yesterday? Is this medicine going to fail? I was having trouble with social security, I didn't know if I was going to get medical care. [It was] just mayhem. And I wasn't getting a good response from my family, we (Scott and I) were struggling financially. There was this time when I was literally going to UCLA almost every single day, because I was involved in a drug trial, to have my blood taken. And they stick that stupid needle in your arm; I mean, that's crazy making, everyday. Do you know what I mean by that expression? It makes you crazy. And I thought 'how do I make sense out of this, how do you make order out of chaos?' And I realised that that's a basic principle of Judaism: how do you make order out of chaos? That's what the creation story is all about. Whether you believe it or not is something else. I'm not even sure I believe it but I want to believe it, ok [laughs]? I want to believe it. That's what God did. There was chaos and he, or she, made order. And I went 'huh, I need to make order out of this chaos'. And the way I was able to do that was to look at the things that I knew from Jewish teaching – and I am not religious and I'm not very well versed in this stuff – but I was able to find things that made sense to me, that helped me kinda get a grip. So when they [the researchers at UCLA] would bind my arm every morning with that stupid piece of rubber to get the vein up, and the colour of it alone is enough to make you throw up...

What colour is it?

Originally I'm sure it's a piece of plastic or rubber but over the years, of course, it yellows and you think 'what sewer did they drag that out of?' They put it on your arm and they stick this thing in and start taking, like, thirteen vials of blood. And I would think 'ok, I can make sense out of this if I can relate it to something I know' and I thought 'ok, I'm binding my arm. That's what you do when you're religious and you pray, you bind your arm, it says "I will bind it to my arm"'. I thought 'ok, if I think of it in those terms then it won't hurt so much, it won't drive me crazy' and that's what inspired that piece. Because then I thought 'I'm doing this stuff because I'm trying to stay well. I'm involved in a drug trial. I'm giving my blood for something. When somebody gave blood it was like a sacrifice'. And then I thought about Abraham binding Isaac, you know the story from the bible? He bound him, and I thought 'ok, I'm binding myself. He was going to sacrifice his son, I'm sacrificing myself for science to try and save my own life'. All this thought went into that photograph, ok [laughs]?

The binding is what you do when you pray?

Yeah, you take out these – I can show them to you if you want?

Yes please. [Pause in interview. NB: Paul and Al discuss *Akedah* further on p.41.]



Albert Winn, *Hanukkiot*, silver gelatin print, 20" x 24", 1995.

Let's talk about some of the more recent works, and the Jewish content. After protease inhibitors came on the market in '96 we started to see a lot of artists doing medicine art, either using medicine as a medium, using the capsules and left over medicines, building pyramids, building sculptures, mixing it with paint. In some of your work the bottles turn up next to the Jewish candles

The menorahs.

And that seemed to me a way of talking about the ritual of taking your medicines, showing that it can become a sort of common place thing, that it's just like any other ritual, be it a Catholic ritual or Jewish ritual. Was that the idea?

Yeah, again it was, I suppose in a sense, a way of normalising it. Again, this is a part of my life. Yes, it is a ritual. It's a new ritual because it seems, particularly nowadays, people are inventing rituals. It's often people who seem to have no religion. People can't exist without rituals. For some people just getting up and having a glass of orange juice every morning, that's their ritual. This pill taking has to become a ritual. It has to be almost like a religious ritual because of the volatility of the pills. You skip doses, there are bad side effects. Maybe not side effects, you may have bad effects in that the virus may become resistant to the drugs. You can't fool around with this stuff, so it's a ritual. I'm not even sure what other word can describe it. That is what I was saying in the work. There's one photograph, I don't know if you've seen it. You mentioned the one with the menorahs, in Hebrew it's called Hanukkiot [discussed later in the interview, beginning on p.47], but there's another one that's literally called *Ritual*.

[Paul displays the image]

Yes, that's it right there. Do you want me to describe it? We're standing in front of a table that is basically set up like Friday evening, the beginning of Shabbat, or Shabbas as it's called in Yiddish. You say a blessing over the candles, you say a blessing over bread and a blessing over wine. This is a Friday evening ritual. My hand is outstretched toward the viewer with the three pills, which happen to be protease inhibitors. I called it *Ritual* because it is part of the ritual. Scott has got his eyes covered because that's what you do when you say the blessing over the candle. It's as if he's saying this blessing over the pills at the same time: praying that they'll work.

Going back to your question about who influences me, I am more interested a lot of times by paintings than by other photographers. I'm really fascinated with renaissance art and particularly religious art. I just think those things are over the top, just outrageous. There are any number of paintings where you see some saint showing the stigmata or something on their hand. That's what I was doing in this photograph – the pills are a sign of my cross to bear.

I don't know if it was that successful in this picture. I've often thought about redoing this photograph in some way to make it even more obvious, but I also didn't want to be *that* obvious but to show these pills in the hand like the stigmata. How's that for a Jewish boy [laughs]? So I called this *Ritual* because these pills are a medicine, it's a ritual. You can't miss it, you can't fool around with it. [Paul and Al return to discussion of this image on p.48.]



Albert Winn, *Ritual*, silver gelatin print, 20" x 24", 1997.

They seem to be working for you. How is it going?

I'm very lucky.

You've found a good combination that's working?

Yeah. I'm very lucky, that's all I can say. I mean, I'm probably one of the luckiest people around. I wish I was luckier, like I wish I had more money [laughs]. I wish I wasn't dependent on social security for my health care but I'm also lucky that I have it. In some ways I've sailed through this thing with very few illnesses. I have some problems, this terrible peripheral neuropathy, and I couldn't walk for a while. I still have pain constantly in my legs and my feet. See that [displaying trembling hands]? I have no idea what that's from but my nerves are sending weird messages to my brain. And I have lipodystrophy, cranial wasting.

They're still not sure if that's caused by protease inhibitors or HIV itself.

Well, I'm not on protease inhibitors anymore. They're pretty sure in this case that it's the virus (that's causing the cranial wasting). But I've had pretty minimal things when I think about it. I've just seen too many people get the oddest diseases you've ever heard of, and die. That didn't happen to me.

That comes through in the photographs. You don't have a lot of graphic photographs of disfigurement or illness or sores, things which can sometimes come into other people's work. But there are the ones with the bandaids.

I purposely tried to stay away from that. There were times when I certainly could have photographed them [my sores]. There were times when I had these terrible herpes outbreaks on my penis. I mean, my penis looked like something that had gone through a meat grinder. It was really disgusting. I sat there and held my dick in my hand and photographed it. [The decision not to display photographs such as this] was a combination of things. Some of it may have been modesty. I mean, people say 'you're immodest, you stand there naked in front of the camera!' but maybe it's this cupping your penis and your testicles in your hand and then showing that to the world, in colour no less! But also I was thinking of the [stigmatizing] portrayal of people with AIDS in this sort of pathetic illness category, and that isn't really what I wanted to do. Those photographs are somehow related to that but somewhat different. [Pointing to a number of photographs depicting close-up body parts covered by band-aids - see overleaf.] Have you seen these before?

No, I haven't.

I have a whole series of these.



Albert Winn, *Band-Aids (Neck)*, silver gelatin print, 30" x 40", 1999.

We're looking at some black and white pictures of close ups body parts, the ear and the side of the neck, which has a band-aids on it; the small of the back with a band-aid. The photographs are really large, and the body parts are set against a sort of a grid system, which is kind of odd.

Well, that body of work is called *Band-Aids* ha-ha. It was in response to protease inhibitors and to the other drugs, taken when I began to regain my health. People began to say things to me like 'aren't you glad you're cured?', 'aren't you glad it's over?', 'isn't it wonderful'. These kinds of things, like 'it is no more', which is a really odd thing to say. To me it shows amazing ignorance. I'm not cured, there is no way I'm cured. I'm walking around with an invisible illness right now, but also with invisible scars. So what I decided to do was photograph every part of my body where I'd had some evidence of illness. The neck was where I had molluscum. It's like this thing you get on your skin, it's a kind of fungus. It happens to people when their immune system is down. The thing in the back is for a lumbar puncture. I have photographs, they're all rolled up downstairs in the basement. I may have some smaller ones here in the closet, just contact prints because these are all done with a 4 x 5 camera, which is a view camera. My legs where I had KS, where I gave myself injections, where I had a KS lesion removed, where I had an intravenous line; every place I stuck a band-aid and I photographed it. As for the grid, are you familiar with Eadweard Muybridge?

No, I don't think so.

I'm sure you're familiar with the photographs. Do you remember the guy who photographed the racehorse and the people walking and carrying jugs of water? This was done in the 1870s, 1880s. Leyland Stanford – Stanford University is named after him – he had some sort of bet with some other racehorse owners that when a horse ran at a certain speed, all four legs left the ground. But they had no way to prove it. So they hired Eadweard Muybridge, who was known as a landscape photographer. He was one of those old guys who went and photographed the west back in those days. Stanford hired him and he built this camera and he set up a series of cameras with a bunch of trip wires and had a horse run by and he photographed it. You can see these individual frames and eventually see where the horse actually leaves the ground, ok? So the grid refers to measurement. What does measurement have to do with this? Someone walks up to you and says 'Paul it's great to see you, you're so thin', 'you're so buff', and of course you walk away and say 'thanks!' But what is that statement? You're being compared to the way you were before. It's a form of measurement. So I thought 'how do I get that aspect of measurement into this, to tie this all together?' So I threw myself onto a copy stand. If you have a flat artwork you lay it on a table and there's a camera up above – it's a copy stand. So I threw myself on a copy stand in these various positions. Let me tell ya, I thought I was going to break my back half the time trying to reach for the cable release! So that's what I did. That's what this work is all about.

So it's a play on this idea that protease inhibitors don't mean that the AIDS epidemic has ended, they're just a band-aid?

Right. It's a band-aid, it just covers it up. But it's really there, it's still floating around. I've written a story about it as well.

Did these get exhibited?

Well, remember when you got into the car [before the interview began] and I said 'I'm going through a really hard time right now'? I feel like nobody wants to look at my work. It's like I've become invisible. I'm really frustrated. I did these at Lightwork. Do you know Lightwork, the residency up at Syracuse University?

No.

I have a bunch of their catalogues. I may even have the catalogue that these are in. I did the work and I printed these up at Lightwork and they got published in their catalogue. But it's kind of like yelling out into the wind for me now. I feel like I'm screaming into the darkness but there's nobody there listening.

Do you think that's partly to do with why people think that AIDS is over, and what these pictures are actually really all about is that people don't feel an urgency about the epidemic anymore and don't feel the need to have art shows about it?

