

GalleristNY

"We've been running around like cats and dogs," the sculptor Rigoberto Torres said on Thursday afternoon at Frieze New York, standing outside the booth he shares at the fair with his artistic partner John Ahearn. He sounded thrilled.

Inside, sculptures from the pair's "South Bronx Hall of Fame" show lined the walls. They're hand-painted casts of people's heads that they made while working back in 1979 at the alternative space Fashion Moda, which was located in the South Bronx, a few minutes' drive from the fair, on Randall's Island.

Mr. Torres posed for a photograph outside the booth, underneath a cast of his own face, which Mr. Ahearn made shortly after they first met more than three decades ago. The pair quickly became collaborators. (I wrote about their work for *The Observer* a few weeks ago.) Then he went back into the booth and slipped on a blue apron.

Throughout the run of the fair, as part of its special Projects section, which is curated by Cecilia Alemani,



The pair work plaster bandages onto the alginate.
photo: Andrew Russeth

Messrs. Ahearn and Torres are casting people on site for a \$3,000 fee, and that afternoon, Ellen Stern was about to undergo the process. Mr. Ahearn snapped a photograph of her to paint from later. Then straws went in Ms. Stern's nostrils and a plastic cap went on her head. She reclined on a simple metal chair. A huge crowd gathered as Mr. Ahearn began gently massaging Ms. Stern's face.

"What do you think, Robert?" Mr. Ahearn asked his compatriot. "Mighty fine, right?" He grabbed a large plastic bowl and began scooping what looked like thick pancake batter onto her forehead. He gently worked it across and down her face, onto the top of her chest. "That's beautiful, beautiful!" he declared loudly. "Can we hear it for Ellen? Come on! Yay, Ellen!" The crowd applauded.

"This stuff sets fast, watch," one onlooker whispered over to another. It does! Mr. Ahearn was plopping on alginate, which dentists use to mold teeth. That layer only takes a few minutes to solidify, and Mr. Torres encouraged Ms. Stern from the moment it went on her skin. "Nice big smile!" he said gently.

As the goop set, the pair began layering on plaster bandages. "You okay, Ellen?" Mr. Ahearn asked loudly (her ears were covered with the stuff). She gave a thumbs-up. The two artists will later use the plaster-alginate mask that was hardening to make a positive cast, and then paint it.

After about 20 minutes, the material was dry. "Robert has decided to cut your shirt," Mr. Ahearn said to Ms. Stern, as Mr. Torres used scissors to cut off the large T-shirt guarding her clothing from the goop, in order to make the plaster mask easier to remove. They leaned her forward in her chair and then popped off the plaster.

Ms. Stern touched her face. "That was the best facial ever!" she said as onlookers applauded. "How about a towel?" Mr. Ahearn asked her. "A towel with some hot water?"