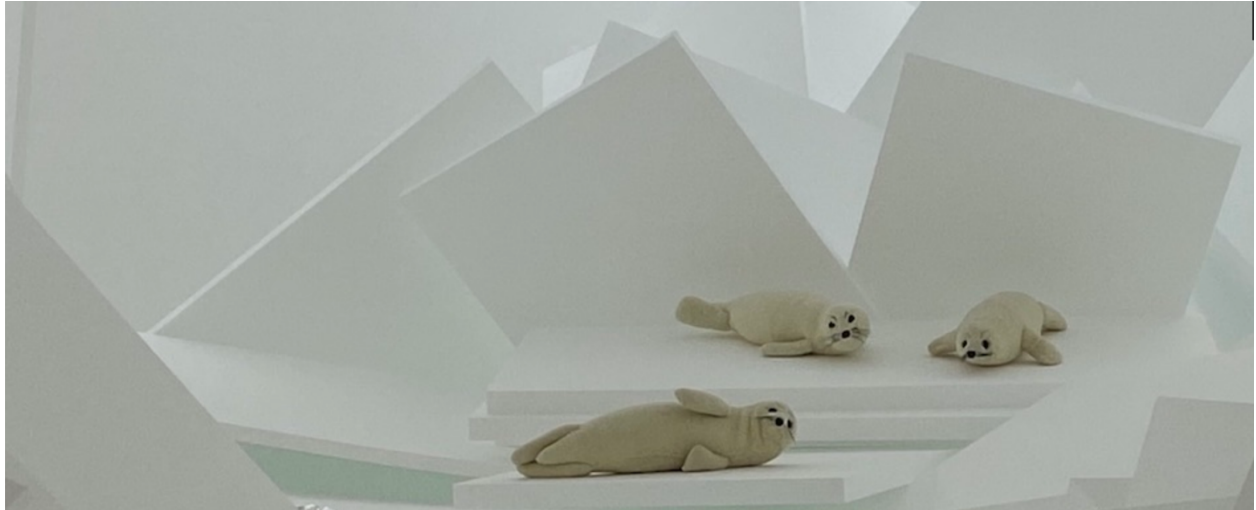


Revolutionary Queer Art: General Idea HIV Exhibit at National Gallery of Canada until November 20, 2022

By Hannah Wanamaker on October 4, 2022



The Great Polystyrene Cold, part of the General Idea AIDS exhibit. Photo: Hannah Wanamaker.

Throughout the pandemic years, Queer art has become a lifeline for the Queer community. In my opinion, one of the best examples of Canadian Queer art is the [General Idea AIDS exhibit](#) currently on display at the [National Gallery of Canada](#). It takes the dark and deadly history of the HIV epidemic and turns it colourful. It's a breath of life that tells the story of the victims of the HIV plague.

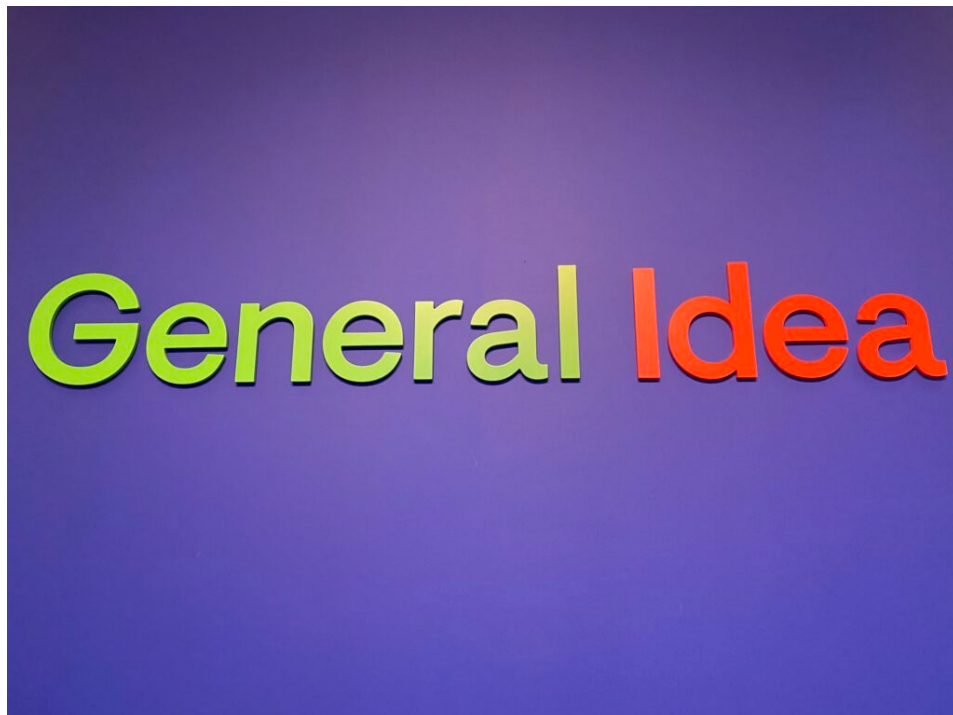


Photo: Hannah Wanamaker.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

General Idea was made up of Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal, and AA Bronson. These three Canadian artists invoked change worldwide by [challenging controversial queer ideals](#) from 1969-1994.

Important themes included throughout the exhibit are corporate greed, discrimination, and androgyny. “The Great Polystyrene Cold,” “Miss General Idea,” and “Pharmacology” are the three pieces that stood out for me regarding these themes. These pieces encompass androgynous themes, which is essential when discussing a multi-faceted issue like HIV.