I think that's definitely true. Sometimes what goes through my mind is that I'm a terrible artist and the work isn't any good.

I think it has got more to do with the social context of the epidemic now. People think that it's time to move on.

I also think that people want to look at pretty pictures. I have two anecdotes to this. One is that I came back from Photo Fest. Photo Fest is an event that happens in Houston every other year. There are all sorts of exhibits throughout the city, and parties and socialising and hoo-ha. But the main part of it is the review sessions. There are curators, gallery directors, independent collectors, independent curators, publishers, all sorts of people. You come and you sign up and you get 20 minutes with each person to spill your guts. It's like speed dating for photographers. They ring the bell and you have to go to the next person. I don't want to name names, but I had some people who looked at the work and literally said nothing. I don't know whether it's because we're all now in this mode of 'you can't say anything bad to anybody'. You look at peoples' work and you say 'oh, it's brilliant', 'oh, it's gorgeous'. I know that when somebody tells you your work is brilliant that's the kiss of death. I hate being with those people. But I do know that some people look at the work and they tell you how moving it is. I had one curator, from a recognisable museum, not the biggest but one that's somewhat known, who said 'you know, this work is a downer and we need to pull people in'. She said 'Al, I think of your work a lot but I can't imagine showing it'. That made me feel *really* good. I just went home so happy it's lucky there wasn't a gun in the house so I couldn't shoot myself. I mean how does that make you feel? 'Your work is really important, it's really good but we're never gonna show it'. 'After Mapplethorpe we don't touch anything controversial'.

Rubbish.

I don't know. I don't know what's going on. The other anecdote I have is that one of my teachers was Pat Ward Williams when I was at Cal Arts. Wonderful, wonderful artist. African American. She's done a lot of work about lynchings and the awful part of African American history. Some of her work reaches inside of you and just pulls your guts out, like some sort of rubber band, and then snaps it back at you. She was interviewed in *Art in America* because she was being seen, she was getting shown, but she wasn't a big, popular icon of the art world. The interviewer said 'how come you're not out there?' and she was very blunt and said 'people just don't want pictures of lynchings over their living room sofa'. Maybe that's what it is with me.

I can understand if they were saying 'I don't wanna buy this' and 'I don't want to spend a lot of money on this because I'm not going to put it up in my house', but when they're galleries and public institutions that's a very odd thing for them to say. I think we were talking before about this move towards gigantism in photography, and I said in particular colour photography. People want to see colourful, pop-cultural referents that look cool and stylish. They want to see pictures of Times Square and Tokyo and neon-coloured, big photographic prints. This is the opposite of that. Enlarged but very detailed body parts in black and white about a topic which is

uncomfortable. It's not fun, *Lost in Translation*, Tokyo style. In that way you're a victim of the current trend.

Yeah. I don't like to think of myself as a victim.

I'm sorry.

That's ok, I know what you mean. I think that this work would lose something in colour.

Absolutely.

And if it's powerful I think it would lose its power. The fact that it is black and white makes it more serious. As for size, those are big enough. They're 30 x 40 [inches], the actual image size. The *My Life Until Now* series, some of them are big but some of them are just 20 x 24 [inches]. I had to go to smaller sizes for a couple of reasons. I can't afford to do big, it costs a small fortune. I don't really have the facilities. I could go up to Cal Arts, where thank goodness – I'm very lucky – I have privileges to work in there because I'm an alumnus and also I teach there, but it takes a lot of physical energy to do one. I feel strong and I can do all sorts of things but to do a series that big I really need an assistant. And I think that the message gets across at 20 x 24, it doesn't have to be any bigger, in fact I wish they could be smaller because they're easier to handle and I'm lazy when it comes to that.

And, as you said, it loses the intimacy sometimes when they're large.

There was an article in the *New Yorker* a few weeks ago about how photographs are getting so large. They need cranes to lift the piece into the gallery. You have to begin to wonder: is it about the work or is it about the size?

Well, we have a size fixation. It's a dominant trait of our culture.

It's like, I'd like to get over my size problems. If I'm in to that I could just go to the local adult bookstore to get my size fixation [laughs].

What about the ones with the Jewish references in them, were they being shown in Jewish institutions?

Again it was Norman Kleeblatt at the Jewish Museum in New York who was the first and almost only interested curator. The Jewish Museum in New York is a really special place, it is unique. It is an art museum first and foremost, although they have a permanent collection of Judaica. It's not a Jewish Museum with a small 'j' like some other institutions where they only show things of Jewish history and culture that are very classically Jewish. The Jewish Museum in New York's stated mission is to show art. They have bought some of the *My Life Until Now* pictures and exhibited them. The Skirball Museum here in LA has exhibited some of them but never purchased. I can't say for sure but I think that they find them troubling. When they had a show a few years ago called *Portraits and Identity*, the woman who was putting it together, Barbara Gilbert, who I think is a very smart curator, chose certain

images and then she came back to me and said 'we have this committee, we were wondering if we could maybe show some other images'. The second choice was pictures of my mother and father getting old, but not of Scott and me.

So it was a tough call, because as an artist you want to be seen, you want to get shown, but I also don't feel that I'm in a position to be a prima donna and say 'take it or leave it'. So what I did was I wrote her a letter that I thought would give her ammunition to take back to her committee. Basically it worked, so they did show some of the original images that she had chosen but then they still wanted the pictures of my mother and father in their later years, something that the upper middle-class people who are their primary patrons can walk in and feel good about, this kind of sentimentality. But I haven't had a lot of people knocking on my door.

The Magnus Museum in Berkeley – they don't call themselves a Jewish museum, they had a 'Judaica Collection' – had a wonderful curator at the time called Michal Friedlander. She's now at the Jewish Museum in Berlin. She called me up one day, I think it was in '96, and said that she had gotten my number from Norman Kleeblatt in New York, that World AIDS Day was coming up and that they had never done anything – again, here's a major Jewish institution – to acknowledge World AIDS Day – this was 1996 already – and could they show my work on that day. It kind of rubbed me the wrong way because it's nice to be asked but it's not the dance I wanna go to. I said 'Well, I don't mind the association with World AIDS Day, I'm honoured, I'm happy, but not for a day. If you're going to show my work give me a week, a month, something, let's make it real. Not one day and then lower the curtain'. Plus the fact that showing these pictures in one day is a big undertaking. I said 'I have another idea though. If you want to just do it for World AIDS Day and maybe that week I want to do something called *Blood on the Doorpost: The AIDS Mezuzah*.

It sounds like a musical.

[laughs] Yeah, kick-line, boys in tights. But you know what a mezuzah is right?

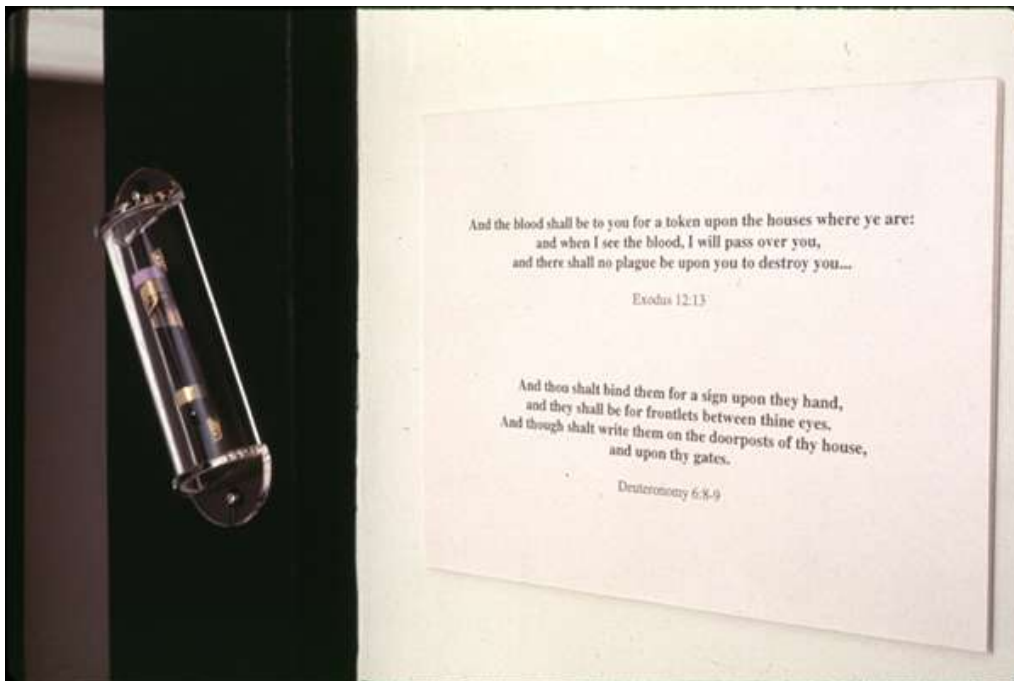
Not really. I'm not savvy with Jewish culture at all.

You're Australian. So you see this thing? It's called a mezuzah.

And you have them on the doors.

They have prayers in them. Many Jewish homes and almost all Jewish organisations will have a mezuzah on their door. It comes from that section in the Bible that says: 'I will think of God's teachings when I rise up, when I sit down, when I go in, when I go out. I'll put them on the doorpost of my house and on the doorpost of my gates and I will bind them on my arm to be close to my heart and to wear as frontlets between my eyes so they will be always in my mind'. Ok? So I was thinking about that and I was also thinking about AIDS being called 'the plague'. I thought 'again, here's all this stuff beginning to come together'. I didn't think about this all in one day, it was a process. I thought, 'well, where does the mezuzah come from? Ok, it comes from that, but does it have some sort of historical antecedent?

Does it come from the story of the exodus, when God says to Moses “put blood on your doorpost and the Angel of Death will pass over and spare you”. I thought ‘that’s interesting’. I had written a story about fooling the Angel of Death and I thought ‘I wonder if I was to take my own blood and smear it on my doorpost, I could fool the Angel of Death’, ok? And if the mezuzah goes on the door (and I’m sort of making this up as I go along because I’m sure that some high-hatted Jewish historian would tell me I’ve got my head up my ass), but I thought ‘they seem to be related’. So I said to her ‘I want to do an installation in your museum on World AIDS Day. What I want to do is build a doorframe and I want to take a vial of my own blood and I want to put it on the door. And I’m going to call it *Blood on the Doorpost: The AIDS Mezuzah*’. And she began to cry. I said ‘why are you crying?’ and she said ‘it’s beautiful, we’re going to do it’. So we did it.



Albert Winn, *Blood on the Doorpost: The AIDS Mezuzah*, detail of installation, 1996.

Where was that again?

In Berkeley. Of course [laughs].

