

PETER COCUZZA – THE LEGACY SERIES

In eloquent words and with exceptional artistic skill, Peter Cocuzza chronicled his descent into the pain and fear of his HIV diagnosis but also his emergence into a place of peace, serenity and hope for his own future and for that of others similarly afflicted. LEGACY is a journey upon which Peter takes us as his reader/viewer companions. Each canvas tears into our souls as we feel the raw emotion that drives his artist's brush and read, in his own hand, the words that reflect his steps along his path. Replete with symbolism, Cocuzza pulls us into his world step by heart-wrenching step and yet, as we move to the final canvas, we too find the peace that he found, both within himself and in his connectedness with those who stood by his side.

LEGACY is Cocuzza's gift to the friends, who have passed, to those who survive and to those among us who take from it a glimpse into the humanity of one extraordinary man who faced death and through it found a way to celebrate life. It is with pride that we acknowledge Peter Cocuzza as a friend. In the end, his final legacy is that he is remembered with affection by all who had the privilege to share in his journey.

Peter Cocuzza, in his own words

#1 BLOOD WORKS

This is where the series begins. It represents that time period from when the blood is first drawn until the day of the results. A time of worry and fear, waiting, wondering what if? The color is red; I am surrounded by my blood, wondering if the virus is hidden among the cells. Encased in a clock, I am beginning a journey through the most difficult time of my life.



#2 DIAGNOSIS

I had received the news over the phone. In the early years, there were no laws to protect us. The doctor who talked me into the test as a part of my regular physical was my family doctor. He had assured me that he needed to know and if I came back positive, he could treat me in the office just as he had my parents' cancer and heart problems. I called him on the appointed day from the lobby of the design center where I was working with a client. He went through the results of the various tests and at the end said the HIV test came back positive. I said: "There must be some mistake." He said: they had run the tests three times, there was no mistake. I was stunned. I asked: "What does this mean? What do I do now?" He replied: "Why are you asking me these questions? I don't have any answers for you!" and hung up the phone. My knees buckled and I began a free fall that was to last several years.



#3 DENIAL

For the next two years, my mate and I denied the virus existed. We talked the day of the doctor's call and without saying anything to each other, we just never spoke of it. We lived with this terrible secret and went on with our lives. Everything had changed, but outwardly we went through the motions of a normal life. Time became my enemy. In this painting I am imprisoned in a clock where the numbers do not make sense. Everything on the outside is light and pastel, obscuring the ominous secret hidden within. From this point on there is no hair, no beard. I felt that I had lost all dignity, that I was less than human...it was more than just a sickness.



#4 MEDICINE MAN

In time I went to other doctors as various problems began to arise. The first doctor began to examine me as I was undressed lying on his table. He looked at my chart, stopped and said: "You have AIDS, there is nothing I can do for you. You are going to die. Go ahead and get dressed." My mate was in the room with me. We looked at each other and began to cry. Another doctor asked me how I contracted AIDS. I said: "I can only assume sexually." He asked: "Heterosexual or homosexual sex?" When I told him homosexual, he stopped the examination, told me to dress and left the room. He would not speak to me again or allow me to sit in the office. Yet another doctor was more polite to my face, but sent me a certified letter informing me that he could not be responsible for my care and that I should not refer any of my friends to him. My dentist would no longer see me. He said he wasn't equipped to handle AIDS patients. The blue figures in this painting are the doctors turning their backs on me. I am imprisoned in a body that is coming apart and sex is now deadly. Time is my constant companion. There is a certain numbness in this painting. It was one of the more difficult issues. You see, I always believed that doctors were kind and healing men, and I no longer could believe or trust them.



