

‘Putti’s Pudding’ is a book and ‘final project’ by American writer and actor Cookie Mueller, and her husband, Italian artist Vittorio Scarpati. Published in 1989, the same year both died from complications related to AIDS, it pairs drawings by Scarpati with writing by Mueller.

Reimagined as an exhibition, *Putti’s Pudding* features forty–five original felt–tip pen on notepad drawings made by Scarpati when he lost the ability to speak, accompanying texts by Mueller, and a public programme of talks, readings, screenings and performance.

By the summer of 1989, Vittorio Scarpati was in the final months of his life. As Mueller explains in the introduction to ‘Putti’s Pudding’:

“As I write this, his life more or less hangs in the balance, both his lungs are collapsed, a complication of bouts with the pneumonia specific to AIDS. He’s attached by tubes to two machines called pneumothorax suction pumps. A tube the circumference of an American nickel coin is affixed into a chest incision that goes into the pleural lining of his lungs. Bubbling with water like tropical fish aquariums, these strange looking clear plastic machines drain the excessive fluid from his lungs while also inflating them, thus keeping him breathing. Out of sheer boredom with time passing, Vittorio asked for pens and pads to draw. With his indomitable spirit and vitality he set about rendering his reality though his talent.”

The resulting works tell a moving story, depicting the brutal, uncertain, ghostly nature of living with AIDS in the 1980s. However, Scarpati’s drawings also radiate life. Something accounted for, and indeed celebrated, in Mueller’s accompanying writing.

This will be the first display of Scarpati’s drawings since their inclusion in Nan Goldin’s *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* at Artists Space, New York, (1989), and the first time they have been shown outside of the US. Importantly, the exhibition introduces Scarpati, a still largely unrecognised figure, to international audiences and contributes to the ongoing project of bringing recognition to Mueller’s life and work.

Mueller first came to prominence for her ribald appearances in the early works of provocative filmmaker John Waters, who memorably described Mueller as “*a writer, a mother, an outlaw, an actress, a fashion designer, a go–go dancer, a witch–doctor, an art–hag and above all, a goddess.*” She went on to become a highly charismatic and influential figure in New York’s downtown scene. She penned a self-help medical column for *East Village Eye*, while also writing a regular art diary for Annie Flanders’ *Details* magazine. After her death, Mueller’s stories were published in the now cult *Walking Through Clear Water In A Pool Painted Black*, 1990. This was the first book published by Semiotext(e)’s Native Agents imprint – a new platform for American fiction edited by Chris

Kraus.

Both Mueller and Scarpati were documented prominently during this era by artists such as Gary Indiana, Peter Hujar, Philip Lorca diCorcia and, most notably, Nan Goldin (*Cookie Portfolio* (1977–1989) and *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986)). Goldin has described her compulsion to photograph friends as a way to safeguard or honour them at a time when AIDS was not only untreatable, but patients were actively discriminated against by the government, health commissioners and the press.

This exhibition is curated by Paul Pieroni in partnership with Studio Voltaire.

About the artists:

Cookie Mueller (1949–1989) was an American writer, actor and ‘Dreamlander’ who starred in many of filmmaker John Waters’ early works, including *Multiple Maniacs* (1970) and *Female Trouble* (1974). Mueller wrote the health column *Ask Dr. Mueller* for the East Village Eye and was the art critic for Details magazine. Her *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* (1990) was the first book published by the Chris Kraus edited Native Agents imprint for Semiotext(e). Mueller died on 10 November 1989. She was 40.

Vittorio Scarpati (1955–1989) was an Italian artist, political cartoonist and jewellery designer. He met Mueller in Positano, Italy, in the summer of 1983. Three years later they married in New York City. Scarpati died on 14 September 1989. He was 34.

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