It’s a wonderful idea.

And I made some text panels that had those portions from Genesis where God says to Moses ‘smear blood on the door and I will pass over you’ and the part from Deuteronomy that says ‘fix it to your doorpost’. Then I called up a friend of mine who lives in Jerusalem, he teaches at The Hartmann Institute, and I said ‘you know, the problem I’m having with this is that it still smacks of victimisation. There’s this aspect here about sickness and I need to get beyond it, how do I get beyond this?’ And he said ‘read Ezekiel. There’s a line in Ezekiel that’s also used during the bris ceremony’. There’s this portion in there where Ezekiel says

'I saw you wallowing in your blood and I said to you "live, by your blood live"'. I thought 'that's fantastic'. Because here's this disease that's in the blood and instead of saying 'you're gonna die' it's saying 'look at your blood and live'. This is very empowering for a person with AIDS who's walking around with a disease in their blood. I felt it was empowering. So that's what I did. I put that up on the wall, ok? And let me tell you, the fireworks started going! It was unbelievable. I had a bunch of rabbis who wanted to try and excommunicate me, even though we don't have that in Judaism [laughs], people said I was desecrating a holy object. But I wasn't, it wasn't that object, it was a made-up object.

It was a new object.

Yeah. It was written about in a paper in London, it was written about in some paper in New York. Just slash and burn, I mean it got everybody excited. The sad part about it was that the people who responded to it positively didn't write about it. But that year, at Miami Beach, there was the Conference of American Jewish Museums. This is a big thing in the Jewish world. They had a plenary discussion on controversial exhibits and there were only two of them. One was Norman's *Too Jewish* show and the other was *The AIDS Mezuzah*. So it got all this controversy but where is it today? It's in my refrigerator. The vial of blood is in a Tupperware container in my refrigerator.

What about the doorframe and the panels?

They got dismantled. I have slides of it and they have them at Visual AIDS also. Other museums around the country, like the Jewish Museum in New York, were considering showing *The AIDS Mezuzah*. We all thought that it would be better to show it at Passover because that's what the blood on the doorpost thing is for. They had meetings about it, there were people who were so against it, 'we can't do this', 'it's too controversial', 'if we show it our donors won't give money'. Like I said, it's still in my refrigerator. I think maybe what I need to do is go out and take pictures of Zoe and Zachary [Albert's dogs] and colour them and sell them on cards.

Are your parents still alive?

No. Why?

You could do another series of them!

Well I did photograph them. I photographed my mother right before she died. I can show you those pictures.

What about the audience response to these? We've heard about the response from gallery owners and critics but do you have any sense of how the audience was responding to your work? Do you have any visitor's comments books or letters or anecdotal evidence?

I think that generally the people who see it respond to it well.

What does 'well' mean though?

What I notice is that a lot of people offer me their sympathy. They can't get any further than that.

But for some people that might be a long way from where they were before they entered the gallery.

That's possible. Like I said, there has been a fair amount of controversy. People just get upset, they don't know what to say. 'We shouldn't have to see these things'. The day that we were going to install the *Mezuzah* the director of the gallery came in and threatened to rip it down. I had to call the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] and they stepped in and said 'No, you can't do that. You cannot destroy it, it's his'. But other than that I really don't know what people's response to it is [laughs].

I've asked you that because I'm interested in this intersection between art and public health. I'm interested in what health implications there are in both making and viewing AIDS-related art in terms of the messages that people take home, people who don't have a lot of contact with the epidemic.

Well, I also presented the work last April at a conference on "Judaism and Healing," sponsored by the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (Los Angeles). The Kalsman Institute, directed by Rabbi William Cutter, is involved in public health in a variety of ways, particularly concerning Jewish issues, values, ethics and Jews involved in health care. There were also a lot of new age types there (at the conference) so that was already an audience that was primed to respond well.

What did you show there?

I showed them *My Life Until Now* and then I showed them the *Mezuzah*. [Inserted in corrected transcript: I also showed another work, a photograph for a tzedakah box. It's a digitized image in which I modelled myself after an image of a kibbutznik on an old Israeli 10 lira note.]

The people who responded most strongly to the work in a way that felt good, and I don't mean the touchy-feely feel good, were the academics who were there. But these are not people who are involved in the art world, these are people who teach at Hebrew Union College, the University of Judaism, the Jewish Theological Seminary, places like that. They teach Jewish ethics, all that kind of stuff. Those are the people who responded to it because they got it. I don't know how else to explain it. These are people who are concerned with how you deal with illness and come to grips with it in a religious way, how you understand suffering, illness and wellness. Those were the people who said that they found the work profound. Again, they're not able to do 'art speak' because that's not who they are. One instructor at Hebrew Union College, her name is Tamara Eshkenazi, who was a keynote

speaker at the conference, who obviously rewrote part of her lecture because in her lecture the next day, having never seen my work before, she spoke about the *Mezuzah* in terms of trying to understand certain things about Leviticus. I didn't understand much of what she was talking about, because what do I know about that stuff, but now I understand that she refers to it in her classes on a regular basis down at Hebrew Union College. The sad part about it is she couldn't remember the name of the artist. But a friend of mine who was in her class said 'hey Al, my professor was talking about your work but she couldn't remember who you were' [laughs].

Did you write her an email?

I need to do that.

She might invite you to give a guest lecture.

Yeah. So how does it intersect with public health? When the work is shown in this context it definitely intersects with public health but it's worrisome to me that I'm being ghettoised. The Centre for Jewish Healing, up in San Francisco, said that they want to show the work, which is great, don't get me wrong, but I knew that in the art world, as soon as I started injecting these Jewish elements into it, I was going to be ghettoised. But I also knew that in just doing work about having AIDS I was going to be ghettoised. The problem is they can't decide which ghetto they want to put me in. Is it 'gay', is it 'AIDS', is it 'Jewish'?

Is it 'long term survivor'?

Yeah.

You're kind of fortunate that you've got four different boxes to fall into. I've spoken to some artists and they feel very constrained that they have one category. They haven't been making work about AIDS for years yet they're still known as 'the AIDS artist'. And my presence didn't necessarily help because I was interviewing them about AIDS-related art!

That's different. Like I said, I went to Photo Fest this year, I went to Photo Americas up in Portland, I got accepted to review Santa Fe, and I only showed the camp pictures. I knew there was a buzz about the work; people were saying 'the reviewers are talking about your work'. I'd sit down at a table and the reviewer would say 'oh, I've heard about this work, I can't wait to see it'. And then silence. And I'd think 'what did I do wrong? What's happening out there?' People are being deluged with imagery, that's for sure, but it feels like 'maybe if we have an AIDS show we'll include you'. I just don't know.

I suppose in those situations your analogy with speed dating is probably accurate. You're going around the room meeting all these people, it's not really a good environment for them to get to know you and your work. People who speak the loudest and who look glitzy will often get the dates but they're not going to become the best partners. I don't think it's a testament to the quality of the work.

I think you're right, but I'd like to get some recognition before I'm six feet under [laughs].

I first encountered your work when it was in Australia in '93-'94.

Don't Leave Me this Way.

It was featured in the glossy catalogue from that show. That was an amazing exhibition. 130,000 people went through the gate. It was the biggest exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia, which is one of our premier galleries. It went for much longer than the normal six week show. I don't know how many catalogues they printed up, maybe 5-10,000 catalogues went out.

I know that catalogue is around but I'm still pissed off about that show.

Why?

Well, I really wanted a round trip plane ticket to Australia so that I could see those life guards and I didn't get to do that [laughs].

[laughs] You would have gone to Canberra, which is about 300km from the beach. There are no life guards in Canberra.

I'm just kidding. I've always wanted to go to Australia and I've never been there.

I think they brought some artists to Australia for that show. I know that some artists spoke at the opening, but it was three or four at the most.

That was really great and I was really happy and honoured to have been included in that exhibition. It was pretty amazing. Jan Zita Grover, who wrote one of the catalogue essays, lives up in Duluth now and she doesn't do photography anymore. She's now writing novels about fishing.

I read something about her, how she's become a semi-recluse and is now living the quiet life.

Apparently there is some sort of arts community up there in Duluth, which is way up north on Lake Superior. It probably doesn't get colder anywhere except maybe the North Pole. I think she has a girlfriend now, who is an artist or something. She writes and teaches and lives this completely quiet life.

Douglas Crimp has quietened down somewhat.

I don't even know where he is.

University of Rochester. It's interesting because these people were so active at the end of the eighties, firing off manifestos on what art should become and what sort of cultural response is required to the epidemic. I suppose new people take their places.

Well, like you said [prior to the recording beginning] about Sarah Schulman, things change and if you stay stuck you become like those people my age who are still walking around with pony tails [laughs]. If you're here in Hollywood and Los Angeles long enough you'll see these older people who are walking around in polyester suits and driving big old Cadillacs, their hair is done and all that sort of stuff. They haven't figured out that the heyday of the movies is over [laughs]. They're still back there. One of the reasons why you should go to my gym is to hang out in the locker room, just to hear the conversations of some of the old guys. 'Yeah, I worked on a picture with so and so'. They were probably, like, production assistants, but they're still back there [laughs]. It's time for them to move on but they can't. I have to admit, I'm not quite sure what to do either. I don't take as many pictures of us as I used to. It's one of the reasons why I started doing the summer camps. Because I needed to address the fact that things have changed. I'm now considered a long term survivor. What does that mean? It has a lot to do with memory. I don't think my life looks different from anybody else's nowadays. Ok, I still go to the doctor more often than most people, and I walk around with this very present danger. I don't know if the pills will stop working tomorrow. I don't know if I'll build up a resistance. But I don't know how that translates into photographs now. I keep thinking about writing more. I haven't done as much writing lately but I keep thinking that maybe that's where it really is.

Tell me more about why you started taking pictures of the Jewish summer camps.

Let's start with the fact that they're Jewish summer camps. I'm Jewish. I went to Jewish summer camps. It's a point of entry for me. It's out there in the ether somewhere and these ideas come at me sometimes. I hate to sound so mysterious about it. I thought, 'I wonder what camp looks like when you're not there'. That's something that was there since childhood. 'What does it look like when nobody is there?' Of course I never saw it. The other thing was that I came across Simon Schama's book *Landscape and Memory*. The title resonated with me. I felt like I didn't even need to read the book, I read the title and I got it. Although I did read the book. I was also aware that Jewish summer camps were becoming a thing of the past. It's not that people don't go to camp anymore, they go for two weeks, they go for a month, they don't go for the whole summer, for that entire summer away experience.

You were saying that you went from about age six to sixteen for two months at a time, and that it was entirely kids.

