

Fowler

MUSEUM AT UCLA

Through Positive Eyes

September 15, 2019–February 16, 2020

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The first time I dressed as a woman I felt I was another person. My gestures no longer provoked laughter. I don't care any longer about the way others react. I am a person who matters. –Ilsa, Mexico City, Mexico, 2008.



After being diagnosed as a child, I grew up thinking that it was impossible for me to have a child of my own. I failed to plan for my future because I honestly couldn't imagine having one. –Lynnea, Los Angeles, United States, 2011.

To help end the stigma around HIV/AIDS and empower people from around the world who are living with the virus, a new exhibition at the Fowler Museum at UCLA will highlight the stories and images of HIV-positive individuals and their perspectives on the epidemic.

The exhibition is cocurated by David Gere, UCLA Professor of World Arts and Cultures, who, with photographer Gideon Mendel, co-founded *Through Positive Eyes*, which is an art project and an exhibition created in collaboration with people living with HIV/AIDS.

Launched in 2007 by [UCLA's Art & Global Health Center](#), *Through Positive Eyes* puts cameras in the hands of the people most deeply affected by HIV to create personal photo essays. Entering its 12th year of intensive photography workshops, regional public exhibitions, and now, a touring global exhibition, the endeavor coalesces around one core tenet: a belief that challenging stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS is the most effective method for combating the epidemic.

“Stigma grows out of fear, which prevents people from getting themselves tested and treated,” said Gere, who is director of the UCLA Art & Global Health Center. “By seeing these photographs and reading the accompanying stories, we can overcome fear and recognize our common humanity. That’s what *Through Positive Eyes* is all about: banishing stigma. It is the most important thing we can do to stop the epidemic.”

The exhibition features photography, video, sculpture, and live storytelling components to reflect the lives of 130 participants from 10 cities where workshops were held: Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Mumbai, Bangkok, Port-au-Prince, London, and Durban. Participants in each city generated a cohesive body of work that is simultaneously expressive and activist—intended to dissolve distrust and fear of people living with HIV/AIDS.

The primarily autobiographical works on view conjure a broad picture of the epidemic—ranging from everyday imagery of relationships, bodies, and hobbies to more abstract meditations on joy, grief, solitude, and resilience—and explore physical and emotional aspects of daily life after diagnosis with a chronic illness. These unfiltered stories allow audiences to meet individuals living with HIV/AIDS and witness their conviction, desire, longevity, and generosity.

“Through Positive Eyes is the sixth Fowler exhibition dedicated to the intersection of art and HIV/AIDS,” said Marla C. Berns, Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director of the Fowler. “HIV is a global epidemic that has engendered a wide range of artistic responses to its changing historical contours. The Fowler is an ideal platform for sharing the collaborative work of the ambitious *Through Positive Eyes* initiative that educates and celebrates individual as well as collective cultural practices—especially art in the service of activism.”

About the Exhibition

The exhibition opens with a mural-size collage of 130 faces, a composite of portraits taken by Mendel, who was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, and now lives in London. “After many years documenting the HIV/AIDS epidemic myself, I felt that the time had come to hand over the camera to people living with the syndrome. I began this project making a portrait of each participant. Along the way I realized that their self-representations, which fill the rest of this exhibition, were much more interesting to me.” Mendel’s composite photograph is surrounded by 10 self-portraits, one from each city where workshops have been held.

In the main gallery, visitors encounter 50 intimate portraits of individuals living with HIV, grouped into four contextual themes: “The Burden of Stigma,” “Stories My Body Tells,” “What Makes Me Laugh” and “Alive and Well.” Each portrait is paired with a narrative caption that conveys the intimacy and agency of self-representation and the fear and freedom of using the photographic medium. The autobiographical narratives often touch upon the aftermath of going public with their HIV status, revealing how it altered relationships with their families, friends, and their selves that accompany disclosure.

Following these individual stories, the exhibition spotlights a sculptural commission by Los Angeles-based artist and HIV-negative ally Alison Saar. In it, a larger than life-size hammered copper female figure anchors the installation, originally part of an AIDS-themed piece, first shown in 1992—at the height of the epidemic in the United States. The figure has been reconceived for a new era, to celebrate survivors and to offer a space for healing and reflection.

The final gallery, dedicated to banishing stigma, features a central stage for live storytelling by the Los Angeles Through Positive Eyes Collective, a group of seven HIV-positive artist-activists, known as activists. The walls are covered in 10 floor-to-ceiling banners, depicting each of the 10 international workshop cities and 130 project participants. The Los Angeles-based activists will take turns performing a scripted monologue on Wednesday evenings and Sunday afternoons.