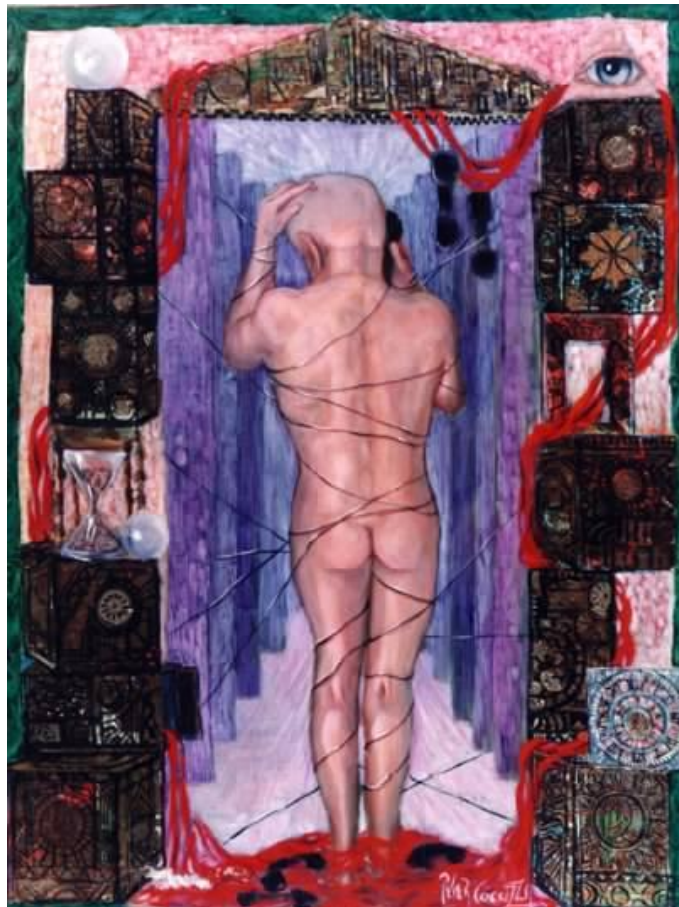
#5 SUICIDE

This painting has no particular place in the series because it is one other thing that haunts so many of us. There are times when it has seemed it is a viable alternative to what I was and possibly still am facing. It is a battle waged, often won...sometimes lost, but one many of us must, in our own time, fight. The pills and capsules would be my method of choice. To just sleep my way to death. The painting is filled with references of death; the cup in the lower right I call the Borgia Cup bringing the promise of death. You will see it used several times.



#6 AMERICAN RED TAPE

As I became sicker, I knew I had to get help. I finally found a doctor who would see me. I was beginning to have trouble working and I was starting medication, which was expensive. Suddenly, I was no longer independent and I found myself forced to ask the system for help. Asking was difficult enough, but the system is a nightmare for the novice. I became a number tied up in telephone cords standing in a sea of red tape. The gold boxes that make the door frame are oriental puzzle boxes I played with as a child. The system made me think of them. Each time I thought I had solved the puzzle, there was another one inside. The triangle with the eye is Intellect. The orb is Destiny. There are two Life and Death. Clock and hour glass are again symbols of time.



#7 ISOLATION

When I could no longer work, I felt useless. I was afraid to say that I had AIDS, afraid to tell people, and when I finally did, some of them just disappeared from my life. The phone stopped ringing and the silence was deafening. I was more and more afraid. I began to self-isolate. If I didn't see anyone, then they weren't rejecting me. Don't say it and it doesn't exist.

Loneliness is a terrible thing and it plays awful tricks on the mind. The longer you isolate, the more entrenched you become. Then there was no one left but me and I finally had to face myself naked and alone. Once I could do that, it was time to make a decision.



#8 SHAME

AIDS, unlike any other contemporary illness, carried the stigma of shame. Why are we so ashamed of just being sick? I wouldn't be ashamed if I had cancer. Why was I so afraid to tell anyone I had AIDS? I had a friend who was a doctor, a general practitioner, who had AIDS. I was the only one he confided in. He was afraid to tell his partners, his nurse, family or friends. He tried to treat himself, but kept getting sicker and sicker. He came to my home one day, needing to talk. He believed he was dying and was too ashamed to tell anyone. I told him at this point he had nothing to lose. He agreed so I made an appointment with an infectious disease doctor and a therapist. He went on a new protocol, his viral load began to drop and his T-cells increased. It was the beginning of his life. His nurse called to ask me why he couldn't tell her after all these years. I explained to her and finally to myself about the shame. That's why I painted this picture. I had dropped the mask, but was still ashamed, caught between a rock and a hard place.