Of course there were adults around but it was entirely kids. Also, camps have been transformed now. They have computer camps, fat camps, camps that train you for taking the college boards and those kinds of things. It's not to go away and have a good time.

You've got to be productive at camp as well.

Right. I was thinking about this notion of the landscape as metaphor that Schama talks about in his book. Also, there was this other experience. We moved out here in '89 and for a number of years I didn't go back east, mostly because I wasn't well enough.

You moved here from New York?

We moved here from Boston but I had lived in New York for a number of years. I did go back to New York and I was walking around my old neighbourhood and even though the streets and the buildings looked familiar, nothing else did. I didn't see anybody I knew. New York has a changing landscape as it is, businesses and restaurants open and close, things change, that is the nature of the place. But I was used to walking around New York and always running into people that I knew. I also had a boyfriend who had died, to say nothing of many friends who had died, and I began to realise that the reason nobody looked familiar is that everybody had died. Sure, people moved, of course, but I began to think about the many people who had died. I would go to their apartment building to see if their name was still on the mailbox. And I got this idea that I would try to photograph the empty streets of New York, but have you ever tried to photograph in New York when it's empty? Unless you have a film permit to stop people from walking on the street you can't do it. And I didn't want to do one of those night time things, it seemed clichéd, it had been done a million times. I thought 'where else can I photograph that might have that same feeling of the pre-AIDS world, where there was a sense of community, a sense of creativity, of experimentation, a time of firsts'. I thought 'whoa, summer camp'. It fit all the categories.

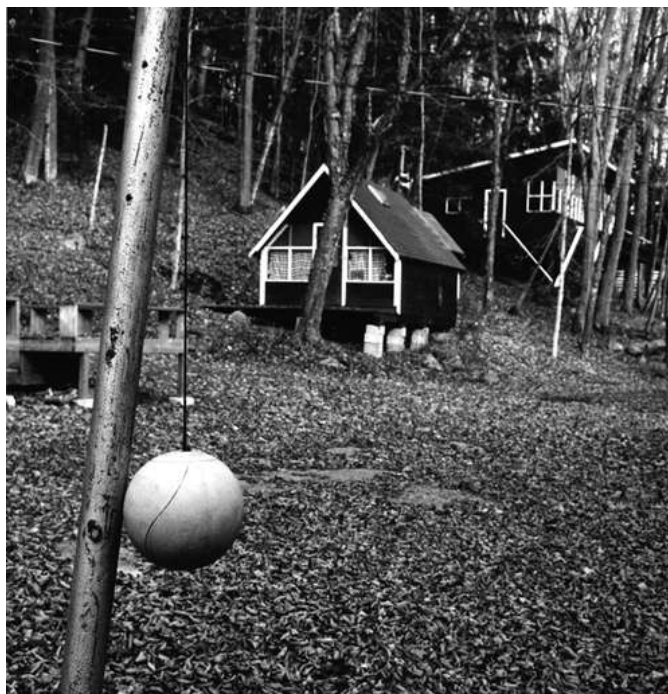
It was fun, sexual experimentation, drug use possibly, the first cigarette.

Yeah, or being in a play, you did art, you were in colour war competitions, you know the green team against the blue team. You have to be very careful when you say that term nowadays [laughs]! In camp people became things that they weren't at home. It was so interesting. The kid who might be a nerd in high school got to be in something at camp, they could shine. Maybe they went home and went back to being a 'whatever' but in camp you got to be somebody. Sometimes in camp you were a nobody also. You didn't get the lead in the play, you didn't get to be the star swimmer on the team or whatever. But there were possibilities. When you were at home with parents or at school with all its rigidity you couldn't have that. I'm certainly speaking personally. I did not have those opportunities when I was at school, I told you about my environment.

Anyway, I thought 'oh my gosh, I'm walking around New York and it feels empty to me. I should find these summer camps'. I knew that they were going out of business. I had seen one or two and I thought 'these are kind of haunting'. Then it began to fit together for me. Maybe these would address the idea not just of being a long term survivor, but of memory, of loss, and a place that once held a great deal of promise and hope but isn't there anymore. That's where those all came from. Yet again there is this element of sadness. Sometimes when I would talk about photographing summer camp, people would say 'why can't you show the kids having fun?' Well, there are ten gazillion snapshots of that already. Who needs that? That's not what this is about.

As you said, that doesn't speak to your experience in terms of HIV.

Exactly, I wanted it to speak very much to that aspect of HIV or AIDS, that there was this terrible loss. It's still going on, it's just hidden, it's just subtler now.



Albert Winn, 'Tetherball' from *Summer Joins the Past* series, silver gelatin print, 8" x 8", 2001.



Albert Winn, 'Bunk Beds' from *Summer Joins the Past* series, silver gelatin print, 8" x 8", 2001.

There's another resonance that comes through the pictures, especially the one with the wire beds, the metal framed beds. Given the starkness of it, there's a holocaust motif running through it; it's not a summer camp, it's a death camp image as well. Was that intentional? I mean, I don't know if I would have got that if I didn't know you were Jewish.

It is there and I don't deny it. Was it the point of the pictures? No. But did I think about it when I was doing the work? Yes. Again, this is another one of those things that gets thrown into the soup. Ask Scott about my soup making. I throw everything in, it usually tastes terrible. But sometimes I get it right. This is a topic that I think about a lot. After all, we're post World War II. There are things in our language that affect our minds. Whether we admit it or not, it's there, even if it's for a nanosecond. You say 'camp, boxcar, train'. You almost smack yourself for even thinking that because it's 2004, that [the holocaust] is ancient history. In your case, 'I live in Australia, I'm not even Jewish. Why do I think about this?' But we do. It's so much a part of us that you cannot shake it. I don't know how long it will be like that. It may be like that for several generations more, it might not, I don't know. So yeah, those thoughts were there. But from a Jewish perspective I also wanted the pictures to challenge that because I think there is a problem in the Jewish world, where a lot of Jewish cultural influences are framed in the notion of the holocaust. There's barely a city in this country that doesn't have a holocaust museum or memorial. That's fine, but is that the sum total of our experience? There is so much vibrancy, there is a richness to Jewish tradition, why is it that in the United States the holocaust is almost the most important thing? I wanted to make people ask why it is that when you see a black and white photograph of bunk beds and barracks you think of the holocaust. I wanted to challenge that. I wanted tension to happen. But I also wanted people to think about the fact that when AIDS first started, people thought about putting people with AIDS in concentration camps. William Buckley wanted us all tattooed. I wanted people to be reminded of that because I think that that can happen again. That can happen with other illnesses. It's not that I wasn't scared, also, after the attacks on the World Trade Centre but there was and still is a hysteria in this country, you know 'take all the Arabs or Moslems and lock them away'. These things are always there, to take the other and put them away. We did that with the Japanese. What has been interesting for me is to hear how people who are not Jewish respond to these pictures. That always makes me feel great. Because in some ways, with a Jewish audience, I've got them, because almost everybody went to camp, everybody gets it, they get the memory stuff. But my neighbour, her mother is from Vietnam or someplace where she had to flee and spend some time in an internment camp. She looked at the pictures and said 'my god, this reminds me of my mother's stories'. A camp in the Poconos in Pennsylvania makes her think of that. I thought, 'then the picture has been successful'. I've had a number of experiences like that. I think 'ok, they're working on different levels, that is what I want'. I think, as a photographer, that is what I want for all of my pictures. I don't want people to say 'I get it, let's move on', I want it to work on a bunch of different levels.

[Inserted in corrected transcript by Al Winn: Some of the pictures and a written essay appeared in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* (University of Pennsylvania), Fall 2004. And some

of the camp pictures appeared in *Zyzzzyva*, an art and literary journal out of San Francisco; so some of the work has gotten out into the world.]

I'm glad that you're getting that sort of response because in a way you are asking a lot of your viewers, especially in today's culture which, as you said, grew up in the mall. It's good that you trust your audience to be able to decipher these different levels of the picture.

You kinda have to do that. I have a friend who gets very upset when people don't interpret her work the way that she wants them to. The thing is, once you put it up on the wall you have to let go completely. People have often asked me "Don't you mind that people are looking at you naked? Don't you feel really exposed?" I say "You know what? The moment it goes up on the wall it's me but it's not me. It becomes whoever is looking at it". Sometimes you wish people got it better, but everybody is going to bring their own stuff to it. You have to let go of it.

OK, for the purposes of the recording: we are going to look through some of Albert's photographs, hopefully in some kind of chronological order, starting in 1989.

Can you talk about the intentions behind the work? Where did it come from? What was happening in your life that may have influenced your work? Can you remember anything about the exhibiting of the work and the responses of the audience, the critics, and the curator? The first image here is called *Psycho Drama*.



Albert Winn, *Psycho Drama*, silver gelatin print, 8" x 10", 1989.

This was from a series which I called *Psycho Drama*. I just thought the title was funny, I still think it's funny. I think I did these in 1988-89, definitely. I had just done a series of photographs of Scott and me in intimate positions. They were like 'body as landscape'. Those were done when Mapplethorpe was making a splash. He was showing these perfect bodies and, as I said before, I would look at this stuff and say 'That's not me. I don't see myself there. I don't have a perfect body'. That's when I started doing those. Then, when I did those, I still felt like there was something missing, because they were just body-scapes, 'body as landscape', and I wanted something that was more psychological because this is where I was beginning to go in my own mind. So I went downstairs to my basement studio, this was in Boston, and I guess I had seen some Duane Michaels and I wanted to do stuff, instead of being about a couple, seeing myself as a couple. These are double exposures. They're all done on one sheet of film, and one is slightly lighter and one is darker. I just wanted to act out these scenes of interacting as if I was two people, like a split personality, but I was two separate people acting out these scenes. I don't know if you've seen any of the others but there is a series of them, I can show them to you. Although I initially put them in a certain progression I discovered that you can rearrange them in almost any way you want to tell a kind of narrative, just from the gestures. I called them *Psycho Drama* in the sense that I was just acting something out. The term *Psycho Drama* comes from, I think, the '60s and '70s when there were these plays, some sort of pop psychology thing, where people got together and acted out their issues. So I called this, in this humorous way, *Psycho Drama*, because in a sense I wanted to make fun of all that but at the same time I wanted it to be about dealing with my own inner self. I showed these at the Museum School of Fine Arts in Boston and they were shown in a few other places but I can't quite remember. People were always intrigued by them because the real image is printed on a kind of ivory matt paper, it seems like it has a texture, and the wall in the background has a texture, so that they look a bit like a Roman or Grecian frieze. So in a way they are tactile, almost sensuous. I'm half naked and you can see the texture of the wall through the bodies and the cracks in the wall, so it has this old look to it. I think they're kinda cool.

