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Andrew Nicholls reviews an exhibition in which eloquent and remarkable pieces of jewellery confront the issue of AIDS

HAART

Galerie Düsseldorf

Western Australia

15 November - 13 December 2009

The work of Western Australian early career artist Kim Stanley Medlen elegantly draws attention to complex and seldom-discussed issues of body image.

Medlen's works explore the experiences of gay men living with HIV/AIDS and strategies they employ to avoid stigmatisation. He is particularly inspired by the use of body enhancement by many HIV positive gay men (such as body building and cosmetic surgery), to create a facade of robust health and hyper-masculine

-In the face of societal fear and disapproval.

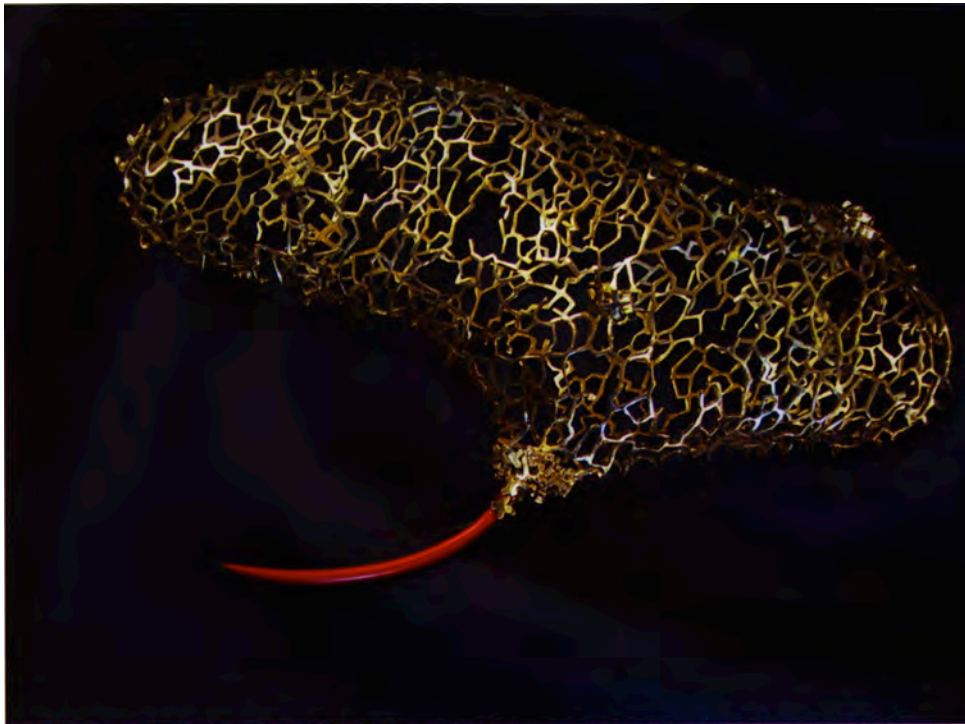
Though working across disciplines, Medlen's background is in jewellery design. His Masquerade series, (produced as part of his Doctorate at Curtin University in 2007) consists of wearable objects including neckpieces and pins. However, in line with his subject matter, all are slightly oversized or exaggerated - Medlen describes the series as "jewellery on steroids". The works employ a simple symbolic vocabulary to aestheticise various medicinal and psychological responses to HIV. Each is based around the form of a distorted love heart, some coated in glossy red automotive paint to simultaneously read as drops of blood, others employing delicate filigree work to suggest cellular structures. The use of the automotive paint over balsa and gold plating over copper evokes deception as well as a protective covering, giving the works a slick veneer in keeping with the theme of disguise as a defence strategy.

The power of Medlen's works draws from his unapologetic flaunting of a camp sensibility - fabulous glossy red love hearts and gold bling - to interrogate his distressing subject matter. As with all expressive 'camp', fury lurks just below the gorgeous surfaces. They are all the more audacious given their wearability, inspiring an added twinge of discomfiture when you imagine their pumped-up glossiness against a body. Medlen himself concedes that you would require "a big personality" to wear some of the more confrontational works, many of which incorporate derogatory terminology such as 'Fag' and 'Cocksucker' as decorative elements.

The Masquerade series won Medlen the Galerie Dusseldorf Postgraduate Scholarship, presented annually to a Curtin art student on the strength of their final exhibition works. The scholarship allows the recipient to undertake their first solo show at Galerie Dusseldorf, one of Western Australia's most prestigious commercial galleries, with the option of exclusive

representation. Medlen's scholarship exhibition, to be entitled HAART (the acronym for highly active antiretroviral treatment, the drug combination treatment most commonly prescribed for HIV) will open at the gallery this November.

The HAART works will build on the Masquerade series, but in a non-wearable context. Jewellery technique will still be evident through the same time-intensive techniques Medlen has used previously, but realised in a larger scale than he has tackled before. Given the power of his wearable works, it will be intriguing to see how his investigation extends into larger sculptural objects.



Kim Stanley Medlen, *Masquerade*, 2007, 22ct gold over copper, automotive paint, 14 x 8 x 5cm. Photography Kim Stanley Medlen.

Kim Stanley Medlen, *Masquerade*, 2007, automotive paint over balsa, 22ct gold over copper. Photography Kim Stanley Medlen.

