

DocArt Trauma: Eric Avery's AIDS Works

By Marjorie B. Cohn

A forearm is stretched full length, veins up. The fist is clenched, a cord knotted around the lower bicep. We've all been there—when our blood is taken or, in a different human context, when we give blood—but not everyone has felt the intensity of fear, or been able to represent it in such a visceral way, as Eric Avery did in *Blood Test* (1986). The print is colossal: the hand and arm fill a four-foot plank that tapers, crowding against the limb's outline. The forms are cut grossly, with repeated visible gashes by knives and gouges. Distended, ropey veins mar the inner arm and a white scar interrupts the base of the bicep.

To give only three of many possible characterizations of the artist: Avery is a gay man, an artist and a physician, specifically a psychiatrist. *Blood Test* documents his first HIV test, taken in 1986 when death was the certain outcome of AIDS: "My pretest counseling indicated that I was at risk for getting a positive result. During the stressful two weeks while I waited for my results (HIV negative), I drew my arm and cut the image."¹ To draw blood and to draw its representation is a strange enough confluence of language, but to compound this with the verb "cut," with its implication of bleeding...

Blood Test, however, also draws on a deeper history. In 1969, during the Vietnam War, as Avery was nearing his university graduation, the United States initiated the first draft lottery since World War II: "There were 366 numbers and the first third was told to prepare to be drafted. My number was 97."² His father was a physician—a pediatric hematologist (a specialty that, in the most pedantic sense, is based on blood tests)—but Harlow Avery did not want his son to become a doctor; it was Avery's printmaking professor at the University of Arizona who counseled him to attend medical school so he could continue his student deferment. The convergence of art and medicine that would inform his adult life and work began early.

As the "class artist" he was enlisted to design the covers of *Syndrome*, the University of Texas Medical Branch yearbook, in 1972 and 1973. On the front of each he



Eric Avery, *Blood Test* (1986), molded paper woodcut, 48 x 16 inches. Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA. Purchased with the gift of Sue Reed, class of 1958. Courtesy of the artist.

screenprinted a grainy reproduction of a 16th-century portrait of the pioneering anatomist Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564). In the 1972 version Vesalius is reflected on himself like an ink blot (though his right-hand version wears a bright red nose cone). In the 1973 version, we see the full portrait, in which he is shown dissecting the forearm of a cadaver. (Only bodies taken down from the gallows were available to Vesalius.)³ It was only recently, when we were discussing this image, that he recognized the link between his 1972 *Vesalius* with the flayed arm and the *Blood Test* of 13 years later.

Throughout his career Avery has incorporated preexisting images into

his work, appropriating their aesthetic strength as well as their signification, but he reimagines them for his own purposes. *Blood Test* harks back to Vesalius; his *America Discovers Columbus* (1992) copies a detail from *Conquest*, a 1930 fresco by Diego Rivera. In Avery's version, a jaguar—the anthropomorphic personification of the powerful native American—rapes Columbus as well as stabs him.

Avery found the required immersion in the medical curriculum traumatic, yet this did not deter him from plunging into more traumatic situations. In his subsequent career as a physician and a social activist he worked in refugee camps in Southeast Asia and Somalia in 1979–1980 and also in his home state of Texas a decade later, when people fleeing human rights crises in Central America sought refuge north of the border. The ultimate existential trauma, however, was the recognition in the 1980s of a new plague, rampant and mortal among gay men.

Avery has acknowledged all of this, and has identified printmaking as his means of working toward psychic resolution:

*Traumatic spaces . . . are for me places of overwhelming experience . . . That happened for me in medical school, and it happened again in Africa . . . working with AIDS . . . going into the prison [to work with HIV positive convicts]. I continually put myself in these overwhelming experiences. All my repressed anger that I have for all the bad stuff that has happened to me, you know, could be really destructive. So I channel all that stuff into my chopping and grinding and pounding.*⁴

This quote comes from a 1997 interview with the cultural anthropologist Michael J. Fischer, who posits that Avery's artistic actions are freighted with the same mission as psychiatry—to relieve trauma. In his book *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice*, Fischer writes:

The physicality of the work to produce this art operates also as a psychological technique of Freudian



Eric Avery, *Syndrome* (Class Book Covers, University of Texas at Galveston Medical Branch) (1972–1973), photomechanical reproduction, each image 9 3/4 x 7. Courtesy of the artist.

“working through” the body, transmitting anxiety and stress for the artist, but also tapping into more general cultural and generational anxieties. The language of emotional working through comes naturally to this artist . . . whose professional language is one of repeated “retraumatizations.” In its full-blown psychiatric usage, retraumatization means recognizing psychodynamic patterns . . . of compulsion to place oneself in situations in which one is at risk of undergoing traumatic experiences.⁵

In another interview Avery commented, “the only part of my life that I feel I’ve really mastered is my ability to make a print. To cut a wood block, to ink the wood block, and to print it... The physical process [has] a rhythm in it and repetitive motion ... that, for me, is very soothing.”⁶

Though this observation details therapeutic motions specific to the making of woodcuts, Avery has produced prints of practically every sort: he has used traditional hand processes such as lithography, screenprint, etching and monotype, as well as techniques more often thought of as mechanical or reproductive—letterpress, relief photo-engraving and digital printing. He has sometimes inverted the traditional printmaking hierarchy: when he was working through ideas for *America Discovers Columbus*, he drew Rivera’s composition on a small zinc etching plate, retouched the proof

in graphite, then gouged the design into wood—recasting elite intaglio as a demotic block print, except in this case it is a “bowl print,” cut into the outside of a large wooden serving dish used at Mexican fiestas.