Does it feel like a long time ago?

It does. I've used these for [Visual AIDS's annual show] *Postcards on the Edge*, several of them. They do feel a long time ago. It was before I was diagnosed. Aha, this next one is...

I love that image.

[laughs] I love this one too. You're missing one. This is the third part of the *Brothers Triptych* [1990]. There is a text piece that goes with this. The one that we're looking at here is of the three penises. No, the three penises is the second panel, the one after it is the third panel and it's of three men embracing. The panel that you don't have here is a photograph that my mother sent me of my two brothers and me seated on a piano bench in front of the fireplace in the living room of our home in Pennsylvania. When this piece was exhibited someone said 'This looks like a photograph of the royal family'. I said 'You mean we're that noble looking?' and she said 'Well, yes, you are that noble looking but it's not that. It's that the presentation is of the perfect family, the way that the royal family wants to be seen'. It is; it's a perfect photograph. These are three perfect little boys. Of course I look at that

picture and I know that according to what they thought was perfect there's an imperfection there: I'm the imperfection. The text piece, which I put on that photograph, was a little, almost like a journal entry, which said something to the effect that when I was little and my parents would go away in the evening my brothers would come into my room to try and educate me about sex. They would talk about what a man is supposed to do with a woman, or a boy with a girl, and describe in great detail how when men get excited their penises become engorged and they insert it into the vagina, all this sort of stuff. They did this because they felt that my parents weren't doing a good job educating me about sex. The truth is they were probably getting their own titillation out of it, but I didn't know that at the time. The only thing I did know is that while they were telling me these stories about what men were supposed to be doing with women I was imagining what I would be doing with another man. So you see the picture of the three little boys and then you see the three penises and then you see three boys embracing. I called it *Brothers Triptych* partly because I knew that this was something that my brothers and I would never engage in. Not only would we not be naked like this together but my brothers and I would never be seen even embracing like this. So in a sense it kind of speaks to a family that I always desired and never had, a family that was never possible for me, and I don't necessarily mean just in the homosexual sense, but even in the affection sense, because my brothers were never affectionate in this manner. It also spoke to my secret desires and to the sense that many gay people see other gay people as brothers, so it all kind of plays into each other.

I did this when I was a graduate student at Cal Arts. I showed it at the school. It caused an uproar because people thought that I was promoting homosexual incest, sex amongst siblings. That was kind of weird coming from an art school which prides itself on being not just on the edge but over the edge! It was up the year preceding my graduation and they actually asked me to take it down, which I thought was pretty amazing. I think I insisted that it stay up. The other place it was shown was LACPS [Los Angeles Centre for Photographic Studies] on Hollywood Boulevard. I don't think LACPS is there anymore. It was in a catalogue. It's interesting how the response was so jarring to people, even people who you would think wouldn't find it jarring, from an art crowd. Maybe it touched a nerve about brothers having sex with each other, this forbidden aspect of sexuality. I also think it was seeing these three penises up close in that fashion, and the different body types. This one guy has got flesh that looks like lava. What you can't see in this reproduction is that these guys had been playing with each other before I came along with my camera. They were in the woods and I said 'stop, I want to take your picture'.

[Following images: Albert Winn, second and third photographs from *Brothers Triptych*, 1990.]



So you just came across them? You didn't set this up?

No, I didn't set this up. I was in an environment where this wouldn't have been unusual. It was at something called a Radical Fairy Gathering and these people were running around naked doing all sorts of things. I was there because I knew that there would be great pictures. The guy in the middle had clearly been exited and there is pre-ejaculate dangling down from his penis, so it's pretty graphic. I don't think it's pornographic but it's right out there. Also, maybe people got upset by it, and I could be projecting here, because again I think people are used to seeing gay men in a very sexual sense, but not necessarily in an affectionate sense. There was this contrast from these little boys to these guys who were clearly in this kind of orgasmic state, but not erect, and then being affectionate. I think that kind of grabbed people, maybe not always in the right way, but it did. I could be wrong. I never really thought about it. To me it was always really funny.

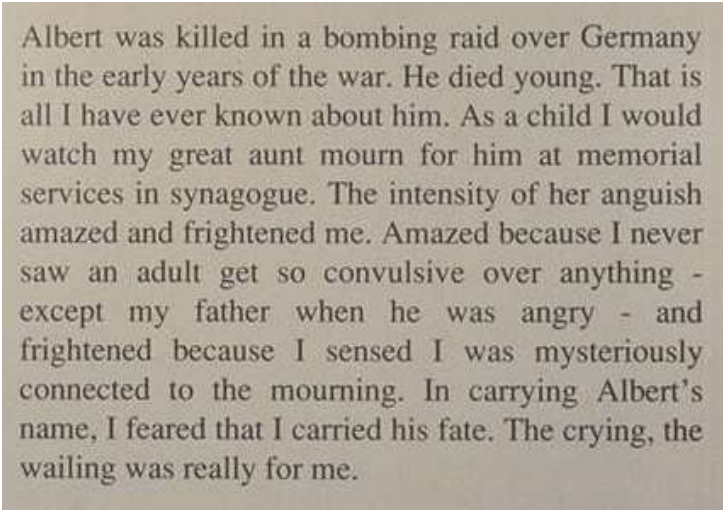
It must have been a bit scary at the time though; people saying that your work was about this when it had nothing to do with incest.

Right, but on the other hand it's that thing that we spoke about before: that once you put something on the wall people bring their own stuff to it. If this is what they're afraid of, if this is their desire, who knows what they see in it. For me part of it is that it's humorous. I had these pictures and as soon as I got that little photograph from my mother I went, 'I know exactly what I'm going to do with this, it's going to be hilarious'. Because in my real life this would never end up there, but I can make it happen in my photographic fantasy life. I thought that was really kind of funny.

Oh my god! [laughs] What we're looking at now is the panel called *My Name*. It's from *My Life Until Now* and it's from a longer story called *My Name*. I used this panel when I was making *My Life Until Now*. It's broken down into five stories and the first one is called *My Name* and it's about how I got my name and about the influence that I thought just being named Albert had on my life. Do you want me to read this?

No, that's alright. [See overleaf for an image of the text panel.]

You know what it is. When I did *My Life Until Now* what happened was I did the photographs first and it didn't seem like enough. It seemed that there was something missing. So I did the small series of photographs called *Diptyches*. Still that didn't seem like enough. That's when I realised it needed text, so I wrote these five small stories to flesh it out. I wanted people to get a sense that this was about a life, it wasn't only about someone who had AIDS and who, at that time, was expected to die very shortly. I felt that this panel, about being named after somebody who died young, related really strongly and in a sense almost set the stage for the rest of this life story.

A rectangular text panel with a light beige background and a thin dark border. The text is centered and reads: "Albert was killed in a bombing raid over Germany in the early years of the war. He died young. That is all I have ever known about him. As a child I would watch my great aunt mourn for him at memorial services in synagogue. The intensity of her anguish amazed and frightened me. Amazed because I never saw an adult get so convulsive over anything - except my father when he was angry - and frightened because I sensed I was mysteriously connected to the mourning. In carrying Albert's name, I feared that I carried his fate. The crying, the wailing was really for me." data-bbox="281 592 711 814"/>

Albert was killed in a bombing raid over Germany in the early years of the war. He died young. That is all I have ever known about him. As a child I would watch my great aunt mourn for him at memorial services in synagogue. The intensity of her anguish amazed and frightened me. Amazed because I never saw an adult get so convulsive over anything - except my father when he was angry - and frightened because I sensed I was mysteriously connected to the mourning. In carrying Albert's name, I feared that I carried his fate. The crying, the wailing was really for me.

Albert Winn, 'My Name' from *My Life Until Now* series, text panel, 1990-ongoing.

How long were each of those five stories?

Some are maybe two pages. Some are five pages, ten pages. These text panels are just a paragraph from each story. I did a reading of all the stories while the pictures were exhibited. Spoken word became a part of the exhibit.

Where was it exhibited?

First at Cal Arts because it was my thesis show. This is what I got my NEA [National Endowment for the Arts / Western States Arts Federation] fellowship for. So it was shown in Denver, Chicago, Minneapolis, St Paul, Boston, bits and pieces of it were shown in New York. Some other cities but I can't remember.

It would have gone to Canberra.

[Looking at another image.] There's no real title to this image. It's part of the *My Life Until Now* series. I don't know what else to say about it.

It's Scott looking at you. [See image overleaf.]

He's holding my right arm. It's got two band-aids on it from tests and things like that. It's in our old living room with decorations.

It says 'welcome home'. Had you just come back from hospital?

I'd been away but I hadn't been in the hospital. I can't lie. It had that sense about it because it was the first trip I had made since I was sick. I had been invited to Blue Mountain Center, which is an artists' retreat. I wasn't in the hospital but it seemed like I was in the hospital. I know that sounds strange. I was away for a month and it was an ordeal. Being at Blue Mountain was very lovely but it was the travelling and it was the first time I'd been away from home for that long and that far removed from doctors. There was a kind of intensity about it. It almost felt like I had been in hospital because there was this urgency about it, like "what happens if he gets sick and he's far away?" I'm talking about the sense of urgency. The Blue Mountain Center is way up in the Adirondacks (northern tier of New York). It's near nothing except Blue Mountain. Had anything gone wrong I don't know what would have happened. I couldn't have just hopped in a car and gone to Kaiser Hospital. I still had to have all my tests done when I came home, lots of tests, to catch up on what I had missed. The welcome home decorations were left over from the night before when I had got home because as soon as I got home I had to go for my check up. I had never gone that long without one.



Albert Winn, untitled photograph from *My Life Until Now* series, silver gelatin print, 20" x 24", c.1997.

The next one is another text panel from *My Life Until Now*.

It's from the story called *Café Figaro*. The stories were *My Name*, *Appendicitis*, *Hawaiian Aliyah*, *Aliyah* being a Hebrew word that means 'to ascend'. It's used when someone immigrates to Israel or when they get called up to read from the Torah; it's considered an honour. I called it *Hawaiian Aliyah* because the story is about how during the Six Day War I wanted to go to Israel and be a volunteer and my parents would have nothing to do with it so they sent me on a trip to Hawaii, where I ended up having sex with a man for the first time [laughs]. This word *Aliyah* has this connotation of being transformed, so I had my transformation in Hawaii. But this panel here is called *Café Figaro* and it's the fourth story. It's a story that is told in the present; the others are told in the past tense. This one sometimes uses the past tense in the language but it's very much in the present. It's about how I feel just finding out that I had been diagnosed. Where the other stories perhaps begin in the past tense this one begins with 'I am telling my friend'. It's right there in the present. So that's what this story is about.