#9 DREAM WAR

I looked for peace in sleep, but found none. The nights were filled with dreams and my bed became a battlefield where Depression and Intellect played a chess game of life and death protocols. My friends, dead and dying, visited me and I felt ashamed and guilty that I was still alive. I was on the edge of C.M.V. and being treated. The eyes in the upper right hand corner of the picture show the clouds beginning to obscure my vision. I dreamed the Angel of Death coming into my room, a gun in my mouth, a poison cup, a dove. Nightmares and dreams were all the same. Will I find peace in death?



#10 DEPRESSION

Like suicide, depression has been a constant companion on this journey. Anit-depressants and mood stabilizers, combined with therapy sessions and a constant fight somehow manage to keep me going when it gets very bad. When the depression takes over, I shut down completely. No one can reach me and it envelops me like the dragon of my childhood dreams, coiling around me tighter and tighter, offering me the Borgia Cup, the way out. Everyone's eyes are looking at me and I can't move, can't speak. I have the keys; deep inside I know to get past this. I just have to fight, but I can't right now. I can get past this, I can, I will get past this if there is just enough time.



#11 RAGE

I had suppressed all the anger for so long. I pulled it tight inside and held it for so very long. Instead of letting it out a little at a time, instead of dissipating, it grew larger and still larger until I could no longer contain it, until it was not just anger, but full blown Rage. Rage at the virus, Rage at the doctors, Rage at all those infected, and those that were well, Rage at all those who walked away and the ones who stayed, Rage at myself and my God for allowing this to happen. It exploded white hot and touched every part of my life. Finally the tears came and I could begin the process I should have started so long ago.



#12 TIME FRAME

Two years ago I had a massive heart attack just a few weeks after I broke my neck in a fall down a flight of stairs. I was rushed to the hospital a second time and put on life-support. I was told I needed open heart surgery and I had a 50-50 chance of surviving the surgery. My viral load was over 100,000 and my T-cells were 35. I asked to see my infectious disease doctor who told me that if I survived the surgery, I would have the possibility of about one year and a half, more or less, with the treatments available. There was finally a time frame; my mortality was now defined. I had to make the decision whether or not to take the chance knowing how difficult my recovery would be. With family and friends gathered around, my mate and I agonized and finally decided to take the chance for whatever time we could have together. In this picture, I am chained to the clock while time looks on. Gears and clockworks grind around me as the countdown begins.



#13 SUPPORT

I am surrounded with love, the support system I never believed would be there for me. The inner circle are the people who stayed, accepted and supported me. The outer circle are those who turned and walked away. In both circles were family and friends and many surprises. I was so afraid to tell my secret, afraid that people would turn away and some did, but many didn't. They were there when I needed them the most. They held my hand through crisis and Code Blue; they gave me the strength to go on believing in the possibilities.



#14 ACCEPTANCE

I never thought I would get here, emotionally or physically. This painting is the culmination of four years' work. Had anyone told me where this journey would take me, I could never have believed him. From the agony and despair of this illness, I have gained an acceptance of myself, of my past and whatever the future will bring. But I live now, today, this very minute as I sit here writing this. I have passed the time frame the doctors gave me. I have completed my series and am currently lecturing, painting and writing a book to accompany the paintings. AIDS gave me a voice and these paintings the courage to use it. How much has changed in these four years. I am no longer ashamed of this illness and I will deal with it one day at a time. It wasn't so very long ago that I said time was my enemy. How thankful I am to have this time.....



