

For Jim Hodges, a Survey of a Career Reflecting on Life



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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

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IN 1986, when Jim Hodges had just graduated from art school, he regularly destroyed his own finished works.

The materials he used then — mainly dirt and dust — were throwaways anyway. But these ritual mutilations, he said, reflected “a punk attitude of destruction, a kind of anarchist approach to things.” They were also the artist’s complex response to the threat of AIDS, he said, and the real life and death context he felt he was very much in.

Mr. Hodges, “a newly out of the closet, gay-identifying person” then, said that in finding a community and a culture, he would recite lines from T. S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets,” while taking encouragement from Jean Genet’s view of masculinity in “Our Lady of the Flowers.”

“On the bus of art history,” he said in a recent interview, “I wanted to sit between Richard Tuttle and Yoko Ono.” He added that “part of the process of identity, and becoming who we are, is in choosing those lineages.”

Mr. Hodges, 56, eventually started keeping his work, as the 25-year career survey “Give More Than You Take,” at the Dallas Museum of Art through Jan. 12, clearly demonstrates. Made up of more than 80 works, in an array of materials including a bell jar filled with handworked glass butterflies and plants and a wall-size curtain composed of stitched-together head scarves, his first comprehensive museum survey in the United States reveals his continued awareness of the fragility of life.

But there is another issue Mr. Hodges seems to be addressing, a question that his show’s title, taken from an Aspen ski-lift ticket he designed a few years ago, hints at: to what extent are we engaged with our communities?

Mr. Hodges said he intended this overview of his artwork, which will travel to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, to challenge the adage an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. “After all,” he said, “why wouldn’t one want to give more than that?”

Mr. Hodges’ artistic coming-of-age dovetailed with a period when irony was the fashionable response to many of the absurdities of contemporary culture. It was a position he did not share.

One of the earliest works in the show, inspired by a gay friend and mentor who had AIDS and was dying, began as torn scraps of tar paper strewn across the floor of Mr. Hodges’ studio. Arranging the scraps into the image of a rose, he said, he taped the scraps together and lifted the piece off the floor. The 1989 work, “Latin Rose,” a heartfelt tribute to his friend, who was a florist, also helped Mr. Hodges set his course as an artist. “That was a huge moment for me,” he said.

“Jim has charted a unique voice,” said Jeffrey Grove, senior curator of special projects and research in Dallas and an organizer of the show. “I think that his strength is a fearlessness, and a confidence in his own process.”

In his glancing, open-ended engagement with difficult subjects, Mr. Hodges trusts the viewer to fill in the blanks. And the honesty of his enterprise, combined with the thrill that comes from seeing familiar objects like silk flower petals, paper deli napkins and even his own clothing elegiacally transformed, has proved extremely powerful.

“Jim’s work is so sensitive, and so beautiful. I think a lot of people who see it really fall head over heels right away,” said Deedie Rose, a member and former chairwoman of the Dallas museum’s board.

Mr. Hodges said he typically began with a kernel of an idea, which he ruminated over, imagining it in relation to, say, a wall, a book or even the ski-lift ticket.

“I partner with everything,” he said, adding that space has long been his main collaborator. Recently, his partners have included musicians and dancers, in what he calls hybrid forms that incorporate live performance and sculpture. “I think of composing experiences in space as elementary choreography.”

Born in 1957 in Spokane, Wash., Mr. Hodges grew up close to nature, and a sensitivity to life cycles, like growth and decay, has long informed his work. After earning a bachelor of fine arts degree from Fort

Wright College in 1980, he moved to New York and received a master of fine arts degree from Pratt Institute.

In the late 1980s, hanging out on his brother's deck in Seattle, he said, he watched a spider slowly spin its orb and decided, "I need to make a spider web." Composed of metal chains, and sometimes combined with drawings and watercolors, spider webs have since become a signature motif in his practice, touching on themes that define all of our lives — fragility, strength, impermanence and resilience.

Mr. Hodges is not the first artist to express ambivalence about the emotions stirred up by a career survey. "There's a nostalgia that's somewhat irritating," he said. "It can be very consuming. But it can be fantastic as well." And in preparation for his show, he is also considering the future. Someday soon he hopes to exhibit in regions where serious conflicts pose a threat to freedom, so that conversations are sparked by art, he said.

"The bottom line is that the purpose of art is to engage one's community," he said. "When engagement with art is happening, there's an opportunity for change."