[Looking at another photograph] This is another panel from *My Life Until Now* and it's me standing naked and Scott is in the background working on his computer. You can't see it in this reproduction but in the actual photograph you can see another photograph behind him of me looking at him. So there are these different layers.



Albert Winn, untitled photograph from *My Life Until Now* series, silver gelatin print, 20" x 24", c.1991.

If I remember correctly there are photographs on the mantelpiece or the bookshelf, or are they cards?

That appears in a number of the pictures from *My Life Until Now*. Again, it says more about our house keeping than anything else.

They're meant to be deeply symbolic, not a sign of domestic shambles!

[laughs] This is for all those art historians to decode, but for the artist it's all just prosaic. I can put it in context because I know what's going on there. The cards start with... Rosh HaShannah, which is in the fall, and the most recent card up there is like a birthday card in the spring, or Passover which is in the spring. So when I jokingly say they're about our housekeeping it's because we never bothered to take the stupid greeting cards down. There are Christmas cards, New Year's cards, Jewish New Year's cards. But it speaks to a sense of, not exactly depression or poverty, though that could be a part of it because we certainly weren't doing very well then, but it's like when you go into rural areas and you drive past these houses at night and even though it's summer or spring they still have the Christmas lights up. I remember when I was in boarding school in Maine I used to notice that. I asked people I knew why they did that and they said 'it's so depressed out here that they keep the Christmas lights up to add some aspect of cheer'. That's kind of like how it was for us. This was not necessarily a happy time in our lives. I was sick. I'd been diagnosed. We weren't going to parties. We were pretty much cut off from our families; I didn't get a lot of support from my family or from Scott's family. So you have to hold onto your joy where you find it. You leave these things up as reminders. That's what the cards are all about.

Why are you looking at him looking at you? Was that a visual pun?

In some ways a visual pun. In some ways this also spoke to our relationship. We were very much together but also, in some ways, in our own worlds. We weren't one of these clingy couples. Again, you [the viewer] may be thinking of certain stereotypes in the gay world.

If I were to call it anything I'd call it Self Portrait Standing Nude.

Why are you nude?

I knew you'd ask that question. I suppose at that time I felt that the nudity helped decode the fact that it was a gay household. If I'd been clothed we'd look like just roommates. This is not a situation that you'd necessarily see two straight men in, if one of them was stark naked. Maybe it adds this aspect of sexuality, that that's there too, and that these people are involved in a domestic relationship. All this stuff speaks of domesticity. So that's a lot of what the nudity has to do with it.

You could have just put a feather boa on the hat stand.

But that's not me.

This next one is called *Not in the Family Picture*. This picture is in the collection of the Jewish Museum in New York. It has been exhibited in New York and here in LA at the Skirball Museum. A lot of people seem to think that this is one of the strongest images I've ever made. It's not a particularly happy image, for me. The story behind it is that I was still very sick at the time. Scott was really intent on getting me some alternative treatment because nothing seemed to be working very well. He made contact with some naturopath, homeopath, different-path kind of treatment up in the northwest, in Oregon and Washington State. So we got this appointment with this, in quotation marks, "doctor". This was a time when people were going around doing these alternative treatments. She was in Seattle. We went up there and when we got up there this person, who seemed to be so interested in my welfare, turned on us. She started laying into me. First of all she had said that we could stay there but when we got there she basically made it clear that there was no room at the inn. She sort of didn't want any men in her house. It seemed that there were only women staying there. It wasn't a lesbian kind of thing, it just seemed like a sister solidarity thing. It was very weird. She let us stay one night but she was clear that it wasn't going to happen any other night. She also laid into me for being a victim, which was clearly not my take on it. She also made this ridiculous claim that the virus could be cured in a petri dish with aspirin so clearly there was no reason for people to be so sick and dying, and I should just get over it. This was a part of her alternative treatment I guess, a slap in the face.

So I had a brother at the time who was living in Seattle and I had never been to his house. I had never been invited. In all the years that I was sick I think I spoke to him maybe once. I had never spoken to his wife. Boy, this is a real confession. I called him because we needed a place to stay and we knew nobody and we were travelling on a shoestring. I said 'we're in Seattle, can we come over and stay?' and they said 'yes'. So we went over and I walked into

their house and in their breakfast room/family room they had all these photographs of everyone in the family. My other brother, his wife, their children, parents and grandparents, except guess who? I found this picture of my two brothers and their wives and their children on vacation. They had all gone on vacation together. And over the years, even when I was a child, I always felt that I had been excluded from family events, particularly from my brothers' events. They did things together but I was never a part of that. But then as I got older I used to get inklings that there were these family gatherings but I was never included. I would ask my mother about it and she'd say 'nobody planned that, it just happened accidentally'. Like it just so happens that the people from Seattle ended up in Florida with my other brother for Thanksgiving. 'It just happened, we didn't arrange it'. I used to think 'how stupid do they think I am?' So we get to Seattle and I see this photograph and here's hard evidence. Not only did these people go on vacation, not only did we not know about it, we just weren't invited. I needed to make this picture because I needed to validate that it happened, validate my feelings about it, that this was not my own craziness, a feeling of 'oh woe is me, little gay brother left out', that this was not my imagination. The other way was to kind of correct it. In a sense – I hate to use the word but it's the only one I can think of right now – it was a way of empowering myself. I have the power, I'm putting myself next to it, I'm taking this picture, I'm making a statement of what it is. I think that message comes across to people when they see it.



Albert Winn, *Not in the Family Picture*, silver gelatin print, 20" x 24", 1993.

So you took that photograph while you were visiting with your brother in Seattle?

Yeah. I just sat down and I took it.

How did the visit go?

It was pleasant enough. Everybody's polite. But it was the first time I'd ever been there.

Were you invited again?

I never went back. I never saw it the house again. They don't live there anymore.

So when do you think your brothers started acting strange and secretive?

I think it happened when I was an infant.

But you're sort of saying that this has something to do with homosexuality and you didn't come out to them until much later on.

It's hard to say. I've talked about this many times with therapists. They've often felt that there's probably some sort of deep seeded homophobia within the family and that at a very young age they noticed there was something different about me. It was something that went unnamed. Maybe this happens in all families, particularly in families where they're all boys; but I was ridiculed terribly for being a little girl, for being effeminate. I didn't think that I was. There wasn't anything I recall doing that made me appear or act effeminate, but I seem to have been ridiculed for that quite a lot. Maybe there was something about me. I don't know. But what I do know is that somehow I felt really different from them. I felt this separateness. But there was also a separateness that went on that was not just about that. It was all sorts of things. My brothers were born almost ten and five years older than me. I always say that our family is divided into two sections: World War II and post World War II. I'm the post and all of them are the rest. They are like a different generation from me completely. I think that we're closer now but not really close. I don't know if they've gotten over their uncomfortable-ness, or if they would even admit to it. If they ever heard or read this they'd probably be extraordinarily angry at me for being so honest, or at least expressing my point of view. But I think that they seem to be less uncomfortable around me than they did in the past, but they could just be politically correct, like so many people are nowadays. People don't openly voice their racism or their phobias because nobody wants to be labelled a bigot. I don't think that they are that way, I think it's really harsh to criticise them that way. But I think there's definitely an aspect of being uncomfortable around it and around me.

Because they've had that discomfort they haven't been able to give you the support that you really needed in terms of your illness as well?

I think that's part of it. I don't know if the truth can ever be known. This is just how I see it from my side. I just know that Scott and I went through this by ourselves. There was the rare phone call. It's a very touchy subject just bringing this up but I may as well. We had no money. We needed help. We weren't the type to necessarily say 'we need a loan, we need something'. But at the same time nobody ever offered us anything. Clearly we weren't doing well. I couldn't work, I was sick, and Scott had these really low level jobs. Here's a guy who went to MIT and when he got out here there was a recession and he took a job as a typist, he was doing temp work. We just didn't have much and nobody picked up the phone and said 'What can we do to help you? We know you need help. It's clear you need help'. Short of us

saying 'We need help. Give us something' it was clear from the lives we were living that we needed help. But it wasn't there. So that's what this picture brings up for me.

So you think that Scott could almost take a picture similar to that one as well?

Probably. His situation with his family is different from mine. I wouldn't want to talk about that. It's better for him to talk about that.

What's the next one? This one we've already spoken about. It's called *Akedah*. *Akedah* is the term in Hebrew that signifies 'the binding of Isaac'. I made this photograph after coming back from one of my regular blood tests at UCLA. At the time I was enrolled in a protocol for an experimental AIDS drug, I can't remember exactly which one. There's a text piece that goes with this. *Akedah* refers to the binding and of course my arm is bound in tefillin. The story is about the attempted sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, then an angel intercedes and Isaac is spared. I felt like I was trying to make sense out of this chaos I was living in, make sense of the insanity, make order out of chaos of living with this illness, so that when they would bind my arm every morning to take my blood out the only way I was able to make sense out of it when they put the tourniquet on my arm was to imagine that it was actually the tefillin, to see those same kinds of things. That way I was able to retain my sanity during this particular time. This picture is in the Jewish Museum collection in New York, it's in the Library of Congress in D.C., several others also, the Light Work collection in Syracuse. I know it's in some private collections. It also garners a pretty strong response. I can't remember anything critical that's been written about it.

It's in your living room upstairs and when you walk in the door it's one of the first things that you see. What do your friends say when they first see it?

It was also in the LA County Museum art show, called Made in California. That was their blockbuster millennium show. Many museums in the country were having millennium shows during the year 2000. It was also in the catalogue of the Made in California show, so I'm really happy about that. It's hanging there [on the wall of the room] because I'm really proud of this picture because it means so much to me, and that it was in the LA County Museum art show and that it's in the museums that it's in. I don't know what people think of it. People look at it and they're just quiet. A lot of people who don't know that it's tefillin – I think the English term is phylacteries – often assume, since they know that all my work is autobiographic, that I was a drug addict. I find that really interesting. The other thing that people think about it, knowing that I'm gay, and they can see that these are leather straps, is they associate it with the S & M leather sub-culture. I did think so much of those things when I made the picture. Again, they were those nanosecond type thoughts that go into it. You think 'I can play with this. This can be a little bit funny'. Because what is this leather binding thing that's going on in Judaism? Is there a bit of leather culture stuff happening there, what is that all about? Of course religious people would find that horrifying but I'm looking at it from a postmodern perspective. I don't know. The other thing that people always wonder about is the bloody band aid right there in the crook of my arm.

