

ETHAN SHOSHAN: SHOW AND TELL

By Elora Tocci

A red balloon. An aluminum can. A set of broken piano keys.

Each of these items can be easily overlooked, tossed in the garbage, thought of as useless or mundane. But for Ethan Shoshan, they serve as powerful metaphors for important life lessons.

Ethan created a storytelling show, entitled "I'm always thinking of you even when I'm kissing another boy," that features seemingly inconsequential objects with deeper meanings. The show debuted at Envoy Enterprises in New York City in 2009 and is currently at Aljira, A Center for Contemporary Art in Newark, NJ. The show includes over 100 items, some collected from the trash, some found by chance and others that have been given to him over the years. The show tends to be queer-centered because it is based on Ethan's life, but people across the spectrum of sexual orientations and backgrounds can find meaning in the various objects he showcases.

"A lot of people can empathize with the work," he said. "It's more than just me. There's a reaffirming quality in the show that transcends who I am and allows people to connect - with me, with the show and with each other."

That's the purpose of the show - to help people share their stories and experiences and find a common thread among them, and to glean meaning from the simple things. Through all the objects, viewers experience love, loss, comfort, joy, sorrow, and hope. The red balloon in the show retells an experience

Ethan had in a New York City subway car. One average day, a clown came onto a subway and danced among the bored, quiet riders. He blew up the red balloon, trying to get a man to take it. The man ignored the clown the first few times and then finally went to accept the balloon, at which point the clown released it into the air. That made everyone on the subway clap and laugh and broke the invisible walls the riders had put up around themselves.

"This one little balloon reminds me of the experience of people breaking out of their shells and having a communal experience with those around them, of smiling and being present to who is around them and the clown becomes a conduit, sharing his gift to the world.. and the balloon can be filled with air or it can be filled with experiences."

Other objects in the show have a more political message. The aluminum can is filled with water and has bold black letters that say "Drinking Water." FEMA created the cans to supply relief workers and New Orleans residents after Hurricane Katrina with safe drinking water, but the water was recalled because it was found to contain carcinogens. "FEMA was supposed to be helping, and they did just the opposite," Ethan said. "The toxic drinking water, trailers for people who had lost

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their homes without keys to get in... the can sums up the real relief efforts the government is giving, a façade of help."

Whether audience members are looking for an activist cause or an emotional journey, they can find it in the show. "Everyone comes with different experiences, and you can pick and choose from the objects which stories you want to hear," Ethan said. "You can pick whichever objects resonate with you. It's kind of like a Tarot card reading."

One woman broke down in tears after hearing one of the stories because it made her realize she had unresolved questions in her own life about a death in her family. "I talked to her for a long time," Ethan said. "There was such a healing quality to the conversation, and I learned just as much from her as she learned from me."

Upcoming projects Ethan has planned include having this show travel, hopefully to Los Angeles, Vancouver and beyond. He is also collaborating with Carlo Quispe, a Peruvian-born queer cartoonist, to present a fashion show this summer centered on global warming issues. His previous fashion show featured androgynous models dressed as their sexual fantasies escorted by military men, depicting the interplay of power and authority with sexual perversions. The upcoming show will kick off by taking the audience on a spaceship ride entitled "Escape to Uranus" and will focus on the interplays between race, gender and sex. "A couple of installations will depict white male voluntary slaves," Ethan said. "We're just going to play around with relationships of colonization, identity and sexual fantasy." Ethan is also creating a group storytelling show based off of the ideas in his current show at The Center for Book Arts in 2012.

While Ethan's work has not led him down a traditional career path, he has never been one to partake in a conventional lifestyle. "When I graduated from Rutgers University, I had no idea what my life would be like," he said. He's cat-sat for his professor, taught yoga, and learned the intricacies of a cancer-treating macrobiotics diet. He's been a computer consultant, a social worker, a waiter, a community activist, a volunteer for nonprofits, and has participated in anti-racism training. "I've always been interested in how people find meaning in their lives, in what they choose to do and how they choose to live,"

he said. "I'm trying to find new ways to work around the capitalist system and still feel enriched, like I'm taking an active part in shaping the world around me."

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