

Arbert Santana

During the late 1980's and early 1990's, Arbert Santana was part of two key early activist efforts to address the growing HIV crisis in NYC: the Lower Eastside Needle Exchange movement and the Latino Caucus of ACT-UP NY. Both of these movements would deeply influence his work in the House Ball community.

HOUSE OF LATEX

Arbert Santana became the face and Mother of the House of Latex Project in the early 1990s. Although the project was started before him, he served as the architect of outreach to a very special population of the LGBT community that suffered a severe dearth of services. The House of Latex Project, under Arbert's leadership, was ground-breaking in the fight against HIV. The members of the HOL were required to learn about the ballroom scene and HIV prevention. This strategy endeared many members of the HOL to the larger community. It allowed members of the community to talk about serious issues with people who walked balls just like them. By the mid-90s, the HOL project had expanded and created a larger program called the Youth and Young Adult Initiatives program. With GMHC's move to 24th Street, a youth drop-in space was created where there were prevention talks called "house talks", resume writing workshops, HIV prevention trainings and weekly impromptu mini balls. The doors were open to ball children from every house. Many of today's legendary children took their first walk and hit their first dip under the watchful eye of Mother Latex. In addition, many of today's HIV prevention workers and leaders who received their first trainings at the youth space are now prevention leaders, running programs and training a new generation of prevention workers throughout the nation. Although he went on to leave other indelible marks on the ballroom scene, the HOL Project stands as Arbert Santana's greatest achievement and gift to a community that he loved dearly. The HOL legacy continues in the children who were or are now members of the house. Arbert would give his blessing to any child who needed to move on, but he would remind them as they left "Once a Latex, ALWAYS a Latex!" Submitted with love from all the Latex children worldwide.

HOUSE OF EVISU

Arbert created The House of Evisu in early 2003, his search was on for walking, and serving kids in the ballroom scene that could stand above the rest. He picked the name because he learned that Evisu meant "luck" in Japanese and because of the love of the upscale and urban fashion line and it had a cute ring to it, which he knew the ballroom scene would grasp very quickly. During the debut of his house in 2003, Arbert submitted this philosophy and mission for The House of Evisu. "The House of EVISU strives to be the best in everything that we do. We expect to gather support from other house members to enhance our skills in and out of the ballroom community. We are about community excellence and achieving our true goals. We are planning to change the ballroom community in order for others to see that there is a lighter side. We are not setting enemies but instead setting a path that shows we are a strong and dedicated force not to be reckoned with. We are planning to show you how it is really done and we will take no prisoners."

Ballroom Archive and Oral History Project

For many years, Arbert spoke of wanting to create a Ballroom archive. An activist to his core, Arbert's vision was to organize history as a resource for everyone committed to the Ballroom scene's tradition of learning, experimentation, and survival. Consequently, the archive does more than gather facts or enshrine individuals as one-dimensional icons or legends. Rather, it circulates memories as openings to the future. Arbert's primary question was "what kind of future do we wish to make together?" He

signaled the direction he wanted to take by inviting a diverse group of people to collaborate with him on the project. In addition to the generationally diverse collective of Ballroom members from many different houses, he invited as collaborators his close friend and comrade, the anthropologist Edgar Rivera Colon and Robert Sember and Dont Rhine of the art collective, Ultra-red. The project began with the collection of in-depth, oral history interviews with Ballroom members and those closely affiliated with the scene. Arbert conducted most of the 150 hours of interviews now in the archive. The collective also began a rigorous documentation of Vogue styles and philosophies and started gathering a wide range of objects and other materials. At the invitation of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School, the Ballroom Archive and Oral History Project and Ultra-red organized a series of events and an exhibition that addressed the relationship between the scene's past and imagined future. A similar exhibition was mounted at basis voor actuele kunst (BAK) in Utrecht, Netherlands. The discussions of the archive organized around these events and exhibitions were characteristic of Arbert's vision and leadership: complex, contentious, robust and guided by love, mutual care and the struggle for social justice. The Arbert Santana Ballroom Archive and Oral History Project will carry this vision forward, putting into practice Arbert's commitment to the future.