I think that's where the drug thing looks most evident. That it's covering a drug mark, a bad hit, or something.

Right. To me it was more that it's 'in the blood'; the illness. Also, even though you can obviously convert to Judaism there's this sense that it's 'in the blood'. This is how you remember the tribe. But also just the irony, the humour of what happens if you put the tefillin on too tightly and you pop the vein. I just began to let my mind go everywhere with this.

Something I wanted to say to you is that even though in my photographs I have this blank look on my face to me a lot of them are very funny. I see humour in them. Maybe it's a perverted sense of humour, but I get this little zap of 'I think this is kinda funny'. Like, 'Wouldn't it be funny if I was to take off my shirt and put on tefillin with this bloody band-aid. Isn't it just a little bit sacrilegious?'

A bit naughty?

Exactly.

You're sort of equating Jewish culture as being another subculture. Jews might be horrified to be put up against sub-cultures of leather and IV drug use, but it's an interesting play.

I don't know if you can say 'up against'. Yes, some people would take exception to the fact. I think a lot of Jews don't want to think of themselves as a minority, but we are. And we're becoming even smaller. And I'm not helping it any [laughs]. But we are a sub-culture. Those are the facts. A lot of people don't want to acknowledge that. Yeah, I think you can see that in there, I wouldn't argue against that. I don't know if I've really thought of it that way.

We were talking before about this intersection between art and public health. You're strapping your arm up and making a picture out of it to help you cope with a stressful situation. You said your life was chaotic, you were finding it difficult to go in and give these blood tests. You've turned to your camera to help you make sense of that, to deal with that, and to make you laugh. Is that maybe an example of art intervening in health and helping you deal with an unhealthy situation?

You could almost say 'is it art therapy?' Maybe it is in a way. Definitely it does intersect. I'm not one of those people who wants to put up walls and say 'this is art therapy and that is art'. If these things work, and they all work together, then fine. There was this controversy a few years ago, mostly around Arlene Croce, the dance critic for the *New Yorker*. She reviewed a dance piece by Bill T. Jones [called *Still/Here*, which utilised HIV-positive dancers] and she called it 'victim art'. I don't know her from a bunch of beans and I'm certainly not in that world. But the truth is, I think she's full of baloney. I personally think that when people make those kinds of statements - I don't care how elevated they are in the literati - they need to turn around and look at their own prejudices. You could say that

about paintings of Jesus. Ok? But those are in the most prominent places of the most prominent museums in the world. So what was wrong with Bill T. Jones doing that dance piece about Arnie Zane? A similar criticism was made about my Mezuzah piece. Not by her but by somebody else from some other conservative magazine. He said 'It's not art. If people want to make something of their personal tragedies,' or something like that, 'if it helps them, fine'. It [the review] was the most condescending piece of junk. Totally dismissive, like, 'this isn't art'. Who is that guy to make a statement like that? Just because he's got a good job as an art critic?

Croce's difficulty is that, if she is to review an AIDS work, it is a catch-22 situation. How can she say she doesn't like it, or that it's a bad piece of art, when someone's life is invested in it and they're trying to speak about a personal experience? For her to give it a bad review, or – she would say - to be objective, she is going to trample on something that is very personal. I think that's what she was getting at in that piece. If I remember she was saying that a reviewer's job in terms of looking at AIDS art is really difficult.

Fine, you can say that it's difficult and you can say that maybe it didn't work for you because of x, y and z. But I think to turn around and call it 'victim art' is not fair.

She didn't go and see it either.

On top of it all. And the reviewers who said that about mine didn't go and see my work either.

They set themselves up then, don't they?

Right. Go see it, look at it, and critique it. I mean, I showed my work at Cal. Arts when I was a student and trust me at Cal. Arts there's lots of blood letting during critique sessions. You're lucky if you can walk out of there on your own two feet sometimes. I could always tell who was saying nice things because somehow they felt sorry for me. But you know what, that didn't make me feel better. I wanted real feedback on my work. I was trying to make good work, whatever that meant. I wasn't going for sympathy. I don't know Bill T. Jones, and I didn't see his piece, but I don't believe for a minute that he was just going for sympathy. I think that she could have gone and seen it and critiqued it. She could have said that it doesn't work for this reason and that reason. It's valid to do your own personal story, but maybe it has to be done in a way that other people can relate to. I have often fought this battle with my work and I don't know if it works all the time. When is it just plain old self-indulgence? I had long talks about this with one of my mentors, Catherine Lord, she's now at UC Irvine. I often had long talks with her about this. When is it just self-indulgence? Is it so personal that it's not accessible to anybody? Maybe in those days people didn't want to acknowledge it but I think that what AIDS has done for many people (some people would say this is not so good and some would say it's a good thing), is that we have all experienced illness and suffering in our lives, so if his dance piece allows the viewer to experience their own stuff through that then it's accessible. Yes it was specifically about Arnie Zane and their

relationship, dying, illness and whatever, but if it can be accessible to someone who has had, say, breast cancer, if it's in a sense personal but universal, then I think it's successful. I just don't buy into the argument that it's victim art.

Can you tell me about other experiences you might have had of viewing works such as Jones' dance piece? You were saying before that you saw Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* when it first played in New York at the Public Theatre. Can you remember other instances of seeing AIDS related artwork, be it theatre, dance, film other art pieces that moved you to think about the epidemic in a different way and to think about your responsibilities within the epidemic, about race, gender, class and other issues to do with HIV?

That's a lot. Probably in almost all of those things you'd have to look at each one of them individually. But if you look at them generally, the first way I related to those pieces – *The Normal Heart, As Is, Angels in America* – is that in many ways I was able to say 'that's me up there on the stage. They're talking about my life'. That always feels very good because it's validating, you don't feel that you're alone. I think when something does that, it allows you to get out of yourself because if all you feel is that you're alone then all you're going to do is stay very protective, you're not going to go out into the world. When you see yourself up there, and of course the work is written and performed by people who are not you, then you know that somebody else has this experience and they understand your experience. It allows you to go out into the world. I've heard people refer to me as an AIDS activist and when they say that I look behind my shoulder, like 'are they talking about the guy behind me?' But I think what it does, if nothing else, if you hand out leaflets or work for an organisation or become aware that AIDS affects other genders, races and classes, it helps you to be more open and not keep your life a secret. That's activism. To me that's the strongest form of activism. I'm not just talking about having AIDS. I think the strongest form of gay activism is just being upfront, in your normal life, about yourself. I honestly and truly believe, don't get me wrong, I think that all the gay organisations in the world are doing great jobs, but I think the most effective gay rights organisation is each and every individual who tells their friends and their relatives, 'I'm gay and guess what? I'm just like you'. That's the biggest and strongest thing, because that's what makes somebody else think 'oh maybe I've misjudged these people because I know my cousin so-and-so and he or she is gay and he or she has AIDS' or whatever. 'If we have laws against them then I'm discriminating against my own loved ones'. So I think that's how those things help to create activism. I'm not sure if that really answers your question. I can tell you that when I do see those things it does inspire me to go back and do more work. But I think that's always true. It's very hard as an artist to be creative by yourself. You need stimulation.

Talking with artists for several weeks has almost inspired me to pick up a camera or pick up paints.

You may have inspired me to go for a PhD. You may also have inspired me to get my head examined [laughs].

And not to agree to anymore interviews.

[laughs] Right.

Did you see *Philadelphia* when it came out?

Yeah. I thought 'great, too little too late'.

It came out in 1993.

I can't remember, but there was something about the end that really bugged me. I think it may have been how it was all tied together in that nice Hollywood way. Doesn't the homophobic lawyer transform himself somehow?

He overcomes his prejudice.

Right. The world is somehow perfect, but doesn't Tom Hanks die in the end?

There's a death bed scene in the hospital with his mum and dad holding his hand and his gay partner on the other side holding his hand.

Yeah, it's almost like the holy family. It's very Christ-like. I suppose he had to die in the end but at the time it came out people were beginning to live longer. It also spoke to that thing about what do they do with gay people in Hollywood movies? They always kill them off. What do they do with people with AIDS? They kill them off. It was too late.

What about the AIDS Quilt? Have you been to an unfolding of the Quilt?

We were at the one in Washington.

There was a really massive one.

Yeah, we were at that one. There's a part of me that doesn't quite get it, I have to admit. There's a part of me that finds that whole thing naïve. This kind of homey, folksy, 'I'm gonna sew a quilt for my deceased friend'. What does that do for them? You could say that it memorialises them, but it seems a little too new agey, feel goody, whatever. On the other hand once you see that thing its mammoth. It is kind of breath taking. But one of the reasons it's mammoth is that the panels on that thing are huge.

They're the size of a cemetery plot. Six feet by three feet.

Right. Again that makes it seem like this quilt covering earth, keeping those dead people warm, because that's what you do with quilts. It's nice on that level and kind of breathtaking. I don't want to sound like Arlene Croce. Maybe it's because my tastes don't go in that direction so I'm a little reluctant to be strident about it. I like crafts. I like really well

made textiles and handicrafts and things. But sometimes I found it so folksy, so homey, that they seemed kitschy to me. I hated that feeling because here was someone who died of the same disease that I have. I felt like I was cursing in the synagogue or something. So I quickly just went on to the next panel. I think the amazing thing about it is that because each one is the size of a cemetery plot it blanketed the area. The problem was they didn't make it well known enough that each panel was the size of a cemetery plot. A lot of people didn't know that. When you have that information it becomes like a punch in the stomach. But then the other part is 'why aren't there more panels?' Because far more people died than the whole Quilt entails.

Can you remember other people looking at the Quilt?

People were in tears. That's what I remember. They had that reverence that people have when they're at cemeteries. You know when you go to cemeteries and you see people looking from one grave to another, maybe looking for a dead relative, or the way that people go through old cemeteries and read the tombstones? You know how older tombstones say things like "beloved so and so taken from us at a tender age", "died of the influenza of 1918" that kind of thing? That's what I remember. Of course I remember running across the names of people that I knew. That was pretty amazing.

It's interesting that you're describing it as a cemetery. I always think of it as a war memorial. You know those descriptions of people crying but also being silent and solemn.

When I said "going through a cemetery" it was, in a sense, like going through one of those war cemeteries. The fact that it's in Washington where you have Arlington National Cemetery within view of where it was displayed and you're so close to battles of the Civil War. I definitely felt that.

So you've never made a panel yourself?

No. I can barely sew on a button.

From what I've seen of some of the panels you don't need to know much about sewing. A bit of black felt marker pen is enough, or attach a teddy bear with sticky tape.

The other thing is I'm not so sure if a Quilt is the appropriate memorial for some of the people that I knew who died from AIDS. I know I don't want a quilt made for me when I die. Make one for me now so I can use it.

