



Fotografiska
New York

Kia LaBeija: *prepare my heart*

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Fotografiska New York

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Kia LaBeija's first museum solo show, an autobiographical exhibition about "love, loss, and growing up HIV-positive in New York City," will feature new artwork as well as three decades of archival images, ephemera, poetry, video, and self-portraiture

prepare my heart honors the artist's late mother (a beloved community leader for parents and children living with HIV), and is titled for the emotional complexity surrounding her mother's devotion to "preparing me for her inevitable death from AIDS"

Intricacies of grief, love, beauty, stigma, identity, being a queer woman of color, and balancing distinct cultural legacies of being a Black woman and an Asian woman are key themes of the show, which offers an intimate window into the artist's upbringing leading up to and following her prestigious role in New York's Ballroom scene as the Overall Mother of the Iconic House of LaBeija in its 50th year

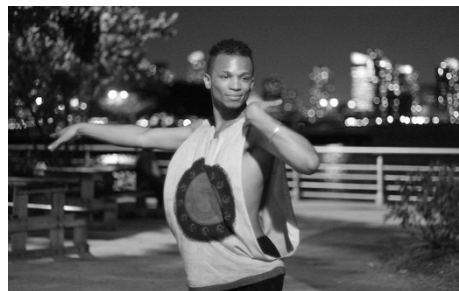
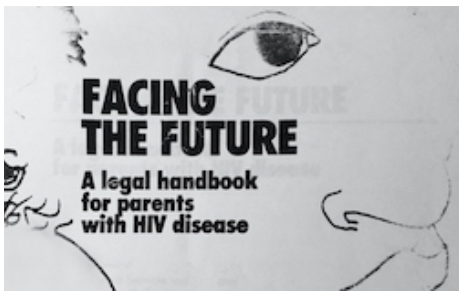
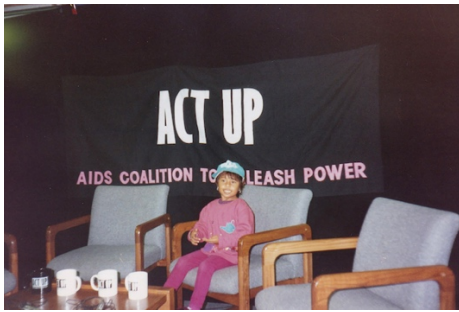
NEW YORK, NY – SPRING 2022 – Fotografiska New York is pleased to present *prepare my heart*, a new solo exhibition from the interdisciplinary artist Kia LaBeija (who prefers the mononym "Kia"), born 1990 in New York City. While Kia has presented work in group presentations at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and more, *prepare my heart* is the artist's first solo museum exhibition and first New York solo show. The objects in the exhibition, presented in an interwoven manner, are of two distinct categories: Kia's autobiographical contemporary artwork, and personal archival material.

Kia first gained recognition as a visual artist in 2013, by way of her membership in the Visual AIDS Artist+ Registry and subsequent inclusion in thematic group exhibitions. *prepare my heart* offers the most complex view of the artist's life and practice to date, including but extending far beyond her important creative work in the HIV activism space.

"*prepare my heart* is my love letter to New York City," said Kia. "I was born HIV-positive in 1990 among the shifting background of Times Square, the fight to change the CDC's definition of AIDS to include women's issues, and the life-saving medications that became available in 1996 – 15 years after the first reports of a 'rare cancer effecting Gay men in New York and San Francisco.' My mother, Kwan Bennett, was an AIDS activist, and fought for women, children and Families. Her death in 2004 at the age of 47 prompted my inspiration to continue her work to shift the

AIDS narrative, a narrative that for decades has sat dormant. My coming of age story celebrates my mother's legacy, my introduction to New York City's Ballroom Scene, learning how to navigate my sexuality, notions of beauty, and finding love and partnership amongst my own internalized stigma – and the stigma of others. This exhibition is centered around my observation that preparation is a response to great trauma, and also looking for the balance between what is beautiful and what is painful."

