

BOOKS OF JAMES

HO TAM (Director)

Ho Tam was born in Hong Kong and educated in Toronto, Canada and worked in advertising and community care before turning to art. He practices a diverse mix of artistic disciplines including painting, video/film, photography, print and public art and has exhibited internationally. His video work has been shown in numerous film festivals and museums, including the Toronto International Film Festival, the Pompidou Centre (Paris) and Museum of Modern Art (New York). Tam has been a lecturer at *University of Toronto* and he currently teaches at *University of Victoria*, British Columbia. He is a graduate of *Whitney Museum Independent Studies Program*, *Bard College* (MFA) and the recipient of various awards, grants and fellowships. Having produced over 20 short video and film work since 1994, *Books of James* is his first full-length documentary.

Conversation with Ho Tam

When and how did you meet James?

It was around late 1996 when I was in the Whitney Studio Program. I met James at a party of the MIX experimental film festival. He was screening his work and so was I.

How did you get drawn to the “books”?

At one point James showed his journals to me. I was immediately captivated by his drawings that documented ten to fifteen years of his life. Just about everyday life – nothing spectacular but so personal and exquisite. I thought everyone should see them. The initial film idea was to feature only the drawings, sort of like a moving exhibit of his art.

You have the three A-words on the movie poster . . .

Yes, ART, AIDS and ACTIVISM -- they summarized what Books of James is about.

And there are three parts in the film – do they correspond to the A-words?

No, the A-words are the focus of the film. The three parts are more about the different time periods in James’s life. The first section (the Personal) is a juxtaposition of images with a narrative, ending with James’s books. The second (the Political) is a montage beginning with interviews and testimony leading to clips of public actions to the TV programs. And the last section (Postscripts) summarizes and questions our world today.

You see “personal is political” in terms of activism?

Well I think that AIDS activism arose from early attitudes and responses to the outbreak. When AIDS first became apparent in the 80’s it was a secretive gay disease. People were marginalized and stigmatized. Even today, although there is more openness, stigma still prevails and prevents the pandemic from getting the attention that it deserves. Despite the incredible spread of the disease in Africa and elsewhere in many developing countries, there is still tremendous reluctance on the part of North America and Europe to go to that next stage of research, finding cure or even the dispensing of antiviral medicines.

How has AIDS affected you?

I had a partner (Kirby Hsu) who died of AIDS eleven years ago. It devastated me over a decade in my life. It is an important history.

Is your focus limited to the AIDS issues? Any common threads through your work?

There are other things in my work I try to explore. A few years ago I did a piece on SARS (In the Dark) – it deals with my experience in Toronto. My other themes deal with exile, immigration, religion and etc. Experience is probably what ties everything together.

You have worked with other mediums before. What is special about film/video?

I also paint and draw. But I find film/video has less baggage and is more open, direct and perhaps effective in communicating ideas.

What would success of the film be for you?

This is my first full-length film -- before this I had worked on over twenty shorts. My goal is to reach a wider audience. I'd like to leave it with the audience to take whatever they can. I didn't have a message in mind when I was making it. Perhaps I want the audience to think about injustice around them and that they can make a difference. The AIDS activists did make a difference. James's story is one example. I want the audience to consider the loss of those ideals and sense of community.

What happens to activism these days?

There was a chance of resurgence of social conscience and activism – perhaps around Post-911 – the reactions against reactions against terrorism. But I don't know what has happened to that energy; it came, went, and disappeared. It is a different time now.

(Interview by Peter McPherson on May 18, 1 PM PDT)