Connecting with audiences through live storytelling about their experiences with HIV, they will engage with campus and local communities. The experience will foster greater awareness and empathy, two essential steps toward banishing stigma and ending the epidemic.

The Fowler presentation is the first stop of a U.S. tour, and the fourth iteration of the global exhibition that debuted at the Durban Art Gallery in South Africa (2016), traveled to the Adler Museum at Wits University, Johannesburg, South Africa (2016), and the Iziko Slave Lodge, Cape Town, South Africa (2017).

Credits

Through Positive Eyes is organized by the UCLA Art & Global Health Center with the Fowler Museum at UCLA and is cocurated by David Gere, Director, UCLA Art & Global Health Center, Professor of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, and founder of MAKE ART/STOP AIDS; Carol Brown, independent curator; and Stan Pressner, lighting designer. The exhibition is made possible by major funding from the Herb Ritts Foundation. It is also supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts and a gift from Elizabeth and Graeme Gilfillan in honor of Sarah Gilfillan.



Related Programs

Opening Night Lecture with Cocurator David Gere

Saturday, October 5 | 6–7pm

David Gere is Director of UCLA's Art & Global Health Center and Professor of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA. Gere reflects on 12 years of *Through Positive Eyes* workshops around the world and the compelling body of portraits and videos by individuals living with HIV/AIDS. Following his introduction, there will be live storytelling performances by members of the Los Angeles Through Positive Eyes Collective—artists who will share their experiences living with HIV. Opening party to follow from 7–9pm. Artists will continue storytelling performances in the final gallery of the exhibition at 7:30pm, 8pm, and 8:30pm.

Artist In-Gallery Performances

October 6, 2019–February 16, 2020

As a live component of the exhibition, HIV-positive storytellers from the Los Angeles Through Positive Eyes collective will share their images and personal narratives, engaging in direct dialogue with museum-goers throughout the duration of the exhibition.

Performance schedule: **5–8pm Wednesdays**

Oct. 16, 23, 30
Nov. 6, 13, 20
Dec. 4, 11, 18
Jan. 8, 15, 22, 29
Feb. 5, 12

12:30–3:30pm Sundays

Oct. 6, 13, 20, 27
Nov. 3, 10, 17, 24
Dec. 1, 8, 15, 22, 29
Jan. 5, 12, 19, 26
Feb. 2, 9, 16

MORE ABOUT THROUGH POSITIVE EYES

David Gere

Project codirector David Gere, Ph.D., leads the Art & Global Health Center at the University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA), where he is professor of arts activism in the Department of World Arts and Cultures. An activist scholar, Gere is the author of *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (2004) as well as numerous journal articles on projects created under the MAKE ART/STOP AIDS banner. Over the past decade, he has cocurated a trilogy of AIDS-themed art exhibitions—*MAKE ART/STOP AIDS*, *The A.R.T. Show*, and *Through Positive Eyes*—seen in South Africa and the United States.

Gideon Mendel

Project codirector [Gideon Mendel](#), born in Johannesburg in 1959, established his career with searing photographs of the final years of South Africa’s apartheid. In 1991, he moved to London and continued to respond to global issues, especially the HIV epidemic. Since 2007, using stills and video, Mendel has created *Drowning World*, an art and advocacy project about flooding that is his personal response to climate change. Mendel received the inaugural Jackson Pollock Prize for Creativity, the Greenpeace Photo Award, and was shortlisted for the Prix Pictet in 2015 and 2019. He has also received the W. Eugene Smith Grant in Humanistic Photography, the Amnesty International Media Award, and six World Press awards.

About the Project

The *Through Positive Eyes* project began in 2007 when David Gere contacted Gideon Mendel, who has been chronicling HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa since 1993. The first workshop was conceived and implemented in pilot form in Los Angeles in February 2007. Since then it has been produced in Mexico City (August 2008), Rio de Janeiro (June 2009), Johannesburg (March 2010), Los Angeles (April, 2011), Washington, D.C. (July 2012), Mumbai (December 2012), Bangkok (December 2013), Port au Prince (December 2014), London (March 2015), and Durban (August 2016). Participants’ work can be found online at artglobalhealth.org/projects/throughpositiveeyes.

About the Fowler Museum

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on works from Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the indigenous Americas—past and present. The Fowler enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs, informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. The work of international contemporary artists is presented within complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action.

Museum Information

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90024 | fowler.ucla.edu

Admission to the Fowler is free

Hours: Wed 12–8pm and Thu–Sun 12–5pm

Parking available in UCLA Lot 4: 398 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd. (\$3/hr; max \$13/day)

Rideshare drop-off: 305 Royce Drive