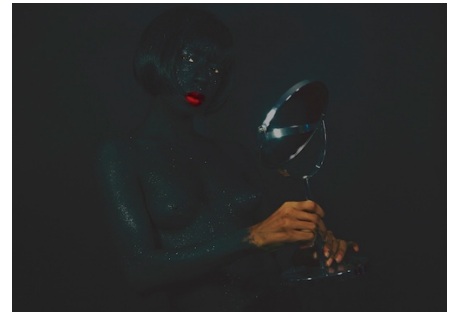
Kia's curatorial decision to feature archival images and ephemera creates a visceral, artifact-driven layer of the exhibition, including signifiers of what it's like to grow up HIV-positive. For instance, one object is a 1996 pamphlet that Kia had in her house, entitled "Facing the Future: A Legal Handbook for Parents with HIV disease." Notable archival images in the exhibition include childhood photos depicting moments like four-year-old Kia smiling against an ACT UP banner, and Kia's mom speaking at a rally in Union Square Park with a young Kia seated next to her. *prepare my heart* also offers an intimate, behind-the-scenes look into New York City's Ballroom scene, through documentation of Kia, her peers, and elder pillars of the Ball community.



Clockwise from top left: *Our Newest Spokesperson*, ACT UP (1994) • *Eleven* (2015) • *Father Hector Xtravaganza* (2014) • *In My Room* (2014) • *Celso, One Night on the Pier* (2012) • *FACING THE FUTURE: A legal handbook for Parents with HIV disease* (unknown)

Photographic self-portraiture, a key element of Kia's practice, is another feature of the show; she remarked on it as follows: "I make theatrical self-portraits as a way to process grief and emotion, to escape 'real life,' and to explore the interconnectedness between fantasy, dreams, and memory. I am commenting on what it means to feel alone, to be a singular person in a world where the intersections of my identity are usually overlooked or not included at all. In my portraits, I like to dress myself in unique pieces that have already had a life of their own. Whether its thrifted or vintage, a hand-me-down or an important piece worn by someone I love. I stage each photograph in a meaningful location to retell or document something important to me. It's taking control of my story in what is ultimately an act of self-love."

One body of work in the exhibition, created between 2018 and 2021, deals specifically with Kia's experience finding love amid the stigma of living with HIV. Combining her practices of poetry and photography, several of these intimate compositions depict Kia, sometimes alone and sometimes with her life partner of eight years, with small text projected onto bare skin. One work, *I RISKED MY LIFE FOR YOU* (2021), embodies the stinging statement that Kia recurrently encountered after previous sexual experiences, "before finding the true meaning of love in my partner Taina in 2014." The complementary work to *I RISKED MY LIFE FOR YOU* is in *SHE KNOWS AND SHE LOVES ME EVEN MORE* (2021), a photograph of Kia and Taina with the piece's titular text projected on the embracing couple's skin.



I RISKED MY LIFE FOR YOU (2021) • *SHE KNOWS AND SHE LOVES ME EVEN MORE* (2021) • *Untitled #5* (2018)

The thematic series about finding love amid the stigma of living with HIV also includes a set of photos (one of which, *Untitled #5*, was on the cover of *ARTFORUM* in 2018) that depict Kia in black luminescent body paint and bright-red lipstick against a black background.

Said Kia, on her interdisciplinary creative practice overall: "As an artist, I work in many mediums. I consider myself an image-maker using photography, film and collage. A performance artist utilizing dance, movement, and acting. And a writer, poet and storyteller. I like to blur the lines between the ways I create. I see my photographs as performance and poetry all in the same."

While Kia is not currently active in Ballroom (and is no longer part of the House of LaBeija), it served a substantial role in her life for ten formative years and commands a broad presence in the exhibition. In addition to her prestigious role at the helm of the Iconic House of LaBeija and her father-child mentorship with the late Ballroom legend Hector Xtravaganza, Kia's Ballroom success has crossed over into mainstream pop culture in several ways. She served as a principal dancer in the pilot of the FX series *POSE*; has danced in a Calvin Harris music video; and starred in the 2016 music video, *Dove*, by Pillar Point, which has nearly 10 million views on YouTube. She remarked, of her relationship to Ballroom:

"As a young queer person of color, Ballroom was everything to me during the period I was immersed in it. I've always been a performer by nature, but what I could achieve as a professional dancer felt limited. When Voguing came into my life and I began to walk balls, I felt a newfound freedom. I had complete autonomy of how I wanted to express myself through movement within the language and art of Vogue. I arrived in the Ballroom scene from so many white spaces, that to be amongst people of color was like breathing fresh air. The familial relationships that emerged from my Ballroom life provided supplementary support exactly where I needed it, and exactly *when* I needed it."

prepare my heart is curated by Meredith Breech, Exhibitions Manager of Fotografiska New York, in collaboration with the artist.