That might also answer your question about why there isn't a panel for everyone who has died of AIDS in this country. Maybe their friends and their lovers decided that it's not for them. Maybe they didn't like the Quilt itself, maybe they didn't like the way it

was displayed and what it stands for, or maybe it just doesn't sum up their personality.

Right.

Let's turn back to the pictures again. You're going to have to pronounce this one for me.

This is called *Hanukkiot*, which is Hebrew for 'menorah'.

Earlier in the interview, we were talking about the medicine bottles stacked up against the candles.

They're basically arranged as if they are a menorah themselves. These are Hanukah menorahs, so there is going to be nine candles: four and four and then one in the middle. If you count this out there are eight pill containers. The thing about the Hanukah menorah is that you've got eight candles that mark the eight days of Hanukah. Then you've got one that is slightly separate, sometimes higher, sometimes lower, and it's called the Shamus and you light that candle first every night. It's in a sense called the guard candle and it's used to light the other candles. In this case the way I counted it there were eight pill containers and in a sense the Shamus is the glass of water because you need the glass of water to take the pills. It addresses that thing of ritual that we spoke about earlier.

It's a funny kind of image as well.

Right. I could have called it *Menorahs* and people would have understood it better but I chose to use the Hebrew *Hanukkiot*, maybe because I lived in Israel and I like to use the Hebrew for the holiday when the picture was taken.

I think the image is explicit anyway.

I think so.

This next one we also spoke about in terms of ritual. It's the Friday evening blessings over the candles, the bread and the wine. But in this case I'm holding my pills, my protease inhibitors at the time. As I said before it's inspired somewhat by Renaissance religious paintings of the stigmata where often you have the saint or Jesus holding their hand out to show the nail holes or the stigmata or something, but here I'm holding the pills out because in a way they're my stigmata. Also, people have looked at this and noticed Scott holding his hands over his eyes. You hold your hands over your eyes when you make the blessings over the candles. The idea being that you light the candles just before the Sabbath begins. You hold your hands over your eyes such that after you've said the blessing the Sabbath officially begins. When you take your hands away the first thing you see are the lights of the Sabbath. I was using that kind of reference also. The first thing he will see when he takes his hands away is these pills but in a sense he's saying a blessing over these pills to tie in an

aspect of holiness, in a way. Some people have said that it looks like he doesn't want to see, that he's in denial somehow. And I go, 'yeah, you're talking about yourself' [laughs]. 'You're not talking about him, that's not him at all'.

It's hard though if you're not aware of that Jewish ritual. I mean I wouldn't know why he's got his eyes covered.

But if he's wearing a kippah (yarmulka) you understand that it's a ritual. His thoughts, in a way, are kind of unimportant. What you understand is that there's some sort of sacred moment going on. Taking the pills really is a kind of sacred experience. I have to think of it that way because I'm putting it into my body and I'm wanting it to work. I think you would understand that also, in terms of being a Catholic. I mean when you take communion it's transubstantiation. You really do believe that that is the body and the blood of Christ. You take that into your body and that becomes a part of you. That's a profound statement of faith. Because if you think of it, it's crazy, right? But it's a profound expression of faith and I think that's what happens when you take pills. You think "I have to believe that these are going to work".

They bring new life.

Right.

This is a tiny text panel. This is my favourite. I really like this one. It's the one where you're about to have the operation and you're lying on the table.

Really? That's your favourite? That's so interesting.

'The Anaesthetist' [from the story *Appendicitus*].

Which I think I've misspelled.

Well I can't say it.

Good [laughs].

"The anaesthesiologist is about to insert a needle into my arm. One of the nurses asks me if I knew what it was. I didn't really. She told me it was truth serum and that while I was asleep she was going to find out all about my sex life and my girlfriends". You're terribly self-conscious because hovering over you is your father and your two elder brothers and you've been shaved. I just thought that was so cruel.

There's something sort of Dr. Mengele about it [laughs].

It's kind of funny and innocent. She thought she was cracking a great gag but you would've been terrified.

I remember being completely terrified because the rest of the story is that there is my father, who is a doctor, my brother, who is a medical student, and the second one who is about to become a medical student, in this hospital where everybody knew my father and our family and they were going to operate on me. They were going to find out about my sex life and girlfriends with this truth serum and during my sleep I was going to talk about how all I really wanted to do was sleep with a man, ok? Bingo! I thought, “they’re never gonna take that truth serum out of my arm, they’re going to put me to sleep until I’m dead”. I would be this total, humiliating embarrassment to my entire family.

Can you remember what age you would have been?

I think I was fourteen. Yeah.

What was the operation for?

They said it was appendicitis. I don’t know if this is true, I only have to believe that it’s true. There was a time when they did something called exploratory surgery. Things were wrong and they didn’t know what was wrong. I don’t think they do that anymore because they have ultrasounds and whatever. As I described to you before, I was in a school setting where I was extraordinarily unhappy. I think it’s quite common for kids, maybe at a younger age than this, that when they can’t express what’s wrong with them – their unhappiness – they begin to manifest abdominal pain. “Mommy my tummy hurts”, when in fact they just don’t want to go to school or they’re being bullied or what have you. I really hated going to school. I was terrified everyday, I was unhappy, I had no friends, I was confused, not just about school. When you’re fourteen you hear other guys talking about what excites them and it’s not what you’re getting excited about. What you’re getting excited about is hearing that they’re getting excited. That’s confusing at best. I would do anything to not go to school. Anything, including flunk. And I did have problems with a lot of subjects at school. To this day I still have problems with math and I still confuse words and get letters mixed up. I probably had some sort of dyslexia, I don’t know. I learned to cope. Certainly it was in the days before they diagnosed those kinds of things. I was diagnosed as lazy. That was the big thing in those days. “He’s just lazy. He’s not motivated”. What nobody wanted to admit was that I was so unbelievably unhappy and it never seemed to occur to anybody to move me to a different school. So that’s what that piece is about. I can still remember to this day. It’s so interesting that this is one of your favourites. That’s fine because it’s meant to be funny as well as being kind of jarring. The one that everybody seems to respond to the most is the girl jumping of the cliff. Did you ever read that one?

No, not yet.

I watched a girl kill herself once. That was pretty weird. This is when I lived in Israel. Have you ever heard of Masada?

No.

Masada is this mountain where Herod had a palace. It's out in the desert overlooking the Dead Sea. During the Roman period, 73 AD, there was a revolt against the Romans and when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem there was a group of zealots who took refuge in this mountain. It's a sort of mountain that stands by itself, it's got a flat top. They took over this place, it's called Masada, and then the Romans put a siege on it to destroy the last remaining Jewish rebels. And that was the end of the Second Jewish Commonwealth, which began the "great Jewish diaspora". And so it became a scene of martyrdom. Rather than submit to the Romans after they were starved out, and they knew they'd all be sold into slavery or murdered or whatever, there was a mass suicide. I don't know how many people. One or two people survived and hid to tell the tale. When the Romans went up there they were shocked that all these people had killed themselves. Maybe they had been killed by their leaders, this stuff gets messed up in history, told and retold to be politically correct at a particular time. But it's not uncommon, just like the Golden Gate Bridge or the Brooklyn Bridge, as a place for people to commit suicide. So at the time I was living in this little town in the desert and I had done a night hike from my town to Masada. Then I would get up early and hike up the mountain to see the sun rise. I got there and the sun was just coming up and I was about to begin my ascent and I heard the tinkling of rocks and I looked up and I saw this girl up there. She just jumped off the side of the cliff. I won't tell you the whole story, you can read it, but the reason I included it in *My Life Until Now* is that when you're younger, and maybe even not, sometimes you experience things in your life and they just become events. Wow! I just saw somebody kill themselves! Wow! I just saw an automobile accident! It's just an event. Then something happens to you years later and you think about it. For some reason that thing comes back to you. Before it didn't make sense, or it was just a punctuation, a period in time, and then suddenly it fits into the context of your life. Not so suddenly, maybe thirty years later, it fits into the context of your life. The whole point of this was that I was somehow able to make sense of this girl's suicide once I was diagnosed with AIDS. The correlation is that in my case maybe I jumped off the edge of a cliff but didn't know it. Maybe she thought she could fly. In the case of AIDS you go and have sex with somebody and maybe that to you, because you're young and inexperienced, is like flying. What you don't realise is that there's a crash landing. That's how I try and fit these things together.

Has *My Life Until Now* ever been displayed as a whole?

At the time it was shown as a whole, but now there's more to it, so no. Periodically it gets added to. I'm not sure that I actually saw it as a whole piece. As things go on it begins to feel more of a piece. Do you want to see some pictures?

Yes please.

Ok. What do you want to see?

It's interesting that you mentioned the Golden Gate Bridge. When Elliot was taking me for a drive across the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco there was a police

chopper sweeping back and forth probably looking for someone that had jumped. He said that was the common thing, to send out some kind of search.

They do it even before they've done it, when they see someone who's acting suspiciously. They think that just having the helicopter there will frighten them away from doing it.

[Looking at a picture.] This is from one of the original works but this was much larger in the original piece. This is *Skin Rashes*. This was something I had done but never printed. I decided not to include it in the original body of *My Life Until Now*.

Are these bottles here to treat the skin rash?

Yeah.

Did anything work?

No. Going off that particular medicine worked. Then they had to put me right back on it.

I think this is the one that's upstairs, it's huge.

[Al and Paul spent the last five minutes of the interview looking at pictures. Only the most pertinent comments have been transcribed below.]

Would you call yourself culturally Jewish rather than religiously Jewish?

I would say so. We observe certain holidays but we're not synagogue goers. I would like to be in a way but we don't live close to the synagogue that I like.

What's stashed in these hanging baskets?

Fruit, vegetables, seaweed.

Things to keep you healthy.

Yeah.

Does Scott like being photographed?

He doesn't [laughs]. Just ask him.

How long does it take to set up a picture like this?

You don't want to know. About half an hour, minimum.

Scott would have to be involved all of that time?

Sometimes I try and get him in at the last minute. The thing is I'll say "look, I want you to stand here because I'm gonna focus here but you're not gonna stand there, I'm gonna stand there. You're gonna stand over there but you're gonna have to stand here while I focus. Put your arm up, put your arm down..." At this point he goes "Al, I'm tired of this. I want a divorce" [laughs].

These are taken with time elapse?

No.

[End of interview]

If citing this interview please use the following:

Albert Winn interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Los Angeles, 25 May 2004, *The Art of AIDS Prevention*, <http://www.aidsart.org/#!vstc1=winn>; accessed <insert date>