Printing from the top surface of a curved, carved object requires something other than a standard sheet of paper as a receiving surface. Intrigued by the three-dimensional potential of a printing matrix cut into wood, Avery experi-

mented with plaster prints, much as Roger Vieillard and Stanley William Hayter had done earlier in the century, making casts of their deeply engraved plates. Avery, however, found plaster reliefs to be both heavy and fragile, and it occurred to him to use paper pulp instead. This opened up new avenues of printed textures, sculptural forms, and even color and light, as he began to mix pigments into the pulp.

Returning to *Blood Test*, we can now understand the raised white scar—a keloid at the base of the bicep—as a trauma experienced by the plank sometime before Avery gouged the image of his own trauma into it; the board, previously used and discarded, had experienced its own wounds. As a physician always looking toward disease prevention through education, in 1990 he produced a sequence of *Blood Test* impressions with pulp mixtures that graduated from white to brown, collectively illustrating the change in the population infected with AIDS, from whites to people of color.

Trauma and our emotional response to it have always been the basis of Avery’s art. In 2009, using a found tree root that had, astonishingly, grown in the shape of an open rectangle, he carved a matrix evoking the “Circuit of Papez,” the brain’s neural structure for controlling emotional expression. On his web



Eric Avery, *America Discovers Columbus, 1492–1992* (1992), etching with graphite additions, 7 1/2 x 9 3/4 inches, Collection of Marjorie B. and Martin Cohn. Courtesy of the artist.





Left: Eric Avery, *America Discovers Columbus, 1492–1992* (1992), carved Mexican bowl. Collection of Jane Petro and Carolyn Becker. Right: Eric Avery, *America Discovers Columbus, 1492–1992* (1992), molded paper woodcut, 28 1/2 x 38 1/2 x 5 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

page, Avery quotes from a medical atlas to explain the anatomy:

*In 1937 James Papez suggested that emotion is appreciated by higher cognitive centers via reciprocal communication between deep structures in the brain...the hypothalamus, mammillary bodies, anterior thalamic nuclei, cingulate gyrus and hippocampal formation [plus] the amygdala and orbitofrontal cortex. Emotional information and responses are coordinated through this system in the brain.*⁷

That is the physician's description. The artist's visualization was simpler: he carved words—THINKING...FEEDBACK...MEMORY...FEELING—into the root, which he inked and pressed into wet paper pulp impregnated with luminescent pigment. The resultant, roughly quadriform woodcut—really a sculptural object—glows green around the stark black words. We can imagine it shining underground or within a skull.

He titled it *The Square Root of Trauma*.

Avery's most sculptural molded-paper woodcut is the *HIV Condom Filled Piñata* he made in 1993—an object that incorporates art, medicine and popular imagery; violence, infection and diagnosis; activism, humor and play. The piñata takes the form of a globe built from two woodcuts that were molded and printed from the inked interior of wooden hemispheres into which multiple holes had been drilled. Paper pulp, extruded into the holes, form white “receptor sites” that stud the completed black paper “virus.” The half-shells, each 8 1/2 inches in diameter, were filled with condoms and then bonded together at their equator. Hung in clusters, these virus piñatas have starred in several of Avery's art/medicine actions, perhaps the most memorable of which was *Healing Before Art: HIV Public Blood Testing*, which took place on 11 May 1994 at Mary Ryan Gallery in New York City and involved an invited group of artists, museum curators and gallery

staff who had their blood drawn for HIV testing.

The event was set within Avery's installation *The Stuff of Life* (1993)—the gallery was hung with virus piñatas and its walls covered with six-foot-high swaths of paper printed with linoleum block renderings of red blood cells and the dreaded HIV-infected white cells in blue. These gigantic cell forms were derived from enlargements of a smear of his own blood, embodying the traumatic blood test when he had imagined his own infection. In 1994, anti-HIV drugs were still in their developmental stage and the only viable medical responses to the disease were informative clinical advice, blood testing and practicing safe sex. The artist and psychiatrist within Avery collaborated to create an aesthetic setting—Blood is beautiful!—and prescriptive art objects—Hit those viruses! Grab those condoms!—to engage, retraumatize and educate all who would want to go on living and to know life as it is. ■



Eric Avery, *The Square Root of Trauma* (2009), printing matrix from a naturally formed tree root (left) and molded paper woodcut (right), both 21 x 26 1/2 x 5 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: "Healing Before Art: HIV Public Blood Testing," for Mary Ryan Gallery, New York, 1994, showing Eric Avery, *The Stuff of Life* (1994), linocut panels, each sheet 72 x 32 inches, and *HIV Condom-Filled Piñatas* (1993), molded paper woodcuts with condoms, 8 1/2 inch diameter each. Courtesy of the artist.

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Notes:

1. Eric Avery's website, www.ericaveryartist.com, consulted 10 May 2016. See this website for the artist's biography and a catalog with images of his prints and art actions. The actual, complex processes of making many of the prints are often illustrated, as well as the sources of many of the images in earlier artworks.
2. Eric Avery to Marjorie B. Cohn, email, 13 May 2016.
3. The back cover of the first volume is a black void, with only the red nose cone from the front disrupting it. The back cover of the second volume pictures a medical student, as Avery [?] saw himself: His head is covered by a bag, his arms are trussed with rope; he is ready for execution.
4. Michael J. Fischer, *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 99. Avery is the subject of Chapter 4, "Cultural Critique with a Hammer, Gouge, and Woodblock: Art and Medicine in the Age of Social Retraumatization."

5. *Ibid.*, 91.

6. Conversation between Eric Avery and Mary G. Winkler, historian of art at the Institute for the Medical Humanities, The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, 23 February 1994, typescript transcript.

7. The quotation is taken from www.ericavery-artist.com, where B. Greenstein, *The Limbic System*, *Color Atlas of Neuroscience*, 2000, p. 316, is cited.