ABOUT KIA LABELJA

Kia LaBeija (b.1990, New York) is an image-maker and storyteller born and raised in the heart of New York City, Hell's Kitchen. Her multidisciplinary practice includes photography, performance, collage, writing, and film. She composes cinematic and theatrical autobiographical works by staging, re-imagining, and sometimes documenting in real-time—or all of the above. She has presented work at The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Brooklyn Museum, The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Museum of The City of New York, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The International Center for Photography and the Performa '19 Biennial.

ABOUT FOTOGRAFISKA

Fotografiska is a museum experience for the modern world. Founded in Stockholm in 2010, Fotografiska is a destination to discover world-class photography, eclectic programming, elevated dining and surprising new perspectives.

Guided by a mission to inspire a more conscious world through the power of photography, Fotografiska produces dynamic and unparalleled rotating exhibitions, spanning various photographic genres, in inclusive and immersive environments.

With a dedicated international community and locations in Stockholm, New York City, and Tallinn, Fotografiska is the premier global gathering place for photography and culture. www.fotografiska.com | [@fotografiska](https://twitter.com/fotografiska)

EXHIBITION TEXT BY KIA LABELJA

prepare my heart

*For Warren and Kwan
And for New York*

As much as we try to arm ourselves with all the necessary tools to avoid being surprised, no one is ever fully immune from the unexpected. When my mother was diagnosed with HIV in 1993, she planned as best she could for the day she would no longer be with us. She had her will drawn up, organized boxes filled with things she wanted me to have, and journaled so that the record of her thoughts could linger with me as I grew older without her. But still, I was not prepared when my father grabbed my hand and said, *mom's gone*.

Kwan's readiness gave her agency for survival. I watched her carefully as she made herself an example for the world. She was not afraid to say she was a woman living with HIV. If anything, it was the fear of not being acknowledged that drove her to liberation. Her death in many ways taught me that love is transcendent—that it does not disappear once the body is gone. These words she left me on paper are a constant reminder: *true love means to be centered, to be whole and to be loving to self and later to others*.

In my heart I know that nothing lasts forever, and as Kwan's daughter I spend most days documenting, collecting, and archiving in hopes to leave something beautiful behind. To be felt without touch. To be heard without sound. To be the best version of myself and acknowledge the triumph of survival. Being ready does not have to be an art, but it can be a gift. Use this gift wisely, share it often—for fear is only a fraction of love.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST'S MOTHER, KWAN BENNETT, TO WHOM THE EXHIBITION IS DEDICATED

"My mother was born on a naval base in Subic Bay, Philippines on March 11th, 1957. She came to America at age 4. My grandmother was the first of her family to migrate to the United States, her father (my grandfather) was an American Navy man stationed in the Philippines. She moved to New York City in her early 20s working in theater production. She met my father, Warren Benbow, a drummer, while working on a show at the AMAS Repertory Theater (founded by Rosetta LeNoire, known best for her role as the grandmother on Family Matters). In the early 80s she survived a rape while closing the theater, and this is the only possible way she may have contracted HIV. At that time, heterosexual women were not looked at as high risk for contracting HIV, so she was never tested as a precaution. She married my father in 1988 at the United Nations Church. In the early 90s, she was heavily involved in advocating for herself and other women who were survivors of sexual assault, incest and rape, helping to allocate funding to open up additional rape crisis centers in New York City. In 1993 after a period of feeling unwell she was diagnosed as HIV positive. This diagnosis shifted the trajectory of her life and she found her first footing in AIDS activism with APICHA (Asian and Pacific Islanders Coalition on HIV and AIDS). There she worked as a volunteer HIV educator and later became a board member. She traveled to conferences throughout the United States and Asia speaking about her experiences and connecting with other women who had been affected by the AIDS crisis. She served on the pediatric Committee of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), and JUST KIDS - an organization and support group for parents living with HIV who also had HIV positive children. The later part of her life was spent learning indigenous spiritual practices and movement performing as a company member of the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers in NYC. She committed her life to self-healing, finding her happiness through dance and community. She is remembered as a joyous and positive woman who navigated life's challenges with style and grace."