

THE EMPTY CLOSET



Just Use It:
Banana boys poster at the Bug Jar on Monroe Avenue. To find out who the Banana Boys are, see page 7.

Banana Boys:

"It's not about politics anymore ...its about education"

By Susan Jordan

People driving down Monroe Ave. in early November saw an interesting sight at the corner of Monroe and Union. There on the wall of the Bug Jar, formerly Rosie's, was a large black and white poster showing two men embracing; beside them was a picture of a condom and the legend "Just Use It."

Needless to say, the poster did not stay up long. But rumor had it that this was the work of "the Banana Boys." Mysterious safe-sex educational brochures had been circulating for some time, one consisting simply of a series of photographs of a banana being covered with a condom. Like many others, perhaps, I assumed that these brochures had been produced out of town and had been imported by some group or individual. But after the poster went up, it began to seem that the Banana Boys were home-grown.

On Nov. 15 at Visual Studies Workshop the mystery was solved. The Banana Boys are actually artist David Pruden and the people who were called in as consultants on his Master of Fine Arts thesis project at Visual Studies — AIDS/HIV educational brochures meant to be truly accessible and informational, as well as graphically interesting. Pruden has distributed brochures, posters and other forms of Banana Boys information throughout the city for some time now, all at his own expense since he did not want to get involved in the politics of various AIDS agencies around funding.

As part of his thesis presentation, Pruden talked about the evolution of his work. He showed slides of earlier work, including his collages of "viral landscapes," in which images of the HIV are greatly enlarged; a dinner table is set in what looks like a desert or lunar landscape, but which is actually the virus itself, a microscopic entity that looms as large as a planet and becomes the world in which HIV positive people exist.

Pruden said that he had studied AIDS educational brochures already available from federal, state and other agencies, and from activist groups. Many lacked information, or the information contained was out of date.

Many covers were intimidating and many brochures used clinical, not street, language. Pruden decided that his own brochures would have to improve on these.

The Banana Boys series includes brochures aimed at the gay male community, IV drug users, women, and the deaf community. Pruden said that he felt it was important to send a message that would entice people to pick up the brochures and read them, not a message that "just because you're HIV positive you're going to die."

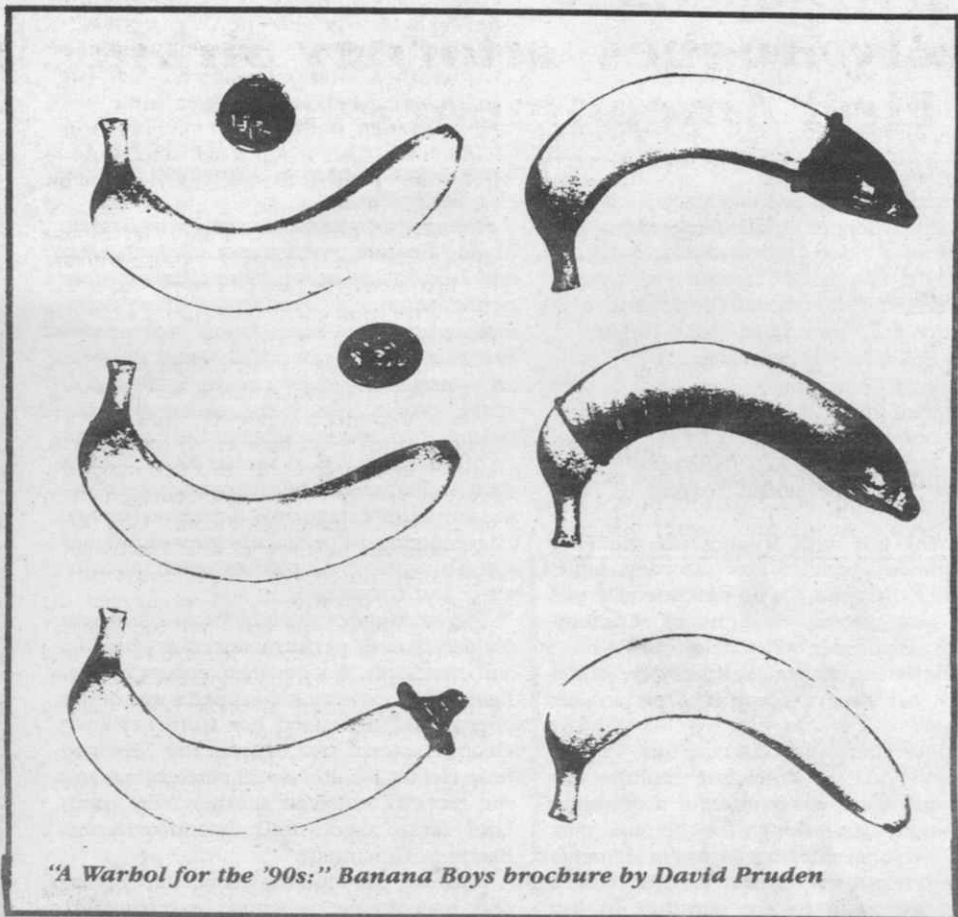
A question and answer session followed the presentation. When questioned about politics, Pruden said that his purpose with the brochures was not to enrage or to raise consciousness, but simply to educate and provide up-to-date, trustworthy information. He said that he is more political in his art work; "I like to bring art, politics and education together."

Pruden said, "Rage polarizes people, especially in Rochester, which is very apolitical and fairly conservative. Rage distracts from the issues. It's not about politics anymore, as far as I'm concerned — it's about trying to educate."

He said that his poster at the Bug Jar was taken down by police, "possibly under suspicious circumstances." He called City Hall to find out why the poster had been removed, and "got the run-around to about six departments." No one could cite a specific ordinance which would have justified the removal; the owners of the bar had given permission for the poster to go up. No report of the incident could be found on the computer.

Some members of the audience, which was made up mostly of Visual Studies faculty and students who would be voting on Pruden's thesis, had criticisms to make. One faculty member asked about his use of graphics and his informational strategy: what kind of message was Pruden trying to send? The questioner found one brochure, which has a picture of two men holding hands and the statement "Just Positive," mystifying.

Pruden said that his strategy had been to



"A Warhol for the '90s:" Banana Boys brochure by David Pruden

not make the cover art so obvious, and to get away from using "AIDS" and "HIV" in big threatening letters which might make people afraid to be seen with the material. He had decided to avoid slickness and keep the brochures at the low end of technology, and to distribute them widely. The intent was to show that the material had not been produced by the government or a large organization. Pruden added that the brochures had been successful in the gay community, especially a "Just Use It" brochure that showed two nude men bathed in rosy tones (although Pruden himself did not find that successful.)

A gay man in the audience told the *Empty Closet* that he felt that Pruden had succeeded. "We seldom see any positive images of gay men or lesbians," he said. "This

brochure is sending a positive message about being gay, and also saying 'I'm just positive — and I can get on with my life.'" Gay men, he said, did not find it mystifying.

Pruden said that some of the brochures addressed relevant issues such as self-esteem, but that the material had essentially a primary message (safer sex information) and a secondary message (get tested).

As Joan Lyons, Pruden's faculty advisor, said, the Banana Boys brochures and posters are right on the line between art and information/education. Some observers were disturbed by the typos and many technical imperfections. But as educational materials they seemed to several gays and lesbians in the audience to be outstandingly accessible and informational. Whether they are Art or not, they may save lives