“The Great Polystyrene Cold” forces the observer to question which lives are worth saving. Three baby seals lying in a frozen landscape brings up the issue of commercial hunting. They represent both the HIV and animal rights movements that co-existed. Depicted is the destruction of life for corporate greed in a capitalist society. While this piece blinds its viewer with its snow-white composure, one could argue that the white represents the purity of humanity. It is the perfect contrast to the rest of the exhibit, as it is untouched by illness and corruption.

General Idea offers many criticisms of the pharmaceutical industry. The painting “Pharmacology” uses the painting “Northern River” by Canadian painter Tom Thomson as a starting point but adds three pills floating above the body of water. These three pills are referred to as anti-HIV pills. It represents the infection of livelihood, whether that means infection of the body, humanity, nature, or even our social systems.

The pharmaceutical industry has made it difficult to obtain medications worldwide due to high costs and distribution restrictions. I see them as a capitalist industry that thrives on people’s misfortunes. That is what is conveyed through this painting. Wherever you looked during the HIV crisis, everything was infected. The one thing that was supposed to offer some solace and save people malfunctioned too. And so many had to perish before scientists and government agencies decided to act.



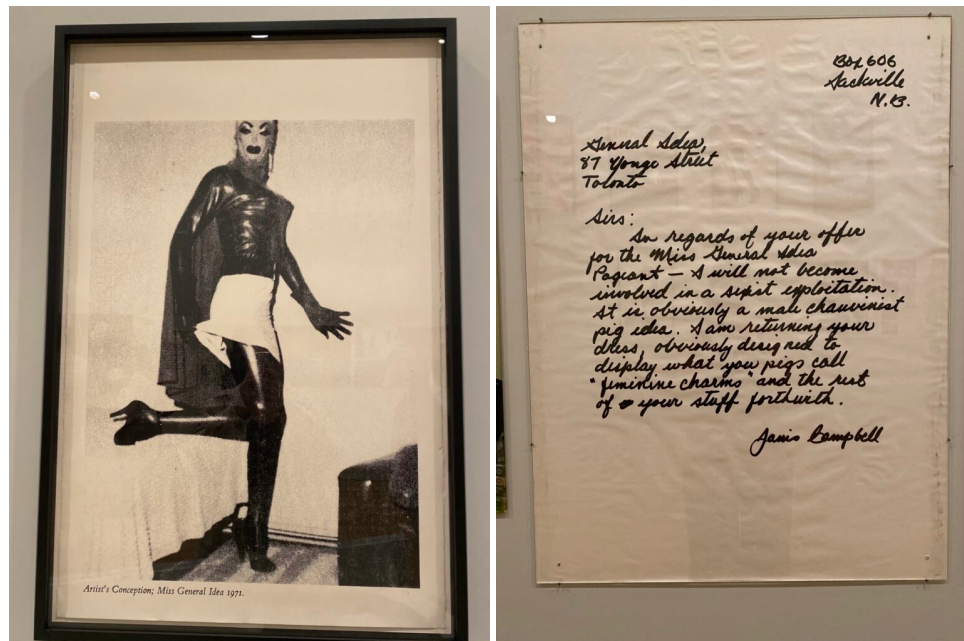
Part of the *General Idea* AIDS exhibit at the National Gallery of Canada. Photo: Hannah Wanamaker.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

The first HIV cases were identified in 1981. In 1985, Canada started testing blood for traces of the HIV strain. It wasn't until six years after the first cases were found that an anti-retroviral drug was approved by the FDA and global action was taken by the WHO and the UN. A decade into the epidemic, the first treatment of many against HIV was approved by the FDA. All treatments approved had their deficiencies. The disease reached its climax in 2002 when it was declared the leading cause of death worldwide. Sterile injection sites, vaccines, and education on contraception and safe-sex practices are the largest preventative measures put into place to reduce the [spread of the disease](#).

But HIV and discrimination against the Queer community are still apparent throughout the world. It wasn't until earlier this year that the ban on blood donation by gay men [was lifted in Canada](#). And it is no secret that the cost of drug treatments remains astronomical, both in North America and worldwide. This returns to the question of which lives are worth saving.

One of my favourite parts of the Queer community is that even in the darkest of times, they still provide rays of light. There are many pieces that exemplify this, but the one that caught my eye was the "Miss General Idea" piece. This was a beauty pageant meant to encompass androgyny. The exhibit includes many photographs of people's interpretations of androgyny in the '70s. As captured in a letter shown in the exhibit, many found this to be perverted. Cross-dressing and drag were heavily frowned upon. But it started changing the way people saw Queer folks. Androgyny provided a light in the darkness for the community. They were starting to force their non-Queer counterparts out of the binary. They had to start thinking beyond the black-and-white ideals that plagued society. That is what makes it such an important piece.



Parts of the Miss General Idea piece. Photo: Hannah Wanamaker.

The *General Idea* exhibit is equally important today as it would have been 40 or 50 years ago. With the emergence of new sexuality and gender identities, it is crucial to have forums in which folks can express themselves—whether through drag, visual art, music, etc. After going through an extreme period of separation, people are now reliant on art to bring their communities back together.

Though this exhibit is temporary, it can act as a gateway for new Queer art forms to become more prominent in Ottawa's culture. It's time to breathe some colour back into our lives and re-spark the Queer fire. It's time to stop asking whose lives are worth saving, and instead, come together as a community and fight to save everyone.

The General Idea AIDS exhibit is on display at the National Gallery of Canada until November 20, 2022. Tickets can be purchased [online](#).