

“Dirt, urine and a cookie jar tell a story about AIDS in the South”

Kyle Croft, Project Manager for Visual AIDS' Day With(out) Art, considers the Archive Louis Zoellar Bickett and its relationship to the impermanence of human life, the dangerous silences of history, HIV/AIDS, queer communities in the South, and more.



Louis Zoellar Bickett, *The Archive*, 2017, Installation view at Andrew Edlin Gallery

The Archive Louis Zoellar Bickett: An autobiography in objects by Kyle Croft

The Archive Louis Zoellar Bickett, a portion of which is currently on view at Andrew Edlin Gallery through April 15, is an autobiography in objects. Since inheriting a box of family photographs from his mother in 1972, Louis Zoellar Bickett has obsessively and methodically collected objects and artifacts from his life. The items, individually tagged, titled and indexed, have accumulated in Bickett’s home in Lexington over the last forty years, numbering in the thousands. There are the expected keepsakes—family heirlooms and trinkets, postcards and souvenirs, religious objects—but also the mundane and sometimes abject accouterments of daily life. Matches, condoms, receipts, even urine, garbage, and manure take on significance simply through their presence in Bickett’s life. In perusing the tags and titles of objects on display, it becomes clear that this project is more than just an extension of Bickett’s creative practice—it is a structure through which he can confront and categorize his life, a way to grapple with the impermanence of human life and the dangerous silences of history.

Until a 2009 exhibition at Institute 193 in Lexington, the archive existed primarily for Bickett. There is a private, domestic quality integral to the archive, a project that was not originally conceived for exhibition. Andrew Edlin Gallery has accordingly arranged the exhibition as a recreation of Bickett’s living room. A rustic china cabinet contains large glass jars full of earth collected from various travels; another contains vials of blood, urine, and saliva from Bickett and others. A bookshelf is crammed with tins, a cookie jar and various other ceramic trinkets,

holy books, and dozens of black binders full of ephemera and research. Sculptural works and photographs crowd the space, obscuring the gallery's white walls. Concurrent with Bickett's show at Andrew Edlin is an exhibition of Beverly Buchanan's surprisingly personable miniature houses—the emotional lives of objects and the home loom large.

Bickett has long considered himself a political artist, but his approach differs from the overt, confrontational aesthetic tactics that dominated the 80s. His politics come through subtly, in the way he selects and presents objects, deliberately highlighting minoritarian histories. Bickett begins with a personal experience—a childhood friendship with a Holocaust survivor resonates throughout his archive, prompting a lifelong investigation into the legacy of concentration camps. He has collected soil from Auschwitz, and a number of items are tagged with “Arbeit macht frei” (“work sets you free”), the infamous slogan at the camp's entrance. These tags make visible the broad associations at work in Bickett's archive—a box of toy soldiers is a more direct association, but a bottle of HIV medication prompts deeper reflection. This self-reflexivity also produced *The Lynching Project*, a sub-project of the archive which collects research and objects relating to some 352 lynchings in Kentucky. Bickett began the project in response to his family's implication in a lynching several generations ago. Binders of historical research are joined by collected lawn jockeys and other vestiges of racial violence in this collection.

Despite existing until recently in the confines of his home, Bickett's archive is anything but hermetic or narcissistic. These sub-projects systematically de-center Bickett from his archive, positioning him in relation to a broader social and historical context. It is autobiographical in the most expanded sense—Bickett's account of himself is inextricable from his record of his friends, his lovers, his travels and his hometown. Individuals appear metaphorically, through postcards and correspondence, gifts, and other material traces. Through these cathected objects, we get a sense not only of who Bickett is, but how he has become that person.

In the forty-five years since its conception, Bickett's archive has also inevitably become a memorial. The objects through which his friends appear also become the way in which they are remembered. *The Obituary Project*, filling twenty-six black binders, collects obituaries of individuals who have impacted Bickett's life, providing a ritualized and productive way to grieve, as well as a record of loss. The project was started in 1981 with the death of Robert Motherwell, which serendipitously coincided with the beginning of initial news reports of what would become the AIDS epidemic. Though rarely discussed, smaller cities such as Lexington were, and continue to be, deeply affected by HIV/AIDS. (The [Southern AIDS Living Quilt](#) offers another account of the impact of HIV in the South, noting as well as the lack of education and awareness about HIV in Southern communities.)

HIV/AIDS is present throughout Bickett's archive—a glass jar full of condoms is labeled “Daddy is HIV+”, another is full of syringes used to supply medicine to a friend. Blood, urine, and semen preserved in glass jars become elegies, crystalized metonyms for those lost to the epidemic. But HIV/AIDS also appears unexpectedly, in baby photos stamped with the phrase “there is no cure,” and benign objects like a baseball cap and a DVD case tagged “memento mori.” These tags are injunctions to consider how AIDS permeates the quotidian, situating the epidemic in the present.

As the recent Visual AIDS exhibition *Everyday* suggested, as HIV/AIDS becomes rendered as history, the ongoing daily experiences of people with HIV/AIDS (and those around them) are often neglected. Personal acts of resistance and remembrance are subsumed by epidemiological figures and legislative victories. This is especially true in the South, which is largely absent from the narratives that are being formed today about the impact of and responses to the epidemic. In conversation, Bickett describes the gay scene in Lexington as a “real hotbed” during the early 1980s—people were attracted by Lexington’s relatively liberal culture and its proximity to Atlanta and Chicago. His is one of an ever-diminishing number of voices who can speak to the presence of gay culture in the South during the 1980s, offering a sense of history for younger generations of queer people who are making lives for themselves outside of urban centers. His archive is a testament to a lively and vital gay community that runs contrary to assumptions about the South as necessarily hostile and isolating for queer people.

Bickett’s impulse to catalog and remember is certainly not unique, but his archive captures much more than the average scrapbook or photo album. His broad, omnivorous eye suggests that our lives are not entirely our own, that we ought to consider how we come to constitute our understanding of ourselves and our world, and that this process is deeply political. Though autobiographical, Bickett’s archive expands far beyond himself, encapsulating his social and political milieu in a self-reflexive history.

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THE ARCHIVE LOUIS ZOELLAR BICKETT on view through April 15, 2017 at Andrew Edlin Gallery, 212 Bowery, New York, NY 10012