Artists whose lives were affected by AIDS now have a space dedicated entirely to showcasing and honoring their works. Today, to coincide with World AIDS Day, the online initiative Art Lives launched as an ever-growing platform to host permanent exhibitions of these artists and serve as the first resource of its kind. Spearheaded by POBA | Where the Arts Live, a nonprofit organization that preserves and makes publicly available the works of artists who have died, the project now features seven artists who lost their lives to AIDS, including Martin Wong, “Godfather of Disco” Mel Cheren, and fashion designer Patrick Kelly. Many of these works have never been properly archived or displayed before as they predate the era of digitization, so Art Lives provides a rare and valuable opportunity to explore them in one place. The site’s archive will continue to expand through crowdsourced efforts, encouraging anyone to nominate an artist—even if unknown—affected by HIV or AIDS and create an individual archive for him or her.
“To be able to see the works live again — art lives despite the fact that this generation was lost to us — I think really puts a very positive view on this, and that’s why we really want folks to help us recognize that,” POBA co-founder Jennifer Cohen told Hyperallergic. “All we want to do is support this work and promote it, and if we can help in restoring some of it and archiving some of it, we can help give folks a trusted resource so they can contribute themselves.”

POBA partnered with three leading HIV/AIDS organizations to select the inaugural group of artists, which focuses on those who died during the 1980s and ’90s. Arts organization Visual AIDS chose to honor Wong — who currently has a retrospective at the Bronx Museum — and Nicholas A. Moufarrege, a critic, curator, and artist who was a major force in the East Village scene before his death at 37 in 1985. Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS (DIFFA) picked three designers: Kelly, who had a retrospective last year at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; architect Jim Terrell; and graphic designer Ken Kendrick, who served as the New York Times Magazine’s art director. Art Lives also honors music icons: along with Cheren, the national nonprofit LifeBEAT has chosen “Queen of Disco” Sylvester James Jr.

On the website, visitors may learn about the lives of the artists, read overviews of their works, and browse different portfolios that display those paintings, photographs, videos, audio tracks, and many more materials. One may listen to groovy hits by Sylvester or watch early footage of the disco idol; another video documents Patrick Kelly’s runway shows and is available alongside his sketches which lend insight into his process. For some of these materials, Art Lives represents the first time they are part of a comprehensive collection, as many works were scattered among heirs or estates, requiring a lot of effort on POBA’s part to track them down. In one memorable case, organizers had to visit an extreme surf school in Hawaii to find Terrell’s sister, who was living on a boat at the time.
POBA relied on information provided by artists' relatives and acquaintances for many of these first exhibitions, but it is also issuing an open call to build on the resource through its “Nominate a Great” page. There, anyone may fill out and submit a form to include an artist who was diagnosed with HIV or AIDS. Entries on artists working in any creative medium — including dance, literature, and poetry — may be suggested. As Art Lives amasses more digital portfolios, it will ask users to identify some of their favorite works, and Cohen envisions the possibility of organizing them into a physical exhibition one day. But for now, the project exists only as an online memorial to the creative legacies of AIDS-affected artists.

“Through this living display of the contribution of this generation of creatives, we want to not only help their works live on in a permanent and growing exhibit but also help to draw attention to the very important work that folks like Visual AIDS, DIFFA, LifeBEAT, and others are doing to help those with HIV and AIDS,” Cohen said. “And we want to really recognize that it’s an ongoing fight.”


Nicholas Moufarrege, “The Fifth Day” (courtesy Visual AIDS)

Ken Derricks, “Just Say No” (year unknown) (courtesy POBA)

Wei Chen, “Shelled 2” (year unknown) (courtesy Colonial House Inc.)

Nicholas Moufarrege, “Mirror” (courtesy Visual AIDS)