

## Handout 1 - Introducing Kia LaBeija

*Born in 1990 in New York City, Kia LaBeija is a visual artist and dancer. Her work primarily focuses on her experience as a black queer woman who was born HIV+. Her work was featured in the Art AIDS America exhibition, a nationally publicized traveling show focusing on the art of the AIDS epidemic from the 1980s to the present.*



Mourning Sickness, 2014

*From VICE, “Kia LaBeija Tracks the Influence of HIV/AIDS on Contemporary Art,” 2015:*

“Mourning Sickness addresses the reality of side effects from ART (antiretroviral therapy). Growing up [HIV] positive, I had to take a strict regimen of medications everyday. Many times these pills made me sick to my stomach, and I spent a great deal of time on my bathroom floor before school...But Mourning Sickness does not always have to be sad, it can be glamorous too. The way I framed the image is as Kia LaBeija, not as Kia Michelle Benbow. I was so tired of seeing sad images of wasting bodies. I wanted to show something more beautiful. I want my viewers to see me how I see me. Even in my lowest of lows.”



Eleven, 2015

*From Refinery29, “Photographing Black, Female, HIV Positive Power” by Amelia Abraham, 2016:*

“Eleven is a piece I created...on the anniversary of the day my mother passed. It had been eleven years. I had the image in mind for a really long time. I was going to create it for Art AIDS America, which ended up not happening. They used other images from the series but not this, which was a bit devastating.

I took the photo in my doctor’s office, and the doctor is in the image. It’s the same office I’ve been going to since I was 4 years old. A few things are happening. I’m sitting in my dress which I wore to my prom, which is a statement in itself because, as a child born with HIV, I wasn’t expected to make it as far as my high school prom. I was born in 1990, and medication that put you on a regimen that was expected to save your life didn’t come around until, like, 1996, so people weren’t sure babies with HIV of my age would survive.

The other thing is that I’m taking my place on the doctor’s bed because it’s the anniversary of my mother’s death, and this was her bed and her doctor, too. And the third thing is the doctor taking the blood in real time. I go to the doctor all the time, to check my CD4 count, see how my viral load is doing. Am I undetectable? How are my organs doing? It’s a method of self-care, but one that not many people get to see.”



Mimi's Last Dance 2016

*From Refinery29, "Photographing Black, Female, HIV Positive Power" by Amelia Abraham, 2016:*

"The name Mimi comes from the musical *Rent*. I've always been aware of my HIV positive status but it's something I kept to myself when I was much younger. I went to a performing arts school and they took us to see *Rent* in 7th grade. I had read it was an adaptation of *La Bohème* but about HIV, but I didn't know much about the context.

I remember the character Mimi coming out and she's HIV positive. It was the first time I saw a character that was brown-skinned like me, with curly hair like me, full of life, singing, and living with HIV. I felt very connected. I didn't have any support system to talk about these things after my mum passed away, so I just bought the soundtrack and I would listen to it over and over. The character deals with drug use and the feeling of not being able to be loved—so not necessarily what you want a 12-year-old to look up to, as a brown-skinned woman with HIV. But I based my wardrobe on that character for years—latex, cheetah print, everything.

As I became of a sexual age I was very lost because I didn't have anyone to guide me on what does it mean to navigate your sexuality living with HIV. I was a young, attractive female with something the world told me was unattractive, dirty, toxic, tainted... So when I created the picture I titled it "Mimi's Last Dance" because I was feeling ready to let go of that fear and the things that had happened to me in the past that had sent me into a bit of a downward spiral."