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**HOME | ART IN AMERICA | REVIEWS**

## Avram Finkelstein Changed the World. Now, at 73, He's Getting His First New York Solo Show

By *Aliza Shvarts*

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Avram Finkelstein exhibition at Smack Mellon

Photographer: Etienne Frossard

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A golem is a figure in Jewish folklore usually made of clay, mud, or dust; a vessel for a word or idea, a metaphor come to life. Golems figure throughout “Something Terrible Has Happened (Corpus Fluxus),” a solo exhibition by artist, writer, and



activist Avram Finkelstein at Smack Mellon—shockingly, his first in New York City. A founding member of various groups behind iconic AIDS actions and political posters, including ACT UP, Silence=Death, and Gran Fury, Finkelstein turns in this new work to something much more personal.

Large-scale drawings and digital prints hang on the walls, the ceiling, and wheeled metal structures that double as weight-bearing mobility devices for Finkelstein in his studio. The works betray a body in flux, evident in the changing quality of Finkelstein's mark-making as it corresponds to his loss of mobility. These marks capture the lived experience not of a singular diagnosis, but instead of the intersecting biological, temporal, and social forces through which bodies become disobedient, acting out beyond our control and no longer as wholly our own.

Expressive swirling marks on flag cloth make up *Golem (BRAF V600E mutation)*, 2024, wherein a giant orange and red figure emerges from a black shadowy space. Titled for a genetic mutation in the thyroid cancer that Finkelstein has—a mutation that makes treatment difficult—it is a self-portrait based on cell microscopy imagery. Monumental yet diaphanous, the work towers over the viewer, swaying in response to bodies that displace air as they move about the space. This performative dimension is a deliberate strategy of accessibility: in an essay accompanying the exhibition, Finkelstein describes the gallery space as an “experiential dancehall,” wherein “activation of the space is a more effective way of creating access,” extending beyond visual and cognitive experiences.



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This dancehall dimension manifests throughout the show. Works such as *Black Golem (after Bergman)*, 2024, use both optical and psychic reflection. On one face of this double-sided composition, hung on a mobile metal frame, we see a silhouetted figure drawn on insulated brown paper Amazon grocery delivery bags. The image is drawn from memories of watching Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* as a too-young child and becoming fixated on the film's imagery of Death playing chess. On the other side, the reflective foil acts as a funhouse mirror. Finkelstein describes the work as a "portrait of pain—something about disability we cannot see—and what it means to be in pain all the time." The work asks: What is required to recognize the pain of others? What kinds of identifications and actions does this recognition prompt?

Questions about the body—and what it is possible to feel between bodies—open poignantly onto relation, as shown in another double-sided composition *Golem (Don's bath)*, 2024. We see an image based on the first photograph Finkelstein ever took of his lover Don on the recto, with Don's face, body, and raised hands rendered in fine line and expressive detail. On the verso appears a ghost, an abstracted body created from thick gesso strokes. The work's complement, *Golem (Go away)*, 2024, draws imagery from one of the last photographs Finkelstein took of Don, the first partner he lost to AIDS in 1984. Here, the figure's outstretched hand is raised in a gesture of cover or refusal.



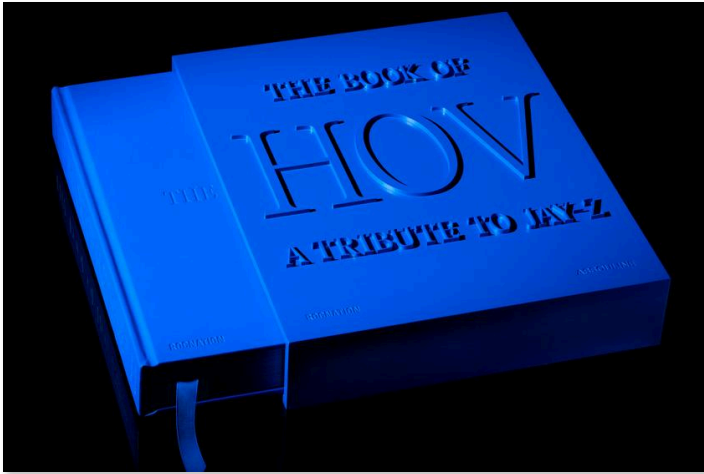
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Finkelstein's golems prompt us to see the body as far more than the sum of our parts. We emerge in cosmic, historical, erotic, traumatic, and political relation to one another. Finkelstein learned this early on: when he was 15 years old, he tried to come out, and this led to court-ordered therapy. In sessions, he was shown images and asked to describe them. When asked what he saw in an image of a man and woman peering through a darkened doorway—an image he re-creates from memory in *Thematic Apperception Test, (something terrible has happened)*, 2022—Finkelstein replied, “something terrible has happened.” His brother later scolded him, “you should’ve said, ‘the loving parents are checking in on their children as they sleep.’”

But his description was no misrecognition. He was accurately identifying his inhospitable, pre-Stonewall world—a world that, through decades of activist

practice, he undeniably changed. Almost 60 years later, turning this time inward, Finkelstein once again asks us to consider how the body can be a locus to remake the world.



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